



TELEVISION CRITICISM 3

VICTORIA O'DONNELL ■ ■ ■ EDITION



THIRD EDITION

Television CRITICISM

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Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC

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Television, the Nation's Storyteller

*Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns
driven time and again off course, once he had plundered
the hallowed heights of Troy. . . .*

*Launch out on his story, Muse, daughter of Zeus
start from where you will—sing for our time too.*

—Homer (*The Odyssey*)

INTRODUCTION

As you have seen in previous chapters, television is a producer's medium, and most executive producers are the creators and writers of the stories that are told on television. Both fiction and nonfiction television tell stories, thus this chapter relates the important characteristic of television as a story-making medium. All television tells stories whether they are through drama, comedy, news, reality, game, or cooking shows. As a television critic, you will analyze the characteristics of narrative and the ways in which stories are crafted to fit the television medium. If you are a student of television production, this chapter will help you develop the stories you want to tell.

Paul Bloom, a professor of psychology at Yale University, said that imaginative events have power because we do not have to make choices since they are made for us: "We can get the best of both worlds, by taking an event that people know is real and using the techniques of the imagination to transform it into an experience that is more interesting and powerful than the normal perception of reality could ever be. The best example of

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this is an art form that has been invented in my lifetime, one that is addictively powerful, as shown by the success of shows such as *The Real World*, *Survivor*, *The Amazing Race*, and *Fear Factor*. What could be better than reality television?

Source: Bloom (2010, p. 176).

Structure and systematic organization are extremely important in television narrative. Because of frequent interruptions during most programs and weeklong gaps between episodes, familiar structure enables viewers to stay with the stories. Time constraints for broadcast television require most stories to fit into 30- and 60-minute time slots, with the stories themselves taking up no more than 22 or 44 minutes, respectively. Half-hour shows are broken into two acts, while hour-long shows are broken into four acts. This allows for the commercial breaks and other interruptions. Programs on premium subscription television such as HBO are also broken into acts, although there is more flexibility because an episode is not interrupted by commercials. Formats are repeated week after week because television programming, for the most part, is episodic. Series and serial television have groups of recurring characters whose essential qualities and basic situations remain the same from episode to episode. In series television, novel events do occur, but the characters and their strategies and actions tend to remain similar. There is usually a resolution to a dilemma or problem in a single episode, but conflicts in interpersonal relationships may not get resolved. In serials, especially in soap operas, the situations continue from episode to episode. Each program in a series and serials is composed of segments with a format holding the segments together, providing them with continuity and narrative progression. Binge watching on Netflix or with a box set of DVDs allows for a flow from one episode to another without commercials, but there are still segments or acts interrupted with brief breaks. Like dramatic series, news programs are structured with breaking news stories early in the program followed by weather, sports, and human interest stories. News programs can be seen as a unified body exhibiting themes and patterns with heroes and villains. Narrative devices emphasizing community and rituals are used in news writing. News is put into frameworks that are easily understood and anticipated. Documentaries are structured as narratives, while sporting events are structured as rituals with stories about heroic players interspersed with the games.

Television's narratives and characters are familiar and reassuring to the audience. Paul Monaco (1998) explained,

Stories are best for television when they are highly accessible, easily understood, fall within a range of plausibility, and strike viewers as familiar enough to fit easily into patterns of repetition. . . . They are best liked and most admired precisely in those instances in which a familiar formula is taken and modified slightly. (p. 6)

Bloom (2010) said,

Stories are similar because people have similar interests. The popularity of themes having to do with sex and family and betrayal, for instance, is not due to some special feature of the imagination, but rather because people are obsessed, in the real world, with sex and family and betrayal. (p. 165)

STORYTELLING AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

Storytelling is an ancient tradition. From the oral storytelling tradition of Homer to the stories told around the fireplace in the past to the electronic hearth of television today, people have enjoyed and participated in a narrative tradition. Narratives probably originated with human signifying practices, that is, the human ability to describe with language events and people in their absence. James Watson and Anne Hill (2003) define story as a social ritual that has the power to bring about a sense of shared experience and of social values. They quote Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984): "Narratives 'articulate our existences'; indeed, we as social, communal animals, are 'defined by stories'" (Watson & Hill, 2003, p. 187). Narratives take many forms, for they may be stories told orally or written, or they may be visual stories told in stained glass windows, tapestries, or carved doors of churches and cathedrals. Many cultural and religious rituals are based on sacred narratives. For example, the story of American independence from Great Britain is celebrated on July 4; the Christian story of the birth of Jesus is marked each Christmas Day on December 25; the story of the rededication of the holy temple in Jerusalem after the Jews' victory over the Syrians in 165 BCE is celebrated during Hanukkah for eight days in November and December. Older stories are regenerated into newer versions. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* has provided the theme for many stories about star-crossed lovers; the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table has been the basis for stories about chivalry, a quest, magic, and heroism; Homer's story of the Trojan Horse is a model for fooling an enemy. Themes from ancient stories, such as the prodigal son, the fall from innocence to experience, resurrection and redemption, weaker persons defeating stronger forces, selling one's soul to the devil, succumbing to a temptress, and so on, proliferate in contemporary stories. As Roderick Hart (1990) pointed out in his discussion of narrative, "Sometimes these stories are complex, springing from deep cultural roots; often, stories told today are but updated versions of centuries old tales . . . they awaken within listeners dormant experiences and feelings" (p. 133).

The Good Wife's plot about Alicia's indecisiveness about staying with her unfaithful husband or her past relationship with her boss, Will, now deceased, having been shot in
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the court room during a trial, is reminiscent of Shakespeare. *TV Guide* writer Ileana Rudolph (2010) wrote,

It's exhibiting many of his [Shakespeare's] hallmarks, complete with star-crossed lovers and a purloined letter. (Or make that voice mail.) "It's Romeo and Juliet!" says a delighted Josh Charles, whose Will Gardner has spent the early part of Season 2 reeling from having his declaration of devotion to Alicia Florrick . . . married object of his desire rebuffed . . . or so he thinks. "Like with Romeo and Juliet, our audience knows there was miscommunication between Alicia and Will after a third party stepped in," says [Julianna] Margulies [who plays Alicia] . . . "But our characters don't." (p. 23)

Like most scholars, Walter Fisher (1989), a rhetorician, made the assumption that humans are essentially storytellers and proposed in his book, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action*, that "all forms of human

Photo 4.1 Alicia and her unfaithful husband Peter, the governor of Illinois, in *The Good Wife*.



Source: © CBS

communication are most usefully interpreted and assessed from a narrative perspective” (p. ix). He wrote,

The world as we know it is a set of stories that must be chosen among in order for us to live life in a process of continual re-creation. [The] narrative paradigm sees people as storytellers, as authors and co-authors who creatively read and evaluate the texts of life and literature. A narrative perspective focuses on existing institutions as providing “plots” that are always in the process of re-creation rather than existing as settled scripts. Viewing human communication narratively stresses that people are full participants in the making of messages, whether they are agents (authors) or audience members (co-authors). (p. 18)

People tune in to television to be told stories, but they have a familiarity with the narrative forms in which the stories are told; they relate to these stories against a backdrop of the stories they know and become the coauthors, so to speak, in the story development. In order for a story to be successful, it has to engage the audience's own sense of narrative. This includes the ability to defer one's gratification, to supply connectives among the parts of the story, and to perceive events as significantly related to the point of a sequence or the entire story.

When my sons were young, I read bedtime stories to them every night. They enjoyed hearing the same stories over and over, often speaking the lines from the books before they were able to read them. My older son and daughter-in-law read to their daughter Elizabeth every night, often the same stories that I read to my sons. Elizabeth also loved the stories on television—*Clifford the Big Red Dog*, *Arthur (the Aardvark)*—and when she was only 3 years old, she could expertly pronounce “aurora borealis” after seeing the Disney movie *Balto* (the story of a sled wolf-dog in Alaska). Like other children, she learned to produce and process stories at an early age. She enjoyed repeated reading and viewing of stories and often told me the stories that she has heard and watched. At the age of 10, she enjoyed television stories about dogs and cats on Animal Planet and shows on Nickelodeon such as *iCarly*, *Victorious*, and *Bigtime Rush* that had activities on their websites. Now, at the age of 15, she prefers adult drama. She enjoys watching *Criminal Minds*, aspiring to be an FBI agent when she grows up. She loves *The Big Bang Theory*, which we watch together, and she is quite perceptive when discussing why she likes the characters on the show. I am an avid reader of both fiction and nonfiction, yet I also regularly tune in to television stories. My favorites are *The Good Wife*, *Madam Secretary*, *The Americans*, *Manhattan*, *Chicago PD*, *Project Runway*, *The Big Bang Theory*, and *Masterpiece Classics*, *Mystery*, and *Contemporary*. I recently watched a 1984 miniseries, *The Jewel in the Crown*, and was captivated by the story.

The *Masterpiece* dramas, especially *Downton Abbey*, are mostly episodic and may go on for several seasons, while made-for-television movies are self-contained and have closure, unless the movie is a pilot for a series. The difference between a self-contained television movie that has closure at the end and a television series is that while a series episode may have closure of a given problem, there is seldom closure for the personal stories of the characters. As I watch series television over time, I learn about the characters, their relationships, and their ways of solving problems. They may solve a crime, figure out how the

crime was committed, find a missing person, save someone's life or take it, defend a client in court, solve an international crisis, separate and reunite, marry, have babies, divorce, and so on, but the series continues each week with the same main characters and their ways of living and working together. When a series comes to an end, we hope for closure.

*M*A*S*H*, which in 1983 after 11 years on the air, had a 2.5-hour finale celebrating the end of the Korean War with Hawkeye, B. J., Major Houlihan, Colonel Potter, and the rest of the 4077th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital returning home. (It was the highest rated single program of all time, with 106 million viewers.) The last episode of *The Sopranos* was in 2007, but people still discuss the ambiguous ending on various websites. At the end of the last show, Tony Soprano goes into a diner and sits at a booth. Each time the door opens, there is a bell. After other customers enter, Tony's wife, Carmela, comes in; then A. J., their son, arrives. A man comes in and sits at the counter, glancing over at Tony. Then we see the daughter, Meadow, having trouble parking. The man at the counter walks past Tony on his way to the bathroom. The bell rings again, Tony looks up at the door, and the screen goes black. That is the end. What does it mean? Did the screen go black because the man shot Tony? Does it mean that Tony will always have to be on the lookout for an assassin? David Chase, the show's creator hinted that was what he had in mind.

The eighth season finale of *Mad Men* ending resolved several relationships (Peggy and Stan, Pete and Trudy, Roger and Marie), found Joan an independent career, and gave Betty a terminal illness. But for Don Draper, the show's lead, it gave him the self-realization that he was an advertising man. As a result of his stay at a California spiritual resort, it suggested that he created one of the best ads of all time, the 1971, multiracial Coca Cola commercial "Hilltop" (I'd like to buy the world a Coke).

THE NATURE OF NARRATIVE

Narrative recounts one or more events, thus a story is a series of events arranged in an order. Narrative can be about one event, as in "the hamster died" or "Marian left Simon." If an event is not recounted, then the expression of it is not a narrative. "Marian is 25 years old" is not a narrative because there are no events expressed in this sentence. It is assumed that a narrative will be expressed by someone to someone; a storyteller relates a story to an audience. Thus, a story can be viewed as being expressed in such a way that an audience can interpret its meaning. Whether the story is told as comedy or drama, news or sports, cooking instructions, or infomercials, there has to be a pattern that viewers can anticipate. When an audience has expectations about what might happen, the narrative plays on those expectations. Narrative can be either fiction or nonfiction as long as events are ordered and recounted. A dramatic series on television is based on narrative, but the news, reality shows, and sporting events also have narrative structure. A narrative has two parts: (1) the structure that comprises the recounting of one or more events; and (2) the communicative act that involves the production and reception of the story.

A story almost always has temporal elements. Some of the events in the story may occur simultaneously; some may be successive; some may go back and forth in time. "Marian left Simon as he boarded an airplane to New York" has a simultaneous temporal element. "After Simon left for the airport, Marian began to pack to leave him" is an example of

successive events. "As Marian packed her suitcase to leave Simon, she reflected on the times in the past when they had been happy" is an example of going back and forth in time. In each case, the stories consist of at least one transformation from one state of affairs to another. Sometimes the events in a story may be linked by cause and effect. "Marian left Simon because he never helped with the dishes" is an example of causation.

The sequence of a narrative has to be structured in a systematic way in an order that makes sense to its audience. This allows the events, characters, and themes to develop and move forward in a coherent fashion. The television narrative should draw the viewers in, engage them, and keep them watching the program. Stories are structured so the scenes build on one another as the viewers gradually learn more about a character and/or the plot. Each stage of the narrative has a logical place and meaning in the sequence, and each stage influences the next one. The television critic can ask why the events are arranged in a certain order and why they started at a certain point and ended at another.

NARRATIVE THEORIES

Aristotle's Narrative Theory

Narrative theory can be traced back to ancient Greece. Aristotle's *Poetics*, written in 330 BCE, is a treatise on the making of a dramatic work of art. Aristotle explained that drama is defined by its shape, composition, manner of construction, and purpose. While character, thought, dialogue, song, and spectacle were considered important, Aristotle said that plot is the most important part of the narrative. He said that plot is the unified arrangement of the incidents, which must have a beginning, middle, and end. Television programming appears to most strongly follow Aristotle's advice, with tightly structured scripts that usually have to be 22 or 44 minutes long. Aristotle also said that unnecessary people and incidents should be omitted from a story's plot. Aristotle's guidelines are familiar to viewers of television in the 21st century. Television scripts must present the conflict to launch the story in the first few minutes of the first act along with the hero, antagonist, and other essential characters who are related to the problem. The successive act(s) present complications, a quest, a goal, and other incidents, and the final act usually presents a solution to the problem, resolving the conflict or achieving a goal. We expect the familiar structure of the beginning, middle, and end; we expect unity of plot; we anticipate seeing only the essential characters with whom we are familiar; and we enjoy stories not only for the pleasure they give, but also for the order they offer. When the resolution is carried over to the next episode, the viewer is motivated to tune in next week to satisfy a desire to know what happens. David Price, director of Amazon Studios, said there is less room for experimentation in storytelling: "There are aspects of narrative storytelling that haven't changed since Aristotle's *Poetics*" (Barnert, 2015, p. 123).

Propp's Narrative Theory

Vladimir Propp (1968), an early 20th-century literary theorist, influenced narrative theory with his 1928 book *Morphology of the Folktale*, although it was not translated into

English until 1966. Morphology is the study of structure and forms, which Propp developed into 31 functions of characters from the perspective of their fundamental meanings in a story. Propp argued that stories always contain the function of the **lack** and/or *villainy*. The story then proceeds to other functions, such as the hero and the villain joining in direct combat resulting in the defeat of the villain. When the hero's task is resolved, the lack is fulfilled, and Propp's last function has the hero marrying the princess and receiving an honor, such as ascending the throne. In other words, an initial equilibrium or harmonious state of a place or character is disrupted, most often by a lack of something or a villain. The narrative charts the course of the disequilibrium and ends with a resolution that restores equilibrium. A lack may be a missing person who is the subject of a search by FBI agents. If found, the missing person is restored to the family, and equilibrium is achieved. A lack may be overcome when police detectives find a criminal—the villain—and bring that person to justice. A person may lack love and a satisfactory relationship that can be achieved by meeting a desirable person. A teenager may lack the use of the family car until proven responsible enough to use it. Lack is also related to desire or wish fulfillment. If what is desired or wished for is not present, then there is a lack. Villainy does not have to be a person but could be an animal or an earthquake or some natural or unnatural event that disturbs equilibrium. The movement to restore equilibrium drives the narrative forward, linking events together, providing insights and meaning, and fulfilling the desire to overcome the lack or the villain.

Barthes's Narrative Theory

The literary critic Roland Barthes (1974) described narrative as having a hermeneutic code. Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation. The stages of the **hermeneutic code** enable an audience to interpret and follow a story as follows:

First, there is an **enigma** that causes us to ask a question about the narrative's development: Who committed the crime? Who will win? How might a character react to a piece of news? How might a relationship develop? The enigma engages our interest and causes us to want to see how it is resolved. The enigma is like a riddle that teases us to guess the next piece of information to be revealed. Second, there is a delay that stalls or postpones the solution to the enigma. The delay sequence may keep the enigma open, causing us to dwell on it as suspense builds. Third, a resolution to the enigma is found, thus satisfying our curiosity and giving us pleasure.

Most narratives have an intricate series of enigmas, delays, and resolutions, with one resolution creating another enigma. For example, the criminal's identity is now known, but will he or she get caught? This drives the narrative forward and sustains our interest. Not only do situation comedies and dramas follow these patterns, but quiz shows, the news, reality shows, and sporting events are also structured in these ways. A quiz show has an enigma of who will win the prize. A reality show engages us in an enigma, delay, and resolution as people, events, and actions cause the candidates for the prized position to be eliminated. For example, the enigma on *The Bachelor* is which woman will he select? Will his parents like the woman he has brought to meet them? (This presents another enigma.) They say that they like her because she is an old-fashioned girl, but then he brings a second woman home to meet them. This produces a delay and another enigma—will they like

her? They do not like the second woman that much, but he spends an evening in the hot tub with her (delay), and picks her over the woman of his parents' choice, thus resolving the main enigma: Who will get selected to be his bride? A sporting event has the "who will win?" enigma. When there is more than one event leading to a bigger prize, the enigma builds suspense over time. American Pharoah, a remarkable racehorse, won the Kentucky Derby and Preakness Stakes in 2015. The enigma was "Will America Pharoah win the Belmont Stakes, the third race for the Triple Crown?" A horse had not won the Triple Crown in 37 years when Affirmed won it in 1978. The media built the suspense until the day of the race. As the horses got into the starting gate, Larry Collmus, the race caller, asked, "Is today the day? Is he the one?" American Pharoah won the race, which was over in less than two and a half minutes. As he crossed the finish line five and a half lengths ahead of the other horse behind him, Collmus, announced, "And here it is, the 37-year wait is over. American Pharoah is finally the one. American Pharoah has won the Triple Crown" (NBC, June 6, 2015). The enigma was solved.

Barthes also described an **action code** that makes complex ideas and feelings immediately recognizable to the audience while, at the same time, their significance becomes apparent in the narrative. This requires the audience to understand the action code within the context of the narrative, thus becoming the coauthor of the story. In other words, the audience senses what will happen next. When Silvio in *The Sopranos* drives Adriana—who has been an informant for the FBI—into the woods, the viewers sense that he is going to kill her. How do they know this? She thought he was taking her to the hospital to see her fiancé, Christopher. Because he did not drive to the hospital, because the woods are isolated, and because she has been an informant, the viewer interprets the situation and recognizes, along with the character Adriana, what the course of action will be. Of course, the viewer has learned, by watching the series, that the characters in *The Sopranos* execute their enemies as a way of obtaining revenge. Silvio is Tony Soprano's right-hand man and would logically be sent to do the dirty deed. The enigma of what will happen to Adriana now that she has told Christopher that she has been giving information to the FBI is delayed as she imagines that she is driving away with her suitcase in the car to enter a witness protection program. Carina Chocano (2004), television critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, wrote: "The moment remains open to interpretation. But it at least hints at the idea that Adriana went to her death like a soldier" (p. E25). When Silvio pulls into the woods, the viewer understands that Adriana will be shot in an act of cold-blooded murder. Chocano wrote that Adriana "suffered like Antigone," thus comparing her story to Sophocles's play *Antigone*, written in 442 BCE. In the play, Antigone, the daughter of Oedipus, was executed (sealed alive in a tomb) by her uncle, the king of Thebes, because she buried her brother Polynices, who died fighting Creon's army. Creon considered him a traitor for whom state law forbade burial. It is a classic story of conflict of loyalty to family versus loyalty to the state. Adriana, likewise, had betrayed her loyalty to the "family" by giving information to the FBI.

Fairy Tales

Fairy tales are adaptable for television narrative. They derive from a long tradition of oral storytelling and are fluid in nature. Popular television series *Grimm* and *Once Upon*

a Time have blended dual universes and parallel narratives with fairy tale characters that enchant viewers. Well-known characters like Snow White and their stories have been transformed into complex narrative. The characters of the fairy tales are no longer one-dimensional, but they still tend to represent good and evil.

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

Narratives rely on conflict and oppositions in their structures. Certainly the masculine/feminine opposition is used most frequently in both situation comedies and dramas. Other oppositions that are widely used are work/home, success/failure, legal/illegal, life/death, good/evil, healthy/sick, competent/incompetent, tolerance/intolerance, trust/distrust, and so on. The oppositions that create conflicts on *The Walking Dead* are humans/walkers (zombies), walker virus/cure, survival/death, and normal life/threatened life as the main characters try to find sanctuary in a world overrun by zombies.

Narrative structure provides a tendency for stories to fall into predictable patterns or formulas. Some formulas are unique to certain television genres and particular shows. The crime show will have a crime solved; harmony will be restored in the family situation comedy; a life will be saved in the hospital; a case will be decided in court; and so on. Formulas that were successful in previous shows are repeated in new shows. Conventions are used that viewers recognize and come to expect. A **convention** is any kind of social or cultural practice used in a narrative that has a meaning that is shared by members of a culture. A musical signature at the start of a television program or a news reader looking directly into the camera are common conventions. Lyrics to songs played during the narrative provide a subtext to the story. As Watson and Hill (2003) point out, "Knowledge of conventions on the part of the audience and recognition when convention is flouted suggests an active union between encoder and decoder" (p. 188).

In order to keep an audience coming back each week to a series, multiple story lines, often without resolution, are developed and interwoven into the narrative structure of an episode. *Hill Street Blues*, on the air from 1981 to 1987, established this pattern with its ensemble cast, stories set within an institution (a police station), several intersecting story lines per episode, story arcs covering several episodes, and literate, witty writing (Stempel, 1996). *Hill Street Blues* had as many as seven story lines going on in one episode. When it did not get good ratings for its first season on the air, NBC renewed the show with the caveat that it had to complete at least one story line per show. You can see this pattern on many shows today. Crimes get solved and court cases are settled, but workplace relationships carry over for many episodes.

To aid viewer memory or to assist viewers who have missed an episode, script writers put in information that repeats previous episodes. Situation comedies recap the narrative situation after a commercial break to reorient viewers. The familiar "previously on . . ." is standard practice for the beginning of a drama series, although some series have dropped the practice. As a series continues, some story lines are brought to closure and new ones are introduced. Because writers have an entire season to tell a story, some story lines continue throughout the season and, in some cases, to the next season.

Another form of structural repetition is the inclusion in the narrative of a number of redundant signs that reinforce a point, a character's personality, a theme, and suspense. These may be in the setting, costumes, details in the dialogue, and action. This kind of redundancy provides texture and tone for the audience and deepens the consistency and believability of the narrative. These are known as social codes and are discussed in more detail in Chapter 6, "Rhetoric and Culture," as cultural signs that are used conventionally for viewer recognition and meaning.

Narrative structure is also adapted to short sequences of action and rapid editing. This is done to try to prevent viewer zapping or channel hopping. It is hoped that the viewer will not want to lose involvement in the ongoing narrative.

It is impossible to separate art from the business of television. The objective of narrative is to attract viewers to the programs, hold them there during the show, and keep them returning each week, have them purchase missed episodes, or subscribe to an online service to watch as many episodes as they want.

Richard Hatem, writer/producer of *Supernatural* and other major television series, discussed narrative structure in terms of acts from his perspective. It should be noted that the term "act" is used by network personnel to describe a segment of an episode that occurs between commercial breaks. Commercial breaks do not necessarily coincide with typical acts in a story line. A break may occur halfway through an act. Here are Hatem's breakdowns for the acts in television drama and comedy (note that he breaks a drama into five acts and the comedy into three acts):

Drama

- Act 1 All the elements are in place. The full ramifications and scope of a problem are realized. The main characters know what the problem is and try to resolve it.
- Act 2 Things get worse. What the character(s) tried did not work. There is no progress, and things may go backwards.
- Act 3 Something else happens and things get worse.
- Act 4 It's worse than Act 3. The solution may be apparent, but the character(s) cannot carry it out, or there is no solution.
- Act 5 The characters come up with a way to solve the problem.

Comedy

- Act 1 A complication occurs that sends the lead character(s) on a mission, to pursue an opportunity, or to solve a problem.
- Act 2 This is the longest act, for it is the quest the character(s) pursue to achieve a goal. Each scene builds on the preceding scene. It usually ends up with a revelation or event that leaves the character(s) facing a choice or dilemma.

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Act 3 The pace picks up and comedic tension builds as the story reaches its climax. The truth is revealed and the problem is resolved. Generally, the ending is a happy one.

Hattem notes that comedic devices, known as tropes, are tried-and-true situation-comedy stories that are used over and over; for example, a lie is told, there is a misunderstanding, role-reversal, jealousy, rocking the boat, time is running out, trying to fix something, etc.

Source: From Venis, 2013, paraphrased, pp. 213–243.

INTERTEXTUALITY

Viewers are more likely to engage with a television program when they experience pleasure. One source of pleasure is recognition of references to other television programs or characters or events. Reference to or connection with other “texts” outside of the present one is known as **intertextuality**. If viewers recognize and understand an allusion, they can become party to it as an inside joke. Intertextuality is often used as a device for parody and has been around in television for many years. Carol Burnett was known for her parodies of movies, television shows, and commercials on her comedy show. Her most famous intertextual parody was a skit called “Went With the Wind,” in which Burnett imitated Scarlett O’Hara. In the movie *Gone With the Wind*, Scarlett makes a dress out of green velvet drapes because she no longer has beautiful dresses. In her television show, Burnett came down the stairs in green velvet drapes with the curtain rod still attached and sitting on her shoulders. When Harvey Korman, playing Rhett Butler, told her, “That gown is gorgeous,” she replied, “I saw it in the window and I just couldn’t resist it.” (You can still see this skit on the Internet.) There are instances of intertextuality in many scripts, not necessarily for parody.

Intertextuality describes both the interpretive practice exercised by viewers and a strategy consciously used by television producers. Brian Ott and Cameron Walter (2000) describe intertextuality as a stylistic device that writers and producers deliberately employ to invite a particular response. One reason for the popularity of the animated show *The Simpsons* is the parody created by many references to other texts. *The Simpsons* deliberately invites viewers to tap into their knowledge of news stories, politics, current events, celebrities, literature, old movies, and other television programs, especially programs about families. In each half-hour episode, *The Simpsons* incorporates 15 to 20 allusions to outside events ranging from *The Odyssey*, *Antiques Roadshow*, Hitchcock movies, and *Mad Men* to physicist Stephen Hawking talking about black holes. Intertextuality credits viewers with the experience necessary to make sense of these allusions, offering them the pleasure of recognition. Likewise, *The Big Bang Theory* has multiple intertextual references, notably names of films and television shows. In one episode, the characters wanted to invent a hover craft as seen in *Back to the Future*, but they ended up watching *Ghostbusters* instead. *Star Trek* is frequently mentioned because it is the characters’ favorite television show.

James Collins attributes intertextuality as a hallmark of postmodern cultural production. He quotes Umberto Eco's description of the "already said"—that is, intertextuality—as the most distinguishing feature of postmodern communication. Revivalism in architecture, vintage clothing, antique furnishings, and so on are forms of recirculation and appropriation of older forms functioning in the present day. Collins (1992) writes, "There is no other medium in which the force of the 'already said' is quite so visible as in television, primarily because the already said is the 'still being said'" (pp. 333–334).

CHARACTERS

Although Aristotle believed that plot was the most important part of a story, characters and their interrelationships dominate television stories. A character's personality may be consistent in a series, but the plot and its outcome can result in a shift in opinion or philosophy. Characters, like the structure of the plots, however, also fall into formulaic types. The next to last episode of *Mad Men* depicted Don Draper, an urban elitist, in conflict with rural, culture-war conservatives when Don got stranded in a Kansas motel. Viewers recognize characters on television when they are acknowledged **social types**, defined by John Reed (1986), a sociologist, as "collections of real people who resemble one another in ways that could be quantified and measured if we wanted to do it" (p. 14). Characters may be popular ideal types and folk generalizations, representing the kinds of people one is likely to encounter superficially. Social types have certain noticeable behaviors and attributes that observers can easily identify and remember. Examples of well-known social types are rednecks, bullies, hillbillies, yuppies, hippies, Southern belles, groupies, snobs, gangsters, cowboys, bosses, maids, butlers, and so on. Because they are no more complicated than they have to be and have limited and predictable functions, they are likely to be minor characters on television. They are represented visually as well as through spoken accents, stock dialogue, and language.

Characters have to be introduced, their personalities defined, and their relationships to one another, to place, and to time have to be established. Characters are appealing because of their traits. The main characters have several traits, while minor characters may have only one or two traits. Character traits may be appearance, attitudes, skills, preferences, psychological drives, and any other specific quality created for a character. Main characters have consistent and strong personalities with a particular mindset through which they approach life in general. Their flaws are part of their nature as are their strengths. As with long-term friendships in which friends reveal more of their personalities, television characters also become better known to us as the series progress.

Consistency of character traits causes audiences to know the character and to look forward to seeing him or her each week. Viewers know that the main characters of a television show will be back again next week to experience similar conflicts and repeat similar acts. Actors portraying television characters often become celebrities, and sometimes their fans confuse the actors with their characters. When a show goes off the air, viewers miss the characters because they have become part of their lives. They regard many television characters as their friends.

Television scriptwriter Madeline DiMaggio also teaches scriptwriting. She advises creating back stories for characters, giving them a biography of significant events that happened in their lives before the television story unfolds. Although the back stories may not be part of the script, they are important in understanding the development of a character and may even help the writers determine locales and other characters. Many television program websites have back stories for the show's characters.

Because scripts for television programs are so tightly controlled, there is little time to show a character's personality except through action. Robert Hilliard (2008) explained, "Not only do the qualities of the characters determine the action, but also character is revealed through the action" (p. 396). The choices a character makes, especially at moments of crisis or conflict, bring out the qualities of the character. Character relationships, which are so important in television drama, reveal a character's personality and compelling characteristics. Also, because of the intimacy provided by television close-ups, the characters' inner feelings can be seen but not necessarily spoken about. We saw in Chapter 2 that this is known as a **subtext**. Marg Helgenberger, who played crime scene investigator Catherine Willows on *CSI*, said, "It's a different style of acting because you look at the evidence without speaking and the audience knows what you are feeling" (William S. Paley Television Festival, 2001).

Most viewers tend to be more connected with the characters than with the plots, and they tune in to see what adventures they will encounter and how they will resolve the enigmas that occur. By watching series and serials on a regular basis, viewers form a relationship with the characters and often identify with them. They see them go in and out of relationships, get married, have children, go to work, fight crime, settle disputes, enjoy leisure activities, and, of course, they see them encounter some form of disequilibrium and try to bring balance back into their lives. When I teach television criticism, I ask my students why they watch the shows they watch. Every semester different students offer the same answer as their predecessors: "Because the characters on television have such interesting lives, and we can vicariously live their lives." In other words, the television characters bring pleasure through identification and entertainment through vicarious experiences.

Characters in plays and made-for-television movies must have their character traits established early in the script because there is not an entire season to develop them. Usually there is just one protagonist whose desire or lack catalyzes the story in these programs. Although there are delays in the narrative, there will be a resolution at the end of the program because there is no continuation unless it gets followed up later by a sequel. There may be more characters in a mini-series. For example, HBO's mini-series *John Adams*, based on David McCullough's biography, had a large cast of historical characters, including Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, but the prominent character was John Adams. From modest beginnings as a farmer to high status as president of the United States, Adams was an independent man with reverence for the law and a commitment to liberty. He was a lawyer whose first appearance in the series occurs after the so-called Boston Massacre. He agreed to defend the British soldiers in court but refused a lucrative post under the British rule and subsequently joined the newly created Continental Congress. His character, as portrayed by Paul Giamatti, was marked by contradictions. At once humble and frugal, he was also ambitious and had a desire to be recognized. Married

to Abigail (Laura Linney), his confidant and advisor, for 54 years, he was often separated from her as he fulfilled his duties. This outstanding production received the Emmy award for best mini-series in 2008, including best actress for Linney and best actor for Giamatti. There were also archetypal and mythical themes such as initiation, the journey, separation, loss, and ascension.

ARCHETYPES

Television characters are often modeled after classical **archetypes** such as heroes and villains, father and mother figures, leaders and sidekicks, wise elders and foolish youths, loyal friends and deceiving associates, and so on. Plots may be based on archetypal themes such as a journey, a quest, heroic action, the antihero, the fall, and redemption. Images such as circles, gates, and bridges can be archetypal. Archetypes are recurrent patterns of actions, character types, or identifiable images whose expression is an unconscious product of the collective experience of the entire human species, an unconscious mental record of such experiences, the collective unconscious.

The Swiss psychiatrist Carl G. Jung (1971) developed a theory of myth based upon his theory of the collective unconscious, which he defined as

a part of the psyche which can be negatively distinguished from a personal unconscious by the fact that it does not, like the latter, owe its existence to personal experience and consequently is not a personal acquisition. . . . The contents [of the collective unconscious] have never been in consciousness, and therefore have never been individually acquired, but owe their existence to heredity. . . . The content of the collective unconscious is made up essentially of archetypes. (pp. 59–60)

Through analysis of thousands of patients' dreams, Jung discovered a striking similarity among ancient myths, dreams, and symbols of widely separated civilizations and cultural groups. He found that the images and structures of the collective unconscious manifest themselves in regularly repeating forms that he named *archetypes*. He believed that these mythical images were present in all people, becoming activated in visual form in dreams and myths. He believed that they express desires, urges, and fears common to people of every age. People react to archetypes because they stimulate images that are already in their collective unconscious. Archetypes depict some eternal quality, some enduring feature of the human race. When people find them in a story, they experience immediate recognition.

Jung wrote that archetypes "indicate the existence of definite forms in the psyche which seem to be present always and everywhere. Mythological research calls them

'motifs' . . . literally a pre-existent form" (p. 60). An archetype is a narrative pattern, a model, or a prototype reflecting cultural patterns that reveal and shape a person's psychic and social life. Some archetypes have human form, such as the hero, a monster, Earth mother, temptress, the innocent, unfaithful spouse, a magician, a martyr, or a warrior; some are experiences, such as a journey, a quest, a task, initiation, descent, ascent, the fall, or redemption; some are things, such as a bridge, fire, a door, or water; and some are metaphors, such as a mandala or magic circle, light and darkness, or heaven and hell. There are too many archetypes to discuss fully here, but they can be found in the many writings of Jung and his followers. On television, heroes are obvious, as are villains, innocents, and temptresses. One archetype that deserves more consideration—because it appears so often on television programs—is the trickster, known for sly jokes, malicious pranks, preference for physical satisfaction above intellectual pursuits, the power to change shape, and sometimes a dual nature (half animal, half human). The trickster, although usually a negative type of hero, may transform what is meaningless into something meaningful (Samuels, Shorter, & Plaut, 1987). Jung identified the trickster in fairy tales such as *Tom Thumb* and *Stupid Hans*, but he also discussed the trickster in Native American mythology, often as a shaman or in the form of a coyote (Jung, 1969). The characters Wilfred on FX's *Wilfred* and Felix on *The Odd Couple* are comic but not malicious tricksters, whereas in a drama, the trickster may be a clever criminal or a jealous rival.

Robert R. Smith found many archetypes in nonfiction television, such as tests of bravery in sporting events; wisdom in statements by government and world leaders; redemption in reports of medical breakthroughs and scientific advancement; Armageddon in news about floods, hurricanes, pollution, and starvation; paradise in holiday celebrations or vacation stories; and Dionysus (god of wine and revelry) in stories about rock concerts, parties, and other celebrations. Television is a natural medium for archetypes because of its visual appeal to a mass audience (Smith, 1976).

Rituals are also archetypal. Recreational, national, and celebratory events on television, such as the World Series, the Super Bowl, the Olympics, presidential inaugurations, royal weddings, state funerals, Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, and tragic disasters, unify the audience as a collective body who observe and participate in these rituals from afar through a communal focus. These are narrative occasions as announcers and anchors tell the stories as the events unfold. Football players take on heroic dimensions in massive stadiums; inaugural rituals with visual and musical symbols of patriotism remind viewers of the stability and continuity of government and nation; state funerals, such as the 1963 funeral of President Kennedy, the 2004 funeral of President Reagan, and the 2007 funeral of President Ford; and televised accounts of tragedies such as the *Challenger* disaster, the Oklahoma City bombing, the Boston Marathon bombing, and especially the fall of the World Trade Center Twin Towers on September 11, 2001, enable the television audience not only to collectively mourn their loss but also to reinforce a strong sense of national unity. Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) explained that we respond to television images as if we were seeing them firsthand, thus physical presence is no longer required for the firsthand experience. Television is truly a "window on the world." The obsessively repeated images of tragedies on television burn them into our minds so that they seem to happen again and become part of our collective memories.

MYTH

Myth and archetype tend to overlap, although myths are more closely related to individual cultures. Myths are important for television criticism because they have formed the foundation for narratives throughout the ages. Mythical themes occur and recur in narratives because they represent life experiences, beliefs, values, and behaviors that organize social interaction. Myths are generally known as fictitious tales, often with primitive or ancient origins, involving supernatural characters embodying timeless virtues and values. These virtues and values tend to be ideas to which people already subscribe. Myths offer examples of right and wrong, explain baffling or frightening phenomena, and provide models of good and evil. They are, according to Richard Slotkin, “stories drawn from a society’s history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society’s ideology and of dramatizing its moral consciousness—with all the complexities and contradictions that consciousness may contain” (Jasinski, 2001, p. 383). Rollo May (1991) explained that

a myth is a way of making sense in a senseless world. Myths are narrative patterns that give significance to our existence. . . . Myths are like the beams in a house: not exposed to outside view, they are the structure which holds the house together so people can live in it. (p. 15)

Myths are also based upon the norms of a culture and acceptable ways of resolving conflict. René Wellek and Austin Warren’s definition of myth includes the notion of human origins and destinies:

Myth comes to mean any anonymously composed storytelling of origins and destinies: the explanations a society offers its young of why the world is and why we do as we do, its pedagogic images of the nature and destiny of man. (Jasinski, 2001, p. 383)

Each society has its own myths that are related to its history, values, and beliefs. According to Roderick Hart (1990), there are four characteristic types of myths based on their functions. *Cosmological* myths explain “why we are here, where we came from, what our ancestors were like” (p. 315). These myths come from family members, school books, church, films, and television. *Societal* myths “teach one the proper way to live” (p. 315). These may be stories of famous people, such as George Washington’s refusal to lie and Abraham Lincoln’s love of school and his long walks through the snow to get there. Although the facts of the myths may be erroneous, the “truth” of their messages is not. *Identity* myths preserve a culture’s distinctiveness and provide a sense of collective identity. Stories of immigrants coming to America and succeeding in the fulfillment of their dreams and stories of the dedication of the United States to freedom and opportunity distinguish the nation from closed and authoritarian societies. *Eschatological* myths “tell people where they are going, what lies in store for them in the short run . . . and in the long run” (p. 318). These myths may promise success through hard work, discovery of a cure for disease, a heavenly reward, or an eternal punishment.

Bronislaw Malinowski (1961), a cultural anthropologist, defined myth as “a body of narratives woven into a culture which dictates belief, defines ritual, and acts as a chart of the social orders” (p. 249). Joseph Campbell (1988), the author of 13 books on myth, believed that there were two orders of myth: “the mythology that relates you to your nature and to the natural world of which you’re a part. And there is the mythology that is strictly sociological, linking you to a particular society” (p. 28). The former is a motivating power or a value system that is universal because it is of one’s own body and of nature. The latter has to do with specific societies. In other words, a person is both a natural woman or man and a member of a particular group. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg (1966), in their book *The Nature of Narrative*, use the terms *myth* and *traditional narrative* synonymously because this was the meaning of the Greek word *mythos*. They further refined the definition of myth by elucidating three types: (1) the imaginative folktale designed to amuse an audience; (2) a legend, a quasi-historical tale of ordinary or fantastic events; and (3) the sacred myth, an expression of and justification for theology, manners, and morals (p. 217). The latter is the most tradition bound of all forms of narrative in any culture and, as an embodiment of religious truth, is not to be tampered with or changed. Scholes and Kellogg pointed out that

traditional and rigidly preserved stories lend themselves to alteration or adaptation; they become rationalized and humanized or fancifully exaggerated. . . . myth, in yielding up its special characteristics, dies only to be reborn. Because mythic narrative is the expression in story form of deep-seated human concerns, fears, and aspirations, the plots of mythic tales are a storehouse of narrative correlatives—keys to the human psyche in story form—guaranteed to reach an audience and move them deeply. (p. 220)

Earlier in this chapter, contemporary television narratives were described as forged from “older stories” and “themes from ancient stories.” Today, myths can be found in our rituals, the visual arts, architecture, books, music, and on television programs. Television stories often have mythic themes already shared by large segments of the population. Television narratives often have characters, situations, and plots taken directly from known myths or mythic motifs. The enormously popular series *The X-Files*, which ended in 2002 and returns in 2016, was analyzed by Leslie Jones (1996) as entirely mythical. Jones found that all the stories in the series were based on three myths in multiple versions and variants: “There’s something in the woods,” “There’s something in the house,” and “There’s something in the government,” depending upon the location of that week’s story (p. 81). Jones described the equal weight given to each of the three categories in the episodes of *The X-Files* as

a kind of narrative osmosis, as characteristics of one category seep into another and all narrative traits become interchangeable. We find monsters of myth, space, and conspiracy equally out in the wilderness, at home in the sewers, and bagged, tagged, and filed for reference in the warehouses of the Pentagon. (p. 83)

Desperate Housewives had a weekly theme narrated by Mary Alice, a character who is dead. On December 4, 2005, the theme was "return of the prodigal son." At the conclusion of the episode, Mary Alice said in voiceover,

The stories are as old as time itself. The prodigal son who returns home, the father who forgives him, the jealous wife who tricks the husband who trusts her, the desperate mother who risks everything for the child who needs her, and the faithless husband who hurts the wife who loves him so deeply. Why do we listen again and again? Because these are the stories of family, and once we look past the fighting, pain, and resentment, we occasionally like to remind ourselves that there is absolutely nothing more important.

The popular series *Lost* was based on thematic myths with archetypes such as fate versus free will, good versus evil, and faith versus reason, but as the showrunner, Damon Lindelof, said,

If there's one word that we keep coming back to, it's redemption. It is that idea of everybody has something to be redeemed for. . . . But in order to redeem yourself, you can only do it through a community. . . . In many ways "Lost" is a mash-up/remix of our favorite stories, whether that's bible stories from Sunday school or "Narnia" or "Star Wars" or the writings of John Steinbeck. (Manly, 2010, pp. 2–3)

One of the characters, Desmond, came to the island on *Lost* when his boat was blown off course. Desmond spent years trying to get back to the woman he loved—Penny, short for Penelope. Penelope was the wife of Odysseus in *The Odyssey*.

Leading characters in television programs are often heroes with supernatural powers or superior abilities. Television series like *Supernatural*, *Daredevil*, and *The Flash* feature characters who use their supernatural powers for the good of humankind. On the other hand, Kensi Blye, one of the lead characters on *NCIS: Los Angeles*, is a slender, feminine, and, of course, beautiful woman who can subdue a criminal much stronger and heavier than she is. Kensi is an NCIS special agent, not a goddess or an Amazon, but she has superior abilities that enable her to bring down criminals fearlessly. Athletes in sports may be seen to have superior abilities, consequently becoming heroes or fallen heroes. Barbaro was a racehorse who became a hero to thousands of admirers. Undefeated in previous races, he won the Kentucky Derby in 2006 by a thrilling 6½-length triumph. He was the favorite to win the Preakness Stakes on May 20, 2006, but suffered a life-threatening injury, shattering his right hind leg at the start of the race. Because of his heroic status, people sent cards, flowers, carrots, and apples to him following his surgery. The University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine, the site of his surgery, convalescence, and eventual death, set up a website with reports of Barbaro's progress, photographs of him, and a link for people to send messages to the stricken horse, their fallen hero (<http://www.vet.upenn.edu>).

Campbell (1988) wrote that there are two kinds of deeds that mythical heroes perform: the physical deed, in which the hero performs a courageous act in a battle or saves a life,

and the spiritual deed, in which the hero experiences the supernormal range of human spiritual life and returns with a message. He described the “usual hero adventure” as beginning with a lack—something has been taken from someone or something is lacking in normal circumstances. The hero takes off on a series of adventures beyond the ordinary to recover what has been lost or to find a remedy. It is a cycle of going and returning. The basic motif of the hero’s journey is to leave one condition and discover that which will enable a movement to a richer or more mature condition.

The antihero is also a familiar character in television programs, from Archie Bunker to Bart Simpson. These are deeply flawed characters with some quality that redeems them. Some have dark pasts like Don Draper on *Mad Men*; some are political operators like Francis Underwood on *House of Cards*; some are fixers like Olivia Pope on *Scandal*; and some do illegal things like Mike Ehrmantraut on *Breaking Bad*. The character based on the life of Thomas Cromwell on PBS’s *Wolf Hall* is a 16th-century antihero who could be in the 21st century. He is cautious, pragmatic, clever, a legal and financial genius, a shrewd fixer for King Henry VIII, and a dark and conflicted man. As Sara Colleton, executive producer of *Dexter*, said, “What redeems these characters for audiences is that all have aspects of their personalities that viewers identify with in some way him in his journey for humanization” (McDowell, 2008, p. 49).

Reality shows are often mythical in nature. *The Amazing Race* is a journey in which the contestants vie with one another to reach a destination with a prize at the end. *The Bachelor*

Photo 4.2 Olivia Pope (left), a political fixer, in *Scandal*.



Source: © ABC

Photo 4.3 Receiving a rose from the bachelor in *The Bachelor*.



Source: © ABC

and *The Bachelorette* are variations on the prince or princess selecting the best person to wed. *The Biggest Loser* is about defeating the monster—obesity. *Project Runway* shows competing designers transforming their models into beautifully dressed, coiffed, and made-up beauties, portraying a Cinderella story.

Television and myth are intimately related in many ways. Traditional tales of gods and heroes, folklore and fairy tales, and villains and supernatural forces are sources for television narrative. The patterns of characters in myth inform the destiny of the characters modeled on these myths. As you can see, there are many ways to analyze the mythical roots of characters in television stories.

SUMMARY

The stories told on television challenge, tease, guide, and please the audience. They arouse viewer desire and then satisfy it. There are stories that offer archetypal models, myths and folktales, and morals and models for living. Roger Silverstone (1999) wrote,

Our stories are social texts: drafts, sketches, fragments, frameworks; visible and audible evidence of our essentially reflexive culture, turning the events and ideas

of both experience and imagination into daily tales. . . . Narratives tell us how it is and it is how they tell us. (pp. 41 & 46)

The television critic William Henry once wrote, "I run to television for solace. In times of personal turmoil it provides familiarity, emotional connections, and the promise of resolution" (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 184). Television is the nation's storyteller. Understanding of narrative gives you, as a television critic, insight into how these stories are told and how they relate to social and cultural life.

EXERCISES

1. Describe the "lack," according to Propp, in a situation comedy and tell how equilibrium is restored.
2. Watch a drama, a reality show, or a soap opera and identify the enigma, the delay, and the resolution.
3. Find an example of an action code (such as the one described in *The Sopranos* example) and describe how you sensed what was going to happen.
4. Watch *The Simpsons* with a friend and list all the instances of intertextuality in one episode. See if you both find the same or different ones.
5. Cite an instance of an archetypal trickster in a situation comedy and in a drama.
6. Find a myth in a television drama and relate it to some deep-seated human condition.

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