

## Narrative

Narrative is very important in sitcoms because not only does it have to drive the humour, it also has to be realistic for the characters and the situations that they are in.

If we were to apply **Propp's theory** of Narrative to our two sitcoms we can see two very different readings that make for a considerably strong comparison.

In the IT Crowd we can see we have 3 **heroes** in Roy, Moss and Jen. We can see this by the programme being named after this small group of individuals, and that each of them have a mini narrative arc through this episode. We are clearly following their journeys. (**heroes journey**)

There are some other identifiable character types in the episode. Negative One, the challenger to Moss in the 8+ group, is identified as the villain who challenges one of our heroes. The **villain** is not evil or extreme like in some genres such as dramas and thrillers and he is used purely for humorous effect.

The three characters; Roy, Moss and Jen change regularly within each narrative arc, taking on the role of **helper(s)**, for each other to provide advice and motivation to their next action. Prime is a more obvious helper in his first interaction with Moss and then he quickly becomes the **sidekick** amazed by Moss' intelligence.

It becomes more complicated when we try and consider some of the other characters in the episode such as Barry the Window Cleaner, Alistair and Douglas and what roles they take in the episode. Douglas, in other episodes of the programme, can be identified as the hero, villain, provider and helper depending on the arc of each storyline; however, in this episode he fulfils only a minor role of facilitating a narrative enigma.

If we were now to try and apply Propp's theory to Friends, it becomes much harder. For this one episode we definitely have Rachel arrive to fulfil the **hero** position. Her '**journey**' to discover life in the city after running away from her wedding will take up the majority of this episode and the other 5 characters would therefore take on the role of the helper(s) all coming to Rachel's aid in different ways during the episode.

It would take a further and deeper reading of Friends as an entire series to understand that the roles are indeed interchangeable. All characters will eventually take on the role of the **hero** over the many episodes and many seasons. Friends is an ensemble comedy that is successful because it follows the stories of 6 different characters. The interchangeable nature of their narrative roles could suggest that it is more complex in Friends to apply the theory of Propp.

Another important way to look at these two sitcoms is to do with their structure. They are directly comparable because they are the very first episode of each – being the opening episode allows a **linear structure** to be established. The **Set-Up** that takes place in the IT Crowd initiates each of their narrative arcs. The Set-Up that takes place in Friends, is much slower and the **backstories** are included very subtly but to give enough detail for the audience not to get too confused. We must remember that the very first episode of a new sitcom has a more challenging job to do when setting up the structure. The IT Crowd has an expectation that the returning audience is aware of each of their main character's personalities.

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In each narrative arc in the episode of The IT Crowd there are some **enigma codes** leading the audience to question many aspects of this episode and to drive each character to make significant decisions. By the end of episode there are still some questions, but by the very nature of sitcom's conventions, these are not answered and left open by the next episode. It is clear we will never discuss Countdown, see Alastair or attend the workout meetings again. Each episode is fresh and new.

Friends, on the other hand, has a simpler structure, with fewer obvious enigma codes and possibly relies on the audience not having to think too much about each character and their past.

Both programmes have an **episodic** narrative. In 'The Final Countdown' we understand the **resolution** of the narrative for this episode is indeed Moss winning Countdown in some way or another. The IT Crowd does not attempt to **set-up** narratives that will run across series and tries to make them completely self-contained. In the Friends episode 'The One where Monica gets a roommate' we again see a very simple **episodic narrative structure** that has a resolution when Monica allows Rachel to move in. The episode also sets up many **narrative arcs** that will potentially stretch not only across multi-episodes, but seasons and eventually years.

As you can see there are lots of different aspects of narrative that can be talked about in both of our sitcoms and they can provide a rich basis for discussion and comparison.