

Narrative Theory and the Role of Destiny in *Lost*'s

Season One Episode, "Walkabout"

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“Norman Croucher. Double amputee, no legs. He climbed to the top of Mount Everest. Why? It was his destiny.” –John Locke, “Walkabout”

Abstract: Introduction, Purpose and Thesis

This paper will provide a narrative analysis of ABC’s *Lost*, focusing on the fourth episode of the show’s first season, “Walkabout.” The purpose of this analysis is to explore the narrative characteristics and production techniques used to illustrate the development of multiple storylines, character interrelationships and viewer involvement. This paper examines two scenes that show what drives main characters John Locke and Jack Shephard to represent the binary oppositions that create values and themes in conflict on *Lost*—faith versus science and destiny versus free will. John Locke, who seeks to prove that nothing can stand in the way of destiny, is a modern portrayal of a historical figure—the eighteenth century Enlightenment philosopher, John Locke.

Throughout the episode, archetypes and myths introduce the themes of destiny, rebirth and redemption, and leadership, which become increasingly significant in subsequent seasons of the show. *Lost* uses distinctive visual styles and musical scores, the flashback technique, and recurring themes to emphasize the role of destiny in each character’s journey of self-discovery. These elements encourage viewers to reflect on an emotional level, and analyze on an intellectual level.

Description of *Lost*

ABC’s serial drama *Lost* debuted on September 22, 2004 and is currently in its sixth and final season. *Lost* tells the story of forty-eight survivors stranded on an island in the South Pacific when Oceanic Flight 815 crashes en route from Sydney to Los Angeles. As time passes, the survivors learn that the island has secrets of its own, including its supernatural properties and political history.

The main characters in the show find themselves “lost” not only on the island, but also in their lives back home, where something was lacking. Embarking on their own journeys of self-discovery throughout the series, these characters transform as they conquer their personal demons. Each episode uses the flashback, flash forward or flash sideways technique to reveal more about a specific character’s past, present or future, while also presenting a larger story arc on the island.

Description of the Episode

“Walkabout,” directed by Jack Bender and written by David Fury, aired on October 13, 2004. The overall story arc begins when wild boar on the island find the bodies of dead passengers in the plane’s fuselage. One main character, Jack Shephard, suggests that the bodies should be burned. When it is discovered that the food supply has run out, John Locke suggests hunting the boar for food. Flashbacks provide a glimpse into Locke’s past, leading to a major reveal at the end of the episode.

Two scenes in “Walkabout” are significant to both the episode and the show. In the first, a flashback shows Locke playing a war simulation game on his lunch hour in an office where he works. Locke wants to be a hero, which he can be through the game. His young boss Randy mocks his statements about leadership and his interest in a physically demanding trip known as a walkabout—an exploration of the Australian outback. When Randy tells Locke that his self-expectations are too high, Locke tells a story to illustrate perseverance, and warns Randy never to tell him what he “can’t do.” Throughout the episode and series, Locke continues to find characters in his life who tell him he “can’t do” something.

The second scene comes at the end of the episode. Another flashback shows Locke being held back as others board the bus for the walkabout. A man tells Locke that he is not capable of going on the trip because of his “condition,” and signals for the bus to leave, despite Locke’s protests that he is prepared. As the camera pulls back, viewers see for the first time that Locke is in a wheelchair. As he watches the bus pull away, Locke’s faith and hope are tested as he screams that he is “destined to do this.” A transition back to the pilot episode shows Locke standing for the first time after the crash, and then back on the beach he is seen grinning as he spots his wheelchair amongst burning wreckage.

Production Information

In January 2004 Lloyd Braun, the then-chairman of ABC, was struggling to move forward with his concept of a show about a plane crashing on an island. The network was skeptical about a story with so many characters and plotlines, but Braun persisted despite multiple rejections. He turned to J.J. Abrams to script the pilot episode, who enlisted the help of co-creator and writer Damon Lindelof.

Lost is shot mainly on the island of Oahu in Hawaii. Sets in Honolulu have been created to depict New York, South Korea, Iraq, Paris and Australia among other locations (Godvin, 2005).

Questions for Analysis and Interpretation

1. How does the visual style of the episode enhance character personalities, storylines, and emotional reactions from viewers?
2. How are myths and archetypes incorporated in this episode, and the series overall?
3. How are the main characters identified and represented in this episode and series?
4. In what ways does “Lost” encourage viewer involvement, as evidenced in “Walkabout?”

Visual Style

The show’s opening sequence is simple, yet telling: The white text “LOST” floats unfocused in the center of a black screen. As the text tilts and moves into a close-up, it comes into focus. Then it once again becomes unfocused, and moves beyond the screen. This is representative of the episode and series, both of which hint at the reasons each character is on the island, but keep answers just out of the viewer’s reach. Throughout the episodes more clues are revealed bringing the story into focus; viewers make sense of character behaviors through flashbacks and on-island scenes. But, just as the text ultimately becomes unfocused and moves beyond the viewer in the opening sequence, so do the answers the viewers have been given—the final minutes of the *Lost* episodes are notorious for raising further questions.

Nearly all of the episodes in *Lost*’s first season open with a close-up shot of a main character’s eye, which symbolizes their need to wake up and take action. This is also an indication that viewers need to open their eyes because not everything is what it seems. “Walkabout” opens with a close-up of Locke’s eye, alerting viewers that the episode will focus on his perspective. Any time emphasis is placed on Locke, he comes to the forefront of the shot. Close-ups are also used as a method of concealment, as in the final flashback when camera pulls back far enough to reveal that Locke is confined to a wheelchair. To heighten the audience’s emotional response, moments of chaos result in sporadic camera movement, such as when Locke stands up for the first time in years, just after the plane crashes on the beach.

Myths and Archetypes

According to Joseph Campbell, the most important function of myth that people today should relate to “is the pedagogical function, of how to live a human lifetime under any circumstances” and

“Myths can do that” (Campbell, 1988, p. 31). They help us make sense of the world and provide order in our lives. In a sense, *Lost*’s entire series is an example of an eschatological myth—one which tells people what their futures hold (O’Donnell, 2007, p. 86). The characters have been led to the island for a purpose, as Locke explains later in the series. This purpose is the mythical quest for self-discovery—determining one’s destiny and choosing whether to accept or fight it. When *Lost*’s characters fail to see their true “selves,” their unconscious needs and desires surface and become apparent to others, which leads them to become enlightened and decide whether and how to address their flaws:

You leave the world that you’re in and go into a depth or into a distance or up to a height. There you come to what was missing in your consciousness in the world you formerly inhabited. Then comes the problem of either staying with that, and letting the world drop off, or returning with that boon and trying to hold on to it as you move back into your social world again. (Campbell, 1988, p. 129)

Locke’s character uses parables to make sense of situations in his life and on the island. In the flashback scene where Locke’s boss is mocking him, Locke uses the anecdote about Norman Croucher—a double amputee with no legs who climbed Mount Everest—to prove his point that he can succeed.

According to O’Donnell, “Television characters are often modeled after classical archetypes such as heroes and villains, father and mother figures, leaders and sidekicks, wise elders and foolish youths...” (O’Donnell, 2007, p. 83). The major themes in *Lost*, specifically in “Walkabout,” include destiny versus free will, rebirth and redemption, and leadership. These themes are all embodied in the archetypes of the main characters. Jack is the hero, the doctor watching over the survivors. Claire is the mother figure—literally pregnant—who organizes the memorial service to honor the dead. Locke is one of the leaders, a man of faith. In his flashbacks, he is also seen as the wise elder although his boss Randy—the “foolish youth”—takes advantage of his wisdom.

The island itself is an archetype for rebirth and redemption. For Jack and the other survivors, the island is hell, but for John Locke it is salvation. The island heals him and gives him a chance to start over. In his flashback, Locke describes the walkabout to Randy as “a journey of spiritual renewal where one derives strength from the earth and becomes inseparable from it.” Locke derives strength from the island

which renews his spirit and faith, and links him to the island in a special way—later in the series he literally becomes inseparable from it.

Characters

Branching from the overall theme of destiny versus free will is the character conflict and opposition of faith versus science. Locke is the “man of faith,” Jack the “man of science.” The two leaders meet officially for the first time in “Walkabout.” When Locke opens his case of knives and leads a trek into the jungle to hunt boar, Jack already becomes skeptical of him. Jack does not want to be involved in planning the memorial service because he is more interested in creating a smoke signal—the practical task at hand, and when some survivors object to burning the bodies he says, “We don’t have time to sort out everybody’s God.” Locke is also the first to come face-to-face with the island’s monster, although he tells Michael he never saw it—this is the first of many lies Locke will tell in reference to his special knowledge of the island’s secrets.

John Locke of *Lost* followed and was influenced by John Locke the eighteenth philosopher. The philosopher John Locke “coined the phrase ‘life, liberty, and estate,’ three things he believed every human being was entitled to” (Stafford, 2006, p. 30) He believed that a person is a blank slate (or “tabula rasa”) at birth and that people are inherently good—experience writes on the blank slate and teaches evil. *Lost*’s John Locke is very protective of his rights—when he feels violated, he often repeats the phrase, “Don’t tell me what I can’t do!” Locke believes that all the survivors have been given a blank slate on the island; he believes that destiny is irrefutable, but that people can choose how to arrive at their destiny. The philosopher John Locke also believed that the first state of nature is hunting and gathering; *Lost*’s Locke is introduced in “Walkabout” as a hunter and gatherer (Stafford, 2006, pp. 30-33).

Music is also a major part of character representation in *Lost* and “Walkabout.” Each main character and plotline in the show has a distinct score. “Locke’s music” is introduced in “Walkabout” when he describes how to hunt the boar and when he is trekking through the jungle. Musical cues in the episode tell viewers that Locke is either vulnerable or in control. Literary critic Roland Barthes based his narrative theory on the hermeneutic code—the stages of enigma, delay and resolution—which allows the

audience to follow the story (O'Donnell, 2007, p. 75). Barthes likened the hermeneutic code to the classic musical score, saying that music has enigmas, delays and resolutions:

What sings, what flows smoothly, what moves by accidentals, arabesques, and controlled ritardandos through an intelligible progression is the series of enigmas, their suspended disclosure, their delayed resolution: the development of an enigma is really like that of a fugue; both contain a *subject*, subject to an *exposition*, a *development* (embodied in the retards, ambiguities, and diversions by which the discourse prolongs the mystery), a *stretto* (a tightened section where scraps of answers rapidly come and go), and a *conclusion*. (Barthes, 1974, p. 29).

Viewer Involvement

Michael Giacchino's distinct scores for characters and plotlines allow viewers to stay a step ahead of the characters, which Barthes described as action code (O'Donnell, 2007, p. 76). "Walkabout" concludes with a powerful musical sequence that creates emotional intensity. Regardless of what a viewer knows about Locke's character later in the series, one re-watching this episode will reconnect with him in the final moments of the episode, remembering how it felt to "get it"—to understand why Locke is determined not to let his destiny slip away...again.

Finally, viewing relations—how people watch the show, such as alone or in groups—impact viewer involvement. People watching in groups tend to share ideas and discuss theories, playing the "game of television" (Lembo, 2006, p. 464). People "can become so involved in the story, the action, or with the characters, that the depictions seem real to them, leading them to feel as if they are there, in the situations and a part of what is happening" (Lembo, 2006, p. 463). Viewers continue their involvement through online forums and Web sites, and even by reading books referenced by the show's characters.

Conclusion

Lost is a unique television show that heightens the depth of its characters and plots with distinctive production techniques, mythical implications and archetypal themes. As shown in "Walkabout," John Locke and Jack Shephard create conflict by testing faith against science and destiny against free will. The show stresses the significance of every interaction in life, yet labels destiny as an end people are bound to reach, regardless of the path they take. Viewers empathize with *Lost*'s characters by realizing their own flaws and the fact that, they too, are on a journey of self-discovery.

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