

"In the criminal justice system, the people are represented by two separate yet equally important groups -- the police who investigate crime, and the district attorneys who prosecute the offenders. These are their stories."-Law & Order

Proppian Analysis of “Law and Order”

The award-winning NBC series, “Law and Order,” about investigating crimes and punishing criminals has a highly formulaic pattern which can be analyzed using methods similar to those of Vladimir Propp in his book, *Morphology of the Folktale*. The plots of the series often bear a striking similarity to actual events in the news, though a disclaimer at the end of the show insists that the plots are all fictional. Crimes involving stem cell researchers, Falon Gong participants, civil rights-sensitive cases, and September 11th fraud cases were all used during Season 13 of “Law and Order.” Perhaps one of the reasons the series is so popular is because it dramatizes yet seems to imitate real life. The “Law and Order” series has been running on NBC for 14 seasons and also has several derivative shows, “Law and Order: Special Victims Unit (SVU)” and “Law and Order: Criminal Intent (CI).” While a Proppian analysis could likely be extended to the entire spectrum of “Law and Order” episodes, this paper will focus for the sake of brevity just on episodes from season 13 of the original “Law and Order”.

Each episode breaks clearly into two parts: the law section (represented as I) and the order section (represented as II). The law section is further broken down into all the elements of the detectives investigating a crime and determining which laws have been broken.

A.) Discovery of a death (or deaths)— A death is discovered by either a civilian (Ac), the police (Ap), or by some other city worker (Aw). The crime is reported to the police and they secure the crime scene.

- B.) Evidence is collected and examined—Evidence is collected by the police and examined by the forensic team. Evidence may be collected from the victim’s body (Bb), from the crime scene (Bc), from the victim’s belongings or residence (Bv), or from a suspect’s belongings or residence (Bs). Evidence is analyzed and either points to a new lead (\rightarrow l), confirms suspicions (\rightarrow c), or results in a dead end (\rightarrow e)
- C.) Witness interrogations—Different witnesses are interrogated to determine their involvement in the crime or knowledge of the events. Different witnesses may be interrogated: eye-witnesses who were present at the time of the crime (Ce), neighbors surrounding the crime scene (Cnc), neighbors to the victim (Cnv), or neighbors to the suspect (Cns). Interrogations may result false alibis (\rightarrow fa), true alibis (\rightarrow ta), leads to new evidence or witnesses (\rightarrow l), or information about motive (\rightarrow m).
- D.) Suspect arrested—A suspect is arrested and brought to the precinct. The suspect may either request a lawyer (Dl) or confess to a crime (Dc). Sometimes no further detail besides the arrest is given (D).

The ‘order’ part of “Law and Order” consists of actions taken by the district attorney in trying the case before a judge or jury. This sequence can be broken down just as the ‘law’ sequence.

- E.) Evidence excluded-- A judge may exclude evidence such as physical evidence (Ep) or a confession (Ec) based on misconduct by the police.
- F.) Plea bargain—A plea bargain is either requested (Fr) or offered by the district attorney (Fo). A request for a plea bargain may be denied by DA or the terms may be rejected by the suspect (\rightarrow d).

G.) Witness/Suspect on the stand—A witness (Gw) or the defendant (Gd) takes the stand to answer questions from the district attorney or defendant’s counsel. This may lead to indications that the defendant may be guilty (\rightarrow g) or may be innocent (\rightarrow i).

H.) Verdict— This element may or may not be included directly in each episode. There are four possibilities: a verdict is implied, but not announced (Hn), a verdict is unknown (Hu), a guilty verdict is returned (Hg), or an innocent verdict results (Hi). There is also the possibility that the judge may overrule a verdict, changing the outcome to innocent (\rightarrow i), or guilty (\rightarrow g).

Finally, one last element must be introduced: the ‘wild card.’ A wild card can be placed in either section I or II. The wild card defines a moment when a dramatic twist is introduced into the case. The wild card can be described as follows:

W*.) Wild Card— a plot twist arises that is a dramatic change in the case. The wild card usually brings the plot back to a major element of the action. For instance, if tests on evidence reveal that a gun wasn’t actually the murder weapon, the wild card would be represented as W*(B), or if the suspect is revealed to be uninvolved in the case, the notation would be W*(D).

One can see how this Proppian analysis works for specific episodes. For example, the 2 episodes “Tragedy on Rye” and “The Ring” are analyzed in the separate file lawandorder2.ppt (for ease of graphical illustration of the plot structure). The plot synopses offered here were written for this paper, but the official summaries can be seen on the show’s NBC website (<http://www.uni-television.com/laworder/html/episode/index.html>).