

Genre and Narrative Elements of the Television Series *How I Met Your Mother*

Kateryna Kachur

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L.S.

Mgr. Libor Marek, Ph.D.
děkan

doc. Mgr. Roman Trušník, Ph.D.
ředitel ústavu

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ABSTRAKT

Tato bakalářská práce analyzuje žánrové a narativní prvky v televizním seriálu *Jak jsem poznal vaši matku*. Teoretická část představuje klíčové pojmy naratologie se zaměřením na typy vypravěčů, fokalizaci, rozlišení mezi diegetickým a mimetickým vyprávěním, časové posuny v naraci a fenomén nespolehlivého vypravěče. Okrajově se rovněž zmiňuje o žánru sitcomu pro zasazení seriálu do širšího televizního kontextu. Praktická část práce zkoumá, jak jsou tyto narativní strategie uplatněny v *Jak jsem poznal vaši matku*. Zvláštní pozornost je věnována zobrazení Teda Mosbyho jako nespolehlivého vypravěče, manipulaci s časovou posloupností prostřednictvím retrospektiv a anticipací a humornému propojování různých narativních rovin. Na vybraných epizodách je ukázáno, jak seriál narušuje tradiční lineární vyprávění a zapojuje diváka pomocí narativní complexity. Cílem práce je ukázat, jak jsou v *Jak jsem poznal vaši matku* využity sofistikované narativní techniky k vytvoření osobité a inovativní formy televizního vyprávění.

Klíčová slova: *Jak jsem poznal vaši matku*, hlasový komentář, diegetický mód, mimetický mód, jazyková událost, obrazová událost, nespolehlivý vypravěč, extradiegetický vypravěč, heterodiegetický vypravěč, fokalizace, retrospektiva, anticipace.

ABSTRACT

This bachelor's thesis analyzes genre and narrative elements in the television series *How I Met Your Mother*. The theoretical part introduces key narratological concepts, focusing on the types of narrators, focalization, the distinction between diegetic and mimetic narration, the use of narrative time shifts, and the phenomenon of unreliable narration. It also briefly touches on the sitcom genre to contextualize the show's formal background. The practical part of the thesis examines how these narrative strategies are applied in *How I Met Your Mother*. Particular attention is devoted to the portrayal of Ted Mosby as an unreliable narrator, the manipulation of chronology through flashbacks and flashforwards, and the show's humorous blending of different narrative layers. Selected episodes are analyzed to illustrate how the series challenges traditional linear narration and engages the audience through narrative complexity. The aim of the thesis is to demonstrate how sophisticated narrative techniques are used in *How I Met Your Mother* to create a distinctive and innovative form of television storytelling.

Keywords: *How I Met Your Mother*, voice-over, diegetic mode, mimetic mode, language-event, image-event, unreliable narrator, extradiegetic narrator, heterodiegetic narrator, focalization, flashback, flashforward.

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I hereby declare that the print version of my bachelor's thesis and the electronic version of my thesis deposited in the IS/STAG system are identical.

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INTRODUCTION

Narrative perspective, together with the way stories are structured and presented, plays a fundamental role in shaping the audience's experience. Techniques such as point of view, manipulation of time, and the reliability of the narrator influence how viewers understand and emotionally connect to the narrative. While traditional television series often rely on straightforward linear storytelling, contemporary series increasingly experiment with more complex narrative forms. This shift is exemplified by *How I Met Your Mother*, in which humor is interwoven with advanced narrative strategies, including the use of an unreliable narrator, frequent temporal shifts through flashbacks and flashforwards, and the layering of narrative perspectives. As a sitcom, genre conventions are drawn on and simultaneously reconfigured through non-linear storytelling, character-based humor, and a structurally intricate narrative approach.

This thesis aims to analyze the narrative elements in *How I Met Your Mother*, focusing particularly on the construction of Ted Mosby as an unreliable narrator and the manipulation of narrative time across the series. By applying key narratological concepts such as focalization, narrative layering, and temporal shifts, this study examines the ways in which traditional narrative expectations are challenged and a more interactive, dynamic viewing experience is created. The goal is to demonstrate how these narrative strategies contribute not only to the show's comedic effect but also to its thematic richness and lasting impact on television storytelling.

I NARRATIVE THEORY

1 DEFINING NARRATIVE

For the purpose of the thesis, an overview of the term narrative will be presented, with a focus on division, key aspects, and fields of application.

The narrative plays a crucial role in how people communicate and share their cultural identities and values. Often individuals rely on narrative in their daily lives without even realizing it. It serves as a crucial tool in everyday communication, helping people structure experiences, share information, and make sense of events. Whether in casual conversation, media, literature, or historical accounts, narratives are deeply involved in human interactions.¹

All narratives require actions or some form of event or change to drive the story forward.² A narrative is defined by the process of following a character. It is only when the narrative focuses on a specific figure that events acquire a coherent narrative structure. Until this point, the space in a literary work or film remains neutral and chaotic, but when a character becomes the center of attention, their actions begin to shape the development of the story. This process not only establishes the protagonist but also reveals the presence of a narrator who directs the reader's attention.³ Narration involves a complex structure in which multiple communicative relationships unfold simultaneously: the writer addresses the audience externally, the narrator guides an internal recipient, and characters engage with each other within the fictional realm through speech, behavior, and thought.⁴ The narrator functions as a link between the imaginary world of the story and its audience, shaping the narrative through this interaction. Without following the character, events remain unconnected, and the text does not achieve the status of a narrative.⁵

A narrative is essentially built around imagined individuals living in an imagined world. According to cognitive theory, simply including a human character is often enough to evoke a basic sense of narrative within the situation in which that character appears. In *An Introduction to Narratology*, Monika Fludernik emphasizes the essential role of character in

¹ Monika Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology*, trans. Patricia Häusler-Greenfield and Monika Fludernik (New York: Routledge, 2009), 1.

² Rick Altman, *A theory of Narrative* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 11.

³ Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology*, 6.

⁴ Suzanne Keen, *Narrative Situation: Who's Who and What's Its Function* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 32.

⁵ Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology*, 6.

narrative development.⁶ In narratology, the term *voice* refers specifically to the narrator, the figure who tells the story—distinct from the author or silent characters. Although the concept of *voice* in written texts may seem paradoxical, it remains essential, as narration involves both the act of storytelling and the social relationship it creates with the audience. The narrator occupies a unique space within the narrative: while they exist only within the story, their act of telling gives the narrative its very form and structure.⁷

1.1 Narrative in Audiovisual Media

Narrative, the way a story is told, is an integral part of every film. It is a way of interpreting, highlighting, or explaining the events that take place in a movie. Narration tells a story by selecting only the main facts and events that occurred while maintaining the main point of the movie. This is done primarily to reduce the time meter because if all the scenes in movies lasted as long as in real life, the viewer would lose interest and be disinclined to view further. This is called the *narrative strategy* used in the creation of audiovisual content. Also, narrative in films is used as a strategy to hide interesting information, thereby maintaining intrigue and making the viewer more interested in the further development of the film's plot.⁸

A narrative is structured around temporal development, where one situation transitions into another, driven by an action or inaction performed by a character or external force.⁹ For instance, if a character in a film performs a rain dance, followed by spontaneous rainfall, the viewer may infer a causal relationship between the two events. However, if sunlight appears instead, it could indicate the failure of the ritual. Similarly, inaction can influence the narrative—if someone fails to rescue a drowning person, this inaction may alter the story's progression or introduce conflict.¹⁰

Film inherently consists of a sequence of photographic images progressing along the temporal axis. Each frame in a film captures a specific moment in time, yet their succession forms a coherent narrative. Due to its intrinsic temporality, scholars like André Gaudreault argue that cinema is inherently equipped with narrative structures. Seymour Chatman

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Susan Sniader Lanser, *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 4-5.

⁸ Michael Ryan and Melissa Lenos, *An Introduction to Film Analysis: Technique and Meaning in Narrative Film*, 2nd ed. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 110.

⁹ Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 3-5.

¹⁰ Peter Verstraten, *Film Narratology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 13.

supports this view, asserting that the sequential nature of film naturally aligns with narrative principles, even when employing nonlinear storytelling or experimental visual techniques.¹¹ Thus, whether in literature or film, the narrative is defined by temporality, *focalization*, and the structured organization of events, shaping its narrative identity across different media.

¹¹ Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (London: Cornell University Press, 1978), 123.

2 GENRE THEORY AND THE SITCOM TRADITION

Genre plays a significant role in shaping how television programs are produced, structured, and interpreted within both industry practices and audience reception. Although genre categories often appear self-evident, their recognition is influenced by cultural conventions rather than objective criteria.¹² As Rick Altman explains, genre can be approached in two main ways: semantically, by focusing on recurring elements like characters, settings, or themes “what is shown,” and syntactically, by examining how these elements are organized into narrative structures “how it is shown.” While these approaches were often treated separately in earlier theories, Altman argues that using them together provides a fuller understanding of how genre functions. This dual perspective explains why genre labels are widely recognized, due to shared surface features, and also how deeper thematic patterns give each genre its distinctive meaning.¹³ He further notes that genres tend to evolve, either by turning consistent content into structured forms or by applying existing narrative models to new themes. Additionally, he emphasizes that genres reflect a balance between audience expectations and industry intentions, serving both entertainment purposes and broader ideological roles.¹⁴

2.1 The Sitcom Genre: History and Features

Genre provides a valuable framework for critically examining television texts, as it offers insight into how such content is structured, interpreted, and categorized by both producers and viewers.¹⁵ A strong example of this dynamic is the sitcom, a television form that has evolved in close connection with the medium itself and continually reflects wider shifts in popular culture and audience expectations.

Sitcoms, short for situational comedies, became a major part of American television by building on the popularity of earlier radio shows. While many early sitcoms were based on radio programs, the term “sitcom” itself only became widely used later, in the 1950s and 1960s. The genre’s growth was strongly supported by the entertainment industry, which promoted it as a familiar and accessible form of comedy. As television audiences grew,

¹² Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1-2.

¹³ Rick Altman, “A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre,” *Cinema Journal* 23, no. 3 (Spring 1984): 10-11, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1225093>.

¹⁴ Altman, “Semantic/Syntactic Approach,” 12-13.

¹⁵ Brett Mills, *The Sitcom* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 24-25.

sitcoms became a reliable way to attract viewers, especially after the success of *I Love Lucy*, which helped define the format for years to come.¹⁶ *I Love Lucy* is widely recognized as one of the most influential shows in the development of the sitcom genre. It helped establish many of the conventions and stylistic features that define the format today, such as a recurring domestic setting, exaggerated comic situations, and the inclusion of a live studio audience. The show was innovative in its combination of film techniques, radio-style performance, and television production methods, including the use of multiple cameras and continuity editing. By blending everyday life with comedic exaggeration, *I Love Lucy* became a foundational text in the evolution of American television comedy.¹⁷ Over time, the word “sitcom” entered everyday language, showing how closely the genre became tied to both television culture and commercial promotion.¹⁸

Understanding the nature of the sitcom as a television genre may not lie in proving it to be a completely uniform or consistent category, but rather in identifying how it sets itself apart from other types of programming. Sitcoms often define themselves through what they are *not*—they are not factual, not informative, and not aligned with genres such as news or documentaries. This contrast plays a crucial role in shaping how audiences perceive sitcoms, especially when compared to television content that is typically associated with seriousness, education, or public value. Scholars like Jonathan Gray argue that this division between entertainment and information reflects wider cultural values, particularly the distinction society makes between what is seen as productive or meaningful and what is considered trivial or recreational. Traditional sitcoms reinforce this divide through exaggerated acting styles and a lack of realism, which makes them appear deliberately artificial. These aesthetic choices, along with institutional and industry practices, contribute to maintaining clear boundaries between genres. In this way, genre classification is never just a descriptive tool—it also carries ideological weight, revealing how certain forms of television are given more cultural legitimacy than others.¹⁹

¹⁶ Mary M. Dalton and Laura R. Linder, eds., *The Sitcom Reader: America Re-viewed, Still Skewed*, 2nd ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016), 1-2.

¹⁷ Dalton and Linder, *Sitcom Reader*, 31-32.

¹⁸ Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2000), 7-8.

¹⁹ Mills, *The Sitcom*, 26-27.

3 THE NARRATOR AND ITS FUNCTION IN NARRATIVE

The narrator plays a fundamental role in shaping how a story is conveyed, interpreted, and understood. As the mediator between the narrative and its audience, the narrator shapes how the reader understands the story by controlling the flow of information, selecting what to reveal or withhold, and determining the tone and perspective of the narrative. The role of the narrator is not merely to recount events but to actively construct meaning, guiding the audience's engagement with the text.²⁰

Understanding the role of the narrator is essential for analyzing any narrative, as it determines the degree of subjectivity, engagement, and interpretation within the text. This section explores the various functions of narrators, their classifications, and their significance in shaping narrative structure and meaning.

3.1 The distinction between the author and the narrator

In narrative theory, it is essential to distinguish between the author and the narrator, as they serve different functions within a text. While the author is the real person who creates the story, the narrator is a construct within the narrative itself, responsible for *delivering* the events to the reader.²¹

Wayne C. Booth introduced the theoretical construct of the *implied author*, which helps clarify the intermission between the real author and the narrator. The implied author is an idealized version of the author constructed through the text, separate from both the real person and the narrator. According to Booth, the narrator is merely a tool for storytelling, whereas the implied author shapes the narrative's moral and ideological framework.²² Unlike narrators, the implied author represents how readers interpret the intentions and underlying meanings of a text, separate from the author's historical identity. Similarly, the *implied reader* is an imagined figure reflecting the expected response or ideological alignment projected by the narrative, distinct from how real readers may perceive or engage with the text.²³ This intermediate level helps to define a broader authority within the text, beyond the narrator's perspective and sets expectations for how readers should interpret the narrative.

²⁰ Altman, *A Theory of Narrative*, 15.

²¹ Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 62.

²² Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 70-73.

²³ Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology*, 26.

Primarily, such a theoretical construct helps explain phenomena like *narrative unreliability*, which is the point of discussion in the next section.²⁴

3.2 Types of narrators

In literature, film, and television, narrators can be categorized based on their involvement in the events of the story and the type of information they convey. The most fundamental distinction is between a first-person narrator, a character within the story they are telling, and a third-person narrator, who exists outside the story's world.²⁵ Gérard Genette expands on this distinction by introducing the concepts of *homodiegetic* and *heterodiegetic* narrators, which describe the narrator's position about the *diegesis*—the fictional world where the events of the story take place.²⁶ In narrative theory, *diegetic* refers to anything that belongs to the universe of the story itself. The prefix *homo-* typically signifies sameness or internal involvement, while *hetero-* indicates an external or contrasting position.²⁷

In a homodiegetic narrative, the narrator functions as a character within the narrative they recount. They do not simply observe the events but actively experience them. This type of narrator plays two roles: the *narrating I*, who recounts the events, and the *experiencing I*, who lives through them. In contrast, a heterodiegetic narrator exists outside the story world. They are not character and have no personal involvement in the events. Even if they directly address the audience, they remain external to the story's diegesis, and thus, there is no *experiencing I* present. In essence, homodiegetic narration features a storyteller who is also part of the action, whereas heterodiegetic narration maintains a clear separation between the narrator and the narrative events.²⁸ A representative foundation for understanding more complex storytelling techniques, especially those involving framing, multiple timelines, or embedded narratives, is Genette's classification of narrative levels. He argues that narratives can be structured across different layers depending on the narrator's position relative to the story. At the top level is the extradiegetic narrator, who tells the story from outside the fictional world, framing the entire narrative and remaining detached from the events. Within

²⁴ Manfred Jahn, *Narratology 2.3: A Guide to the Theory of Narrative* (Cologne: University of Cologne, 2021), 23, www.uni-koeln.de/~ame02/pppn.pdf.

²⁵ Jahn, *Narratology 2.3*, 5.

²⁶ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 245.

²⁷ Jahn, *Narratology 2.3*, 5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

this frame, intradiegetic narrators can emerge—characters who exist within the story world and narrate a secondary narrative. Their narration adds a second layer to the narrative structure. The story they tell introduces a third level, known as the metadiegetic, which refers to the events recounted within the embedded narrative. According to Genette, each act of narration is situated on a level above the events it describes, forming a vertical hierarchy. These levels are defined not by time or space but by the narrator's narrative function and degree of embeddedness. This model helps to reveal how complex narratives are constructed, how stories can be nested within one another, and how the narrator's position influences the audience's engagement and interpretation.²⁹

In *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, Gérard Genette formalizes this framework by introducing a two-dimensional classification system. He combines the narrative level either extradiegetic or intradiegetic with the narrator's degree of involvement, either heterodiegetic or homodiegetic. These two dimensions yield four possible narrator types. An extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator recounts the events of the story from outside the story world and plays no role in the events. An extradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator is also external to the story world but recounts their own past experiences. An intradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator exists within the narrative world and typically recounts a story they are not directly involved in. Finally, the intradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator is embedded in the story world and tells a story in which they are personally involved.³⁰

These paradigms can be better understood through examples drawn from contemporary American sitcoms. Abed Nadir from *Community* (NBC, 2009–2015), for instance, serves as an example of an intradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator, as he occasionally frames or comments on events involving other characters while not actively participating in those specific storylines. Conversely, *How I Met Your Mother* (CBS, 2005–2014) features Future Ted Mosby as a classic extradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator. He tells the story of his past from a future point outside the primary timeline while also being a central figure in the events he narrates. These distinctions are essential for analyzing how a narrator's position either inside or outside the story shapes narrative structure, supports genre-blending, and influences how audiences understand and interpret sitcom storytelling.

²⁹ Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 228-230.

³⁰ Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 248.

3.3 The unreliable narrator

It is equally essential to differentiate between a reliable narrator and an unreliable one. The presence of unreliable narrators further demonstrates that the narrator cannot be equated with the author. An unreliable narrator presents a biased, misleading, or even false version of events, which the reader must interpret critically.³¹ If the narrator were simply a reflection of the author, then all narrators would be inherently reliable, which is not the case in literature or film.

It is worth noting, that the narrator is considered unreliable when they inaccurately present information due to their limitations or desire not to give the full account of the story.³² Unreliable narration in cinema is a powerful narrative technique, as the voiceover commenting on events often contradicts the visuals, which the viewer perceives as a more reliable source of information.³³ Narrative unreliability occurs when the narrator loses the reader's trust due to discrepancies between their perception of reality and generally accepted social or moral guidelines. Such unreliability can be primarily due to the narrator's beliefs, emotional bias, limited knowledge, or deliberate manipulation of facts. In some cases, narrative unreliability arises from the narrator's lack of awareness, which differs from the reader's understanding of a situation.³⁴

The concept of unreliability in narration was first suggested by Booth. He compares this concept with the implied author and analyzes these concepts based on each other. Booth states that a narrator is considered reliable if their statements or actions align with the values and standards established by the work itself. They are deemed unreliable when they deviate from these norms. Booth considers that an unreliable narrator is not necessarily a liar or someone who deliberately misleads false information on purpose. Usually, they simply look at the world from an angle that contradicts the author's intention. Sometimes there is a bit of irony in this, but irony alone does not make the narrator unreliable. The point is how much they deviate from the author's "norm"³⁵

³¹ Peter Hühn, Jan Christoph Meister, Wolf Schmid, and John Pier, eds., *Handbook of Narratology* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 896.

³² Ibid.

³³ Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 235.

³⁴ Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology*, 27.

³⁵ Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 158-59.

A clear example of this is found in *The Black Donnellys*, where the narrator recounts the story of the Donnelly brothers from a prison. From the early episodes, it becomes evident that this narrator cannot be reliable because he misremembers events, changes details, and at times presents various interpretations of the same story. In the context of television, such moments of unreliability challenge the viewer's perception of truth within the narrative, as the realization that the story may be distorted or even entirely fictional prompts a shift in the viewer's understanding. It encourages them to question earlier episodes and reassess their interpretation of the plot. The use of a narrator who exists outside the main timeline and reflects on past events ultimately introduces a new layer of storytelling. It draws attention to the narrative process itself, incorporating self-referential commentary and enhancing the show's complex, media-aware structure.³⁶

Hansen classifies narrative unreliability into four major types. The first type, intranarrational unreliability, appears within a single narrator's account when contradictions or questionable claims arise without input from other narrators. The second type, complete internarrational unreliability, involves a narrator whose credibility is called into question when compared to the versions of events provided by other narrators. The third type, intertextual unreliability, relies on familiar narrative conventions such as the presence of a naive narrator or other recognizable traits to signal unreliability. The final type, extratextual unreliability, depends on the reader's external knowledge and experience. This form raises questions about potential contradictions between what is presented within the text and the extra-textual criteria readers use to judge narrative reliability.³⁷

³⁶ Paul Booth, "Memories, Temporalities, Fictions: Temporal Displacement in Contemporary Television," *Television & New Media* 12, no. 4 (2010), 378.

³⁷ Hühn et al., *Handbook of Narratology*, 898-99.

4 MODES AND TECHNIQUES OF NARRATIVE REPRESENTATION

Narrative is shaped not only by the events it conveys but also by the manner in which those events are presented. The distinction between showing and telling, the perspective from which the story is mediated, and the strategies used to guide audience interpretation all contribute to the construction of meaning. These formal aspects of narration influence how viewers or readers perceive characters, interpret events, and engage with the narrative as a whole.

4.1 Diegetic and mimetic narration

Based on Aristotle's three means of imitation which consist of the medium, the object, and the mode of imitation, David Bordwell decided to distinguish between two significant conceptions of narrative representation, namely, diegetic and mimetic. The diegetic theory may be referred to as a study of Plato, as he distinguished two conceptions of narration that are based on linguistic practice. The first one is pure narrative where the poet assumes the role of the speaker and the whole story unfolds solely from his perspective. In contradiction to the imitative narrative which maintains that the poet expresses personal views through the voices of fictional characters.³⁸ Mimetic theories formulate narration as representation or imitation: the process of showing. It is worth noting, that firstly Aristotle's understanding and view of mimesis was intended solely for theatrical use.³⁹ The model of mimetic theory frames the act of vision as central to representation and that's why it laid the foundation for narrative tradition in film theory.⁴⁰ In cinema, the mimetic type of narration is predominantly used, as viewers typically recognize who is speaking and what the character represents, as long as the character is visually present on screen, even if the voice itself is heard from off-screen. However, when a voice appears without any visible source, the narration shifts into what is considered the diegetic mode. This technique, commonly known as *voice-over*, allows the narrator to present off-screen events or internal reflections that are not visually accessible to the audience at that moment.⁴¹

³⁸ David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 16.

³⁹ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 3.

⁴⁰ Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 9.

⁴¹ Bill Scalia, "Between Diegesis and Mimesis: Voice-Over Narration in Fiction Film," *Bright Lights Film Journal* (January 2019): 1–2, <https://brightlightsfilm.com/between-diegesis-and-mimesis-voice-over-narration-in-fiction-film/>.

Film narration can be divided into two fundamental types: the *image-event* and the *language-event*. The image-event refers to the visual presentation of events and characters—an approach that forms the foundation of film as a medium. Early cinema, for instance, relied solely on moving images without any sound or dialogue, making mimesis the primary narrative mode. Because images have a direct impact on the viewer's perception, audiences are typically able to interpret what they see on screen without any prior knowledge or verbal explanation. In other words, mimetic representation allows for an immediate understanding of the unfolding action, grounded in visual experience.⁴² The language-event, on the other hand, is defined by the presence of verbal narration that is not directly tied to a visible source. While language can coexist with the image event, such as when a character speaks on screen or their presence is implied and understood, it functions as a separate diegetic element when it is no longer tied to a visual referent.⁴³ In this context, voice-over becomes the dominant form of language-event, representing a shift from showing to telling. The image may continue to play, but the voice-over introduces interpretation, commentary, or information that does not emerge naturally from the visible world of the film.

This distinction is further explored by theorists such as André Bazin and Stanley Cavell, who argue that cinema's visual foundation and its photographic origin make mimesis its essential mode of representation. Bazin, for example, emphasizes that photography transfers reality from the world into the image, anchoring film in the visible and referential. Cavell likewise notes that images in cinema retain a strong connection to external reality due to their indexical nature, they are not just symbols but actual imprints of the world. However, when a voice is heard without a visual anchor, it detaches from this mimetic base and instead signifies through language. In such cases, the viewer does not see the event unfold but is instead being told about it placing the narration in the diegetic mode.⁴⁴ A clear example of mimetic narration can be found in scenes where a character speaks directly, even if the camera is not focused on them. As long as the viewer can identify the speaker and situate them within the visual context of the scene, the speech remains part of the mimetic image-

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Scalia, "Between Diegesis and Mimesis," 2.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

event. This is evident in typical dialogue sequences using shot or reverse shot techniques, where the visual link between character and voice is preserved.⁴⁵

In contrast, diegetic narration becomes especially apparent through the use of voice-over, which Bill Scalia categorizes into three types: descriptive, interpretive, and interior monologue.⁴⁶ A notable example of descriptive voice-over appears in *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947), where Charles Chaplin's character narrates the events of the film from beyond the grave. The voice accompanies the image of his tombstone, creating a layered narrative structure that operates outside the immediate scene.⁴⁷ Here, the viewer is not experiencing the story through action, but rather through reflective commentary, marking a clear instance of language-event and diegetic narration.

Overall, mimesis in film is grounded in the direct visual presentation of action and speech, closely tied to the photographic realism of the medium. Diegesis, in contrast, relies on narrative techniques such as voice-over that guide, interpret, or supplement what is shown. Together, these modes shape how stories are conveyed in cinema, revealing the layered complexity of filmic narration.

4.2 Focalization in narrative theory

The term focalization was first proposed by Gérard Genette as a substitute for the terms perspective and point of view. Unlike approaches that attempt to integrate aspects of consciousness, language, narrator positioning, and point of view, Gérard Genette and later Mieke Bal introduced the concept of focalization, which radically transformed the traditional understanding of point of view in narratology. Their approach distinguishes between two fundamental questions: perspective: "who sees?" and voice "who speaks?"⁴⁸ Genette identifies three types of focalization:

- Zero focalization (*focalisation zéro*) – Corresponding to omniscient narration (as described by Franz K. Stanzel), where the narrator has complete control over the story, can

⁴⁵ Scalia, "Between Diegesis and Mimesis," 1-4.

⁴⁶ Scalia, "Between Diegesis and Mimesis," 5.

⁴⁷ Scalia, "Between Diegesis and Mimesis," 8.

⁴⁸ Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology*, 37-38

access the thoughts of multiple characters, and move freely between different locations within the narrative.⁴⁹

- Internal focalization (*focalisation interne*) – Focused on a single character, limiting the perspective to their knowledge and experiences.⁵⁰

- External focalization (*focalisation externe*) – Presents events from an external viewpoint, without insight into the characters' internal thoughts.⁵¹

However, Genette's model presents certain inconsistencies, as a reflector-character falls under internal focalization, yet perceives other characters under the constraints of external focalization. To address these limitations, Mieke Bal refined the terminology by distinguishing among: the focalizer (the entity that perceives the information), the focalized object (what is being perceived), and visible and invisible focalized objects. She positions the term the focalizer between the narrator and character and assigns it an independent role in the storytelling process.⁵² She admits that the focalizer as the subject of focalization represents the viewpoint from which the characters are perceived. This viewpoint can on one side belong to the character or exist outside of the story and when the focalizer is also a character he gains a certain narrative privilege over the others.⁵³

Identifying who focalizes which element is essential, as it directly influences how readers interpret the focalized object. The relationship between focalizer and focalized object can be consistent or variable throughout a text. Understanding these patterns is important because the focalizer shapes the image of what is being described, and, in turn, reveals something about themselves through the way they perceive and present it. Focalized elements can include characters, settings, objects, or events. Each act of focalization offers a particular interpretation, whether subtly implied or clearly stated. The extent of subjectivity and how explicitly it is expressed may vary, but it always influences the reader's understanding of the narrative.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 189-194.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Wolf Schmid, *Narratology: An Introduction*, trans. Alexander Starritt (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 94.

⁵³ Bal, *Narratology*, 146.

Bal's approach defines limited perspective as the inability of the focalizer to access invisible focalized objects.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, an omniscient narrator has access to their thoughts, though this perspective exists solely within the narrative discourse. This model does not treat limited perspective as a separate category. Instead, it focuses on access to the characters' consciousness, which serves as a key analytical criterion.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Bal, *Narratology*, 144.

⁵⁵ Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology*, 97.

5 TIME AND STRUCTURE IN NARRATIVE

Time is one of the most significant components of narrative because it determines how events are structured, presented, and perceived. According to Ricoeur, time is not merely a component of narrative; rather, he views time and narrative as deeply interconnected, as narrative serves as a way for humans to relate to time.⁵⁶

Many theories examine the role of time in the narrative, but one of the main and most common is the construct of dividing narrative time into discourse-time and story-time, where discourse-time refers to the time required to process the narrative and story-time refers to the time of representation of events of the story itself.⁵⁷ This division was suggested by Seymour Chatman and was further developed by other authors. For example, story-time was further discussed as tempo or pace.⁵⁸ This definition primarily refers to the difference between the time spent reading or watching a story and the duration of the story itself.

5.1 Gérard Genette's theory of narrative discourse

Gérard Genette's narrative discourse explores the temporal structure of storytelling through three key concepts: order, duration, and frequency.⁵⁹ Order examines how events are sequenced in a narrative, duration focuses on the connection between story-time and discourse-time, and frequency analyzes how often events are narrated. These elements shape the reader's perception of time within a story, influencing its pacing, structure, and overall effect.⁶⁰ One of the key aspects of narrative discourse is order, which refers to the deviation from chronological sequencing. This technique is widely used in films, where montage enables various forms of temporal manipulation, such as *flashbacks* and *flashforwards*. A flashback (*analepses*), as one type of anachronous sequence, is a common narrative device that disrupts the linear flow of time to provide background information or deepen the audience's understanding of past events. In contrast, flashforwards (*prolepses*) shift the storyline forward in time, generating suspense and hinting at future outcomes. By breaking

⁵⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 52.

⁵⁷ Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 62.

⁵⁸ Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology*, 32.

⁵⁹ Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 32.

⁶⁰ Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 131.

chronological order, these methods allow writers to construct more dynamic and compelling narratives.⁶¹

5.2 Prolepses and analepses as a temporal device

One of the most widely used narrative techniques in cinema is prolepses, commonly referred to as a flashforward. This technique presents events that occur later in the story's chronology, disrupting the linear progression of time. Gérard Genette describes prolepses as a narrative technique through which future events are disclosed before they would naturally unfold within the chronological flow of the story.⁶² Flashforwards serve a crucial function in shaping the viewer's expectations, enhancing their understanding of characters and events, and building narrative tension through anticipation. Often, these projections into the future are not depictions of actual events but rather representations of the narrator's imagination or speculation. As such, flashforwards frequently portray hypothetical scenarios or situations that *could* occur under specific circumstances, offering a probable rather than definitive outcome. In these cases, the narrator reflects a potential trajectory of events based on what is expected at that point in the story time.

Flashbacks or *analepses* are ubiquitous narrative devices used to disrupt linear chronology to deepen story and character. In cinema, flashbacks often serve to compare different periods for thematic effect.⁶³

⁶¹ Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 32.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology*, 32.

II ANALYSIS OF HIMYM

6 NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND PLOT DEVELOPMENT IN HOW I MET YOUR MOTHER

How I Met Your Mother is a widely recognized American sitcom created by Craig Thomas and Carter Bays. The concept of the series was inspired by real events in the lives of the creators themselves. They tried to recreate memories from their student years, with all the funny and awkward situations that happened to them at that time. Craig Thomas admitted that he did not want these stories to disappear without a trace, so he decided to bring them to the screen, sharing the funny moments from his life with a wider audience. In his interview, Carter Bays said that to write the entire 208 episodes of the series, he repeatedly turned to his past as a source of inspiration for interesting stories. He noted that since he had a deep connection with Ted and the other characters throughout the various stages of the series, it came naturally to him to create their stories. Most of the stories are based on the personal experiences of Craig Thomas and Carter Bays, starting from the directors' student days.⁶⁴ This gives the series more sincerity and makes the characters more believable and therefore closer to the viewer's perception, who often find their own experiences in it, which in turn creates a strong emotional connection with the series.

In *How I Met Your Mother*, the central figure is Ted Mosby, a young architect whose life story serves as the foundation of the series. However, the narration is provided not by Ted as he appears within the events, but by an older version of himself, commonly referred to as Future Ted. Voiced by Bob Saget, this narrative figure occupies an extradiegetic position, as he exists outside the immediate timeline of the story he recounts. Relative to the events he narrates, namely the past experiences of his younger self, portrayed by Josh Radnor — Future Ted is heterodiegetic, since he is not physically present within the narrative scenes. Nevertheless, he remains homodiegetic in a broader sense, because the story he tells is ultimately his own; he once participated in the events he now recounts. Throughout the series, Future Ted functions as an external focalizer with retrospective commentary, offering frequent evaluations, ironic observations, and selective revelations of the past. More precisely, he can be described as an extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator with retrospective, often interpretive, commentary, guiding the audience's perception of both the narrative

⁶⁴ Ella Martinez, "How I Met the Creator of How I Met Your Mother," *Yale Daily News*, September 1, 2022, <https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2022/09/01/how-i-met-the-creator-of-how-i-met-your-mother/>.

events and their significance.⁶⁵ He retrospectively recalls his love affairs and unsuccessful attempts to find a relationship between 2005 and 2013. This storyline functions as the foundational narrative framework upon which the entire series is constructed. His narrative involves his close friends, specifically: Marshall Eriksen, a young lawyer who is committed to protecting the environment; his wife Lily Aldrin, a kindergarten teacher and art lover; Barney Stinson, a charismatic adventurer who leads a rather extravagant lifestyle; and Robin Scherbatsky, a Canadian journalist with whom Ted develops a rather complicated romantic relationship and who quickly becomes part of their group of friends.⁶⁶

Ted in *How I Met Your Mother* doesn't date women just for fun like his friend Barney does. He dates them because he genuinely believes he'll eventually meet "the one." This quest not only reinforces the show's title, especially in the first four seasons but also defines who Ted is: a hopeless romantic chasing his dream of true love. At the same time, he's also trying to find meaning beyond his unsteady career as an architect and his reluctant bachelor lifestyle. By the time Barney proposes to Robin in Season Eighth, Ted remains the only unmarried member of the group. Throughout the series, he frequently expresses his desire to find "the one," a sentiment he articulates as early as their first date in the opening episode when he refers to Robin in those exact terms.⁶⁷ Ted is portrayed as a man with a clear sense of purpose, and for a period, nothing stands in his way. However, his determination is disrupted in Season 4, Episode 5, when Stella leaves him at the altar, bringing their wedding plans to an end.⁶⁸ After that point, his narrative arc becomes less clearly directed. In Seasons 4, 5, and 7, he goes through extended periods without actively seeking romantic relationships, and the quest for love ceases to function as the primary motivation driving the storyline. Instead, it's Future Ted who keeps reminding the audience and his kids of the promise behind the story: how he eventually met their mother.⁶⁹

In the end, Ted meets the woman he had always dreamed of. They get married and have two children together. However, after she tragically passes away due to an illness, Ted

⁶⁵ Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 228-230.

⁶⁶ Adeline Terry, "'Kids, you may be wondering how many of these stories I'm telling you are true': The Birth of Humour through the Rebirth of the Narrative in *How I Met Your Mother* (CBS, 2005–2014)," *Renaissance(s)/Rebirth(s)*, no. 16 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.4000/esa.4651>.

⁶⁷ Florent Favard, "The Yellow Umbrella Syndrome: Pledging and Delaying Narrative Closure in *How I Met Your Mother*," *Graat On-Line*, no. 15 (April 2014): 31, <http://www.graat.fr/2favard.pdf>.

⁶⁸ *Shelter Island*, season 4, episode 5, directed by Pamela Fryman, aired October 20, 2008, on CBS.

⁶⁹ Favard, "The Yellow Umbrella Syndrome," 31.

reunites with Robin, believing that they are kindred spirits and that everything in their lives has been leading them back to each other.

6.1 Genre and innovation in *How I Met Your Mother*

Among modern sitcoms, *How I Met Your Mother* offers a compelling example of how the genre can evolve through innovative production techniques and narrative complexity, while still maintaining its comedic foundation. One of the most distinctive aspects of the series is its use of a hybrid production format. Unlike traditional sitcoms that are filmed entirely in front of a live studio audience using a multi-camera setup, *How I Met Your Mother* combines multi-camera filming on standing sets with single-camera sequences for flashbacks, cutaway scenes, and rapid location changes. This hybrid approach enables the show to break from the spatial and narrative limitations of classic sitcoms, allowing for more cinematic visual storytelling and greater flexibility in scene composition and pacing.⁷⁰

Instead of being performed live with immediate audience reactions, the episodes are filmed in full and then shown to an audience afterward, whose laughter is recorded and used as a laugh track. This production method retains the rhythm and familiarity of traditional sitcoms while supporting the show's more complex and fast-paced storytelling structure. The narrative itself is framed as a long, personal story told by the protagonist, Ted Mosby, to his future children—an unusual device for sitcoms that enables non-linear storytelling, frequent time jumps, and extensive use of foreshadowing. These structural choices allow the writers to play with audience expectations, deepen character development over multiple seasons, and introduce humor that builds on recurring jokes and traits unique to individual characters.⁷¹

As the series progresses, its comedy becomes increasingly driven by character interactions rather than isolated punchlines. Traits such as Marshall's obsession with cryptids or Barney's evolving list of romantic schemes become sources of humor that grow organically from the characters' personalities. This shift reflects a broader trend in contemporary sitcoms toward serialized character growth and emotional engagement, distinguishing *How I Met Your Mother* from earlier sitcoms that often prioritized formulaic episodic structure over narrative continuity. Ultimately, the show represents a transitional

⁷⁰ Emily St. James, "T.V. on TV: *How I Met Your Mother*," *Slant Magazine*, December 12, 2006, <https://www.slantmagazine.com/tv/tv-on-tv-how-i-met-your-mother/>.

⁷¹ Ibid.

moment in the sitcom genre—bridging traditional formats and new storytelling possibilities suited to the demands of a more narratively sophisticated audience.⁷²

6.2 Diegetic and Mimetic Narration in *How I Met Your Mother*

How I Met Your Mother presents a compelling blend of mimetic and diegetic narration, using both modes strategically to shape the storytelling structure. The series is framed by an extensive use of voice-over, where Future Ted (voiced by Bob Saget) recounts past events to his children. This narrative device is a clear example of diegetic narration, as it introduces a language-event—the voice of an older Ted who exists outside the visual world of the main storyline. His commentary is not directly linked to the immediate on-screen action but rather reflects, interprets, and sometimes reshapes past experiences through the lens of memory and personal bias. This use of voice-over places the narration in the diegetic domain, as the viewer is not simply watching events unfold but is being told about them by a narrator who is removed from the present action. Such narration qualifies as a language-event, where the source of speech is not visible on screen and serves a reflective or interpretive function.⁷³ Moreover, this aligns with Bill Scalia's classification of voice-over as descriptive and interpretive, since Future Ted often contextualizes or explains the significance of what the viewer is seeing.⁷⁴ For example, in many episodes, the narrative is interrupted or reframed by Future Ted's commentary, revealing additional information or correcting what has just been shown sometimes humorously contradicting the visual narrative, thus reinforcing the diegetic mode of narration. For instance, in Season 2, Episode 9, "Slap Bet," Ted speculates:

"Kids, your Aunt Robin had a secret she didn't want anyone to know."⁷⁵

Ted first explains that Robin avoids malls because she was secretly married in one. The flashback shows Robin in a wedding dress, supporting his claim. However, just moments later, Future Ted admits:

"Okay, that wasn't it either. The truth is, Robin was a Canadian teen pop star."⁷⁶

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Scalia, "Between Diegesis and Mimesis," 1-5.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ *Slap Bet*, season 2, episode 9, directed by Pamela Fryman, aired November 20, 2006, on CBS.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

This voice-over correction rewrites the narrative, and a new flashback reveals Robin's embarrassing music video "Let's Go to the Mall." Another example appears in Season 5, Episode 12, "Girls Versus Suits," where Future Ted narrates a story but intentionally withholds details from his children. He says:

"I'm not gonna tell you her name, let's just call her... your mother."⁷⁷

In the scene, the woman's mouth visibly says a different name, but the voice-over replaces it, clearly illustrating how the diegetic narration alters the mimetic presentation for storytelling purposes. These examples highlight how the series uses Future Ted's voice-over as a language-event that reinterprets or reframes what the audience sees, thus operating within the diegetic mode of narration.

A particularly interesting dynamic in *How I Met Your Mother* arises from the tension between the diegetic voice-over and the mimetic visual narrative. For instance, there are moments when Future Ted recounts an event one way, only for the *visual* flashback to suggest a different version, or for other characters to challenge his memory. In Season 2, Episode 17 "Arrivederci, Fiero," Future Ted describes Marshall and Ted's road trip traditions by saying:

"Every time we hit the road, we had one rule: no matter what happens, we don't stop the Fiero until we hear 'I'm Gonna Be 500 Miles' at least five times."⁷⁸

However, the flashback shows them repeatedly stopping for snacks, directions, and to stretch directly contradicting the "rule" Ted confidently narrates. Later in the same episode, Ted's narration claims that Marshall taught him how to drive, saying:

"It was one of the proudest moments of his life." Yet, when Lily questions this memory, Marshall insists: "No way, I definitely didn't teach you. You already had your license when we met!"⁷⁹

These narrative discrepancies highlight the *unreliability* of the diegetic narrator while reinforcing the mimetic nature of what the audience sees. In such cases, the voice-over

⁷⁷ *Girls Versus Suits*, season 5, episode 12, directed by Pamela Fryman, aired January 11, 2010, on CBS.

⁷⁸ *Arrivederci, Fiero*, season 2, episode 17, directed by Pamela Fryman, aired February 26, 2007, on CBS.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

becomes less about recounting objective truth and more about character perspective, interpretation, and selective memory.

Overall, *How I Met Your Mother* exemplifies how contemporary television can merge mimetic and diegetic narration to enrich storytelling. The image-events of the flashbacks create an immersive, mimetic experience for the viewer, while the language-events, delivered through voice-over, frame and reinterpret that experience, often adding humor, irony, or emotional depth. This dynamic interplay not only defines the show's unique narrative voice but also illustrates the theoretical distinction between mimesis and diegesis as discussed in film theory.

6.3 Focalization in *How I Met Your Mother*

A complex narrative structure is presented in *How I Met Your Mother*, in which focalization is central to shaping how events and characters are understood by viewers. The series is framed by the retrospective narration of Future Ted, who recounts the story of how he met his children's mother. In terms of Gérard Genette's model, this structure prominently features internal focalization, since much of the narrative is filtered through Ted's point of view, namely his experiences, interpretations, and emotional states. Ted, as both narrator and focalizer, constantly presents the world and the people in it from his subjective perspective. For instance, in Season 2, Episode 9 "Slap Bet," Ted introduces Robin's mysterious aversion to malls with the line:

"Kids, your Aunt Robin had a secret she didn't want anyone to know. A secret that would ultimately bring us closer together... but for now, it was driving us apart."⁸⁰

Here, Ted is the focalizer, and Robin is the focalized object. The perspective is limited to what Ted knew at the time, and the viewer receives only what he perceived or assumed. When the visual flashback contradicts this assumption by first showing a fake wedding, then revealing Robin's Canadian pop star past, the narrative demonstrates how subjective internal focalization can mislead or reinterpret reality. A similar case appears in Season 1, Episode 3 "Sweet Taste of Liberty," where Ted's cautious worldview contrasts

⁸⁰ *Slap Bet*, season 2, episode 9, directed by Pamela Fryman, aired November 20, 2006, on CBS.

with Barney's impulsive attitude. The episode is focalized through Ted's reluctant participation in Barney's night out. During the airport bar scene, Ted says:

TED: This is a mistake.

FUTURE TED (V.O.): At the time, I didn't see the point. But Barney... Barney had a different way of looking at things.⁸¹

Here, the viewer not only observes Ted's internal focalization but also how the focalization shifts subtly to include Barney's worldview as interpreted by Ted. Mieke Bal's model helps clarify this by identifying the focalized object, namely Barney's lifestyle, and the focalizer Ted, who filters it through his values but also allows space for reinterpretation. Even when the narrative attempts to adopt another character's point of view, it remains filtered through Ted's retrospective narration.⁸² The series occasionally experiments with zero focalization as well, especially in scenes where information is revealed that Ted could not have known at the time. For example, in Season 2, Episode 3 "Brunch," the narrative cuts between several conversations happening simultaneously at a brunch table. Future Ted narrates:

"Of course, I didn't know this at the time... but here's what was really going on."⁸³

The story then shifts into omniscient mode, offering the viewer access to multiple characters' private conversations and thoughts. This is a rare instance of Genette's zero focalization, where the narrator steps out of his limited perspective and allows a broader understanding of events to be shown.⁸⁴

On the opposite end of the spectrum, external focalization appears in moments where characters are shown in action without insight into their thoughts. For example, in Season 6, Episode 13 "Bad News," the final scene unfolds without any dialogue or narration as Marshall receives devastating news about his father.⁸⁵ The viewer observes only facial expressions and body language. No voice-over is present, and no thoughts are disclosed, fitting Genette's definition of external focalization, where the audience is positioned as an outsider, interpreting events purely from what can be seen. Throughout the series, the

⁸¹ *Sweet Taste of Liberty*, season 1, episode 3, directed by Pamela Fryman aired October 3, 2005, on CBS.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ *Brunch*, season 2, episode 3, directed by Pamela Fryman, aired October 2, 2006, on CBS.

⁸⁴ Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology*, 38.

⁸⁵ *Bad News*, season 6, episode 13, directed by Pamela Fryman, aired January 3, 2011, on CBS.

dominant focalizer remains Future Ted, and his perspective shapes how characters and events are presented. His focalization introduces bias, nostalgia, and occasional unreliability, which adds complexity to the viewer's interpretation. For example, in Season 5, Episode 3 "Robin 101," Future Ted says:

"I was an expert on Robin. I'd dated her. I knew her moods, her quirks, her needs."⁸⁶

What follows is a humorous yet somewhat condescending lecture to Barney on "how to date Robin." This moment exemplifies how the focalizer's self-perception and emotional history influence the portrayal of other characters. Robin, here, becomes the *focalized object*, filtered through Ted's lingering feelings and assumed authority over her personality.

Multiple types of focalization are employed in *How I Met Your Mother*, with internal focalization through Future Ted appearing most consistently. By applying Genette's and Bal's models, the viewer can see how focalization in *How I Met Your Mother* not only determines the flow of information but also exposes the narrator's subjectivity, limitations, and motivations. The tension between what is seen and what is told, between mimetic image-events and diegetic language-events further enriches the complexity of focalization in the series.

6.4 Flashforward and flashback as a narrative device in *How I Met Your Mother*

It is worth noting that flashforward allows the show to break from traditional linear storytelling by revealing future events before they unfold in the present timeline. Flashforwards are used not only to build suspense and curiosity but also to create emotional depth and long-term character development. In other words, prolepses refer to a narrative leap forward in time. In the series *How I Met Your Mother*, proleptic moments frequently occur as the protagonist, Future Ted, reflects on his past. A clear example can be found in Season 1, Episode 16, where Ted decides to try a long-distance relationship with his then-girlfriend, Victoria. The couple expresses optimism, believing their relationship will remain unchanged despite the distance. However, the narrative immediately shifts to Future Ted,

⁸⁶ *Robin 101*, season 5, episode 3, directed by Pamela Fryman, aired October 5, 2009, on CBS.

who bluntly tells his children that long-distance relationships are a terrible idea and that his decision at the time was ultimately a mistake:

TED: Look, I know it never works for anyone, but... do you want to try long distance?

VICTORIA: Yes, yes!

TED: It's gonna work. We're going to make it work... it'll work.

FUTURE TED (V.O.): It didn't work. Long-distance was and is a terrible idea, a really terrible, just awful. But more on that later.⁸⁷

Throughout the series, these flash-forwards function as little spoilers or clues about what will occur next. The audience often finds out the outcome of a situation before seeing how it plays out, which creates a kind of playful tension. This storytelling trick adds to the humor because viewers get to watch the characters act with hope or confidence, even though Future Ted already knows and tells the audience how bad things will turn out. That contrast between past optimism of Ted and future regret is part of what makes the series both funny and emotionally engaging.⁸⁸

The sitcom *How I Met Your Mother* employs an elaborate flashback framing device: the entire series is narrated by a future Ted Mosby recounting to his children the story of how he met their mother. This structure turns the show into a nine-season-long flashback, allowing the writers to play with nonlinear storytelling for comedic and dramatic effects. The future narrator selectively withholds information, using flashbacks to build up an ongoing mystery about the titular Mother. Notably, Ted's voice-over will occasionally reveal future knowledge that shapes audience expectations, for instance, referring to a character as "Aunt Robin," thereby alerting viewers that Robin is not the "Mother" and intensifying curiosity about who it will be.⁸⁹

To describe the narrative situation in *How I Met Your Mother*, Booth introduces the term "extensive flashback." The entire storyline is structured as a prolonged recollection of past events. The series employs a frame narrative, meaning that the main events unfold in the past but are consistently filtered through a future perspective. Each episode begins with a brief scene featuring two children, identified as Ted's children, listening to their father's

⁸⁷ *Cupcake*, season 1, episode 16, directed by Pamela Fryman, aired March 6, 2006, on CBS.

⁸⁸ Jason Mittell, "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television," *The Velvet Light Trap* 58 (Fall 2006): 29–40, <https://justtv.files.wordpress.com/2010/12/mittell-narrative-complexity.pdf>.

⁸⁹ Craig Jacobsen, "How TV Met Narrative Sophistication," *Flow: A Critical Forum on Media and Culture*, October 6, 2006, <https://www.flowjournal.org/2006/10/reunion-the-nine-24-narrative-flashback-arrested-development-the-office-how-i-met-your-mother/>.

story. Additionally, a caption on the screen reads “2030,” indicating that this is the point in the future from which the story is being narrated.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Booth, “Memories, Temporalities, Fictions,” 377.

7 NARRATIVE VOICE AND UNRELIABILITY IN *HOW I MET YOUR MOTHER*

The Television series *How I Met Your Mother* can be considered unique due to its narrative structure. The narrative unfolds entirely as a flashback, starting in 2005, with Future Ted recounting the events to his children in the year 2030. To achieve this narrative effect, the series employs a distinct voice for Future Ted, using actor Bob Saget to narrate the story, rather than Josh Radnor, who portrays the younger version of Ted on screen. For most of the show, the identity of the “Mother” remained a mystery. It is not until the end of the penultimate season that she is finally revealed as the character Tracy, who meets Ted at Barney’s wedding.⁹¹

Throughout the first eight seasons of *How I Met Your Mother*, viewers are gradually fed subtle and misleading clues about the identity of Ted’s future wife. Although Future Ted narrates almost every episode, he keeps the full truth about the *mother* hidden, choosing instead to reveal fragments over time.⁹² One of the biggest hints comes in Season 5, Episode 12 when Ted dates Cindy, who turns out to be the “Mother’s” roommate. Cindy complains about her roommate, but ironically, Ted is more drawn to her unseen presence. Before leaving, he catches a brief glimpse of the future Mother’s foot as she walks through the apartment. Another important detail is shown when he accidentally leaves behind a yellow umbrella, which originally belonged to the “Mother” something he had unknowingly taken from a club before that.⁹³ The umbrella later becomes a recurring symbol of their eventual connection. The creators cleverly weave in these fragments while keeping the “Mother” herself just out of reach, building anticipation while constantly reminding the audience that all these little moments are part of a much bigger picture.⁹⁴

7.1 The narrator in *How I Met Your Mother*

It is worth noting that Future Ted’s role as the narrator is central to the structure of *How I Met Your Mother*. He serves as a homodiegetic narrator, which means that he is both the

⁹¹ Scott Collins, “What Made ‘How I Met Your Mother’ Worth Waiting For,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 31, 2014, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/tv/showtracker/la-et-st-himym-20140331-story.html>.

⁹² Favard, “The Yellow Umbrella Syndrome,” 30.

⁹³ *Girls Versus Suits*, season 5, episode 12, directed by Pamela Fryman, aired January 11, 2010, on CBS.

⁹⁴ Favard, “The Yellow Umbrella Syndrome,” 30.

storyteller and a character within the narrative he recounts. This storytelling method features Future Ted, speaking from the perspective of the year 2030, as he reflects on his earlier life and narrates to his children the series of events that ultimately brought him to their mother. By adopting this storytelling approach, the series offers viewers a deeply personal and subjective account of events, filtered through Future Ted's own perceptions and memories. As it was mentioned earlier, the series employs various narrative devices, such as flashbacks and flashforwards, which are seamlessly integrated into Future Ted's storytelling. These techniques not only enrich the plot but also underscore the subjective nature of memory and personal history. The interplay between Ted's present narration and past events highlights the flow of storytelling and the impact of perspective on how stories are conveyed and interpreted.

Future Ted's narrative role in *How I Met Your Mother* can be effectively analyzed through Gérard Genette's typology of narrators and narrative levels. Throughout the series, Future Ted functions as an extradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator. From his vantage point in the year 2030, he recounts his own past experiences to his children, positioning himself outside the primary timeline of the events but within the diegetic world as their original participant. Although Future Ted is not physically present in the scenes he describes, his close emotional connection and involvement in the events distinguish him from a heterodiegetic narrator. The entire narrative is structured around a clear extradiegetic frame: Future Ted's act of telling the story to his children serves as the outermost layer, within which a series of intradiegetic and metadiegetic episodes unfold.⁹⁵ The use of flashbacks, memory lapses, and subjective commentary further emphasize the complexity and unreliability of his narration, underscoring how Genette's model helps to reveal both the layered narrative structure and the deeply personal perspective that shapes audience engagement with the story. From the very first episode, Ted Mosby is introduced as the framing narrator, with his older self known as Future Ted providing the voiceover. Season 1, Episode 1 begins in the year 2030, with Ted speaking to his children:

FUTURE TED (V.O.): Kids, I'm going to tell you an incredible story—the story of how I met your mother.

TED'S SON: Are we being punished or something?

FUTURE TED (V.O.): No.

⁹⁵ Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 228-230.

TED'S DAUGHTER: Dad, is this gonna take a while?

FUTURE TED: Yes. Twenty-five years ago, before I was Dad, I had this whole other life...⁹⁶

This playful exchange immediately introduces the show's narrative structure. Ted functions as an extradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator with retrospective, meaning he exists outside the timeline of the main events but is also a key character in the story he recounts. This is why it is important to distinguish between Ted and Future Ted as two separate narrative personas where one experiences the events in real-time, and the other reflects on them years later with selective memory and personal bias. His role as both protagonist and storyteller positions him as an inherently unreliable narrator—one whose account is filtered, fragmented, and deeply personal. The Future Ted speaks directly to an internal audience, namely his children while simultaneously addressing the external audience, the viewers. The show rarely cuts back to scenes with the children, which is a deliberate comedic choice. The same footage of the children was reused across seasons, as the actors would age faster than their characters. Instead, most episodes rely on Future Ted's voice-over narration to guide transitions, deliver exposition, and comment on the story's events.

The Future Ted Mosby's role as an extradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator with retrospective in *How I Met Your Mother* serves as a fundamental narrative framework, offering an intimate and personalized recounting of his life's journey. This approach invites viewers to engage with the story on a deeper level, considering not only the events themselves but also the nuances of memory, perspective, and the art of storytelling.⁹⁷ Also, this narration allows for a rich exploration of his character's inner thoughts, emotions, and motivations. However, this narrative choice also introduces elements of unreliability. Future Ted's recollections are occasionally inconsistent, and he sometimes omits or alters details, leading viewers to question the accuracy of his storytelling. This unreliability adds complexity to the narrative, as it becomes evident that Ted's memories may be influenced by his biases or selective recollection. This leads to a discussion in the next section about the unreliable nature of Ted's narration.

⁹⁶ *Pilot*, season 1, episode 1, directed by Pamela Fryman aired September 19, 2005, on CBS.

⁹⁷ Terry, "The Birth of Humour."

7.2 Future Ted Mosby as an unreliable narrator

As mentioned earlier, Future Ted serves as the primary narrator, describing to his children the circumstances that led to meeting their mother. Throughout the series, Future Ted's storytelling exhibits characteristics of an unreliable narrator, as evidenced by inconsistencies, embellishments, and subjective interpretations of past events.⁹⁸ For instance, certain episodes highlight Future Ted's confusion or forgetfulness regarding specific details, such as misremembering names or altering timelines, which underscores the fallibility of his recollections but not necessarily full unreliability. As Seymour Chatman notes, characters who function as reflector figures like Bloom in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, whose inner thoughts structure much of the narrative, may not be intentionally misleading, but rather limited in perspective. Similarly, Future Ted's narrative shortcomings can be seen as a result of personal bias and restricted insight, rather than deliberate deception.⁹⁹ This narrative approach invites viewers to question the accuracy of his account, adding depth to the storytelling by highlighting the subjective nature of memory. By acknowledging Future Ted's unreliability, the series encourages audiences to consider how personal biases and flawed recollections can shape one's retelling of past experiences. This section focuses on concrete examples that illustrate Future Ted Mosby's unreliability as a narrator throughout the series.

Based on Hansen's classification, Future Ted Mosby from *How I Met Your Mother* primarily exemplifies intranarrational and intertextual unreliability. He frequently displays intranarrational unreliability because his narration often includes internal contradictions, selective memory, and exaggerated portrayals, especially regarding romantic relationships and personal achievements, without direct contradiction from other narrators. Additionally, Future Ted represents intertextual unreliability, as he embodies the familiar character trope of a nostalgic, sentimental, and somewhat naive storyteller, signaling clearly to the audience that his narrative should not always be accepted at face value. While there may occasionally be hints of extratextual unreliability, stemming from viewers' external knowledge of real-world social conventions and relationships, Future Ted's unreliability primarily arises from his own narrative inconsistencies and recognizable narrative conventions rather than competing narrations or solely external factors.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Hühn et al., *Handbook of Narratology*, 896.

⁹⁹ Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology*, 28.

¹⁰⁰ Hühn et al., *Handbook of Narratology*, 898–99.

This theoretical framework becomes especially useful in examining Future Ted, who consistently demonstrates traits associated with narrative unreliability. Throughout the series, he often misremembers details, alters timelines, censors certain moments for his children, or even fabricates short-lived scenarios for comedic or dramatic effect. As the show progresses, his inability to present a coherent and accurate narrative becomes increasingly apparent, transforming him into a textbook example of a complex unreliable narrator.¹⁰¹ One of the clearest indications of Ted's unreliability appears in Season 3, Episode 17, "The Goat," where he recounts a chaotic birthday involving a goat. However, this peculiar anecdote is first introduced in Season 1, Episode 21, when Future Ted, while narrating events from his 28th birthday, unexpectedly references a future incident:

"Actually, my 30th birthday was not so bad. Well, except for the goat in my bathroom. Which is a great story. But I'll get to that later."¹⁰²

This moment sets the foundation for a narrative thread that reappears in Season 3, Episode 17, in which Ted recounts the events leading to a goat named Missy residing in his apartment after Lily chose to rescue her:

"Well kids, here we are. We have arrived—my 30th birthday. The long-awaited story of... the goat..."¹⁰³

As the story approaches its chaotic climax, in which the goat causes destruction in the apartment, Future Ted pauses and realizes that the events he is describing took place a year after his 30th birthday:

"Oh, right, the goat. So funny. You are going to love this. So, later that night, the goat locked herself in the bathroom and was eating one of Robin's washcloths and... wait, hold on. Robin wasn't living here on my 30th birthday. When did this happen? Oh, wait—the goat was there on my 31st birthday. Sorry, I totally got that wrong."¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 158-59.

¹⁰² *Milk*, season 1, episode 21, directed by Pamela Fryman, aired May 8, 2006, on CBS.

¹⁰³ *The Goat*, season 3, episode 17, directed by Pamela Fryman, aired April 28, 2008, on CBS.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

The actual conclusion to the story is revealed in Season 4, Episode 24, “The Leap,” when Ted, now 31 years old, tries to stop Missy the goat from eating a towel and is promptly attacked by her:

“Now, I have told you some of the story of the goat already.”¹⁰⁵

It is only at this point that Ted correctly remembers how the goat ended up in his apartment.¹⁰⁶ The episode also shows him hospitalized due to the incident, blaming the goat for his injuries:

LILY: What happened exactly?

TED: What happened is you let a freaking wild animal into our apartment. I was savaged.

LILY: That is the sweetest, cutest goat in the whole world.

TED: Sweetest, cutest goat in the whole world?

FUTURE TED (V.O.): I was pretty sleep-deprived at this point, so this probably is not how it really happened, but here’s how I remember it.¹⁰⁷

This final line is followed by a dramatized scene in which the goat aggressively attacks Ted. However, Future Ted’s admission casts doubt on the accuracy of the memory. Most likely, this exaggerated version did not occur exactly as described. Rather, it reflects Future Ted’s tendency to dramatize events for comedic effect. This moment exemplifies his unreliability as a narrator, as the audience is left uncertain about what happened since the only account comes from Ted’s flawed, retrospective perspective. Another story that clearly illustrates Future Ted’s unreliability as a narrator appears in Season 3, Episode 5, “How I Met Everyone Else.” In this episode, he refers to a woman he was dating at the time only as “Blah Blah,” openly admitting that he no longer remembers her real name.¹⁰⁸ This moment highlights one of the key reasons behind Ted’s narrative inconsistency: the limitations of memory over time. The episode opens with Future Ted narrating:

FUTURE TED(V.O.): Kids, back in the fall of 2007, I was dating this girl named... Oh God, what is her name? It’s been 23 years; I can’t remember all this stuff. For the sake of the story, let’s call her...

¹⁰⁵ *The Leap*, season 4, episode 24, directed by Pamela Fryman, aired May 18, 2009, on CBS.

¹⁰⁶ Favard, “The Yellow Umbrella Syndrome,” 31-32.

¹⁰⁷ *The Leap*, season 4, episode 24, directed by Pamela Fryman, aired May 18, 2009, on CBS.

¹⁰⁸ Favard, “The Yellow Umbrella Syndrome,” 32.

TED: Everyone, this is Blah Blah.

BLAH BLAH: Please, call me Bla.¹⁰⁹

This scene underscores how even key figures from his past become blurred or lost in Ted's recollection. Rather than attempting to recover her name, he casually assigns her a placeholder, treating it as an insignificant detail. While the moment is played for humor, it also reinforces the idea that Future Ted's version of events is filtered through the haze of time and selective memory. It reminds the viewer that what they are hearing is not an objective account of the past, but one shaped by the narrator's fallibility and personal framing of the story.

In Season 1, Episode 15, "Game Night," Future Ted openly admits that there are parts of his past he chooses not to share with his children, saying:

"I tell you a lot of inappropriate stories, but there's no way in hell I'm telling you this one."¹¹⁰

This moment draws attention to a recurring feature of his narration—intentional omissions and censoring which ultimately contributes to his unreliability. It is worth noting that Future Ted is not addressing an impartial audience, but rather his children, which inherently influences the way he retells events. Because of this, he often filters or distorts the story to keep it age-appropriate, omitting explicit details and replacing them with euphemisms.¹¹¹ A prime example of this filtering appears in Season 5, Episode 6, where Ted uses the phrase "playing the bagpipes" as a stand-in for sexual activity. Future Ted narrates:

"In the fall of 2009, a new couple had moved in upstairs. We had not met them yet, but we could hear them all the time. They were always... Well, kids, let's just say they were always playing the bagpipes."¹¹²

This line is followed by actual bagpipe music, reinforcing the comedic substitution. The euphemism is further extended in dialogue:

¹⁰⁹ *How I Met Everyone Else*, season 3, episode 5, directed by Pamela Fryman aired October 22, 2007, on CBS.

¹¹⁰ *Game Night*, season 1, episode 15, directed by Pamela Fryman, aired February 27, 2006, on CBS.

¹¹¹ Favard, "The Yellow Umbrella Syndrome," 32.

¹¹² *Bagpipes*, season 5, episode 6, directed by Pamela Fryman aired November 2, 2009, on CBS.

ROBIN: Okay, this is ridiculous. I can't believe these two are still bagpiping.

TED: I know. It's been six hours. Must be that tantric bagpiping he's into.¹¹³

Such moments illustrate that the narrative Future Ted offers is not simply incomplete due to forgetfulness, but it is deliberately shaped to suit his audience. These creative distortions are humorous, but they also show how Future Ted controls the narrative, choosing how much of the truth to reveal. This highlights the fact that the audience is limited to the information Ted considers relevant or suitable to share. Moreover, Ted's unreliability operates on both structural and thematic levels. Cornillon argues that the true story being told is not how he met the mother, but rather how he continued to be in love with Robin.¹¹⁴ This is explicitly acknowledged by his daughter in the final episode, pointing to a deeper narrative motive that even Ted may not consciously realize.¹¹⁵ Future Ted's narration, then, is not an objective record of events but a reflection of his emotional processing and unresolved attachments. He is not deliberately misleading; rather, he tells the story as he believes it happened, which makes his narration emotionally sincere but factually inconsistent.¹¹⁶

In Season 6, Episode 11, "The Mermaid Theory," an additional example of Ted's unreliability as a narrator is presented in *How I Met Your Mother*. Future Ted, recounting events that took place one evening, struggles to accurately remember what happened, resulting in a fragmented and distorted narrative. His memory fails him as he attempts to reconstruct the events involving Barney and Lily, but rather than a coherent retelling, the audience is presented with a jumbled mashup of scenes that border on the absurd, such as Barney suspending a beer bottle in mid-air above Lily's stomach, and Lily bursting into tears after being called an *octopus*. These exaggerated moments point to Future Ted's tendency to embellish or misremember, highlighting his role as a storyteller who prioritizes drama or amusement over factual accuracy.¹¹⁷

BARNEY: Lily, I guess that leaves just you and me. Want to hang?

FUTURE TED (V.O.): And then Lily said something to Barney that insulted every fiber of his being.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Terry, "The Birth of Humour."

¹¹⁵ *Last Forever*, season 9, episodes 23–24, directed by Pamela Fryman, aired March 31, 2014, on CBS.

¹¹⁶ Terry, "The Birth of Humour."

¹¹⁷ Favard, "The Yellow Umbrella Syndrome."

LILY: Nah.

BARNEY: *gapes*

FUTURE TED (V.O.): Wait. No. It had to be more than just, “Nah.” Oh, I think she said...

LILY: You’re a big stupid octopus head!

BARNEY: *gapes*

FUTURE TED (V.O.): No, that doesn’t make sense. Okay, hang on. What did she say? She said, um, uh. To be honest kids, I’m having a little trouble remembering exactly what their fight was about. Hey, it was 20 years ago! I’ll remember. Anyway, the next night¹¹⁸

This moment encapsulates the series’ playful manipulation of time and memory. Ted’s flawed recollection emphasizes the constructed nature of the story he’s telling. His role as a narrator is not to deliver an objective account but to entertain and reflect upon the past with selective, sometimes faulty, memory. The inconsistency in his retelling forces viewers to question the accuracy of everything he shares, reinforcing one of the show’s central narrative techniques: memory as subjective and storytelling as inherently unreliable.¹¹⁹

Ultimately, Future Ted realizes his confusion stems from incorrectly recalling the timeframe of Barney and Lily’s argument, finally understanding that their disagreement involved Barney’s humorous “Mermaid Theory”—the notion that spending enough time with someone makes them gradually attractive. The playful chaos Future Ted creates through repeated storytelling culminates in a touching, rather than comedic, resolution when it’s revealed that Lily is pregnant, adding emotional depth to the humorous confusion. This conclusion subtly shifts the tone from humorous absurdity toward warmth and sincerity, highlighting Ted’s role as an endearingly flawed narrator whose narrative imperfections enhance both humor and emotional resonance.

¹¹⁸ *The Mermaid Theory*, season 6, episode 11, directed by Pamela Fryman, aired December 6, 2010, on CBS.

¹¹⁹ Terry, “The Birth of Humour.”

CONCLUSION

This thesis analyzes the narrative structure and genre of the television series *How I Met Your Mother* through the lens of contemporary narratological theory. The theoretical part outlines key concepts relevant to the study of narrative, including the distinction between author and narrator, types of narrators, unreliable narration, focalization, diegetic and mimetic modes of presentation, and the manipulation of narrative time. These frameworks provide the foundation for a systematic analysis of the series. The sitcom genre and its conventions are briefly introduced to provide contextual background for understanding the show's genre-based expectations and narrative framework.

The practical analysis demonstrates that *How I Met Your Mother* makes extensive use of sophisticated narrative techniques. The characterization of Future Ted Mosby as an unreliable narrator, the frequent deployment of flashbacks and flashforwards, and the interplay between subjective and objective narrative perspectives contribute to a complex and layered narrative structure. Rather than adhering to a strictly linear progression, the series reconstructs events through a fragmented and often subjective lens, inviting viewers to actively engage with the narrative and interpret inconsistencies within the story world.

In this thesis, *How I Met Your Mother* has been examined as a sitcom through which traditional genre expectations are challenged and redefined by means of complex narrative strategies. Central to its structure is the figure of Future Ted, an extradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator whose retrospective storytelling frames the entire series. His narration allows for non-linear chronology, subjective focalization, and frequent narrative manipulation, highlighting the unreliability of memory and the constructed nature of personal stories. Rather than presenting a neutral account, the series embraces narration as an active, shaping force that guides audience perception and creates space for long-term thematic and emotional development. Through this innovative use of narrative voice, the integration of sophisticated narratological strategies within a comedic format is illustrated in *How I Met Your Mother*.

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