

# Mortality

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ISSN: 1357-6275 (Print) 1469-9885 (Online) Journal homepage: [www.tandfonline.com/journals/cmrt20](http://www.tandfonline.com/journals/cmrt20)

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To cite this article: Enni Salo, Outi Hakola & Jere Kyyrö (05 May 2026): Laughing at death rituals: performances of (in)sincerity in American situation comedies, *Mortality*, DOI: 10.1080/13576275.2026.2662581

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2026.2662581>



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Published online: 05 May 2026.



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## Laughing at death rituals: performances of (in)sincerity in American situation comedies

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### ABSTRACT

This article analyses depictions of death in popular American sitcoms utilising concepts from performance theory. The chosen shows were *How I Met Your Mother*, *Modern Family*, *New Girl*, and *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*. Sitcoms' death situations imitate and comment on the ideals and norms of real-life social performances. Through content analysis and close reading, we found that storylines about death emphasise comedy and social connection within death rituals. Rituals often include humorous mishaps, as the characters defy social expectations. When the deceased is unfamiliar, humor can be grotesque, and characters feel social pressure to perform the role of a grieving person – often unsuccessfully. Rituals also offer a genuine chance for mourning and social support when a loved one passes. Mortality serves as a contrast that highlights the life-affirming message of the shows and the value of long-lasting social bonds. Sitcoms navigate the balance between culturally ideal sincere moments, failing to live up to these ideals, and joking in a light-hearted or even brutal manner. The shows therefore offer the viewers a chance to face death from a safe distance, allowing space for laughter.



### KEYWORDS

Death; television; ritual; comedy; sitcom

### Introduction: death in sitcoms – a serious laughing matter

While death and dying are one of the most common themes in film and television entertainment (King & Hayslip, 2002, p. 38), humorous sitcoms and dark themes of mortality can seem like a surprising combination. Yet occasionally death has served as the starting point for sitcoms, for example, *Go On* (2012–2013), *The Good Place* (2016–2020), and *Not Dead Yet* (2023–2024). Here, we turn our analytical gaze towards sitcoms that on the surface have nothing to do with mortality, but upon closer examination, it is revealed that even the sitcom world cannot escape death.

Mediated death tends to be exaggerated and violent (Schultz & Huet, 2000; Sumiala, 2022). King and Hayslip (2002, p. 38) argue that television shows too often fail to address how losses affect the surviving family and friends, while Wheatley (2024) argues that television's serial format provides in-depth possibilities for a multifaceted approach to

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death and bereavement. We argue that compared to other entertainment media, sitcoms depict death in an atypical way when they pair mourning and rituals following major losses with frequent jokes for the audience's enjoyment. At the core of these grieving processes are the heartfelt interactions of friends and family, which form the most integral part of the shows and present everyday death and its rituals in a warm, approachable manner. This study sheds light on how death is depicted within the sitcom genre, putting emphasis on the prominent themes of death rituals and comedy.

Given that media significantly impacts people's understanding of death (Gauntlett 2008, p. 2; Williamson et al., 2011, p. 550), scholars have argued that examining the deaths of fictional characters is essential for understanding how such portrayals influence audiences' perceptions of death (Şengün et al., 2023, p. 40). Media offers opportunities for audiences to witness death and experience emotions and rituals related to loss (Combs, 2014, p. 3; King & Hayslip, 2002, p. 38; Murray, 2016, pp. 43, 50; Sumiala, 2022). Consequently, media representations enable the public to reflect their attitudes on the topic and negotiate the socially expected death rituals. Thus, it is refreshing that the popular sitcom genre appears to offer alternatives to mediated depictions of death, dying and grief, including death rituals, which prepare for death or help to mourn after the passing.

We analyse death-related storylines from four American sitcoms from the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which are (1) *How I Met Your Mother* (2005–2014), (2) *Modern Family* (2009–2020), (3) *New Girl* (2011–2018), and (4) *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (2013–2021). These sitcoms have international audiences and remain popular, with streaming services expanding their reach. Their popularity and cultural influence are reflected in their multiple seasons, awards and nominations and frequent inclusions in ranking of the top sitcoms of 2000's (IMDb, 2016). While the analysed material is contemporary, numerous successful predecessors, such as *All in the Family* (1971–1979) and *The Golden Girls* (1985–1992), laid the groundwork in portraying characters' experiences with the death of friends, family members, and romantic partners. *Friends* (1994–2004), one of the most popular and influential sitcoms of all time, had multiple episodes dealing with loss in a humorous yet heartwarming manner. Episodes such as *The One Where Nana Dies Twice*, which portrays the grieving process following the death of a beloved grandmother, and *The One with the Mr. Heckles*, which explores the passing of a cantankerous neighbour, bring forward the historical framework where sitcoms do not exclude death from their narrative worlds.

*How I Met Your Mother* follows the lives of a friend group comprised of three men and two women. The show's premise is that the main character Ted Mosby, played by Josh Radnor, is telling his children stories from his life leading up to meeting their mother. *New Girl* also follows a close-knit friends group. The star of the show is Zooey Deschanel, who plays an endearing teacher named Jessica 'Jess' Day, who befriends her roommates. *Modern Family* is a mockumentary-style show that follows three families related to each other living in Los Angeles. The head of the family is Jay Pritchett, played by Ed O'Neill. Finally, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* tells of a fictional 99<sup>th</sup> precinct of the New York City police department. One of the main characters is detective Jacob 'Jake' Peralta, who is played by comedian Andy Samberg.

All chosen shows share features common to sitcoms; they have an ensemble cast, and the stories are set in a realistic world, although with some exaggerated plotlines. They utilise variations of single-camera production, where the action is directed towards the

camera, adding to the cinematic sense of the narration (Becker, 2008, p. 9). This is treated as a more genuine approach to storytelling compared to traditional sitcoms that are filmed in front of live audiences highlighting the show's staged nature. The perceived genuine action aligns with our focus on sincerity when laughing at death in sitcoms.

In the following section, we explain how we utilise concepts from performance theory to analyse the sitcom death depictions. After that, we give an overview on death in the analysed sitcoms, and then we analyse how the idea of facework plays a role in creating comedy in death situations. Following that, we look at death rituals, in which different social settings such as stages become notable. Finally, we end the analysis by examining situations that are depicted as the most sincere – sitcom characters grieving a loved one.

## Exploring death performances

We approach sitcom deaths as layered performances and rituals. Performances, for all intents and purposes, are forms of play that are presented to an audience. Sitcoms, which were historically performed and taped in front of a live audience, fit this category of performance genres similar to theatre and films. These are the so-called make-believe performances, which 'maintain a clearly marked boundary between the world of performance and everyday reality' (Schechner, 2020, p. 16).

Sitcom is an abbreviation of situation comedy, a name given to a group of television shows in 1950s to separate these narrative and dramatic comedies from variety shows. Sitcoms renewed the comedy field by allowing audiences to see the action in twisted everyday situations (Marc, 2016, pp. 1–2), typically through a group of friends, work community, or family. Because sitcoms dramatise everyday life while humorously deviating from familiar situations, they offer audiences exemplary ways to recognise and study various role performances and social expectations (Paolucci & Richardson, 2006, pp. 32–34, 46). In this manner, while sitcoms remain in the make-believe category, they also reflect performances of ordinary social interactions. According to performance theorist Richard Schechner, this realistic performance is common in Western acting, even if the story or settings are exaggerated. The fictional characters may feel real to the audience, as they portray easily recognisable emotions and interactions. Importantly, these feelings are meant to be performed sincerely (Schechner, 2020, pp. 82, 84).

When sitcoms venture towards death, the questions of performance become intertwined with rituals – a connection emphasised in anthropological approaches. Bradd Shore argues that rituals, which are processes where human behaviour is given symbolic meanings and performs activities with personal or collective significance, are separate from ordinary behaviour. They carry with them a heightened sense of performance – a sense of appropriate responses and actions that are both personally significant and collectively expected. He separates implicit rituals, or everyday ritual acts, and explicit rituals, or ceremonials, such as funerals. Sitcom storylines with deaths reflect rituals related to death, particularly to social expectations of how grief is performed in everyday actions (implicit rituals) and various ceremonial events (explicit rituals).

Due to genre expectations, these performances of death rituals are presented in a twisted form that forces the audience to recognise the difference between social expectations and genre performance. As our analysis will show, sitcoms typically build their death-related jokes according to the incongruity theory of humour, where one

realises the discrepancy between the expectation and the actuality of a social situation. Here, one laughs at the absurdities of the world. Death as a topic already breaks the sitcom audience's expectations. Additionally, jokes about death tend to laugh at social expectations on how one should versus how one sometimes reacts to death. In sitcoms, incongruity is the most typical humour technique, along with superiority humour (Juckel et al., 2016). According to superiority theory, people laugh at others' misfortunes, because it makes their lives appear superior. In other words, comedy can make us feel better about ourselves. The least used humour strategy, in sitcoms' death depictions, is the relief approach. Relief theory argues that laughter can reduce tension, particularly when it comes to fears and anxieties. In everyday humour, relief is seen to play an important feature in death-related jokes (Lambert South et al., 2020). The emphasis on incongruity guides us to pay attention to the performance of death in sitcoms, particularly when the familiar death rituals are twisted and presented in an alternative light.

To study the incongruity of sitcom performances of death rituals, we use sociologist Erving Goffman's concepts to create a theoretical analysis model. Goffman has written about performative aspects of social interactions, and discusses *the dramaturgy of interaction*, which refers to pre-established patterns of action that define roles that interacting actors should take. These patterns are ritualised, often idealised, forms of collective values (Goffman, 1959, pp. 2–4, 16, 35). Because sitcoms focus on studying social interaction, their performances of death can be approached in this dramaturgical manner, where incongruity within the dramaturgy serves both as a source of humour and social commentary. We map this dramaturgy of death-inspired interactions in sitcoms, along with the three dichotomies inspired by Goffman: front stage/backstage, right/wrong face, and sincerity/cynicism.

Sitcoms present themselves as stages where social situations are studied and laughed at. This stage, according to performance theory, is divided into the front stage and backstage (Schechner, 2020, p. 40). The front stage demands socially proper performance, whereas the backstage is 'a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course' (Goffman, 1959, p. 122). In sitcoms, the front stage is at play when characters interact with the outer world and the society, such as funerals. The backstage is defined by intimacy and closeness, when characters can share their inner thoughts with their inner group (and the audience). Playing with these stages is at the core of amusement, as viewers witness how characters act on both stages, and the incongruity between these performances becomes humorous. This is done explicitly when *Modern Family* utilises mockumentary comments and *How I Met Your Mother* uses a reminiscent and unreliable narrator, and implicitly when the viewer sees characters acting differently privately and publicly.

The second dichotomy arises from Goffman's concept of facework, where people seek to maintain each other's faces, but in pranks, a person may be tricked into showing the 'wrong face'. Goffman calls the maintenance of others' faces in social interaction facework (Goffman, 1959, pp. 58–59; 1967, pp. 5–45). In the context of death, Michael Hviid Jacobsen has converted this concept into the notion of deathwork, where in professional roles and established practices of end-of-life care, funeral, bereavement, and mourning guide how social actors present themselves in death-related situations (Jacobsen, 2022, pp. 310, 312). While sitcoms are not typical places for deathwork, how sitcom characters react to death makes deathwork visible and

**Table 1.** Goffman-inspired dichotomies of social performance in sitcom characters' responses to death.

	Front stage	Back stage
Sincere with the right face	In public, characters perform genuine emotions that are socially acceptable (socially ideal).	Characters express genuine emotions appropriately in private settings (socially ideal).
Sincere with the wrong face	Characters show genuine emotions that are socially inappropriate, used to generate humour from awkwardness or shock value.	Characters express genuine but inappropriate emotions in private, revealing vulnerabilities in characters.
Cynical with the right face	Characters fake emotions that are socially acceptable, often leading to comedic situations where the audience is in on the joke.	Characters feign appropriate emotions in private settings, often to maintain a facade.
Cynical with the wrong face	Characters fake emotions that are socially inappropriate, creating humour from the inappropriate behaviour.	Characters fake inappropriate emotions in private, often for comedic effect or relief.

enables audiences to notice potential incongruities related to social expectations. Particularly in front stage performances of death rituals, the use of the wrong face may appear inappropriate, which can cast doubt on the character's morality or challenge cultural norms.

The third dichotomy of sincerity and cynicism refers to a cultural ideal of being sincere in social situations (Cronin, 2000; Houseman, 2021). Here, Goffman wasn't interested in 'what the self "really is"' (Jacobsen, 2022, p. 310) but whether the performer believes in their performance. The sincere performer does, and the cynical performer doesn't (Goffman, 1959, p. 18). While one might take an agnostic stance towards the existence of a 'true self', it is important to acknowledge that representations of social performances in sitcoms often reflect normative ideals regarding the proper way of performing and being 'true' to oneself. Death situations may present challenges for an individual's sincerity, as death-related interactions involve rigid rules of behaviour and considerations for people's feelings. These three dichotomies, inspired by Goffman, map out the sitcom characters' responses to death in the storylines, and how the humour could potentially link to these responses (see Table 1).

While the social expectations are that the mourner shows the right (or the proper) face in public situations at front stage performances, the cultural ideals add a level of sincerity to these actions. The status quo related to death-related rituals remains intact when the mourner is both sincere and appropriate in their behaviour. This assumption is humorously twisted in sitcoms, as they play with an idea of what happens when either front or back stage performances fail. Social games and jokes intentionally create embarrassments and fantasies, retold through real, embroidered, or fictitious anecdotes, detailing past disruptions and resolutions (Goffman, 1959, p. 14).

## Materials and method: mapping out mortality

From the four sitcoms, we analysed 37 death-related episodes. Episodes were chosen for analysis based on death being a notable theme in one or multiple storylines. These episodes were found by reading plot summaries available online and on streaming services, in addition to thorough lists of deceased characters posted online by dedicated fanbases. If these materials mentioned anything related to death or grief, the episode was viewed for further review. After picking an episode,

the previous and later episodes were viewed to identify if the plotline expanded to these. Commonly, sitcoms contain the story arc within one episode, but death as a topic breaks the conventions of the genre and can disturb the conventional feel-good ending.

First, we used content analysis to map the death depictions in data. We studied: (1) who are the dying characters, (2) what was the reaction to the death, (3) what are the causes of death (purposeful, accidental, or natural causes), and (4) are these depictions explicit or implicit? Here, explicit refers to on-screen visibility of death, body, or body parts. Conversely, implicit means that neither the death nor the corpse was shown. Second, we used close reading to recognise patterns in audiovisual storytelling in relation to our theoretical model (Table 1). We analysed the characters' actions and dialogue, death rituals and audiovisual aspects, such as costumes and the staging of rituals.

### ***Who's dying in the happy world of sitcoms?***

The content analysis revealed that sitcoms represent death from a safe distance. None of the deaths are of the main characters. Instead, the recognised 47 deaths in these series were divided into four categories: (1) unfamiliar characters (45%), (2) close loved ones (31%), (3) pets and animals (17%), and (4) antagonists (7%). While it's not unheard of for a main character to die, it's rare in American sitcoms, often inspired by off-screen events. In *8 Simple Rules* (2002–2005), actor John Ritter's unexpected death was written into a storyline. At times, characters are killed off due to the actor's questionable behaviour, when Charlie Sheen was expelled from *Two and a Half Men* (2003–2015) and Roseanne Barr from *The Conners* (2018–2023). When beloved characters die, it's not only the characters but the audience who grieves (DeGroot & Leith, 2018, p. 200). As most sitcoms aim for feel-good stories, they tend to avoid causing distress for audiences, which is visible in avoidance of deaths of children and teenagers. This is evident in the analysed sitcoms, where most deaths were of adult or elderly side characters and extras. Safe distance, Brett Mills (2009, p. 6) argues, provides moving situations without unbalancing genre expectations too much.

The distance is further ensured by off-screen deaths. The deaths are mostly implicit, with few exceptions. In some funeral scenes, open caskets offer opportunities for the main characters to engage with corpses, and in the police series *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, some murder victims are shown explicitly. Such scenes offer chances for grotesque and exaggerated moments of comedy about the deceased or fears of dead bodies.

Furthermore, we analysed how the main characters reacted. Reactions were categorised into socially expected reactions (right face), such as shock, grief, anxiety, anger, denial, or taking part in death rituals in a way that is portrayed as sincere and socially unexpected emotional reactions (wrong face), such as joy, pleasure, excitement, joking, relief, and need to perform a role or fake proper emotions. In many cases, strong emotional reactions were bypassed, or not revealed to the audience, which led to a third category of 'not applicable'. This includes scenes in which the loss of a close person happened a while ago and thus remembering them no longer brought forth feelings of grief. In the analysis, it was noted that sometimes the characters' reactions changed within the episodes, which led us track these emotional transformations (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Reactions to deaths by character type and alignment with social expectations.

	Socially expected reactions	Socially unexpected reactions	Socially unexpected turned socially expected reactions	Socially expected turned socially unexpected reactions	Not Applicable	Total
Unfamiliar character (19)	5	14	0	2	71	92
%	5%	15%	0%	2%	77%	100%
Close person (13)	29	2	9	0	22	62
%	47%	3%	15%	0%	36%	100%
Animal (7)	7	3	3	0	12	25
%	28%	12%	12%	0%	48%	100%
Antagonists (3)	1	5	2	0	11	19
%	5%	26%	11%	0%	58%	100%
All (42)	42	24	14	2	116	198
%	21%	12%	7%	1%	59%	100%

### ***Mourned or mocked?***

Deaths of unfamiliar characters were often absurd, exaggerated, and used for comedic functions – and the causes were mostly accidental or violent. In *New Girl* season 4, episode 19 *The Right Thing* a man whom Jess dated dies in what is described as a motorcycle accident. When another character is surprised to hear Pete drove a motorcycle, Jess specifies: ‘He didn’t. Apparently, he was thinking about getting one, and he slipped and fell on the showroom floor’. Such jokes can make viewers feel superior by not expecting to die in such a ridiculous manner. Therefore, sitcoms give permission to laugh at these comedic deaths. Consequently, the deaths of unfamiliar characters rarely prompted significant emotional reactions and often led into joking at their expense. While characters occasionally express distress, these reactions were typically, quickly passing and shallow expressions.

The closest people to die were mostly elderly relatives of the main characters, and the cause of death were mostly natural causes, such as a heart attack or dying of ‘old age’. This differs from typical entertainment representations, where violent deaths are the norm (Schultz & Huet, 2000, p. 137). Natural deaths with a focus on grief add a sense of realism to the shows, which work in a socially recognisable and plausible frame despite their comedic take on issues (Mundy & White, 2012, p. 106). These deaths often prompted negative feelings and provided sincere portrayals of grieving. In some instances, socially unexpected reactions turned into expected reactions, such as in *Modern Family* season 3, episode 20 *The Last Walt*, where the elderly neighbour of the Dunphy family dies. The neighbour, Walt, was friends with the family’s son Luke, yet Luke seemingly had no reaction to this loss. This worries Luke’s mother Claire, who is also struggling with the realisation that she smiles when talking about Walt’s passing as a coping mechanism. Luke feels pressured into expressing grief and in a comedic moment flatly notes: ‘I’m sad. I’m so very sad’. Claire notes how unexpected reactions – such as repressing one’s feelings or smiling – can be ways to cope with loss. As sitcoms seem to value sincere moments when it comes to the loss of a close person, the storyline ends with Luke and Claire having a heartfelt moment of sincere grief.

Animal deaths cause mixed emotional reactions. The pets of the other people are comparable to the fate of the unfamiliar characters. They are played for comedic effects without strong emotional reactions, for example, when a side character's cat falls from a window. However, the main character losing their beloved pet often causes distress and their grief is treated with sympathy and respect. This differs from the case of antagonists of the main characters. Here, the sitcoms partly follow the popular culture's trend, where antagonists' death can be met with celebration (Fitzgerald et al., 2022). Such deaths likely raise socially undesirable reactions, like relief, yet sometimes surprisingly lead to genuine grief amidst the pressure to perform socially expected reactions.

### Putting the fun back in funeral: breaking social expectations

In the sitcom world, the characters attempt to live up to social ideals but humorously fail. Inconsistent people, Gerry Cox (2017, p. 77) argues, 'risk being embarrassed or discredited in their roles' (losing 'face'). Instead of avoiding such performances, these shows rely on inconsistencies in playing said roles and defying social expectations to create comedy.

One expectation is to take death seriously and respect the deceased. Sitcom characters often subvert this norm by joking about the dead, particularly when the deceased is an unfamiliar figure. Here, both the characters' and the audiences' emotional distance permit a humorous approach. These jokes can be grotesque, making fun of the cause of death or even the corpse, as in season 1, episode 15 of *New Girl* titled *Injured*. Winston, one of the friends, recalls how he failed at giving an eulogy. In a flashback scene, Winston dressed in a black suit gives the eulogy at an unknown person's formally staged funeral, but his mannerisms are reminiscent of an informal stand-up gig. 'What kind of a dummy fixes a washing machine using a knife? This kind of dummy!' he jokes pointing at the closed casket adorned and expecting the solemn funeral guests to burst into laughter. Instead, there's an awkward silence as Winston has contradicted the expectations of his role. Audiovisually, the traditional funeral setting emphasises the conflicting rituals where Winston performs the wrong face for the funeral guests, yet due to the safe distance, the audience can enjoy the incongruity between expectations for eulogies and stand-up shows.

In addition to Winston's social failure, the cause of death can be seen as embarrassing. According to Kristen Murray, dark comedy may create a sense that death is 'occasional and self-inflicted, not common-place and inevitable'. Embarrassing ways to die might minimise the audience's concerns about their mortality and feel superior in that they wouldn't make such mistakes (Murray, 2016, 46). Thus, joking at a dead person's expense often utilises superiority humour and includes both the (main) characters and the viewer in on the joke.

By mentioning this seemingly shameful death, Winston has not only disregarded the way he's presenting himself in a social situation but also how the deceased might have wanted their last image portrayed. For the deceased, death 'is the time when we have to present our final self', and self of the dead person must be maintained by others (Jacobsen, 2022, p. 311). Winston acts contrary to these expectations, disregarding the face of the deceased and thus breaking the situation. As a specific genre of cultural narratives sitcoms include depictions of broken situations such as the fantasies and anecdotes mentioned by Goffman. These narratives produce amusement but also

construe the understanding about how to relate to death situations. When commenting on how people perform in death-related situations, sitcoms comment on the underlying social structures as well as idealised social values.

Jokes about death are usually classified as dark humour, but dark comedy can be especially callous when the deaths in question are violent and purposeful (Murray, 2016, pp. 3, 53). Deaths of that nature, such as murders, are common in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*. In season 1, episode 5, *M.E. time*, Jake investigates a suspicious death and jokes about the victim's large size, assuming their weight caused their death. In real life, professionals who encounter death at work utilise humour to cope with situations, relieve stress, and to maintain collegial relationships (McLachlan, 2013; Scott, 2007). However, such jokes tend to take place back stage, not in front of an audience. Thus, Jake's reaction isn't unheard of but bringing it out into the open breaks the social expectations, in a manner that invites the viewer to take part in the relief function of humour.

Pet deaths also offer ample opportunities for comedy. Contrary to unfamiliar characters, pets are often important family members, deserving of grand death rituals, such as elaborate funerals. Exaggerated rites may appear unexpected, as grieving pets isn't widely recognised in society – although research highlights owner's need to grieve and engage in rituals (Hess-Holden et al., 2017). In sitcoms, grief of the pet owner is portrayed sincerely, and humour builds on the contradicting definitions of the situations between the owners, audience, and other characters.

*New girl* plays with the viewers' expectations, as season 7, episode 4 *Where the Road Goes* opens with the touching song *Only Time* by Enya that talks about how time will heal. The sombre main cast drives on a gloomy rainy day in a spectacular funeral procession as viewers wait in suspense: who has died? Humorously, it's revealed that the episode is dedicated to mourning Winston's cat with a grand unveiling of a polished gravestone at a pet cemetery, elaborate memorial service, and formally dressed funeral guests. These audiovisual elements that signal a traditional, grand funeral, typically reserved for grieving the substantial loss of a close person, construct humorous incongruity. They mark the memorial as something out of the mundane, which is emphasised when one of the friends breaks the etiquette by showing up in sweatpants, causing others to frown about the lack of taking the event seriously. Overall, the unexpectedness of the situation arises from displacing the pet ritual from the private space to be performed on the front stage. Adapting human-centred rituals to fit a pet funeral suits the sitcom's heart-warming yet amusing tone. In the story world, Winston's sincerely portrayed grief is not mocked. Instead, it is sitcom audiences who are invited to laugh at the ritual's unexpectedness and excessiveness.

Comedy relies on violating the audience's expectations with unexpected social situations. When jokes are at the expense of dead characters, sitcoms use strategies familiar from superiority and relief theories to increase the safe distance to death. Another typical humorous strategy arises from incongruities of the situation: the audience is comforted knowing that they aren't expected to laugh at death but at human-created rituals. In psychological humour theories, the jokes that provide distance to death have been seen as death denial, which helps the audience to avoid death-related pain (Thorson, 1985). However, James Thorson (1985, p. 206) argues that making light of death provides control, which helps to make death less all-consuming. Nicoleta Răban-Motounu's (2021, p. 192) empirical study supports this view, as she found that laughing at sitcoms

helped study participants become aware of their negative emotions, accept them, and lessen their anxiety. Thus, sitcoms' potential to make fun of death or funeral rituals shouldn't be read as a sign of disrespect but to allow death to be a controlled part of the comedic world.

### Rites gone wrong

Social failures are typical sitcom material. This plot structure, particularly, can be studied through the tension between back and front stage emotional reactions. Audience knows the complex emotions that the characters feel about the deceased, but not all of these are considered socially acceptable. Because death is a ritualised social event that emphasises proper manners (Jacobsen, 2022, p. 312), the sitcom characters need to perform in front of the outsiders to their ingroup. Mortality plotlines often focus on these social failures in death rituals and mourning processes that occur when the characters lose their face whilst trying to give a convincing performance.

The amusement depends on the viewer's ability to recognise inconsistencies in the ritual, as there is incongruity between how the characters act on both front stage and backstage. The division between the stages helps in distinguishing what parts of death rituals are portrayed in sitcoms as 'cynically performed' and 'sincerely performed' acts. Goffman (1959, p. 18) argues that giving a convincing social performance is easier when one feels it is sincere. Both in the real world and in realistically performing sitcoms, these believable performances are an essential part of a successful death ritual, and when people are unable to perform them, rites do indeed go wrong (Cox, 2017, p. 77).

In *New Girl* season 4, episode 19 *The Right Thing*, Jess is shocked to find out that a man named Pete, who she briefly dated, died. At the memorial service, she discovers that Pete was cheating on his girlfriend with her. Not wanting to ruin the intimate at-home memorial and the last image of the man as well as losing face herself, she pretends to have been Pete's co-worker. The comedy arises from the incongruity that Jess goes in with genuine intentions but is pressured into giving a cynical performance. There is a significant contrast between the cynical performance and the memorial service, which is otherwise attended by a selected ingroup. The memorial is set up for sincere mourning with close-knit family and friends, but Jess disrupts this. Jess must adjust her social face in the front stage performance, as the ritual doesn't proceed as expected. Eventually, the truth is awkwardly uncovered as the insincerity of her performance and Pete's betrayal is revealed in front of the memorial guests. This goes against the idea, where a memorial is a peaceful event attended by loved ones (Murray, 2016, p. 45), effectively ruining the service.

Another situation, where characters are depicted as having to give a cynical performance of grief, is the death of an antagonist. Antagonist's death can be entertaining to viewers, who are excited to get rid of a despised character (Fitzgerald et al., 2022, p. 571). In *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* season 7, episode 7 *Ding Dong*, one of the main characters, Raymond, is overjoyed to hear of his nemesis and colleague Wuntch's passing. Unfortunately for Raymond, it's revealed that Wuntch had told everyone that the pair reconciled, and Raymond wants to organise Wuntch's NYPD memorial service. Wuntch figured that Raymond's incapability to hold a respectful service would consequently ruin his career. Although for most of the episode, Raymond struggles to perform the role of

a mourner – for example, he first had the memorial space decorated with colourful balloons, party hats, and a banner celebrating ‘she’s dead!’ – he finally gives a touching and sincere speech at the properly decorated memorial. The ritual, which was set out to be a failure, turns out to be successful as Raymond manages to give the right social performance.

Despite the humour that conflicting performances cause, sitcoms present sincere performances of mourning as valuable. When the characters recognise the feeling of loss, despite the complex relationships, their emotional reactions start to line with social expectations. In Goffman’s terms, this helps to turn the cynical performances of grief into sincere sense of loss, mending the back and front stage performances.

### Heart-warming and quirky

Sitcoms give significant screentime to portraying serious and emotional moments of coping with the loss of a close family member or friend. These moments often take place within the backstage with the ingroup of the main characters and grief is portrayed sincerely. Viewers may also feel sadness for losing a beloved fictional character (DeGroot & Leith, 2018, p. 200). Therefore, both the viewers alongside the characters require time to process these impactful losses. Alongside humorous registers, these deaths add several emotional registers to the narration (Mills, 2009, p. 7).

In *Modern Family*, the deaths of Phil’s mother (Grace) and Claire’s and Mitchell’s mother (DeDe) are given special episodes, and the aftermaths of death and grief are returned later in the series. Season 4, episode 24 *Goodnight Gracie* focuses on Phil’s mother’s last words and wishes that she prepared for her family. These letters allow the family members to learn to know her better and provide opportunities to express their emotions and remember her together. Later, Grace is mentioned in a couple of episodes in the context of how much she’s missed.

In DeDe’s case, in season 10, episode 5 *Good Grief*, Claire receives the unexpected news of her mother’s passing while dressed in a Halloween costume as a giant spider. Her husband Phil, dressed as a fly, is tangled up in a decorative web as distraught Claire hugs him. The costumes create a visually humorous moment whilst the scene is emotionally sincere and sentimental. Festive holiday costumes also show that death does not ask for time and a place but invades everyday life that continues around those who mourn. During the episode, the whole family dressed in elaborate costumes appears to continue their mundane lives. Jay, DeDe’s ex-husband, for example, obsesses over his sandwich. These representations do not differ from their actions in previous episodes, but in the context of mourning, these reactions appear improper. Through revelation, they realise that they are trying to find different ways to memorialise Dede. With improved communication, they realise that mundane activities carry personal memories. Jay reveals how DeDe made the best sandwiches, and thus, his obsession over a sandwich was about remembering DeDe. The episode shows that when death becomes part of everyday life, there are no social rituals to follow, but the focus is on the sincerity of the performance. The narrative and humorous incongruity is built between the tension of proper and sincere performance.

In a later episode, this death is revisited when DeDe's belongings are divided as memorabilia to the family. These episodes show that although grieving is often seen as a solitary backstage activity (Cox, 2017, p. 80), in sitcoms the mourning process should be shared. Characters rarely grieve alone, and solitary solutions lead to miscommunication. However, when the family gathers, their sincere emotions become supported. Being around your closest friends and family is a safe backstage setting, in which one can express their feelings.

Continuity of death stories becomes important in *How I Met Your Mother*, when Marshall's father Marvin dies. Season 6, episode 13 *Bad News* ends with Marshall's wife tearfully informing her husband of his father's passing, breaking the usual sitcom format of leaving viewers on a happy note. Marvin dies suddenly from a heart attack – although importantly he was shown to have had a good life. Three subsequent episodes are impacted by this loss. Aftermath of this grief is again underlined, as a whole season later Marshall is seen visiting his father's grave.

After the solemn ending of *Bad News*, the next episode 14 *Last Words* depicts Marvin's funeral rituals and Marshall's grieving process. The other main characters – Marshall's friends – try fulfilling some kind of role at the funeral to make the day easier for Marshall and his mother. As the friends discuss their duties, Ted and Barney decide they want to make Marshall laugh. Their efforts fall flat, as Marshall isn't amused by their jokes. Being true to oneself also concerns the displaying of emotions.

As the title suggests, last words become an important topic in the episode, as Marshall's relatives share their beautiful memories of Marvin's last words with them. Marshall is trying to recall his last interactions with his father and is left underwhelmed and seemingly wondering how they lived up to the roles of a dying person and the one saying goodbye. The friends try comforting Marshall by stating that last words aren't important. Upset Marshall questions this sentiment by asking his friends, what their last words to their fathers would be if they were to die. This makes them re-evaluate their relationships with their fathers and admit that last words can be significant.

A meaningful moment of grief happens on what can be viewed as the backstage. When others are giving their speeches at the church during the funeral, overwhelmed Marshall steps out of the performance front stage. His friends follow him outside, highlighting how mourning in sitcoms is not a solitary act. Marshall listens to a voice message left by his father, which disappointingly turns out to be a pocket dial. While Marshall starts to yell about how unfair the situation is, the friends eventually hear Marvin's voice on the phone. Marvin had noticed that he had accidentally dialled his son, and he expresses what a great time he had last time visiting Marshall and seemingly ends the voice message by saying how much he loves his son. Marshall is touched to find out that these were his father's last words to him, but humorously the message continues as Marvin asks Marshall to let him know, if he finds Marvin's foot cream, as his fungus is 'acting up again'. The tension is gone, and Marshall continues attending the service and gives a speech about his father's last words. However, instead of telling everyone about the voice message, he tells the story of their last face-to-face interaction – choosing to keep 'the real last words' to himself and his back-stage friends.

Kenneth Vail et al. (2019) study found that death awareness could cause despair for those with more external values (such as wealth, fame, or appearances) whilst people who are more concerned with personal growth and close social relationships were

reminded to 'reflect on life with greater satisfaction'. This is repeatedly depicted in sitcoms, particularly with performances of sincere backstage emotions. The message of the episode *Last Words* is to hold your loved ones close, and one of the friends is even encouraged to contact his estranged father. In addition to possible character development (Mills, 2009, p. 6), deaths of loved ones provide heart-warming and touching moments, emphasising the value of close relationships and the life-affirming message of the shows.

Highlighting these values can also be done without killing off a beloved character through 'close calls', as multiple episodes in the analysed sitcoms simply contain the threat of death. In both *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* season 8, episode 3 *Blue Flu* and in *New Girl* season 1, episode 15 *Injured* one of the friends in the main cast worries they might have terminal cancer. These worries are proven unnecessary after the characters have evaluated their lives and given them a new appreciation towards it.

Sitcoms might make the topic of mortality more approachable for their viewers because social relations and strengthening them are central to their rituals and death depictions. The audience is invited to see how the characters perform these feelings in a sincere way and live through this with them. Instead of laughing at grief, humour is directed towards social expectations of how grief should be manifested. By giving room for numerous reactions and eventually claiming them as normal and acceptable, sitcoms manage to give insight into various ways of grieving.

## Last words

Whilst sitcoms do not aim to accurately capture all complexities of mortality, they do overall seem more grounded than general media portrayals of spectacular and sensational death. When it comes to losing a loved one, sitcoms often depict death as something that comes at an older age and can be peaceful, followed by the support of friends and family through the grieving process. Death in this genre, rarely, functions as a force that drives forward the overall narration. Instead, particularly when discussing the death of a loved one, death episodes sometimes differ from the structure of the normal episode, marking it as special. In these cases, sitcoms acknowledge the devastating power that death has on relationships.

Despite the serious topic, death episodes bring amusement for the viewer, often by building incongruity between expectations and 'reality'. First, the most direct jokes take place with unknown characters, allowing the viewer to laugh at the cultural ideals of death without strong emotional ties to the situation. This, however, shouldn't be read as a way of avoiding death but instead it's a subtle way of making death familiar, something that loses some of its terrifying power when mocked. Second, when sitcoms venture into emotionally challenging death events, humour is used to comment on the rituals and social expectations, not death itself. Here, the audience is in on the jokes, which are directed towards social expectations and cultural norms. Safe distance is merely a tool to make significant social commentary, where the sitcoms give public space for complex emotional reactions to death.

Sitcom characters end up in situations where fulfilling social expectations on how to react to death is difficult to achieve. The viewer, who is familiar with such social expectations, can find amusement in these failings, yet at the same time sitcoms manage to point

out that reactions to death are complicated and that what might appear outwards as socially undesired way of reacting might have its reasons. When the viewer gets to see both front stage and backstage, the narration allows juxtaposing the 'cynical' and 'sincere' performances.

Additionally, audiovisual elements are utilised to create humorous moments. For instance, various sets, costumes, and music set understanding of front and backstages. The traditional funeral settings efficiently frame the action to take place on the front stage, whereas reactions to death in the midst of everyday life construct a sense of the backstage. Also, audiovisual staging can make the scene appear more serious or light-hearted – even when this does not align with the situation. Be it a police officer's memorial service decorated like children's birthday party or a cat's funeral with elaborate rites, these are incongruent with the expectation of how death rituals should be approached.

Sitcoms humorously play with these expectations, yet notably by the end of the episodes, the cultural ideals of sincerity tend to be reaffirmed. Sincerely, with the right face on either front or backstage appears as a cultural ideal, which the sitcoms first twist and turn in their narratives. The death episodes often end with the characters expressing their 'true' selves by emphasising sincerity and sharing one's emotions with others. Especially with the loss of a close person or pet, the backstage becomes an important place to express sincere grief, which is shared with the ingroup. Here, the characters' sincerity in their performance adds an important emotional register for audiences to relate to.

Death becomes marked as something that can help one to appreciate themselves, others, and life. In other words, death in sitcoms can be used to emphasise the life-affirming message that stresses close social relations and sincerity in social encounters, and here, the humorous touches increase the positive tone of this message.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by The Finnish Cultural Foundation under Grant [00231037].

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