

Everybody Loves Raymond is an American television sitcom that ran on the CBS network for nine seasons from 1996 to 2005. The series centres on Raymond (Ray) Barone and his Italian-American family. He lives with his wife, Debra, and their three children: daughter Alley and twin boys Michael and Geoffrey. However, Ray and Debra's lives are constantly interfered with. Ray's parents live directly across the street from them. Ray's mother, Marie, is overbearing and always critical towards Debra's effectiveness as a housewife. Frank is his loud and sometimes rude father, who always has an appetite. Ray's brother, Robert, is constantly jealous at all of Ray's success and attention from their mother. Barry Langford has argued that two very important conventions of sitcom are the "obligatory incorrigibility" and "entrapment" of characters (Langford 17; 21). In this essay I am going to argue that *Everybody Loves Raymond* clearly uses these two conventions. The trapped nature of the family situation, location wise and emotionally, allows for continuing conflicts and the show's circular narrative structure contributes to the underdeveloped and flawed nature of the characters. Much of the show's humour can be seen within family altercations and also when the family as a whole come together.

Traditional sitcoms use the three-camera set up. When two characters are confronting each other, two cameras will shoot close-ups of each character, while the third camera will shoot them together (Mills 39). This is effective because it allows us to get two laughs out of the joke: one from the funny thing that is said and another from the other character's reaction (39). In other words, the three-camera setup allows us to get maximum humour out of the situation.

Traditional sitcoms are shot in the studio. Therefore, the characters are in similar situations, location wise, throughout the whole series. Langford points out that the characters frequently imagine or talk about an "outside" world where they can escape their "spatial boundaries" (22). In *Everybody Loves Raymond*, Ray is an avid golf fan. He is regularly shown reading a golf magazine in bed while Debra tries to talk to him. Ironically, when he is shown actually playing golf, in the season eight episode "Fun With Debra," Debra is with him. Frank is regularly shown talking about "the lodge," where he spends time with his male friends away from his wife. Again, this setting is hardly

shown. These two examples emphasise that part of the humour of sitcom is due to the fact that the characters are constrained and unable to enjoy themselves.

Characters are also in similar situations from a narrative perspective. This is because sitcoms follow Todorov's classical narrative structure. This involves the disruption of a stable situation and its resolution within each episode (Currie, Sitcom). Lacey outlines Todorov's five-step narrative model: There is an initial state of equilibrium and this is disrupted by some action. Then there is recognition of this disruption and an attempt to repair it. Finally, a new equilibrium is established (29). *Everybody Loves Raymond* follows this narrative in each episode. A problem arises causing conflict between the characters and the characters then spend the rest of the episode searching for a solution.

Lacey argues that the narrative of television series can be characterised as circular: "the television series uses the second 'A' [new equilibrium] to return us to the initial situation" (30). Lacey then says that it is important for an episode to end as it began, because this allows the series to "start again, from exactly the same point, the next week" (31). Mills notes that individual episodes rarely refer to events in previous ones (27). The circular narrative serves an important function in the sitcom. Because we are returned to the initial situation at the beginning of each episode, there is little room for narrative progression or character development. The main characters in *Everybody Loves Raymond* are so successful because they are put in similar situations throughout the series. Viewers are constantly entertained by knowing that these characters are unable to escape the various situations they are put in.

The circular narrative structure is linked to Langford's argument on the "entrapment" of characters (21). In other words, the characters are trapped into their situations. These can include work or family situations. Staiger observes that American sitcoms are based on extended, multigenerational families, in domestic settings (165). *Everybody Loves Raymond* uses this idea effectively. The Barone family are very close, physically and socially, but this is also their downfall. Much of the show's humour comes down to the fact that they are too close.

Ray's parents live across the street from him and his wife, Debra. Throughout most of the series Ray's older brother, Robert, lives with his parents. Garner explains the problem this creates: "the interlopers treat Ray and Debra's house as an extension of their own, barging in unannounced" (38). Frank regularly goes there to eat and watch sports games on the television. Robert sometimes goes over to escape from his parents. Marie frequently brings food to their house and also to check up on Ray to see if there is a problem. Debra is usually annoyed at all this intrusive behaviour. The trapped nature of Debra is summed up perfectly by Debra herself in the episode, "The Angry Family." While talking to their twins' school teacher, she says: "When I got married, I didn't just get a husband, I got a whole freak show that set up their tent right across the street." This quote reinforces Debra's feelings of frustration. Debra's entrapment is not helped by the fact that Ray is reluctant to stand up to his family, especially his mother. Therefore, Ray is also trapped. Although he does not want to upset Debra, he is more afraid of upsetting his mother and losing "his status as the mollycoddled son" (Garner 38).

This leads on to the trapped nature of Robert's character. As Hartley points out, sibling rivalry is part of family behaviour (66). Robert spends most of the series living with his parents, divorced, and in unstable relationships. Essentially, Ray has everything Robert does not: a wife, a house, and recognition at work. Therefore Robert remains jealous at all of Ray's success. He is also trapped into being second best to Ray with regards to getting attention from their mother. Robert's melancholic attitude towards life provides much of the show's humour. However, even though Marie clearly favours Ray over Robert, she is also protective of Robert throughout the series.

This leads on to the incorrigible nature of the characters. Langford argues that the circular narrative contributes to "amnesia, in whatever lesson has been learnt one week is forgotten the next" (17). In other words, the characters are unable to improve or develop throughout the series. In *Everybody Loves Raymond*, Marie never seems to realise that she is too caring towards her sons. In "The Lucky Suit," Robert's job interview with the FBI becomes an embarrassment when the interviewer reads out a fax from Marie saying that she ruined Robert's lucky suit. In the next scene, a furious Robert confronts his mother who, without getting any hint of wrongdoing, asks him how

his interview went. When Robert mentions the fax, all she can say is how happy she is that the fax went through since it was her first time using a fax machine. This example emphasises that Marie is oblivious to her overprotective behaviour and never seems to realise that it is over the top.

But Marie's overbearing attitude towards Ray features more prominently throughout the series. In "The Sneeze," Ray thinks he is getting sick after a man sneezed on him at the airport. Debra thinks that Ray is overreacting. However, Marie is quickly on the scene. She kisses Ray's forehead, makes him chicken soup, tells him to rest, and questions Debra when she sees that Ray has not got his "blue blanket." This example shows that Marie is treating her grown-up son just like a baby. Marie's unawareness of her overbearing demeanour relates to Langford's argument and is a continuing element throughout the series.

The previous example also highlights another one of Marie's flawed characteristics: she is always critical of Debra and never seems to realise that Debra is annoyed by this. The main reason for Marie's behaviour is because she does not want Debra to replace her as Ray's foremost caregiver. Therefore, Marie always critiques Debra's effectiveness on housewife duties, including cooking, cleaning, and laundry. One time she even quips to Debra, "real cooks don't need recipes." Debra remains unable to cook throughout the series. Therefore, her character also reflects the circular narrative structure of traditional sitcom and the incorrigibility of characters.

Part of Debra's frustration is due to Ray's laziness and inability to understand how she feels (Reimers 117). In the episode "Bad Mood Rising," Ray buys Debra pills because he thinks that she has PMS (premenstrual syndrome). He then tape records Debra, without her knowing, when she is in a bad mood. He later plays the tape to her. Debra then verbally attacks Ray by pointing out all the times he has made her angry. These include snoring at her grandmother's funeral and finding his underpants in the kitchen. Ray's laziness is also expressed in "What Good Are You." Debra starts to choke and all Ray does is turn up the volume on the television. These examples relate to Langford's argument on incorrigible characters. Ray is flawed because he never seems to show any enthusiasm when it comes to helping Debra.

Ray is perceived by his father, Frank, as weak. Sometimes he refers to Ray as “Nancy,” which is his way of saying that Ray is “gay” or not manly. This leads on to the corrupt nature of Frank’s character. He is a proud male and this is reflected in his loud, rude, and unemotional behaviour. Reoccurring motifs of the series include him unbuckling his pants when he sits down to eat and watch television, and his “holy crap” response to anything that shocks him. He constantly mocks and insults his wife, showing hardly any affection towards her. In “The Toaster,” Marie tells him that she is “not just some, trophy wife.” He responds: “You’re a trophy wife? What contest in hell did I win?” Frank’s character relates back to Langford’s argument that sitcom characters provide laughter because they do not feel regret, guilt, or shame (18). Put simply, he feels no remorse after insulting his wife

Frank’s rudeness can also be seen when the family as a whole confront other characters. These moments provide, in my opinion, some of the sitcom’s funniest moments. When Frank and Marie first meet Amy’s (Robert’s girlfriend’s) parents, Hank and Pat, Marie is completely baffled by the fact that Hank has never had a muffin. Frank is equally confused when Hank tells him he likes to keep Sundays for church and family instead of television. After an argument, Frank reinforces his personality when he says “all this stuff about church is a load of crap ... [Hank] probably spends all day Sunday watching T.V. in a muffin shop.”

Smith makes a valid observation when he says that audiences can “predictably expect Robert to be jealous ... Frank to be boorish, and Marie to be controlling” (78). He goes on to say that characters forget their lessons learnt within the episode as if their memory was wiped out (78). In one episode, Michael has written a book entitled “The Angry Family.” We are led to believe that Michael’s book was based on his actual family, as it contains the traits present in his family: arguing and shouting. During the episode the family is shown having therapy with a priest. It is made clear in the meeting that: Robert is not even mentioned in the book, Marie thinks Debra is the source of all the anger in the family, Ray is reluctant to stand up for Debra, and Frank is loud and demanding. However, in a twist ending, we realise that Michael’s book was actually based on a cartoon he likes. Smith argues that part of the pleasure of *Everybody Loves Raymond* is watching the characters

perform their various qualities as they deal with problems (78). In this example, the Barone family show exactly the same character traits that have been present since the series began. Put simply, we are continually entertained by the flawed nature of the characters presented to us.

By analysing the series as a whole, and using examples from specific episodes, *Everybody Loves Raymond* clearly uses the conventions of traditional sitcom as argued by Langford. The entrapment of characters in certain settings and situations creates ongoing conflicts and arguments between all members of the Barone family. The circular narrative structure means that the characters are unable to develop. Therefore, their incorrigible nature and inability to learn from mistakes provides endless humour and laughter. Reruns of *Everybody Loves Raymond* continue to entertain audiences, and the multiple Emmy Awards won by the show reflects its status as one of America's most comical and popular sitcoms.

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