

This essay is an analysis in terms of narrative and genre of an episode of the television show *Law & Order*, from season one, 'Out of the Half-Light'. A narrative is "a text structured by the time sequence of the events it represents" (Thwaites et al 2002, p 118) and it is also used to provide reasons for the events (*Study Guide CMM19* 2009, p 57). Neale reports Lacey as saying that genre is a 'repertoire of elements' such as character types, setting, iconography, narrative and style (Neale 2001, p 3). The appeal of genre lies in its predictability, the audience knows what to expect. yes One of the attractions of crime texts is that no matter how disturbing the plot, the viewer can be assured of a resolution at the end (Davies in Fiske 1987, p. 114). Yes This familiarity gives pleasure to the viewer and, by using hegemony (ideology offered by a dominant group to a subordinate group as something they already believe) (Thwaites et al 2002, p 170). yes. That pleasure is used, in this case, to offer to viewers a humanist-patriarchal ideology saying that the world can be changed by the actions of a few good men aided by women who are not equal partners (*Study Guide CMM19* 2009, p 66). yes

Crime genre texts follow a similar format. A crime is committed and investigated, a breakthrough occurs and the situation is resolved. The plot, or sequence of events in the narrative (Thwaites et al, 2002, p 126), of this episode is a sixteen year old African American girl, Astrea Crawford (Crawford), who alleges that she has been raped by white police but provides no more details (the crime). An African American congressman, Eaton, takes up her cause and prevents her from cooperating with the police (the investigation). Finally Crawford's mother admits to a District Attorney, Robinette, that the allegations are false (breakthrough) and the matter is resolved (resolution).

Law & Order is identifiable as belonging to the crime genre because of its use of a similar style of character types (hero and villain), settings such as court rooms, iconography (realistic sets that look like a police station), narrative and style to other crime texts. The plot follows a logic of its own – 'filmic logic'- which structures events to suit the narrative (*Study Guide CMM19 2009*, p 58). Yes If the events were presented strictly as they are set in real time, the sense of suspense would be lost, for instance we would know that no crime has actually taken place. yes

Vladimir Propp defined character types in fairy tales in his list of functions - the hero, the villain, the princess and her father, the dispatcher, the provider, the helper and the false hero (Turner 1988,p 68). These categories define the range of actions of each character or their actantial function (*Study Guide CMM19 2009*, p 73), for instance the hero's actions are good, the villain's actions are evil and the princess needs rescuing. Each character's function undergoes development as the narrative requires using key points where the character's decision determines the course of the narrative (*Study Guide CMM19 2009*, p 77). These functions are equally applicable to texts in the crime genre. yes

The characters of the police and the lawyers from the District Attorney's office fall into the function of hero(es). They are questing heroes, searching for the truth, as shown in the key point where the lawyers decide to force Crawford to testify to the Grand Jury. If the lawyers had not taken that decision, they would have had no evidence to investigate, ending the search. Their decision and the resulting pressure eventually contribute to the resolution by persuading Crawford's mother to reveal the truth.

Warwick Mules 5/2/10 9:50 AM

**Comment:** There is a difference however, between questing for truth, and doing one's job. Police procedurals walk a fine line between the two.

Eaton is the villain, a stereotypical politician, dressed in expensive clothes and giving emotional speeches to whip up the crowds. He uses Crawford to advance his own career without any thought for her welfare, as in the key point where Stone warns him of the consequences if Crawford and her family do not testify and Eaton says he cannot help Stone. At this key point Eaton could have assisted the police but that would not be in keeping with his actantial function as villain yes. Eaton also fits into the function of false hero, Crawford turns to him for protection but he does not protect her, he uses her. Yes He is also the dispatcher, he challenges the police and lawyers to investigate without any information, sending them on their quest for truth.

yes

Crawford and her father fit into the functions of the princess and her father. Crawford needs rescuing. Her motivation for making the false allegations is her fear of her father's reaction to her pregnancy and her wish for an abortion. She believes her father will be more willing to agree to an abortion if she says she has been raped. Her father makes the decisions in this family and his actions in following Eaton's advice not to cooperate with the police hinder the investigation. He is also revealed at the end as a violent man who beats Crawford until warned off by Robinette.

Crawford's mother is the provider. She provides the truth to Robinette at the end which enables him to resolve the situation. She is portrayed as the stereotypical over emotional woman, breaking down into hysterics at the key points when the police make a last appeal to her to interview her daughter and when they appeal to Eaton in her presence to allow Crawford to speak to them. If she had decided then to help the investigation, the resolution would have come earlier. All her decisions are made for

her by men, first by her husband and Eaton and then by the priest who arranges her meeting with Robinette.

The helper function is filled by various minor characters, mainly women, such as the rape specialist who warns the allegations may be false, the judge who decides the family must testify and the nurse in the beginning who helps the police to question Crawford.

The narrative presents a fabulation or story (Thwaites et al 2002, p 172) of race relations between African Americans and Whites and how they should be resolved.

The fabulation infers that the Crawford's, and by extension African Americans in general, difficulties are the result of their distrust of the law. Yes The superiority of the lawyers to their opponent Eaton is shown for example by the use of the camera angles and positioning of the characters in the key point of the grand jury scene where the camera, using a technique known as point of view (*Study Guide CMM19 2009*, p 68), looks down on Eaton as if from Stone's viewpoint – Stone is looking down on Eaton from a position of moral superiority. This technique invites the viewer to also look down on Eaton and all he represents as the viewer identifies with Stone, a white lawyer. yes

As Fiske notes 'genre is a means of constructing both the audience and the reading subject' (1987, p 114) and is used to influence the meanings of the text offered to and accepted by the readers (Fiske 1987, p 114). Texts in the crime genre present the hero as good and the villain as evil so the resolution in favour of the hero must be in favour of good. Yes Turner states that humans define things in terms of what they are not

Warwick Mules 5/2/10 9:51 AM

Deleted: :

Warwick Mules 5/2/10 9:53 AM

**Comment:** Capital L. law is not the same as law. No one can mistrust Law, which is mythic in nature, eg. the triumph of good over evil.


Warwick Mules 5/2/10 9:52 AM

Deleted: L

(1988, p 73), so this text invites the viewer to ally themselves with the heroes, who are good, all male and mostly white, against the villain Eaton, who is evil and African American. This construction of identification closes off alternative readings of the text, for example Eaton has legitimate questions for a system that is most likely racist but the resolution is not in his favour so his views are discarded as of no importance.

Yes good point This identification is also how the narrative presents a humanist-patriarchal ideology to the viewers as something they already agree with as the viewer is invited to identify themselves with the heroes and all that they stand for.

1,343 words



## LIST OF REFERENCES

Fiske, John 1987, *Television Culture*, Methuen, London, pp 109-115

Neale, Steve 200, 'Genre and Television' in Glen Creeber, *The television genre book*, British Film Institute, London pp 1-7

*Study Guide CMM19 Text and Culture* 2009, School of Humanities, Griffith University, Brisbane

Thwaites, Tony, Davis, Lloyd and Mules, Warwick 2002 *Introducing Cultural and Media Studies: a Semiotic Approach*, Palgrave Macmillan, United Kingdom

Turner, Graeme 1988, 'Film narrative,' ch 4, *Film as Social Practice*, Routledge, London pp 67-74

*Law & Order* 1990, television series, season 1, ep 11 'Out of the half-light', Wolf Films, USA

This is a very good essay. Many sound points and systematic analysis of the complexities of the narrative and characters. Shows considerable ability to use terms and concepts. Shows some insight into the moral dimensions of crime drama. Good use of secondary sources.

29/35