

# Narrative Complexity, Character and Action: Reconfiguring Gender Norms and Genre Conventions in a Police Procedural

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**Abstract:** This essay looks at how components of narrative complexity function in *The Closer* (TNT 2005 – 2012), a television detective series developing intertwined professional and personal plots around a female protagonist. Interdependent elements of character and action in the drama illustrate how weekly subplots build to create a portrait of the lead and her interactions with family, friends, and colleagues. Aesthetics and ideologies in *The Closer* reconfigure genre conventions and gender stereotypes associated with the police procedural by highlighting contrasts between femininities and masculinities related to character and action. The series resets gender codes by describing the female protagonist's weaknesses and strengths in relation to her effectiveness as an investigator and a manager, who has a feminized appearance and a masculine style of working.

**Keywords:** narrative complexity, character, action, gender, police procedural, genre

## 叙述复杂性、人物与情节：侦探剧对性属标准与体裁惯例的重构

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**摘要：**本文着眼于探讨构成叙述复杂性的各成分在电视剧《罪案终结》中如何发挥其功能。《罪案终结》是美国 TNT 电视台在 2005—2012 年期间播放的侦探系列剧，情节围绕女主人公展开，主要

涉及其工作和个人生活。该剧的相关人物和情节阐明了周播剧中次要情节的建构如何塑造了女主角的领导形象,以及她与家人、朋友和同事的互动。《罪案终结》中的美学和意识形态通过女性气质与男性气质的强烈对比,重构了侦探剧的体裁惯例和颠覆了传统侦探剧中刻板的性别形象。作为调查员和管理者,女主角在办事效率方面既有弱点也有长处,该系列剧重新设定了性属符码,让女主角拥有女性化的外表却具有男性的工作风格。

**关键词:** 叙述复杂性, 人物, 情节, 性属, 侦探剧, 体裁

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Recent television series demonstrating narrative complexity establish their fictional worlds by developing round and flat characters that engage in action over time within intersecting narrative arcs. As Jason Mittell explains, “narrative complexity is a redefinition of episodic forms under the influence of serial narration—not necessarily a complete merger of episodic and serial forms but a shifting balance. Rejecting the need for plot closure within every episode that typifies conventional episodic form, narrative complexity foregrounds ongoing stories across a range of genres” (Mittell, 2006, p. 32). In this essay I look at how components of narrative complexity function in *The Closer* (TNT 2005 – 2012), a television detective series developing intertwined professional and personal plots around a female protagonist. My argument considers interdependent elements of character and action in the drama, illustrating how weekly subplots build to create a portrait of the lead and her interactions with family, friends, and colleagues. Adhering to the narrative conventions of the police procedural, *The Closer* references the work of real-world detectives, incorporates information about forensic techniques, and includes personal details about major characters. (*Noah's Archives*, 2014)

Although particular episodes introduce and solve certain homicides or other major crimes, the major narrative arc of *The Closer* weaves a multi-year story line about the a female chief of detectives whose relationships with her co-workers shape her character and affect plots recounting her long pursuit of

a particular criminal. My analysis examines how aesthetics and ideologies in *The Closer* reconfigure genre conventions and gender stereotypes associated with the police procedural by highlighting contrasts between femininities and masculinities related to character and action. The main narrative line of the series highlights Chief Brenda Leigh Johnson's position as a woman in the male-dominated profession of policing and the ways her professional position affect her personal life and the ways that her personal attitudes influence her work.<sup>①</sup> Brenda's method of solving murder cases draws on her abilities to pull together evidence and to extract confessions, "tough" abilities that contrast with her "soft" appearance and manner of speech. Brenda's unusual style and her ethical perspective are questioned over the course of the long narrative arc of the series, which describes the protagonist's rise and fall as chief of a major division and encourages ethical criticism of her actions as chief.

Peter Rabinowitz argues that a name in the title of a fiction identifies the character as "Showing up in a position privileged by a rule of notice", which is "one way of attracting attention". (Rabinowitz, 1987, p. 128) *The Closer* is a moniker rather than a proper name, but using the phrase in the show's title draws attention to the protagonist and her special abilities concerning interrogating suspects and analyzing forensic evidence. The series highlights character and action as equally important. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan writes, "it is legitimate to subordinate character to action when we study action, but equally legitimate to subordinate action to character when the latter is the focus of our study." (Rimmon-Kenan, 1989) Looking at the interdependence of characterization and action in *The Closer* reveals how the series highlights gender issues to question the law-and-order ideology of police procedurals. The series resets gender codes by describing the female protagonist's weaknesses and strengths in relation to her effectiveness as an investigator and a manager, who has a feminized appearance and a masculine style of

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① Brenda's talents are not stereotyped as feminine in contradistinction to female protagonists in *Profiler* (1996–2000) and *Ghost Whisperer* (2005–2010) who solve crimes based on their unique, somewhat supernatural gifts. In *Profiler* Dr. Sam Waters (Ally Walker) sees through the eyes of others. *Ghost Whisperer*'s Melinda Gordon (Jennifer Love Hewitt) can see and communicate with ghosts.

managing her team of detectives.

### **I. Character: Feminine Leader of the Pack**

Kyra Sedgwick plays Deputy Chief Brenda Leigh Johnson, an authoritative, attractive woman who left the Atlanta Police Department to take charge of a Los Angeles police squad of homicide experts drawn from various divisions. Although Chief Johnson and the multicultural members of her squad usually resolve one case within a one-hour episode, plotting also stretches over the series as details from early episodes also crop up in later episodes and as Brenda's character transforms from marginalized, appointed leader to protective, admired chief. Brenda initially appears a feminine, Southern interloper entering the mostly hard-boiled masculine world of homicide investigators who work by competing, upstaging, and yelling. She quickly learns many co-workers resent her; some members of her squad threaten to quit rather than work with her. Over time Brenda manages to win the respect of her new colleagues because she is an excellent detective and adept leader of her elite unit. She is also extremely polite, and she convinces them that each case must be carefully analyzed to discern what elements are out of place and which story is not credible. Her distinctive abilities as "the closer", whose deft handling of interrogations results in convictions, generally mark her as worthy of admiration by her colleagues and the audience until her admirable talent in thoroughly resolving each case turns into a financial liability and an ethical lapse.

Brenda's girlish appearance and her commanding authority at a crime scene or in the murder room are highlighted in each episode. At first, she commands attention for her idiosyncratic, overly feminine sense of style. In later years of the series, she is more elegantly attired. Most episodes begin at the crime scene with a number of detectives working to find clues as Chief Johnson arrives. The typical first camera shot of Brenda, an eyeline match that is easily identified with Laura Mulvey's formulation of "the male gaze", begins at the character's feet and travels up her body before keeping her in a medium shot at a crime scene or in the Los Angeles Police Department offices. (Mulvey, 1985) Robert Dale Parker notes that "Mulvey describes

classical Hollywood cinema as organized around a binary opposition between a masculine spectator, the subject, and what we might call a feminine spectated, the object” (Parker, 2008, p. 153). Viewers observe Brenda shod in high heels, wearing pastel or brightly colored sweaters or highly stylized jackets with flowing, sometimes flowery skirts, leaving her hair long and loose or tied up as if for “prom”, and carrying a large black shoulder bag that holds a combination of work files, material evidence, and personal stuff, including a cache of sweets. As the camera pans out from her figure, Brenda’s image compels viewers’ attention as her trench coat (in beige, pink, coral, red, or white) stands out among the ensemble of dark-grey and black suits worn by her colleagues.

Brenda is the highest-ranking female in the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), and her personal characteristics loom large. Excellent at her job, she appears excessively feminine, bossy, quick to show emotions, and able to persuade and/or coerce suspects to confess.

As “the closer”, Brenda has a history of solving difficult cases by encouraging murderers and witnesses to talk, skills she honed while working for the Central Intelligence Agency, where she also learned about forensic techniques. An ensemble show, *The Closer* keeps Brenda’s technical skills in the foreground while sketching her relationships with the men and the occasional woman in her squad as background.

Given that she supervises a squad composed initially of mostly men, whose personalities are not quite as well developed in the show as Brenda’s, it is a testament to the narrative complexity of the series that characterizations of the chief and her team complicate stereotypes. Her positive and negative moral traits mark her as a round character, while other characters have fewer dimensions in being associated with specific traits. However, the series rewrites gender stereotypes in developing characterizations of detectives. Crusty and aggressive male detectives also reveal sentimental streaks, while their chief appears a glamour girl with the heart of a gun. Chief Johnson combines traits typed as masculine (aggression, risk-taking, authoritative decision-making) and feminine (attractive appearance, polite speech, emotionality, flirtation). Brenda’s feminized character traits include a strong

Southern accent, overly polite manners, and a strong candy habit. She sometimes adopts a persona that appears sympathetic to criminals, particularly when she leads them to believe she does not work for the police so that they will be more open in speaking with her. Yet, by the end of each episode, Brenda appears more authoritative in her role as chief of her squad because she combines masculine and feminine traits.

As a cultural figure, the female detective embodies stereotypes of femininity combined with methods of ratiocination. Her appearance in print, television, and film narratives about crimes acknowledges her moral commitment to determine truth and to punish the guilty, although her methods are frequently unorthodox and run counter to those employed by her male counterparts. (Colatrella, 2011) Priscilla Walton and Manina Jones argue that the cinematic representation of an attractive female police officer focuses on “the conflation of sexuality and power”, a “conflation” that appears “as both a contradiction and a threat” (Walton & Jones, 1999, p.231). Recent television series set the female detective’s sensuality, competence, and compassion within legal settings, largely police stations and courts, contexts that highlight gender, ethnic, and class differences and that “dramatize[s] the problem of gender equity in institutional settings” (Walton & Jones, 1999, p. 231).

In this way, police dramas reinforce social norms and ideologies of law and order, although those starring women sometimes illustrate females’ subversive tendencies to skirt official procedures or to resort to informal channels of communication. Gender inequities in detective stories can be dramatized and visually represented by a character’s different physical presence, her unusual dress, and/or her fluctuating emotions. Institutional settings highlight tensions between femininity and professional confidence when there are many more men than women, when men’s authority dominates or represses women, or when the woman’s professional style, attitude, or workspace is depicted as stereotypically feminine. It is also worth noting the female detective can seem uncomfortable in domestic settings, sometimes cast as “a fish out of water” as inadequately cooking and/or cleaning or as vulnerable to criminal or patriarchal forces. For example, Brenda has limited

cooking abilities, tends to be sloppy at home, and during the course of series discovers that she is going through early menopause, which makes it impossible for her to become pregnant.

Reflecting an interest in realistic subject matter akin to that of reality television shows like *Cops* and crime reports on local news shows, the police procedural genre is ubiquitous on American television: “The popularity of procedural shows never wanes; day-in, day-out, the formula never changes, but we keep watching. Procedurals like *Law & Order* and *CSI* are the reliable backbone of entertainment; sturdy, consistent, always there to give you what you need without doing anything too new or exciting. We love procedurals.” (Fenlon, 2014) Many ensemble police procedurals include female characters, but fewer shows focus on women as agents of authority. Julie D’Acci counted seven procedurals focusing on female characters on U. S. television before *Cagney and Lacey* (1981–1988) (D’Acci, 1994, p.109). Few procedurals link criminal investigations as closely to the detective’s personal life as *The Closer* does in delving into Johnson’s health and reproductive status, her sexual history, her relationships with her husband and parents, and her pet ownership and linking these particular aspects of her life to details in the cases investigated by her and her squad.

## II. The Interdependence of Character and Action

Most people have no idea what they are up against when they enter into dialogue with Chief Johnson, who looks like a model but always remains focused on her case. When she first meets the detectives in the newly formed elite squad, they express annoyance as she decisively delegates tasks and tracks her subordinates’ progress. They are surprised that Brenda, or “the chief”, as they call her, insists on digging deeper into forensic evidence that she can use during her interrogations. In early episodes of Season 1, Deputy Chief Taylor (Robert Gossett), who wanted Brenda’s job as chief, and Lt. Andy Flynn (Tony Dennison) conspire to interfere with her investigations, trying to embarrass her by questioning her abilities and turning up

embarrassing information about her past.<sup>①</sup>

Brenda's sensitivity enables her to monitor the emotions of those she interviews during homicide investigations and to judge suspects' statements during interrogations. She occasionally suggests she will "help" witnesses and suspects, if they tell her the truth, although sometimes these offers are misleading. For example, in the penultimate episode of the series, after Brenda suggests to a female teenage suspect that mitigating circumstances may set her free, the teenager admits that she lied to the police when she identified an innocent man as her rapist. She made the accusation of rape against a stranger to protect her boyfriend from her domineering father's rage. Brenda arrests both the girl and her father for the second-degree murder of the war hero unjustly accused by the girl of rape.

The narrative arc of *The Closer* moves from highlighting Brenda's success at work while experiencing an unstable home life to examining her moral integrity by questioning specific aggressive decisions and actions that she makes as deputy chief. As already noted, her character blends traditionally feminine, radically feminist, and distinctly quirky traits that both constrain and enable her ability to solve cases and to work with peers and supervisors, who sometimes question her behavior and actions. Over the course of the series, difficulties in Brenda's personal life, notably vicissitudes in romantic and family relationships, health concerns, including learning that she is no longer fertile, and anxieties about where to live in a strange city,

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<sup>①</sup> See *The Closer* website. <http://www.tnt.tv/series/closer/about/>. From "The Closer", *Wikipedia*, footnote 5: "Previously known as Priority Murder Squad (Season 1, Episodes 1 & 2), then Priority Homicide Division (Season 1, Episode 3 through Season 4, Episode 9). The Division's name was first changed from Priority Murder Squad when it was recognized that the initials were PMS, leading to unintended humor due to Chief Johnson's sex. Division's official name was changed to Major Crimes Division (MCD) during Season 4 Episode 9 in response to the storyline's media misinterpretation of the use of the word 'Priority,' and the team first operated as the MCD in the following episode. At the end of summer Season Four, Episode Nine ('Tijuana Brass'), the squad was re-tasked to handle a range of crimes including fraud and kidnapping, and renamed the Major Crimes Division, whose brief was enlarged (in theory) to include to a wider range of major crimes including grand theft, fraud, rape and homicide, along the lines of a Major Case Squad. Nevertheless, storylines continued to focus on solving murders until late in the sixth season when, after the ascension of a new police chief, the underutilized squad was assigned a serial armed robbery gang—which in the event, quickly became a murder investigation the next day."



compete with the challenges of managing her team of headstrong detectives as they investigate and solve cases. At first, Brenda appears a stickler for the rules, but over time she bends protocol and procedures to protect her squad and to close her cases. In each episode, Brenda learns to interact and communicate more productively with her romantic partner FBI Special Agent Fritz Howard (Jon Tenney), her parents (Frances Sternhagen and Barry Corbin) and other relatives, and/or the various members of her squad and her superiors.

The long narrative arc of the series highlights Brenda's obsession concerning the arrest and conviction of criminals. This obsession is represented as a kind of competitiveness; she does not want criminals to beat the system, and she will use any means possible to incarcerate the guilty and "win". Many episodes depict Brenda as a bit less than truthful so that she can manipulate people, and Brenda's core integrity is later questioned by colleagues, the press, and ultimately attorneys who complain that she plays by her own rules to force confessions and to trample on the rights of criminal suspects. James Phelan points out that ethics and aesthetics are always interconnected. (Phelan, 2005, p.102) The ethics and aesthetics of *The Closer* illustrate the power and the problems associated with the protagonist's admirable efficiency in closing cases, as Brenda's relentless pursuit of the guilty inevitably puts her in a morally precarious position when she overreaches to punish a confessed criminal who engineers immunity from punishment.

Brenda is inspired by information gleaned from personal experiences that she can apply to the case at hand. Her supervisor observes that Brenda has a hard time understanding that there are other people in the world, while her squad notices that her compulsion to analyze evidence and to determine guilt indicate that Brenda has a kind of autistic disorder. In Season 1, Episode 7, "You Are Here", Brenda describes autism in considering whether someone is a suspect:

Low-functioning autistics have no language skills; they cannot survive independently by themselves. Keith is not like that. According to his school records, he's very intelligent but he does have issues; he's unemotional,

frequently says inappropriate things, he's literal-minded, he gets fixated on minor details, he gets agitated when his routine is altered and he's extremely uncooperative when anything or anyone gets in the way of him doing what he wants.

Detective Flynn sarcastically asks, "Does he have a Georgia accent?" Brenda's sympathetic analysis of Keith's character correctly describes the innocent boy, while Flynn's question seems a witty but mean-spirited put down.

Despite earning the respect of her subordinates by resolving most cases, Brenda remains marginalized as her effective methods are scrutinized in the department and beyond by those who worry about the legal and ethical rights of criminals. Creators of *The Closer* were inspired by Helen Mirren's performance as Detective Chief Inspector Jane Tennison in the British television series *Prime Suspect*, which debuted in 1991. Tennison is an idiosyncratic, effective, and culturally sensitive investigator who becomes sexually involved with colleagues and who manages hostility from the dominating men she works with by being as tough as they are until she gets home. However, Tennison's determination at work makes her seem as rugged as the boys, while Brenda takes a different way to demonstrate her authority. Media critic Maddy Dychtwald points out that Brenda "retains (and revels in) her femininity, keeps her composure, can handle the two 'sexist pigs' who bait her due to their jealousy and insecurities, and not lose her head" (*The Closer*", Goodale, 2010). Unlike the men in her workplace who tend to get louder and more obnoxious to enforce their authority, Brenda works in a lower but extremely effective register with her steely glance, cool words, and extreme politeness.

The chief's gender becomes an advantage in many cases. During her second case in Los Angeles (Season 1, Episode 2: "About Face"), Brenda enters the world of Heather Kingsley (Helen Tucker), a former model and wife of a Hollywood movie star who died at home from nicotine poisoning. Although many detectives on Brenda's squad assume the husband is the logical murder suspect, Brenda insists on interviewing all who had contact with Heather before she died. Chief Johnson and Sgt. David Gabriel (Corey

Reynolds), the first member of her squad who accepts her authority, track the victim's steps from the hairdresser to a dress shop and a makeup artist before arriving at a restaurant. Interviewing a series of witnesses, Brenda gets a makeover along the way. She adopts a more becoming hairstyle; buys a red fitted, V-neck dress with white trim around the empire waist and neckline; and has her makeup done by a professional. Her investigative method of putting herself in the victim's footsteps coincides with her makeover into a glamorous Californian. By following the victim's trail, Brenda realizes that the husband's extramarital affairs embarrassed the victim into looking her best for a confrontation with a rival. After the coroner's autopsy shows that the nicotine entered through the victim's hair, Brenda realizes that the pregnant hairdresser's affair with the victim's husband provided the hairdresser with a motive to kill her lover's wife.

Within the same episode (Season 1, Episode 2), viewers learn that Brenda's career in Atlanta was tarnished by a morals charge. In a later episode we find out her jealous then husband instigated the charge, which was eventually dropped by the Atlanta department. Brenda divorced that husband and appears as a single woman in the first episodes of *The Closer*, but the series reveals her past relationships in subsequent episodes by dropping hints about Brenda's personal life. Will Pope (J. K. Simmons) was recently appointed deputy chief of the LAPD at the beginning of the series, and he immediately hires Brenda, who worked with him in the Washington, D. C. police department, to head the special murder squad he creates. That Pope and Brenda had an affair while she was single and during his first marriage is not initially known by the members of Brenda's LAPD squad, although Brenda's boyfriend and later husband Fritz Howard, who also knew Brenda in DC, is aware of this past relationship.

During *The Closer's* second season, Will Pope asks Brenda to testify as a character witness in his divorce case from his second wife (Season 2, Episode 10: "The Other Woman"). Pope hires a lawyer to defend Brenda during her deposition. The wife's attorney suggests that Pope's and Brenda's affair might be continuing, outraging Estelle (Shannon O'Hurley), Pope's wife, who might lose custody of the children. Brenda's lawyer Barbara (Robin

Riker) indicates during the deposition that charging Brenda with infidelity will only encourage him to bring his own charges pursuing Estelle for her marital infidelities. In front of Brenda's squad, the frustrated wife accuses Brenda of still sleeping with Pope, a charge that makes the squad wonder if that is how their boss got her job. Lt. Louie Provenza (G. W. Bailey), who in early episodes mocked Brenda's Southern accent and her seeming beauty contestant ways by calling her "Miss Atlanta" behind her back, says he doesn't care if Estelle's charge is true or not because Brenda is the best cop in the department.

The LAPD also has baggage, which offers a realistic frame in representing the media within the fiction. The real world back story for the series highlights the police force's diminished reputation, which was tarnished by various high profile cases, including the Rampart scandal in which 70 police officers were implicated in crimes during a set of investigations of the corrupt Rampart police division that took place from March 1997 to December 2001 ("Rampart Scandal Timeline"). Some detectives on Brenda's squad lived through those difficult times, although they did not participate in crimes or corruption. Their characterizations are largely developed by emphasizing their relationships with women and their particular traits. Provenza has four ex-wives and is grumpy, while Lt. Flynn, another divorced white male senior officer is known for his cynicism and smart quips at murder scenes. The younger detectives were recently hired and are from more diverse backgrounds. Lt. Philip Tao (Michael Paul Chan) is a former Scientific Investigation Division (SID) officer of Chinese ancestry who is married with children; he specializes in technology, computers, and electronics and sharing all details of these. Detective Julio Sanchez (Raymond Cruz) is a widower who knows about LA gangs and seems on the make whenever speaking with a pretty woman. Detective Irene Daniels (Gina Ravera) knows all about financial malfeasance, while Detective David Gabriel has various areas of expertise and is the first squad member to take Brenda's side. Both single, Daniels and Gabriel have a short romance that results in her leaving the squad. (the series after the fourth season) Buzz Watson (Phillip Keene), the Civilian Surveillance Coordinator, records each crime scene and interview.

Over time, these squad members from different divisions bond with each other and with Brenda, so that they can act in a coordinated fashion to analyze physical evidence, witness statements, and interrogations associated with each murder and to present a credible narrative of how and why it was committed. Each episode concentrates on the aftermath of a crime, usually a murder, and the investigation, but some episodes employ flashbacks as detectives speculate about criminal methods, motives, and opportunities.

Brenda does not limit applying stellar interrogation techniques to likely criminals, as the series represents her as applying these abilities in dealing with her colleagues, her boss Pope and, Brenda's sometime nemesis in blue, Commander Taylor. In the episode "To Protect and Serve" (Season 2, Episode 5), Brenda is called into Chief Pope's office where he yells at her for letting Lt. Provenza and Lt. Flynn declare that a homicide investigation investigated by Commander Taylor's Robbery Homicide squad will be taken over by Brenda's Priority Homicide squad. Provenza and Flynn intervened because they found the body in Provenza's garage, where they left it to go to a baseball game.

At first Brenda is blindsided by Pope's criticism of her squad, as she knows nothing about the victim or the investigation, but she manages to get Pope to reveal all relevant details within a few minutes. She puts him on the defensive by asserting that he is micromanaging her squad. Then she prods him to say more about the case by using a questioning tone, repeating the information he provides, and acting as if she already knows about the case. Brenda emphasizes the phrase Pope uses to describe the victim ("this girl"), and he corrects himself, telling Brenda the victim is a 30-year-old woman. Brenda says what's critical is where the victim was found, and Pope questioningly supplies the location where the body turned up: Sepulveda Blvd. The exchange between the two is brief, as Brenda doesn't want to reveal that she doesn't know what Pope knows. She later manages to convince him that she knows something about the case that he doesn't: she hints that the FBI has been called in. Keeping Pope and Taylor at bay, Brenda works with her squad to solve the murder without revealing that the LAPD detectives who found the body did not call in the murder so they could try to

attend a Dodgers' game.

### III. Admirable Character and Ethical Lapses

Focusing on a woman with a high profile job, talented subordinates, and a handsome, supportive, accomplished husband, *The Closer* also depicts the trials and the tribulations of female professionals over the long arc of the series. The series appeals to anyone struggling to manage work and a personal life, while representing the special attributes of Brenda, who relies on superior interrogation techniques, sensitive instincts for ferreting out when someone is lying, and the efficient expertise of members of her squad, as directed by her, to close the case. Brenda applies information or principles learned outside her job and a sensitive understanding of diverse human needs and interests to press criminals to confess. She relentlessly works to resolve each case and has a hard time leaving work at the office. At home she frequently consults with Fritz to get his perspective and access to FBI information and technology. Brenda is obsessed with murder and with certain cases. When playing tourist in Hollywood with her mother and Fritz, she asks about the cause of death at each star's home they visit. Most significantly, Brenda pursues serial rapist and murderer Philip Stroh on her own time, retaining boxes of files relevant to cases involving this serial killer and lawyer in her home.

Brenda finds it difficult to accept unresolved cases, and she resents when others call her to account, even if she errs or offends. For example, in Season 1, Episode 13: "Standards and Practices", Brenda apologizes in her own fashion:

I'd like to start with you, Ms. Powell. I'd like to say how sorry I am that I was unable to ignore your general level of incompetence in the wrongly obtained conviction in the case of Bill Croelick. And I'm sorry if you felt hurt and defensive about putting a man on death row for the wrong crime and I certainly hope that that will never ever happen again. Agent Jackson, I, I deeply regret that the FBI handed over two million dollars to a man on a terrorist watch list without the capacity to trace it, or managed to follow him for months without knowing his wife was having an affair with the doctor. And

I hope you do much better in the future. Captain Taylor, I suppose I should apologize to you for not having been born in Los Angeles, but, having seen your work up close now for several months, I can honestly say that, try as I might, I can't think of any fair and reasonable system on Earth where I wouldn't outrank you. There, I hope that clears everything up. Well, excuse me, I mean, uh, I have to go. Thank you very much. Thank you.

Brenda elicits testimony from suspects, witnesses, and officers that supply necessary, yet otherwise overlooked details to construct a narrative accounting for the motive, method, and opportunity for the crime and, sometimes, its cover up. At one point she tells a colleague, “As hard as a secret is to uncover, it's even harder to keep.” She quickly notices contradictions in testimony, and she directs each interrogation to ask questions and make statements that prompt people to reveal key information. Often her interlocutors don't realize they are speaking to a police officer while Brenda conducts interviews because she omits that information or on occasion initially represents herself as an administrative assistant, a social worker, or even a lawyer. She does not hesitate to employ deception and coercion to solve cases, doing so by establishing an “illusion of intimacy”, as a recent article on police deception discusses (Skolnick & Leo, 86).

Laws regarding police deception are “inconsistent, even confusing” (Skolnick & Leo, 82): “Sometimes they may, and sometimes they may not, lie when conducting custodial investigations.” (Skolnick & Leo, 82) Mark Godsey, reviewing a book by Richard Leo, notes that “Police have developed fraud-based interrogation techniques because they assume that every suspect under interrogation is guilty and needs some coercion and trickery to come clean, and because the police ‘view themselves as agents of the prosecution and thus the suspect's adversary’ (120)” (Godsey, 2008, pp. 718–719). The model interrogation technique promoted in U. S. police departments is the Reid Technique, which relies on three phases of a process to solve a crime: collecting and analyzing factual evidence to determine the direction of the investigation and to establish insight into the suspect, non-accusatory interview of the suspect that asks “specific behavior provoking questions” to interpret “subject's behavioral responses”, and an accusatory interrogation to

elicit evidence. (Jayne & Buckley) Each episode of *The Closer* follows these phases of the Reid technique, although Brenda often independently manages to discover (or sometimes manufacture) evidence that she uses to confront the suspect in the accusatory interrogation.

Often by lying about evidence and by speculating about the motives and methods followed by a suspect, Chief Johnson tricks criminals into confessing and therefore closes her cases. Brenda argues that lying to suspects is a logical, if unethical, procedure because the suspects are lying to her. She and her squad typically deceive assumed criminals by encouraging or constraining them to confess to the crime, whether or not the police have physical evidence in the case. Highlighting confession as a critical tool in the police arsenal, the series illustrates how a skilled interviewer can persuade or trick a suspect into confessing. Confession ends an investigation, allowing a case to go to trial, but Brenda and her squad are rarely called into courtrooms on the show. Therefore, viewers don't often get to see how those confessions hold up during the trial. The value of a coerced confession may be questionable, but "A confession has a compelling influence on jurors and they are more likely to convict on the basis of a confession than anything else, including eyewitness identification. This effect persists even when the jury is fully aware that a confession was coerced and likely involuntary" (Wakefield & Underwager, 2011).

Although Brenda sometimes appears untrustworthy in her dealings with suspects, their lawyers, and her superiors, most members of her squad agree with her decisions to subvert procedures. Brenda is like the femme fatale in film noir, who, according to Walton and Jones, "represents female power in the social and economic realm as inappropriate, deviant, and unlawful" (1999, p.193). She can thus be regarded as "configuring an ambivalent relationship to the institution of the law" (Walton & Jones, 1999, p. 203). Brenda earns the respect of her squad and her supposedly stalwart supporter Will Pope becomes Chief of Police, yet she remains marginalized in the fictional world when ethical and legal aspects of her effective methods are called into question. Internal Affairs Captain Sharon Raydor watches over Brenda to rein in her troublesome behavior and to protect the police force and



the city from legal damages. Raydor's careful ethical and procedural standards inevitably conflict with Deputy Chief Brenda Leigh Johnson's aggressive, less ethically sensitive, and technically rigorous approach to solving cases. In Seasons 3 and 4, Brenda puts up with a journalist shadowing her and questioning her actions, and, in Season 5, Internal Affairs Captain Sharon Raydor dogs Brenda's every step. "Strike Three" (Season 5, Episode 7) concludes with an exchange between Brenda and Raydor that sums up their different approaches:

Brenda: Captain Raydor. I see you made your deadline.

Raydor: Yes, ma'am. Officers Stern and Duran have been completely exonerated.

Brenda: And because the way Force Investigation Division operates, I'll be investigating murders of more good cops just like them.

Raydor: Excuse me?

Brenda: When officers are shot and killed in the line of duty, they're investigated by me. When they shoot back, they're investigated by you. That means that they'll think twice before defending themselves. That hesitation will mean that more good cops will die. I have to ask, have you ever considered what your principles cost?

Raydor: Seventy million dollars. That was the settlement in the Rampart case. One hundred. That's how many convictions were overturned due to renegade police and lack of oversight in one division alone, not to mention the loss of trust the LAPD needs to remain effective.

Brenda: There has to be a better way.

Raydor: Well, until then, you've got me.

Early seasons of *The Closer* illustrate Brenda's work as an antidote to the corrupt practices that long endured with the LAPD, while the later episodes suggest that her zealotry to root out crime and punish criminals makes her go too far.

Despite Brenda's ethical and legal lapses, her character does not become a villain. Concomitantly, while solving high profile murder cases in renegade ways, Brenda matures as a person. Over time viewers recognize that she is in a stable marriage rather than being a single woman with a somewhat

scandalous extramarital affair in her past. She and Fritz find a better home than her first (a house vacated because the occupant was murdered); she has become a parental substitute on a sometime basis to her niece; and she has more become accustomed to LA ways. Most significantly, Brenda's consistent excellence at her job and her equitable manner of supervising her talented squad of detectives increases the admiration of her subordinates and even some superiors. At one point in Season 6, Brenda was nominated by Internal Affairs officer Sharon Raydor to become the chief of police, a job that Brenda's mentor Will Pope coveted and eventually earns.<sup>①</sup> Later episodes depict few substantive disagreements between Brenda and most of the detectives on her squad and tense discussions rather than conflicts among Brenda and Raydor, Commander Taylor, and Chief Pope.

Plotting in the last two seasons documents how Brenda's unorthodox, if effective, strategies in manipulating criminals to confess generate civil actions harming the police department's reputation and the city's finances. Culminating in episodes in which Brenda is subject to continuing oversight, Season 7 focuses on whether she is an ethical person and officer. Brenda remains at the center of the show's action, although having transgressed she seems marginal to its political authority as Internal Affairs officer Raydor takes on more authority in the narrative when she shadows the squad to monitor Brenda. Brenda becomes the target of an internal investigation after she disregarded suggestions that she protect Turrell Baylor, a murderer who received immunity from prosecution and then confessed. Over Detective Gabriel's objections, Brenda orders her squad to leave Baylor at his home, where gang members seek revenge and kill him. Baylor's family subsequently files a civil lawsuit against Brenda because she and her squad left him without any police protection in known gang territory.

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<sup>①</sup> Brenda came in second to Tommy Delk, but she was relieved not to be appointed to the position. After Chief Delk dies of a heart attack in the murder room, Pope is appointed as chief, which crushes Commander Taylor's hope of further advancement and would seem to ensure that Major Crimes will remain under Brenda's direction.

#### IV. Ending without Closing

The 2011–2012 episodes reveal a new threat against Brenda. The season focuses on Captain Raydor's Internal Affairs audit of the Baylor case, a leak from within Brenda's division about it, and the suit is filed by the Baylor family's zealous attorney. Although a judge stops the Baylor lawsuit, the lawyer is able to cite a string of cases concerning Brenda's suspects who die in police custody; these cases constitute the basis of a Federal lawsuit. Turrell Baylor's lawyer Peter Goldman brings a case against Brenda for violating the civil rights of her suspects by using deceptive practices in interviewing them. As viewers learn from the penultimate episode, Goldman hired someone to infiltrate Brenda's squad and to leak information to him; the leaker turns out to be David Gabriel's girlfriend, a woman who insinuates herself in Gabriel's life to collect information about Brenda's squad that Goldman can use to litigate against the city and the police.

The final episodes of *The Closer* transition to a new series, *Major Crimes*, which retains many characters from the original series, although not Brenda and David Gabriel. Kyra Sedgwick exited *The Closer* in its final season, when it shifted into *Major Crimes*, which stars Mary McDonnell who continues to play Captain Sharon Raydor. The finale of *The Closer* introduces Rusty Beck (Graham Patrick Martin) as a witness to the serial killer Philip Stroh's burial of a dead woman. Stroh chases and attacks Rusty at night in Griffith Park, but the teenager manages to get away. After a security camera in a department store connects Stroh to the murdered woman, Brenda uses Rusty to lure Stroh on to the street where he is arrested for cruising and brought to the police station.

However, the police do not have physical evidence to connect Stroh to the murders of several women buried in Griffith Park and cannot arrest him. Frustrated and clever, Brenda attacks Stroh in the elevator when he is leaving the building. Deputy District Attorney Hobbs' accompanies Rusty and Brenda to the coroner's office so that the pathologist can, with the DA's permission, take Stroh's DNA from Brenda's hands and insert it in the woolen cap that Rusty pulled off Stroh's head during the attack in the park. Brenda brings

Rusty home and feeds him dinner to encourage him to share evidence. Stroh surreptitiously enters Brenda's house and holds Rusty hostage, holding a knife at the boy's throat. Stroh threatens to kill Rusty as Brenda tells him that she manufactured evidence against him.

Cool in a crisis, Brenda remembers that Rusty told her how he protected himself from dangerous men. She advises Rusty to "go slack", a phrase the boy mentioned to her; in context it means he should flip Stroh over. After Rusty knocks down Stroh and there is a safe distance between them, Brenda gets her gun and shoots Stroh (through her handbag) but does not kill him. She refuses to kill him and refuses to hear him provide information about the murders he orchestrated and committed. As Matt Webb Mitovich points out, "*Brenda lives on*. She was not killed off in some hero's death. She did not leave in disgrace. She theoretically could resurface... And she moves on to her new career with needed closure, knowing that Phillip Stroh will prey no more." (Mitovich, 2012) Brenda caught Stroh but stops her pursuit there; therefore, she stops being "the closer". There is no scene of Stroh being interrogated or confessing. In the last two episodes of the series, she is tired of listening to bad people and weary after her mother's unexpected death. Brenda realizes that she needs to have more time in her life to spend with the living. She decides to accept a job as chief of the district attorney's bureau of investigation and negotiates to bring David Gabriel with her. Michael Wright, the head of programming for TNT, TBS, and Turner Classic Movies explains the future for the show: "THE CLOSER concentrated solely on getting confessions, this is about getting convictions." (Cortez, 2012) *Major Crimes* picks up where *The Closer* leaves off by following up on prosecution of Philip Stroh's crimes, including his attempted murder of Rusty, the homeless teenager who becomes Captain Raydor's adopted son.

*The Closer* was a popular and critical success in the U. S. Sedgwick won numerous awards for her performance in seven seasons. From 2006 to 2010, she "had made history as being the only female actor in the history of television to be nominated for an Emmy, Golden Globe, and Screen Actors Guild award every year that the show aired in the eligibility period" ("The Closer"). The series has also been successfully exported to many European

countries, Korea, and South Africa. The show's portrayal of a competent, attractive professional woman who manages a squad of detectives and confronts criminals relies on and reconfigures stereotypes of femininity, while showing Brenda's transformation from enthusiastic, effective chief of detectives to weary, mourning leader who regrets her former attitude of solving cases by any means necessary.

Brenda's last scene with her squad shows her accepting their parting gift: a handbag as close to the one destroyed by her shooting of Stroh as her team could find. By replacing their chief's signature item, an object combining associations with femininity and technical expertise, the team seeks to heal her wounds; they have filled the new handbag with small chocolate cakes with cream. Her final words to the team are "It looks like love" spoken in her gentle voice as she is tearing up. Leaving the squad, Brenda enters the elevator to depart her old job while unwrapping and eating a small cake. The character of Brenda regains integrity in the narrative by refusing to kill Stroh, by leaving a job that encourages her to make bad people talk, and by ensuring that her new job lets her bring the ostracized Gabriel with her. Stroh is incarcerated, and Brenda is free.

Writing about the interdependence of character and action, Porter Abbott notes that "Characters, to put this in narratological terms, have *agency*; they cause things to happen. Conversely, as these people drive the action, they necessarily reveal who they are in terms of their motives, their strength, weakness, trustworthiness, capacity to love, hate, cherish, adore, deplore, and so on. By their actions do we know them" (Abbott, 2008, p. 131). *The Closer* illustrates its titular protagonist's competence in closing cases as intertwined with her ultimate failure to protect and serve Turrell Baylor and others, as her actions to force confessions in some cases provoke ethical criticism regarding her means and their outcomes. Over the course of the series, Brenda becomes less concerned about following procedure and protecting the rights' of criminals, but her faults are forgiven as she leaves her job as chief.

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