The Demise of How I Met Your Mother

Tomi Obaro

Tracking the devolution of a quality TV show is an inexact science. Some programs naturally acclimate themselves to this practice because the drop in quality is so stark, so jarring. (Think of the fourth season of Grey’s Anatomy, the fifth season of The Office, the second episode of Glee). With other shows the fall from grace is harder to detect. Maybe the very thing that made the program great has become its handicap, or the quality of individual episodes fluctuates so wildly that it’s impossible to determine what one thing definitively ruined the show. Still, if only for the rare occasion when show writers take a cue from their fanbase and self-correct an errant plotline, there is something to be gained from delineating where a program went wrong. It can be a form of therapy for the jaded viewer, reminding him or her that the show once heralded really was good, that the 12-hour viewing sessions were indeed worth it, and that the fan’s taste is vindicated for yet another round.

I recently undertook this exercise with CBS’s hit sitcom How I Met Your Mother, a comedy about the quotidian trials and travails of a group of late 20-somethings living in New York. Each episode starts in the year 2030, with future Ted Mosby (an uncredited Bob Saget) telling his children the story of how he met their mother, a saga spanning seven seasons so far. (It’s an absurd conceit, but once you buy into it, it works. It certainly helped

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fight off any ersatz Friends claims for the show’s creators, Carter Bays and Craig Thomas.) The bulk of the action takes place in the mid-aughts with young Ted Mosby (Josh Radnor), a somewhat milquetoast architect who lives with his two best friends from college, Marshall Eriksen (Jason Segal), a law school student, and Lily Aldrin (Alyson Hannigan), a kindergarten teacher. They’re all also friends with Barney Stinson (Neil Patrick Harris), a playboy with a luxury suit fetish, and Robin Scherbatsky (Cobie Smulders), an ambitious television reporter.

At its best, How I Met Your Mother was a celebration of enduring friendship. It’s the kind of sitcom that thrives in the Internet age—but not in a post-obscure-pop-culture-references-from-Evermore free pieces.
the-show-on-even-obscurer-fan-sites kind of way, but in a these-characters-could-maybe-kind-of-actually-exist-in-the-real-world way, and they have Facebooks, and inside jokes and they actually change—something the very nature of the television sitcom is supposed to prohibit. Sitcoms, after all, are designed to be palatable comfort food, a nice distraction from the humdrum day-to-day of real life. Audiences watched Everybody Loves Raymond knowing that Ray would get into an argument with Debra, Marie would hassle everyone, Robert would sulk and Frank would unzip his pants. The pleasure was always in watching the banality unfold. Seinfeld was famously about nothing, but so are all sitcoms. They exist in a realm of stasis. To change would ruin the platitudinal effect of the sitcom, the feeling of safety and familiarity the genre evokes. But this lack of change often means that as shows age, the stasis of the sitcom characters becomes more and more depressing. As freshly written as Cheers was, there was something really disheartening about watching Sam and Carla work in the same bar year after year after year. The same goes for the gang at Dunder-Mifflin in The Office, corporate lemmings stuck working for an outdated company.

What made How I Met Your Mother somewhat novel for a sitcom was its insistence on introducing change—real-life change. It’s this quality that made How I Met Your Mother so endearing, aside from the chemistry of the cast itself. This commitment to real change lent a sense of verisimilitude to a show about New York filmed on a soundstage in Los Angeles and accompanied by a laugh track. Even the opening credits—a pastiche of awkward photos of the five main characters—successfully generate a feeling of authenticity that is usually missing from most multi-camera sitcoms, and each character has specific, vivifying traits that make them memorable, the way every ideal sitcom character should be. Robin is the alpha woman; she loves guns and cigars, doesn’t want to have kids and was once a Canadian pop sensation. Marshall is the affable idealist, a corn-fed Minnesota boy who loves the environment and Star Wars in equal measure. Lily is the sweet but stubborn mother hen of the group, with vague artistic aspirations and a healthy dose of bi-curiosity. And
there is Ted, the misty-eyed romantic, easily the most grating of the characters, but still an essential part of the group. Even Barney, a philanderer who concocts finely-wrought tall tales in order to bed women, has enough distinguishing characteristics to keep his character innovative despite being the show’s most blatant sitcom archetype.

The group’s struggles are refreshingly similar to the plights of millions of regular young adult folk. In the first season, newly engaged Marshall and Lily try to keep their sexual chemistry alive. Robin works an awful 4 AM shift at the local TV station. Ted searches for his soulmate in the midst of a bevy of New York women. They meet up after work at MacLaren’s bar to share struggles, argue, and commiserate.

The mother mystery conceit of the show is definitely a boon, encouraging viewers to get involved in searching for clues and tracking down red herrings. It certainly helps that Carter Bays and Craig Thomas were (until recently) fastidious about upholding episodic continuity and integrating character tics gradually. The fact that the show is told from the future also enables more inventive story structures; some of the show’s funniest moments come in flashbacks—college Ted wearing a poncho and sporting a major Jew-fro, Lily in a goth phase, Robin as an ’80s teen pop star singing “Let’s go to the mall.” Certain traditions become a part of the culture of the group, like their staging of interventions for problems as far-flung as Barney’s penchant for pyrotechnic magic tricks to Ted’s decision to marry a woman the gang disapproved of. When Future Ted calls smoking marijuana
eating a sandwich for the sake of his children, it becomes a re-
curring sight gag, neatly avoiding the ire of CBS censors and
turning into an inside joke for diehard fans.
At its best, How I Met Your Mother could spark the same level of cult
appeal as NBC’s Community, a show with much more current
critical attention.
But that was at its best. At its worst, and I’m afraid How I Met Your
Mother is currently at its worst, the show is a receptacle of stale,
blatantly misogynistic jokes, odd character discrepancies, and
outlandish plot developments.
It was bound to happen, I suppose. How I Met Your Mother is currently in its seventh season, and it
is notoriously difficult for long-running sitcoms to maintain their quality. By the third or fourth
season, writers begin to run out of ideas and ac-
tors grow fidgety. Unfortunately, How I Met Your Mother is not immune. By now, all possible love
triangles within a degree of reason have been played out. Robin has dated both Barney and Ted—twice. Barney’s misogynistic banter has
been a part of the show from the beginning, but
the other characters always toed the line between
outrage and amusement. Not so anymore. Not
only do they openly encourage Barney’s latest
antics, but suddenly Ted has joined in. “Third
Wheel,” an episode from the third season about
Ted’s attempt to have a threesome with two women, is so out of character for Ted, it’s risible.
It also doesn’t mesh with other episodes about sex. For example, in a great episode from Season
Two, “First Time in New York,” the gang handles
the subject of teen sexuality with notable nuance.
In a refreshing gender switch, Ted is the one who
gets too attached to his girlfriend after they lose
their virginity together. But in “Third Wheel,” the
whole gang rallies behind Ted as he tries to have
sex with two facile women. It’s the sort of thing
that would happen to Barney, except the whole
group would never cheer Barney on. It’s also only the first of many character discrepancies and inconsistencies that began to mar the show.

After painstakingly paving the way for a Barney and Robin relationship, for instance, the writers abruptly ended it for no apparent reason beyond Barney’s sudden weight gain (a cruel gimmick involving some bad fat makeup), something the viewer only sees in the episode where they unexpectedly break up. Even if relationship-swapping among a group of young attractive people is on par with the course for any modern television program, Barney and Robin had genuine chemistry. The writers’ decision to end the relationship so suddenly felt like a capitulation to the unspoken rule that that which is popular must necessarily dictate the direction of a sitcom. (This is also part of the reason why sitcom writers are so loath to actually invite change into their characters’ lives). Barney Stinson as perpetual playboy was the breakout character; Neil Patrick Harris is the only cast member to win an Emmy for his role, and is arguably the most famous actor in the show besides Jason Segal. Letting Barney mature threatened to ruin the viewing experiences of those who tuned in solely for the cheap boob jokes. And so Barney immediately relapsed into his sophomoric, horny self, and episodes like “Right Place, Right Time,” about Barney’s 200th conquest, saw the light of day. Even now, as the possibility of a rekindled Barney and Robin relationship becomes more and more likely (yes, even with Quinn, Barney’s current girlfriend, the show seems headed in that direction), it feels like too little, too late.

Additionally, in the past, the gangs’ little tics were introduced gradually and viewers recognized them whenever they flared up. But, suddenly,
as if the writers were completely out of fresh episode ideas, mannerisms that the five had apparently been doing forever, unbeknownst to the audience, become all the rage in one episode, only to totally disappear an episode later. Season Five’s “Last Cigarette Ever,” about the group’s attempt to quit smoking, is predicated on the showy, slow reveal that they had all been heavy smokers, but because we had never seen even hints of this before, the episode felt like a reach for former fruits of glory. Just like that, How I Met Your Mother’s episodic continuity, one of the show’s strongest assets, was compromised.

Another reason for the show’s major plummet in quality is its recourse to decidedly lackluster guest stars. From an ill-used Martin Short as Marshall’s boss to Zoe (Jennifer Morrison), a supposed environment-lover who dressed like a Gap model circa 2002, to Kevin (Kal Penn), a therapist who had absolutely no chemistry with his love interest, Robin—they all overstayed their welcome. Meanwhile, subplots have taken a turn for the worse, with false pregnancy scares, random reappearances of missing fathers, and bizarre boat rides.

In fact, ennui has so plainly taken hold of the show as a whole that the prospect of at least two more seasons, as CBS has intuited, is actually depressing. (Another depressing fact: This lackluster season is on track to become How I Met Your Mother’s most-watched ever thanks to syndication on FX and streaming on Netflix.)

For a time, How I Met Your Mother was the most progressive traditional three-camera sitcom on air. While other sitcoms were cleverer and filmed in the trendy, single-camera mockumentary style, How I Met Your Mother defiantly took an old-fashioned conceit and dared to make it modern. Its catchphrases were Internet meme-ready long before shows like Happy Endings and New Girl came along. The palpable group chemistry and the writers’ insistence on letting the characters evolve—they get job promotions, and new apartments, and even move to the suburbs in a fashion that other sitcoms would not dare—were refreshing. But now those very qualities are endangered. New love interests come and go with alarming alacrity; the clever, intricately
written episodes of yore, in which small, moving moments were created from seemingly inconsequential setups, are no more. New episodes are a shadow of their predecessors, and watching the characters torturously contend with dull writing is why I don’t watch the show with the same religious fervor anymore. But what is the most galling about *How I Met Your Mother*’s decline is that the show never aspired to be great art. It was contentedly mediocre, a good show but not great, a show not destined to make critics’ top ten lists but certain to be DVR-ed every week, a solid no-thrills diversion. Now even those minimal standards have been dropped, and it’s a bummer, because they really did feel like friends.