

## **Making the Case for Teaching Character Change in Complex TV: *The Closer* and *Major Crimes***

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### **ABSTRACT:**

Jason Mittell's 2015 book *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* offers enough material to sustain a semester-long undergraduate course. Because of its approachability and students' interest in discussing characters, his chapter devoted to viewers' parasocial relationships and characters' potential for change is among the most teachable. However, teaching complex television that relies on intensely serialized story elements can make choosing televisual texts for study and discussion challenging. Therefore, series that skew episodic yet still incorporate serial elements, like police procedurals, can prove to be a practical alternative for classroom study. This article describes how using the interrelated police procedurals *The Closer* and *Major Crimes*, offers a rare opportunity to analyze long-term, meaningful character growth through the character of Captain Sharon Raydor. Key scenes across the two series demonstrate the unusual process of transforming Sharon Raydor from a one-dimensional antagonist on *The Closer* to a dynamic protagonist on *Major Crimes*. This transformation directly engages students with foundational terminology from Mittell's chapter, such as *alignment*, *access*, *attachment*, and *allegiance*. Moreover, it allows them to weigh the evolution of Sharon Raydor against the four types of character change Mittell describes. The article shows how this can be effectively accomplished by viewing one full episode from each series plus an isolated scene from an intervening episode of *The Closer*.

**Key Words:** Complex TV, *The Closer*, *Major Crimes*, characters, change, parasocial relationships, police procedurals, gender

Because it analyzes a variety of shows, addresses the business of the television industry and its impact on storytelling, considers viewers' perceptions of televisual stories and the impact of online fan communities, explores the proliferation of show-related paratexts, and identifies significant trends in recent television storytelling, Jason Mittell's book *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* provides an excellent blueprint for a semester-long television studies course. (Indeed, as I learned while teaching such a class, there is likely enough material to sustain two rigorous semesters.) Mine was an upper-division English elective populated primarily with English majors, some of whom were pursuing a film/television studies minor. While many of the students had taken other film studies classes, television studies coursework was a new offering in my department at the time, so students were largely unfamiliar with the specific demands and idiosyncrasies of crafting "complex TV" narratives. From a teaching standpoint, one of the fruitful chapters proved to be Chapter 4, "Characters." In this chapter, Mittell focuses on the one-sided parasocial relationships viewers develop with fictional television characters and how those relationships might be leveraged to facilitate character change. As someone who regularly teaches creative writing, effective character development is a regular topic in my classes, yet this was a new opportunity to consider how factors such as time (a narrative presented in installments over many years), actor performance, editing, sound, and even *mise-en-scène* impact television character development. To illustrate Mittell's theories, I relied on TNT's police procedural *The Closer*, about Brenda Leigh Johnson (Kyra Sedgwick), an Atlanta transplant who takes over the LAPD's Major Crimes division, and its spinoff/sequel *Major Crimes*. What made these series valuable was the unusual evolution of one character, Captain Sharon Raydor (Mary McDonnell). By studying three episodes across the two series my students were able to chart the arguably unprecedented and largely organic transformation of Sharon Raydor from flat, unsympathetic antagonist of *The Closer* to sympathetic, multi-dimensional protagonist on *Major Crimes*.

Why *The Closer* and *Major Crimes*? Because Mittell's analysis of particular shows and episodes is so often thorough and compelling, I wanted them to apply his concepts to other shows, instead of inviting them to parrot Mittell's readings either in their writings or class discussion. The challenge of planning and teaching a course devoted to complex TV is its very complexity; its hybrid status as both episodic and serial. For example, Mittell often returns to *Lost* to illustrate key terms and concepts, but with its intricate mythology, large cast of characters, call-backs, Easter eggs, and multiple timelines, cherry-picking a few episodes or assigning a small block of consecutive episodes seemed of limited value. In essence, *Lost* seemed too serialized. *The Closer* and *Major Crimes* are both quintessential examples of complex TV. Despite some multi-episode and multi-season plot arcs, they skew toward the episodic with a focus on a "case of the week" that typically gets resolved by episode's end. The more dominant episodic elements made it easier to focus on only those episodes and scenes that most intensely highlighted Sharon's evolution. I could, therefore, introduce students to *The Closer* through an episode that did not air until its fifth season.

To address complex TV's potential for depicting character change, Mittell uses a set of relatively straightforward terms, largely borrowed and slightly adapted from the film theorist Murray Smith. The success of Sharon Raydor's transformation can be better understood through the application of those terms, namely *alignment* (*attachment* + *access*) and *allegiance*. "Alignment," Mittell says, "consists of two key elements: *attachment* in which we follow the experiences of particular characters and *access* to subjective interior states of emotions, thought processes, and morality" (129). Allegiance, meanwhile, is "the moral evaluation of aligned characters such that we find ourselves sympathetic to their beliefs and thus emotionally invested in their stories" (134).

Although I was teaching a television studies course, this close reading of the two shows could prove useful in a screenwriting/scriptwriting class; a theory-based class, given Mittell's strong theoretical underpinning; or even in a fiction workshop as a brief departure from the traditional workshop and a way to

encourage student writers to think more critically about how they craft their own characters. The concepts might even be adapted to a composition course that emphasizes the reading of visual texts. Regardless of the course subject, popular television shows like these are, as Henry Giroux says, “attractive cultural texts for students because they [are] not entirely contaminated by the logic of formal schooling” (3). Although Giroux is speaking specifically of film and singles it out as being of superior pedagogical value, the boundary between film and television is becoming increasingly permeable. (Julia Roberts stars in the recently released Amazon series *Homecoming* while South Korean auteur Park Chan-wook directed the 2018 miniseries *The Little Drummer Girl* that aired on BBC One and AMC to name but two examples.) Now seems an appropriate time to acknowledge that televisual texts offer the same benefits. They, too, are “a visual technology that functions as a powerful teaching machine that intentionally tries to influence the production of meaning, subject positions, identities, and experience” (6). Robin Redmon Wright has shown in her study of *The Avengers*’ impact on British women that television characters can powerfully influence viewers’ behaviors and attitudes. Helping students understand how television writers, directors, actors, etc. shape these parasocial relationships to produce specific viewer responses is time well spent in any classroom context.

The “For Further Exploration” sections concluding each episode discussion provide ways of extending or adapting this analysis, if I had had more class time available, or if I used it in a context other than television studies. In some cases, they pose questions included on the handout I provided to my students, while in others they introduce areas of relevant inquiry that organically entered our class discussion.

Below I have outlined my ways of approaching significant scenes from *The Closer* and *Major Crimes* in order to stimulate connections to Mittell’s Chapter 4. Students were given a handout with just these questions and no episode information. We then discussed the questions after viewing each individual episode or scene. They had read Mittell’s chapter prior to our screening and discussion, and we reviewed the chapter-specific terminology covered in this article as well. These are the episodes/scenes and results of the discussions:

### **THE CLOSER SEASON 5, EPISODE 3: “RED TAPE”**

**Episode Summary:** Sergeant Gabriel and Commander Russell Taylor are enjoying an after-work drink at a bar only to be interrupted by the sound of gunfire outside. The two rush to the scene, and when someone fires at Gabriel, he fires back, critically wounding a young man named Erik Whitner. In addition, there is a dead body at the scene. These circumstances lead to the introduction of Sharon Raydor, a captain in the Force Investigative Division, the equivalent of internal affairs. She and Chief Johnson spar over which investigation takes priority—FID’s into Gabriel’s actions or Major Crimes’s into the dead body.

#### **LAYING THE GROUNDWORK:**

**What are some similarities you noticed between Brenda Leigh Johnson and Sharon Raydor?**

The entire episode functions as an extended exercise in compare/contrast, so after students viewed the episode in its entirety this was an important step in preparing to discuss Mittell’s terminology and concepts. My students had no trouble generating a list that included the following:

- Both are attractive, middle-aged women played by recognizable actresses.
- Both have achieved a high rank within the historically male sphere of the Los Angeles Police Department.
- Both project aggressive personalities enhanced by a thorough knowledge of the law and police protocol.
- Both doggedly pursue justice for victims.

#### **SCENE #1: SHARON RAYDOR ARRIVES AT THE CRIME SCENE**

**Q:** Given all of their similarities, why are we inclined to root for and like Brenda more than Sharon even though

Brenda actively bends or subverts the rules in ways we should find troubling for someone in law enforcement? (At one point in the episode Brenda threatens, manipulates, and intimidates Erik Whitner while he is in the hospital.) In other words, if Sharon occupies the moral high ground, why do we almost immediately decide we do not want her to “win” the episode’s ensuing power struggle?

**DISCUSSION:** The first place the handout asked students to look for a potential answer was Mittell’s discussion of alignment. Both of its components, attachment and access, relate to point of view. The dominant point of view in any episode of *The Closer* belongs, naturally, to Brenda. However, she does not immediately appear in “Red Tape.” In her absence we experience events from the perspective—or, we are attached to—Sergeant Gabriel and other familiar members of Brenda’s team who are invested in Gabriel’s personal and professional wellbeing. Gabriel serves as Brenda’s initial surrogate. Regular viewers of *The Closer* have spent four full seasons and part of a fifth attached to Gabriel, and while first time viewers, like some in my class, will have only been attached to him for a few minutes, that attachment carries meaning because during that brief time he has been shown responding bravely to a violent situation while off duty. He has put himself at risk to protect the innocent people on the street and inside the bar. Point of view/attachment remains with Brenda’s team when Detectives Provenza and Flynn arrive on the scene. It is from their perspective that viewers first encounter Captain Sharon Raydor.

Sharon Raydor enters the story as a disembodied voice that emerges from a black screen. The voice is a dictatorial monotone assigning tasks to officers at the crime scene. When Flynn speaks to her after the camera has allowed us to see her, she is brusque:

FLYNN: Well, we were wondering if, while you’re investigating the shooting of a scumbag suspect, we might be able to look into the actual murder.

PROVENZA: Chief Johnson won’t be happy with the evidence just deteriorating—

SHARON: This isn’t Chief Johnson’s crime scene, so I wouldn’t worry about it, gentlemen. Officer-involved shootings are my jurisdiction, not Major Crimes.

PROVENZA: That dead body over there is ours.

SHARON: Not tonight.

Sharon inflects these last two words with a particularly dismissive and condescending tone. Immediately following the exchange, Commander Taylor attempts to defuse the increasingly tense situation, but Raydor cuts him off to enumerate protocols he appears to have violated at the crime scene, asking “why the sergeant who pulled the trigger was permitted to leave the scene after he’d been drinking while you were with him, which makes you a percipient witness.” Before he can respond, she asks him which hospital the victim has been taken to. She raises her voice to ask about the hospital, and once she has gotten an answer, she appears to roll her eyes.

Based on our discussion and the handouts I collected, students recognized that because the episode opens at the bar with viewers attached to Gabriel and Taylor, and we continued to be attached to them during the shooting and experienced it “first hand” we are “on their side,” so to speak. Therefore, when Sharon shows up and abrasively takes control, we find her off-putting and, more importantly, a threat to those we have been attached to, especially Gabriel.

**FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION:**

- Explore the relationship between Sharon Raydor and the typical portrayal of Internal Affairs personnel on television police procedurals. If students do not have any examples to contribute from their personal viewing histories, the TV Tropes website has a lengthy Internal Affairs entry that is worth sharing.
- Consider how Sharon's name stacks the deck against her before we even really know her. What are the definitions of "raid" and "raider"? How do they contribute to our first impression of the character?

**SCENE #2: SHARON MEETS SERGEANT GABRIEL AND BRENDA**

**Q:** Despite numerous similarities between Brenda and Sharon, what differences between the two women does this scene highlight? How do they determine our level of allegiance to them?

**Q:** How does Mary McDonnell's portrayal of Sharon Raydor shape our access and allegiance to the character? How does this combine with the scene's editing and use of camera distance to solidify our instincts to feel an allegiance to Brenda and her team rather than Sharon?

**DISCUSSION:** Brenda arrives at a hospital to speak to a distraught Gabriel. Her first words convey concern, asking Gabriel if he is okay. Gabriel volunteers to Brenda that he "may have made a mistake here" by not reading the victim/murderer Erik Whitner his rights. Brenda reassures him: "That's okay...That's not a mistake." A lack of evidence at the scene, in particular no bullet marks or gun, prompts Brenda to add that "[a]s far as FID is concerned, you were not fired upon, and you shot an unarmed man," making Sharon's lack of caring and surplus of suspicion a trait that defines her. The exchange rounds out a recurring aspect of the Brenda/Sharon contrast: Brenda cares about people, while Sharon, as was evident at the crime scene, seemingly does not.

In my experience, when discussing character in television or film, students tend to focus on the content of a character's dialogue and that character's actions. Once Sharon enters the frame, this scene offers a valuable opportunity to illustrate how those crucial elements can be enhanced by the choices of actors, directors, and editors in ways that deepen our understanding of characters. There is something excessively aggressive about Sharon Raydor, an acutely abrasive petulance magnified by her naked assertions of authority. How does Mary McDonnell accomplish this? As we began addressing the issue of her performance, we revisited Mittell's observation that "[t]elevision characters derive from collaborations between the actors who portray them and the writers and producers who devise their actions and dialogue" (119).

In this scene, Raydor meets Gabriel for the first time, and rather than greet him in a professional manner, she chooses to chastise him for his conduct: "As a sergeant, I would expect you to be familiar with the rules and regulations surrounding the use of your firearm." Gabriel replies, "And you would be correct." "Then why," Sharon continues, "did you disregard LAPD policy and leave the scene of your action?" When studying this exchange, I asked students to focus on McDonnell's voice. Speaking these lines, her voice has a staccato, almost robotic quality that accentuates the apparent inhumanity of her character. Sharon's voice never wavers as she orders Gabriel to immediately take a breathalyzer test, taunting him by suggesting that maybe his lawyer should explain to him "the consequences for not doing as I ask." Raydor hardly gives Gabriel enough time to react before following up with, "Do you need help with the word 'immediately'?" Sharon is raising valid concerns about Gabriel and Taylor's actions at the crime scene, but those questions are effectively drowned out by the way she presents them. Asking students how they think Sharon feels about Gabriel, Taylor, and the whole of Major Crimes, is likely to elicit answers focusing on contempt, condescension, and superiority. Did her apparent feelings match those of my students? Hardly. This disconnect speaks directly to *allegiance*. Although Mittell associates allegiance with morality, Sharon's behavior here demonstrates that

morality involves more than what is right under the law. It extends to the old, simple concept of the golden rule. Morality, then, becomes muddled with emotions. Students felt badly for Gabriel because he was subjected to Sharon's combative style after having already endured a stressful situation outside the bar. They could not support her otherwise admirable quest to determine whether or not Gabriel abused his authority.

Meanwhile, Brenda stands at the edge of the frame. Although she is not directly involved in the conversation, the camera occasionally cuts to her in a medium close-up. To solidify students' understanding of access, this is an excellent moment to pause to ask what they believe she is thinking while she watches. The camera captures her with a wide-eyed expression, a combination of alarm and amazement. Her expression confirms that Gabriel could very well be in trouble if Sharon is in charge of his fate. The goal is to help students realize that Sharon's characterization, and our decision to withhold our allegiance, is heavily influenced by this access to Brenda.

When Brenda finally speaks, the scene again magnifies the contrast between her and Sharon. Brenda does not match Sharon's tone or reveal her disgust. Instead, she reverts to her well-practiced Southern politeness: "Captain Raydor, it is so nice to finally meet you." Sharon does not reciprocate. The tension between the two women intensifies. Each expresses her priorities—Brenda for the officer under her command, Sharon for "an unarmed civilian sprayed by bullets." Sharon warns Brenda that she should be careful of who she sympathizes with in this case. In a rejoinder that will thrill viewers already eager for Sharon to experience some degree of comeuppance, Brenda plays her trump card, catching Raydor in the act of not following the rules. It is a delicious reversal given everything we've seen. Brenda tacks on her title, "Chief," to the end of Raydor's warning, then repeats the whole sentence back to her, "Chief" included. Raydor responds with an incredulous, "Excuse me?" Brenda goes on to add, "You are a Captain and a subordinate officer, and you will remember that when addressing me. Do I make myself clear, Captain?"

And here we have another point of intersection linking Sharon and Brenda. Brenda also pairs aggressiveness with excessiveness. Only in Brenda's case, her aggressive behaviors are shot through with her excessive Southern politeness and femininity, best embodied in her trademark phrase, a cloying "thank you" that punctuates many of her sentences. Those students who were already familiar with *The Closer* readily imitated Kyra Sedgwick's enunciation without prompting from me and cited this as an aspect of Brenda's personality they found endearing. Often, Brenda's behavioral excess gets played for gentle comedic effect whereas Sharon Raydor's serves as a warning to not get on her bad side.

#### **FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION:**

- Ask students how the scene uses wardrobe to further enhance the differences between Sharon and Brenda and shape our perceptions of them. Brenda wears a carnation pink coat, unbuttoned and untied, and a floral pink skirt. Both reinforce her femininity and, perhaps, her Southernness. Conversely, Sharon wears a black coat that is buttoned and tightly belted.
- Show a contrasting clip of Mary McDonnell to illustrate her exaggerated performance. A brief, effective example would be her only scene in the film *Margin Call*, in which she plays the understanding ex-wife of Kevin Spacey's character.
- Reshow Brenda's entrance in her subsequent visit to the crime scene that begins with her admonishing one of Sharon's subordinates. Why are we likely to find *this* power play highly entertaining? Is Brenda parodying herself? Is she parodying Sharon? Both? Regardless, it clearly illustrates Brenda's excesses being played for comedic effect.

#### **SCENE #3: BRENDA SAYS GOODBYE TO KITTY**

**Q:** The subplot dealing with the impending death of Brenda's cat, Kitty, could have presumably happened in any episode, yet the writers chose to pair it with this case and the new character of Sharon Raydor. Why do

you think that is?

**Q:** Why is it important that the episodes begins and ends with scenes set in Brenda's home?

**DISCUSSION:** The episode's "Kitty" plot is the one my students wanted to discuss most urgently. In fact, we ended up starting with this scene and working backwards through the rest of the episode. It is this scene that illuminated for them just how far the episode goes out of its way to emphasize Brenda's compassion and devotion to those she cares about, whether it be Gabriel or her pet. The episode begins with her trying to hide Kitty's deteriorating health from her husband, Fritz, an FBI agent. Later, she tries to put off dealing with Kitty's condition when Fritz calls her at work. While Fritz tries to convince her that euthanizing Kitty is the most loving thing they can do for her, tears well up in her eyes. "I can't do it. I can't do it," she replies. Before returning to work she has to take a moment to compose herself. As these scenes remind us, Brenda is capable of great vulnerability, great depths of feeling. She is also capable of revelatory self-awareness. Brenda's return home to tell Fritz the doctor is on the way to put Kitty down, as well as her final private goodbye and declaration of love for Kitty, directly follows Sharon's final appearance in the episode, a meeting with Brenda and Gabriel in Brenda's office that confirms Gabriel's innocence. Tensions have ebbed, but they have by no means ceased. With Brenda once again deploying her Southern politeness, this time to offset what must be interpreted as sarcasm at some level, she tells Sharon, "I have learned a great deal from your single-minded approach." At home Brenda reveals that when it comes to Kitty she has been guilty of the same singlemindedness. She admits to Fritz that she has only been thinking about herself.

In television shows primarily set in workplaces, scenes that extend attachment to protagonists' homes offer special opportunities for access. Throughout the episode, Brenda makes a great effort to maintain a professional façade despite the emotional toll Kitty's health takes on her. However, viewers are allowed to share this intimate moment with her when the façade cracks. After verbally sparring with Sharon on multiple occasions, Brenda is bereft of words. All she can say is "My poor, poor, poor, poor, poor, poor Kitty." That is all she needs to say to convey her devastation. Our access to her feels total, and my students found it to be a deeply affecting scene, one that, in retrospect, actually hardened their negative attitudes toward Sharon. The episode concludes by reiterating that Sharon's mindset, and, by extension, Sharon herself, is not to be modeled or admired. Despite being on the right side of the law, the final scene tells us, she embodies the opposite of what is reasonable and humane, firmly entrenching her in the role of rival/antagonist.

### **THE CLOSER SEASON 7, EPISODE 19 "LAST RITES"**

**Episode Summary:** Brenda and her team investigate the murder of a priest, but her tactics anger not only the Catholic Church, but Chief Pope, who threatens her with disciplinary action for ignoring his orders.

#### **SCENE 1: SHARON COUNSELS BRENDA**

The dynamic between Brenda and Sharon has evolved over the nearly two seasons that have elapsed since "Red Tape." In this scene, the two women sit across from one another at Brenda's desk, and though Brenda is animated and frustrated, that frustration is not personally aimed at Sharon. They are cooperating, "trying to reopen dialogue with the archdiocese," without any of the rancor that defined their earliest interactions. Throughout the scene Sharon naturally advocates for prudent actions that follow the LAPD's rules while considering the tremendous power and influence of the Catholic Church. What's remarkable is not the purely professional aspect of the conversation but the more personal turn it takes when the tensions between Brenda and her superior, Chief Pope, come to the forefront. My students saw an entirely different Sharon Raydor

here. Rather than act as an adversary, she takes on a new set of roles when the conversation turns, and she begins to focus on how she thinks Brenda should manage Chief Pope's fragile male ego. For the duration of the scene Sharon serves as an adviser, confidant, and potential mediator squarely on Brenda's side. What's more remarkable still is that Sharon is willing to sidestep, or at least delay, the rules by convincing Pope not to sign a formal complaint he has written up on what he perceives to be Brenda's insubordination. "[I]f you can't keep relations friendly," she advises, "you need to keep them smart." Rather than scoff at the advice, Brenda asks for Sharon to elaborate, to tell her what would be smart in her situation, and Sharon obliges. They become two like-minded, career-oriented women strategizing ways to effectively deal with male-dominated institutions without compromising their own hard-earned power, a theme present since *The Closer's* first episode.

**FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION:**

- This scene is an ideal place to revisit Mary McDonnell's portrayal of Sharon. In particular, how does her speaking voice in this scene compare to "Red Tape"? Does the apparent change function as a form of access to Sharon?
- Is Sharon's wardrobe changing also? If so, why would that matter?

**MAJOR CRIMES SEASON 1, EPISODE 1 "RELOADED"**

**Episode Summary:** Following Brenda's resignation in *The Closer's* series finale, Sharon takes over Brenda's team to figure out who murdered one of the men presumed to be part of a gang robbing grocery stores, killed while sitting in the back of a squad car. Meanwhile, Sharon tries to placate and protect an at-risk youth, Rusty Beck, the star witness in Brenda's last case.

**SCENE #1: SHARON IS INTRODUCED AS BRENDA'S REPLACEMENT**

**Q:** How does Sharon's demeanor here compare to that in "Red Tape"?

**Q:** With which character(s) is your allegiance strongest? Is it the same at the beginning of the scene as at the end?

**DISCUSSION:** Sharon Raydor does not enter the episode until more than eight minutes have elapsed in "Reloaded." Just as in "Red Tape" she arrives at a crime scene where she is unwanted. The episode introduces her by intercutting shots of Commander Taylor acquainting her with the crime scene, while Provenza, Fitz, Tao, and Flynn discuss the theory that a grocery store has been robbed by men with military training. The point of view for these shots corresponds to that of someone standing beside them, listening to them talk. They don't notice Sharon yet, but the camera and the viewer does. However, the camera and the viewer are too far away to hear Taylor and Sharon's conversation. Filming and editing her arrival this way heightens tension, making the viewer anxious for the moment Sharon's presence becomes known to everyone else. Viewers of *The Closer* know that once it does, the team will react negatively. In fact, Provenza's behavior when he learns from Commander Taylor that she is now his ranking officer mirrors Sharon's when she first meets Sergeant Gabriel in "Red Tape." He asserts his authority and condescendingly questions Sharon's intelligence: "There are a couple of things you don't seem to understand. One is that I am the incident commander, and the other is English. Because I've said it twice." But Sharon now occupies Brenda's role. Rather than retaliate or counter by asserting her new status, she listens, nods, and at one point, even smiles. Like Brenda, she counters hostility with politeness and deference. "I told you we should have waited," she says to Commander Taylor, knowing she would be received coldly. Because she obviously wanted to avoid an unpleasant exchange like the one she has endured with Provenza, the viewers' attitudes soften. Unlike her earliest appearances on *The Closer*, we



see Sharon's sensitivity and self-awareness. My students read this as the first step in repositioning Sharon as an underdog we can't help but root for, yet it does this by straining a long-standing allegiance with a character like Provenza. In essence, the scene dares viewers to switch sides.

#### **SCENES #2 AND #3: FLYNN CONFRONTS SHARON/SHARON STRIKES A PLEA BARGAIN**

**Q: What role does Sharon play in both of these scenes?**

**Q: How are they important to her repositioning as a protagonist rather than antagonist?**

In a conversation with Detective Flynn outside the medical examiner's office, Sharon can't recall the name of the man whose murder they are investigating. "When working homicide, it's good to know your victims by name," Flynn tells her, giving her an elementary lesson in compassionate police work. Despite encouraging progress, Sharon remains self-centered. She still struggles to connect to others on an emotional level. Flynn goes on to eviscerate her, blaming her for the trouble they are having making progress in the case. In particular, he blames her for a rule requiring suspects to remain at a crime scene if shots are fired. Students cited this as a moment that strengthened their view of her as an underdog as it seems unlikely that she alone is responsible for this quirky piece of protocol that directly led to the victim's murder.

Her response marks the turning point in the case and in Sharon's transformation from antagonist to sympathetic protagonist. Again, she refrains from a combative reply. She calmly leads Flynn to begin to connect the elusive dots as she reasons aloud that the killer would have to have an insider's knowledge of the LAPD to take advantage of this obscure piece of protocol. Crucially, the scene shows Sharon, who has been met with resistance from Brenda's team at every turn, contributing an insightful piece of reasoning as well as collaborating with Flynn to determine that it must be another detective's son, himself a veteran, feeding the gang sensitive police information. From this point forward the case accelerates toward its resolution.

The plea bargain scene with Larry Miller, the detective's son, continues to highlight her growing ability to modulate and manage her tone and demeanor. The prosecutors and Miller's lawyer dominate the scene, but when she does enter the conversation, she plays the role of the good cop in contrast to Sanchez who plays the bad cop. In response to Miller shouting "no" and flinging papers off the conference table in protest, Sharon addresses Miller in a low, calm, almost maternal voice as she tries to sell him on the generous deal the DA's office has offered. "Let me give you some perspective, Greg," she says, "because none of us is happy with this situation, but you are the only one with options here, and they're very easy to understand." Importantly, as in the earlier scene with Flynn outside the medical examiner's office, Sharon succeeds. Thanks to her firm but maternal approach, Miller accepts the deal.

#### **SCENE #4: FRITZ COLLECTS BRENDA'S CANDY**

**Q: How does this seemingly throwaway scene make allegiance with Sharon more possible?**

**A:** Despite its brevity, my students believed this to be one of the episode's most important scenes. As Fritz scoops the stash of candy from the drawer of Brenda's old desk into a paper bag, he tells Sharon, "Good job today." As someone intimately connected to Brenda both personally and professionally, we can assume that Brenda herself would share Fritz's assessment. If we don't want to go quite that far, we could alternatively assume that because Brenda trusts Fritz personally and professionally, we can trust Fritz here as well. His words signal to viewers that they and the familiar members of Brenda's team are in good hands. Viewers can feel confident in establishing an allegiance with Sharon from this point forward and accept her as protagonist/heroine.

**SCENE #5: SHARON AND RUSTY AT HOME**

**Q:** How does this scene compare to the final scene of “Red Tape”?

**Q:** How does this scene represent the culmination of Sharon’s change? Using Mittell’s terminology, what type of change does it illustrate?

**Q:** Why does this scene strengthen our allegiance to Sharon?

**DISCUSSION:** Perhaps more than any of her words or actions, this glimpse of Sharon’s private life solidifies her as the protagonist of *Major Crimes*. The plea deal scene with Miller and the end of the scene with Fritz, in which she takes a foil-wrapped snack cake from the drawer and tucks it into Rusty’s knapsack, work together as a pivot toward this scene, and, more importantly, the dominant domestic plot that will define Sharon for the duration of the series—her and Rusty’s gradual progress toward a loving mother-son relationship.

Sharon assures Rusty that she won’t be put off by his hostile attitude because she has already raised two teenagers and has “a tremendous capacity for ingratitude.” Meanwhile, Rusty has no use for the snack cake, Sharon’s first maternal gesture towards him. It is a minor misstep on Sharon’s part. That, however, pales in comparison to the misstep that follows. Wary of his new living arrangements, he asks what they will call each other. At first, she attempts to make a joke of her no-nonsense reputation, saying he should call her Captain Raydor. Rather than soften toward her, he doubles down: “Oh, well, maybe that’s why you live alone with a spare bedroom.” As my students pointed out, Rusty becomes the latest male to bully Sharon, this time in her own home. Any possible co-existence seems to shatter when Sharon says he can call her by her first name. That sounds fair, but Rusty thinks she has made a cruel and tasteless joke because Sharon is also his wayward mother’s name. In Rusty’s eyes, this is an unforgivable betrayal, one that highlights some of Sharon’s familiar faults. She has proven true Rusty’s claim from an earlier scene that the LAPD is full of liars because she claimed to be actively searching for his mother while trying to solve the case of the week. She demonstrates her familiar single-mindedness at its worst, the collateral damage being Rusty’s nascent desire to trust an adult. In addition, she has failed to fully internalize Flynn’s earlier lesson about the importance of names. She has not yet allowed herself to truly empathize with Rusty and the daunting circumstances he faces. This revelation about Rusty’s mother’s name also betrays the jokey, light-hearted manner she adopted to connect with him. The pretense of familiarity becomes the joke, leaving Sharon with proverbial egg on her face. Her plea of “I’m making a good faith effort. I am” is too little too late for Rusty, yet it is exactly what the viewer needs to hear.

Sharon has tried and failed, and the realization of that failure hits her as soon as Rusty leaves the room. Here is this episode’s equivalent of the attachment and access achieved in the final scene of “Red Tape.” Sharon’s shoulders fall, her eyes close, and she lowers herself onto the sofa, succumbing to what must be physical and emotional exhaustion. She leans back and shakes her head, presumably disappointed in herself for the mistakes she’s made. It is the viewers’ most uninhibited glimpse of Sharon Raydor to date. A few moments before, she had said, “Rusty, I just got this job yesterday. Give me a chance to catch up.” Even without the explicit reminder, the fact that she has dealt with so many disparate challenges on the first day of a new job helped nudge students to her side. She may have botched the execution, but her intentions toward Rusty are noble and refreshingly selfless, allowing viewers to feel a mounting allegiance. My students, despite understanding Rusty’s jaded attitude, genuinely felt sorry for Sharon while watching this scene and felt she deserved better because she is clearly trying. In their eyes, the former bully did not deserve the “punishment” Rusty dishes out. They recognized her as a character during what Mittell calls a *character transformation*,

“a gradual shift of morality, attitudes, and sense of self that manifests itself in altered actions and long-term repercussions” (141). What makes Sharon Raydor realistic and an unexpectedly compelling protagonist is that she remains a work in progress at the end of the episode. By not letting her get everything right at work and at home, the writers make her more sympathetic. We have come alongside her at the moment when her evolution is accelerating, and it is the one-step-forward-two-steps-back quality of the evolution that endears her to us in unanticipated ways.

**FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION:**

- Comparing Brenda’s change at the end of “Red Tape” and Sharon’s change across multiple episodes in a creative writing workshop’s discussion of the perceived tyranny of the epiphany in fiction could be a useful supplement to texts like Charles Baxter’s “Against Epiphanies” and Jim Shepard’s “I Know Myself Real Well. That’s the Problem.” I would contend that Brenda’s change, unlike Sharon’s, feels more like Mittell’s *character education*, an epiphany of sorts that “is commonly seen in the smaller scale of an individual episode” (138).
- To what degree is our growing allegiance to Sharon influenced by her display of more traditionally feminine attitudes and behaviors? Students could debate whether or not they think TNT and the show’s writers made a deliberate effort to make Sharon more like Brenda to ensure fans of *The Closer* watched *Major Crimes*.

This in-class activity achieved its goal: to help students identify Mittell’s terminology and ideas about complex TV characterization on screen. The unanimity of their reactions to Brenda and Sharon both verbally and in writing demonstrated the effectiveness with which both series constructed viewers’ parasocial relationships with their protagonists. The activity was also intended as a bridge from their reading of Mittell to an essay assignment on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s 2011 miniseries, *The Slap*, which asked them to apply terms and concepts from Mittell in a thesis-driven reading of *The Slap*’s unconventional approach to character development and point of view. (Each episode is presented from a different character’s point of view and those characters may or may not play a major role in the other episodes.) Overall, the essays successfully utilized Mittell’s Chapter 4 to support students’ readings of *The Slap* and was possible thanks to the preparatory work done with *The Closer* and *Major Crimes*.

For those uncertain about the value of using televisual texts outside of television studies, they appear to be gaining a foothold in other disciplines within the English Department, especially creative writing. I recently experienced some of the most productive fiction workshop discussions ever in a class that used Benjamin Percy’s *Thrill Me: Essays on Fiction* as one of its two primary texts. Percy makes frequent use of film (like *Jaws*) and television (like *Game of Thrones*) examples alongside literary ones. They loved relating examples from their own viewing history to Percy’s craft essays. Similarly, Sandra Scofield’s *The Scene Book* includes exercises that ask readers to closely examine their favorite film and television scenes to better understand scene structure in short stories and novels. Television and film texts can offer an immediate common ground between students who are streaming and binge-watching the latest Netflix content, and teachers can use this shared literacy as a starting point for conversations on all facets of narrative and literary analysis.

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