

Introduction

I originally began this document as a way of channeling my belief that Robin and Barney were meant to be together, and that the final episode of the series, in which they divorce only three years after the wedding, leaving Robin free to finally get together with Ted after all, 25 years after they first met, was a huge mistake on the part of the writers. I felt that Barney had changed and grown beyond recognition, throughout the timeline of the show, and at great personal effort and cost. Any show worth it's salt would surely have rewarded this with a happily ever after scenario, and it felt cruel not to offer that to poor Barney.

The fact is, the programme was built around the character of Ted. Ted is the 2030 narrator, telling the long and involved tale of his twenties and thirties, to his teenaged children. The entire structure is built around Ted as a hero. And Ted is very sweet, and very lovable, for a lot of the time. I quite see, now, that they had written themselves into a corner. Ted had to end up with Robin, eventually, and he could never do that if her marriage to Barney had succeeded. But I maintain that Barney is a far better hero than Ted could ever be.

Barney - the true hero of *How I Met Your Mother*

It was only on my second watch through of *How I Met Your Mother* that I realised that Barney was not always as out of control as he seems to be for much of the series. In season one, he is certainly a womaniser, and certainly more interested in the one-night stand than in forging a relationship, but he's a much more ordinary young-man-about-town than he is by season three. The extent of his "plays" in the first episode is, "a little game I like to call, 'Ha-a-a-a-ve you met Ted?'" Ted is described as his wingman, but in reality, Barney is Ted's - there is no "Have you met Barney?" game, not least because Ted is still a little cautious of following Barney's lead, when he has, at this stage, only known him for a year or two (see flash-backs to Ted's goatee), but is quite sure that he's probably a bit evil. Fun, but evil.

He continues to determinedly describe Ted as his wingman, even when Robin takes on the role, and he admits to her that Ted has never agreed to do any of this stuff with him. You get the impression, mostly from Barney himself, that they have a long history of cigar clubs, strip joints, and laser tag, but we also know that Ted refuses to "suit up", despite constant demands that he do so, that it is Robin, not Ted, who actually consents to do these things with Barney, and that she has a great time doing so. It's very early on, but it's the first clue that Robin is Barney's perfect woman, and that actually, he's also very well suited to her. He doesn't mind her shooting hobby, whereas Ted is repulsed by it, they are spontaneous fun-seekers, and they share an emotional illiteracy that makes them equally crave lightly held commitment, low expectations, and living in the moment rather than making significant plans for the future.

It is when Robin is coupled with Ted, and mostly very happy with him, that Barney starts down the road of the manipulative and amoral womaniser, and one wonders if it is the emotional turmoil of seeing his ideal woman taken out of his reach in this way, that triggers his sudden and sharp assertion that he doesn't need a relationship at all. If Robin were with anyone other than Ted, Barney might feel justified in trying to win her away from her boyfriend, but since Ted is his "bro", and someone with whom he feels a strong sense of love and connection, he has no option but to step back. In order to persuade himself that this is, in fact, his choice and his preference, he launches headlong into developing the Barney persona with which we become familiar, but the ferocity with which he embraces this is unnatural, and slightly desperate. In later seasons, Lily describes such behaviour as "a cry for help" from a Barney whom she perceives to have changed, fundamentally. However, it seems to me that his approach to the nameless, impersonal string of female conquests was always a cry for help, and was always about Robin.

His first real "play" is not a lie, as such - it is an elaborate scheme designed to confuse a woman into thinking she might be seriously injured, when she knows she is patently fine, before revealing that it was all the build up to a rather crass chat up line. It is mind-bogglingly extravagant - he hires actors to pretend to be paramedics - and culminates in Barney himself starting up a chant of "give him your number", which the other customers of the bar take up with enthusiasm. The poor girl is left with little choice, in the face of such social pressure, other than to write her phone number on a piece of paper and give it to Barney.

Obviously, there's a lot wrong with this. As the "play" works itself out, it amounts to a form of gaslighting, in which a girl who is perfectly fine is browbeaten into believing otherwise by Barney, in direct contravention of the evidence of her own self. And when it is all finally revealed as a trick, at the moment when she might justifiably be angry, Barney brings the social coercion of the entire bar to bear, so that she finds it impossible to do anything other than accede to his demands.

However, as one of the first of Barney's tricks, it is rather better than much of what follows. The girl in question has not been specifically targeted for her youth, naivety, or stupidity, unlike many of Barney's later conquests. It is merely her "hotness" that has caught his attention. And the trick he plays is not designed to permanently mislead the girl. He is not pretending to be a baseball player or an astronaut, in order to secure her. He merely wants to impress her with his showmanship, which is a genuine characteristic of his. As with so many of Barney's conquests, he walks away with her phone number, but we never find out if he calls her, if they date, if they date more than once, or if she consents to sleep with him.

This last point is also significant. Increasingly, Barney seems to see the chase as a game. Not unlike his beloved laser tag, he wants to throw himself into this game 100% - in this case that means increasingly elaborate costumes and situations, paying actors, renting spaces, and a steady increase in the extent to which he is both willing and able to manipulate and control the people around him, to get what he wants. Sex is the ultimate

prize, but actually, the sex itself is not really what Barney is seeking. He loves the game he's playing, and he loves feeling like he's good at it (and he is good at it, even if he's the only person in the world attempting to play it his way). The sex is, almost literally, a trophy he can look at, as a symbol of his achievement. In the earlier episodes, merely getting the girl's phone number seems like as much of a win. He persuaded her to accept his advances, and that was the goal.

Later in season two, Barney engages in his first genuine trick - he pretends to be Ted for an evening. He is tracked down by Lily and Robin, who believe themselves to be hearing tales of the real Ted's unfaithfulness to Robin. It transpires that he had taken on Ted's persona as a protest against Ted's unwillingness to go out with them (he's working hard on an architecture project), and eventually goes home with a girl who believes him to be "Ted Mosby, architect". When Lily and Robin track him down to her apartment, they discover that Barney expects to leave his conquests while they are in the shower, never to be seen again; that he has a form letter that he leaves on their pillow describing a ludicrously elaborate "you will never see me again because I'm actually a ghost" explanation, and signed, "Barney" - he has to cross it out. So at this stage, he is prepared to lie to get out of a girl's bed, but is only just starting to lie to get into it. And clearly, adopting another name is not something he has planned for, though we see him do it many times subsequently. In fact, he alludes to the fact that his real name has developed a reputation, and that alter egos are now becoming an attractive solution for him.

What we see, then, is Barney's gradual descent into the person we generally consider him to be. It's not that he's never lied to a girl before - he tells a bridesmaid at Stuart and Claudia's wedding that he's leaving town to join the Peace Corps - but it's exceptional. It's not his habitual *modus operandi* up to this point. The lies only start to become a normal part of his pick-up routine when they are triggered, by a startlingly good time with a girl, doing a range of fun, non-sexual things, and accelerated by that girl starting to date Ted, and so becoming unavailable.

At this stage, Barney is monumentally un-self-aware. He has no frame of reference for recognising that he has genuine feelings for a woman, rather than power and conquest urges for a girl's body. However, the feelings are there, and are very real, and they inform a great deal of Barney's character development. We learn in season one that, after being hurt by Shannon, the love of his life, he dropped his gentle, hippy persona, and took on the suit-wearing user-of-people type, reflecting the man for whom Shannon had left him. It is this moment that forges the Barney we know, but when this is stripped away, the Barney underneath is capable of vast love, care and self-sacrifice. This is the Barney who seems uncaring and disinterested when Marshall is devastated over Lily's leaving for San Francisco, but is later revealed to have walked out of the bar, not to escape the boredom of Marshall's sadness, but to get on a plane to San Francisco, knock on Lily's door, implore her to come home, then get on a plane back again after only three hours' stay. In that conversation, he also tells Lily, "I can't keep stealing women from him forever," suggesting for the first time that all of those apparently selfish incidents where Marshall was getting somewhere with a date, only to have Barney swoop in and whisk her away with his

superior skills of conquest, were intentionally designed to keep Marshall for Lily's inevitable return.

This conflict between Barney's motives comes up again and again - he certainly has something to gain from persuading Marshall's date to go home with him instead, but he does often have more altruistic motives, as well, and he almost always keeps them secret, as if caring about the people around him is a shameful and embarrassing weakness.

We know that Barney's past has left him deeply damaged. He has unfolding issues surrounding his lack of a father growing up, and for such a talented liar, he has the most enormous blind-spot around his mother's lies to him. Mostly, she lied to protect him, but whereas his brother gradually grew out of believing these implausible things, Barney fiercely held onto the belief that the postmaster general apologised for losing his party invitations (which explains why no-one came), and that his real father was the host of The Price is Right. The viewer suspects that, deep down, he must realise that so much of this is untrue, not least because of Neil Patrick Harris' excellent acting - there is a wild-eyed fear in Barney, when his friends begin to suggest as much, even as he fiercely doubles down on his beliefs, and shuts down their arguments. He sees no irony between his mother's lies to him, and his elaborate fake family, actors whom he has employed for her benefit for nearly ten years. However, when his friends stumble across the scheme, it all falls apart, and he owns up. She, as a consummate liar, takes the revelation with surprising equanimity. It should be noted, however, that whilst Ted's kissing of Barney's fake wife is a catalyst in all this, it's not really the reason that Barney decides to drop the charade - in many ways, a perfectly plausible divorce storyline would have got him off the hook nicely. It seems more likely that his friends' stumbling into the charade made it suddenly seem distasteful to him. It is not easy to know Barney Stinson, but these people have seen through enough of his tricks to know him better than anyone. Exposed by the light of their knowledge and understanding of him, he is suddenly very uncomfortable. They know him, and they disapprove. Presumably, he always knew they would, hence he had kept his secret family from them for so long.

At the same time, then, as Barney is descending into a morass of lies that he's prepared to tell to get laid, he is forging platonic relationships that render him more exposed than he is comfortable with. Led particularly by Lily and Ted, the gang know and understand that what Barney says is no indicator of what Barney really feels, and they each choose, day by day, whether to force his hand by articulating his true feelings back to him, or to give him the relief of the fantasy life he expounds. When Barney's brother tracks down the black preacher who is his biological father, and Barney too-eagerly embraces his black half-brother's black father as his own, it is Marshall who says that Barney has had an emotionally difficult and draining day, and, suggests that they, "just let the guy be black for a day". They walk a tightrope with this. Too much pushing to face reality, and Barney withdraws into his fantasy world, angry and isolated, but too much facilitation of those fantasies prevents him from ever facing up to truth. His friends crave more opportunities to know the real Barney, but it's slow, careful work.

When Barney and Robin finally get together, it's a tricky time. They are both so afraid of commitment, of planning for the future, or of labelling their relationship in any way that might subsequently tie them down, that they struggle to communicate adequately. They avoid fights by either walking away, or having sex instead, which means that when they do fight, months of repressed anger spills forth. Unsurprisingly, this makes them both unhappy, and they agree to separate.

Their friends, who worked so hard to bring them together, have concluded that this is by far the best solution, but really, it is difficult to see this point of view as anything other than defeatist. Barney and Robin have not changed. They still have a great deal in common, and could still have a great deal of fun together, if they chose. The weakness in this relationship is that neither knows how to express their feelings healthily, much less how to diffuse the unhealthily expressed feelings of the other. These things can be learned, though, and it seems that rather than work out ways to do that, Robin and Barney give up at the first hurdle.

A key turning point in Barney's development comes when he finally meets his father. After a period of great anger, partly that his father is no longer the partying roadie who first got his mother pregnant (a persona that Barney could have related to, and felt a connection with), and partly that he was now offering Barney's step-mother and half-siblings the ordinary, boring, suburban fathering that he had never had, Barney turns to his father, and asks how he did it. He wants to know how a person goes from being a man-about-town, serial user of women, to being a quiet, boring family man. "I'm broken," he admits, for the first time.

This is, in many ways, the most significant moment of the entire series. It is Barney's turning point. At subsequent times, he attempts to revert to his earlier lifestyle, but it never quite works for him, after this. The shine is gone. He has absolutely no ideas how to go about it, but he knows, now, that there is more to life, and he wants to find it.

Shortly after this, he meets Nora for the first time. Nora is a colleague of Robin's, and is utterly delightful. His relationship with her makes a rocky start, when she learns about the lies he has told to get women to sleep with him, and is understandably unwilling to trust him. At this point, Barney is so confused about himself, he finds it hard to know when he's lying and when he's telling the truth, but the rest of the gang are fairly convinced that he genuinely likes Nora, and that when he tells her that his advances were, in fact, a sophisticated trick to get her into bed, it is not his first moment of honesty with her, so much as a double-bluff, designed to construct an escape for him, because he's terrified. The echoes to his early period as Robin's boyfriend are clear: when Lily forces Barney and Robin to admit that they are in a real relationship, they walk down the street hand-in-hand, believing they have lied to her, and she fell for it, but Lily smiles and says, "No, they just don't know they were telling the truth." Barney is utterly incapable of knowing his true feelings, because those feelings terrify him so much, he dare not address them. Relationships mean vulnerability, and he can only achieve that vulnerability, even as he craves it, by stumbling into it accidentally, and without realising.

Barney's relationship with Nora is actually delightful. She is kind, and sweet, and she brings out the very best in him. He really doesn't want to lie to her, though I'm not sure he can necessarily help it - old habits die hard. If it were not for Robin, they might have made it as a couple. But since Robin has always been Barney's soul-mate, and since seeing him with another girlfriend (a thing that's never happened before) has made her realise how much she still wants him, it is kind of inevitable that they end up wrecking everything. They spend an evening reminiscing about the night of hurricane Irene, six months earlier, a night which was, itself, fraught with reminders of how unsupportive Robin's father is of her. Robin's relationship with her father is one of her major vulnerabilities, and whilst Barney isn't above playing on that, he does recognise that she deserves better, and is able to articulate as much, from time to time. At the end of the flashback, Robin and Barney nearly kiss, but are interrupted by her father finally calling her to check she's OK. It is remembering this moment, in a cab leaving the bar at the end of the night, that triggers a sudden and passionate kiss which leads to their having sex in Barney's apartment.

Initially, they are both determined that this was a mistake, that they are both happy with their respective partners (Robin has been with Kevin for a few months, at this point). They agree that it would be best if they never spoke of this event, ever again, but later that day, they are obliged to double date at a work event hosted by Robin's and Nora's mutual employer, on a three-hour boat ride. The stress of keeping their secret causes them to start to freak out. Barney constructs elaborate escape fantasies, and Robin quickly notices that they all end with them running away together. Three times, she asks him if this is actually what he wants, and eventually he says yes, he wants to be with her.

Barney is so confused, here. He really did think that Nora was the one he wanted, but admitting that he'd rather be with Robin makes him incredibly vulnerable, a sensation that he loathes. Not only is he open to rejection by Robin, which is to be avoided, but he is risking both a long-standing friendship with her, which he has long valued, as well as his relationship with Nora, which he immediately knows would be unsalvageable if she were to find out. It took a great deal for Nora to trust him in the first place - she would be very unlikely to ever do it again.

After some discussion, they agree that they have to tell Nora and Kevin what happened, in order to end those relationships, and create the opportunity for them to be together, but circumstances and common-or-garden cowardice conspire to prevent them from doing so. Then they decide that on a boat is a terrible time to do it, since they would be unable to leave afterwards, so they agree that they will go their separate ways, break up with Nora and Kevin, and meet up in the bar at midnight, to start their new life together. Barney does, indeed, come clean with Nora, even after they discover her parents waiting at her apartment, and it seems like he couldn't possibly do so. Robin, however, is prevented from doing the same. Kevin begs not to hear the thing she feels she needs to say, and manages to be so romantic and accepting of her, even though he has a pretty good idea of the sort of thing she must have done to feel so guilty, that she doesn't do it. She arrives at the bar with Kevin in tow, and communicates with Barney only by two looks - his raised-eyebrow, questioning how their plan had gone so wrong, and her barely perceptible shake of the head in reply. Barney is clearly devastated.

For a while, then, Barney is single again. He's not doing so well, this time. There is an episode where he and Ted decide that their need to settle down can be met by adopting a child together, which Narrator Ted is keen to emphasise comes from their both being in "a really bad place". Robin, however, is also struggling to cope, and eventually tells Barney that she thinks she is pregnant, and that if she is, he is the only person she has slept with recently, and must be the father.

This is not something either of them want, but Barney does well, here. He is supportive, without adding pressure to do anything in particular. He escorts her to the doctor to find out for certain, and they celebrate together when it transpires that she isn't pregnant after all.

Eventually, Barney is called upon to act as Ted's wingman, and spends an evening in a nightclub, talking to Quinn, in order to facilitate Ted's wooing of her friend. Quinn seems to know Barney very well, and he is wrong-footed by the fact that she seems to know him, and be impervious to how he is trying to present himself. It transpires that this is because she is a stripper in his favourite strip club, and has known him for years, but that he didn't recognise her with her clothes on, so to speak.

Barney is smitten with Quinn, though makes his usual dance of not admitting it, and he starts to visit the strip club more regularly, in an effort to persuade her to go out with him. She tricks him into spending thousands on her dances, on the promise of a real date, but doesn't follow through, leaving his friends quite sure that she is taking him for a ride. At about this point, Ted tells Barney that he is sure that Robin still loves him (Robin's relationship with Kevin had just ended, and she had turned down Ted's renewed advances), but Barney doesn't want to know. He's still angry that she let him down, and whilst that doesn't normally show in his interactions with her, he is clear that he's done chasing after Robin, now.

Quinn does, eventually, agree to go out with him, and from there things move pretty fast. Quinn has a lot in common with Barney - she shares his love of complex lies and tricks. When he wants to introduce them to his friends, but tells her they are neurotic and controlling and likely to try to break them up, she suggests that they "mess with them", and together they create a fiction in which Barney is being controlled by Quinn, so they can make the denouement in which they demonstrate that they are a much better couple than the gang are prepared to give them credit for. As part of this, they pretend that they're planning to move in together, but during the course of it, decide that they really want to, and Quinn moves into Barney's apartment.

This is complicated. In the day-to-day, Barney and Quinn are pretty good together, but he's unwilling to let her replace any of the stuff in his apartment with her stuff, and Lily calls him out as unable to see a future in their relationship. Barney sees the need to demonstrate his commitment, and makes a show of smashing his mugs, to make space for Quinn's. Every step of Barney's journey towards a real, grown-up committed relationship is hard-won. He has never had to give up part of his territory in this way before, and it is a

process of realisation that this is part of the deal.

In a major flash-back episode, we see how far Barney has really come. Ted and Marshall have been watching the Star Wars Trilogy every three years since college, and every three years they have fantasised about how great their lives would be three years hence. They always believe that, three years from now, they will finally be in the the place they long to be - married, career successful, family on the way. Barney's fantasies, however, are the opposite - he believes his life to be perfect as it is, and every three years, his fantasy for the future involves his introducing a pretty girl to the guys, declaring that they'll be seeing a lot of her, before she leaves, and he corrects that they'll never see her again. Apart from the invention of "back boobs", nothing changes for him, but this time, he looks slightly hunted, and confused, as he says that no, he doesn't want that. He doesn't want to still be playing the field, abusing a stream of women whose names he can't even remember. He wants to be settled with one person. He has changed.

This episode really completes the change in Barney. It's a very short moment, but the viewer believes him, when he says he really is done with all that.

However, it is also the point where he starts to realise that dating a stripper sucks. He tries to persuade Ted that they should now ensure that every single night of the week is "legendary", and spends a week upping the ante with more and more elaborate stunts with which to make the night even more memorable than the one before. When Ted rebels, and insists that if every night is legendary, none of them can be, Barney crumbles, and admits that he's desperately trying to distract himself from the fact that his girlfriend spends every night giving lap-dances to other men, for money. It's destroying him that she is so right for him, in so many ways, but that he has to share her body in this way. There's obviously a lot to unpack here - at the end of the day, viewing a woman's body as the property of her partner is hardly liberated thinking, but it really seems that Barney of season three would not have cared much. He loves Quinn, and he wants an exclusive relationship with her. He seems to have no interest in cheating on her, but struggles to see her stripping as anything other than her semi-cheating on him. This is eventually resolved by Quinn herself: Barney attempts to control the situation by proposing to her, only to learn that she has already given up stripping for him.

Barney and Quinn are engaged for only a few months, before breaking up over a prenuptial agreement. The document outlining their relationship makes a stack of paper more than three feet high, and they realise that actually, whilst they love each other, and are happy together, they have absolutely no trust in each other at all. So, Barney now values trust as well as fidelity. He wanted Nora to trust him, because he knew she would reject him if she didn't, but now trust has become a goal in and of itself - he sees that a relationship without mutual trust is lacking a key component. His standards get higher with every relationship.

With this bout of singleness, Barney follows Marshall and Lily down the route of interviewing of nannies. He finds, however, that he has lost his touch - not in persuading them into bed, or performing when they get there, but in walking away afterwards. He is

beaten up in the street by a gang of a dozen or so pram-pushing nannies, to whom he had lied, and whom he had then left. In the end, he briefly hires the elderly Mrs Doubtfire figure that Lily had eventually rejected, to keep him on the straight and narrow. She sits in the bar, and tells him off, as he tries to pull a girl whilst dressed as an airline pilot. Comically, he ends up bedding the old woman, too, but before that, there is a hint of his conflict, and his unwillingness to slip back into being the man he used to be.

When he comes across a stray dog, his desperate need to be loved leads him to declare the dog is his new “bro”, dressing it in suits, using the dog to attract women, but also petting ugly dogs, wingman style, so “Brover” can get to know the dog’s doggie friend. When the real owner inevitably turns up, and he has to give him up, he actually climbs onto Robin’s balcony with a view to throwing himself off. It’s skirted over as comedy, but actually, suicide attempts aren’t terribly funny. Barney has poured all of his hurt and neediness into this pet, and when that crutch is taken away he is briefly, but genuinely, devastated. Given that we know that Ted’s “bro” contributions are limited, and largely theoretical, Brover is actually fulfilling Robin’s role, here. Once Barney has broken up with Quinn, it is difficult for him that both Ted and Robin are in relationships, but the bro-role that Brover is fulfilling for him bears a much closer resemblance to his relationship with Robin than with Ted - especially the scene where the dog licks Barney’s face, and Barney, revoltingly, licks him back, essentially french kissing him.

The beginning of Barney and Robin’s finally getting together comes with the end of Robin’s relationship. Her boyfriend, Nick, has strained his groin playing basketball, and after only three days of avoiding sex so his injury can heal, Robin realises what the others have known for a while - he’s not very clever. She quickly concludes that she should dump him, now, recognising that once she starts to sleep with him again, she will cease to care about his intellectual weaknesses, in the face of his impressive body, and sexual prowess.

At about this point in the process, Barney becomes very invested in seeing this break-up come to pass. He has shown no indication of being particularly distressed over this relationship, up to this point, but the second Robin says that she needs to break up with Nick, Barney goes into overdrive. He creates an elaborate (how many times have we described Barney’s activities as elaborate?) email invitation, ostensibly from Robin, to her annoying but well-meaning co-worker, Patrice. Patrice has been desperate to be Robin’s friend for some time, and Robin has been frankly nasty to her in return, in between taking advantage of her hospitality when she needed somewhere to live. Barney’s message is scheduled to send itself, unless Robin breaks up with Nick, on speaker-phone, so all the gang can hear.

The break-up is going badly - Nick has no idea that it is coming, isn’t bright enough to spot the hints, and then gets bad news about his basketball injury, and Robin is on the verge of bottling out of the whole thing. Listening to all this at the end of the phone, Barney responds by stalking out of the apartment, and turning up at the restaurant, to make an extraordinary announcement: he tells Nick, with the utmost conviction, that he is in love with Robin, that he can’t live without her, that he can’t stop thinking about her, and that they are meant to be together. Robin watches, astonished, clearly feeling, as the audience

does, that even Barney could not be faking this depth of feeling. It's a remarkable speech of which to find oneself the subject. Nick leaves, and Barney and Robin return to the others together, laughing about how Barney is so talented at faking love for an ulterior motive - he is quick to dispel any idea that Robin has gained that he was describing his true feelings, but we know Barney of old, now. Many times, he has pretended that he was pretending, in order to disguise his true feelings. The audience is left, not so much disappointed to learn that it was not true, as frustrated to see him, yet again, deny what is clear and self-evident.

Time passes, and Barney and Robin spend a week working together on the selection of a new strip club - he is a prized customer, who is being wooed by every strip club in town, and he hires Robin to act as his agent, negotiating for gifts and bribes with each club, before he makes his final selection. This is a classic example of how much genuine fun Barney and Robin can have together. When he first makes the offer, she recognises that no sensible person would be prepared to do such a thing, but she agrees, because it sounds like fun - and then she does seem to have a great time, fielding his calls, taking meetings with strip club owners, and getting quite a few bribes of her own, all the while reporting back to an increasingly impressed Barney. There is a cynicism that Robin and Barney share, and since the only losers are strip clubs, there seems to be no downside to their indulging that side of themselves.

It all seems to be going well, until they stagger home from the selected strip club, more than usually drunk, and Barney attempts to kiss her, saying, "I always have fun with you." Robin looks stricken, and slightly horrified, and clearly was not expecting this. She rebuffs him, and things become awkward between them for a few weeks. Eventually, Barney sits her down, and promises that he's done trying to "get" her. "You don't have to worry," he says. The bad news, is that Robin finds herself instantly attracted to Barney, largely because he has taken himself out of play, and since season two, they have shared a tendency to want the other most when they are unavailable. The good news, is that Barney is lying, and this is his biggest "play" yet.

This play is the most convoluted one yet, and takes at least three episodes to work itself out. It rests on the assumption - borne out by previous experience - that being told that Barney is out of play, will make Robin desperate to have him. When Barney and Robin got together the first time, it was in a maelstrom of reaction and counter reaction - Robin could not bring herself to want him, if he wanted her, but when he reacted to her rejection by withdrawing his affection, she was immediately interested again. It was the main reason they concluded that talking about the relationship was kiss of death to the whole thing. Barney is a master manipulator, though, and knowing this about Robin means that he is confident that, by promising to never chase her again, he can hold her on his line indefinitely.

Secondly, he brings Patrice on board. Whereas previous versions of Barney would not have thought twice about using Patrice, and discarding her when she ceased to be useful to him, reformed Barney is honest with her, and she comes into his play as a co-conspirator, willingly and with her eyes open. He pretends to date Patrice, claiming that her kindness

and acceptance of him are what attract him. There is a big fake speech, for the benefit of Ted, Robin and Lily, none of whom know that Barney realises they are hiding in his apartment, in which he tells Patrice that she makes him want to be a better person, and at the end of which he burns the Playbook, as a symbol of his having changed.

I struggle a little with this, because I find Patrice's character deeply problematic. Patrice is kind. She is generous. She is cheerful, and warm, and that Robin has spent so long rebuffing her attempts at friendship can only be because Robin is a thoroughly nasty person. The truth is that the programme absolutely refuses to take Patrice seriously as a character, when the only thing that is wrong with her, is her body shape. Patrice is played by a short, fat actress, and as we know, fat women can only be figures of comedy. Actually, Barney's fake relationship with her is very convincing. He uses it to demonstrate how far he has come, to illustrate to his friends what kind of relationship he wants, and is now capable of. It is sad that they all remain horrified by his relationship with Patrice, that they believe to be authentic, and the only thing they can possibly object to in it, is that she is fat.

After a fairly short period of time, Barney tells Ted - the second-leakiest cistern in the group - that he is planning to propose to Patrice, confident in Ted's inability to keep this information from Robin. He constructs Robin's ideal proposal in Patrice's name, on the roof of the TV studio where they both work, and then waits for Robin to inevitably come and prevent it, having been primed by Ted. The plan works to perfection. Robin comes, finds the roof covered with candles and rose petals, then finds the ripped-out final page of the destroyed Playbook, which describes the whole thing, point by point, and ends with the line, "Hope she says yes".

Finally, FINALLY, after so many near-misses, so much terrible timing, so much failed communication, Robin and Barney are back together, and the series is on the home straight. The flash-forwards to Robin and Barney's wedding day have been coming for over a season and half, by this time, and it is with an enormous sense of relief that the viewer finally sees things coming together.

At this point, it should be said that Robin and Barney's wedding represents a definite downward trajectory for the series. Robin and Barney have been friends for seven years, by now, but have only been a couple for a disastrous few months, three years ago, plus a one night stand, a year or so before. Robin has also matured in this time, realising that all the freedoms for which she gave up Ted, at the end of season two, have come to nothing. She is still in New York, still working in the news, still with the same group of people, and actually, if she had been prepared to commit at that time, she could have been happily settled ever since. As they have both progressed and developed since they were previously together, it would seem prudent to show cautious optimism for the future - to settle into being boyfriend and girlfriend again, to take care to understand what went wrong the first time, and how they can do better. Instead, since they have come back together over an engagement ring, they take the extraordinary decision to immediately plan a wedding, without taking any time to readjust to the situation. Coupled with the stylistic decision on the part of the programme makers to make the whole of season nine cover the three day

weekend of their wedding, this makes the relationship much more fraught and angst-ridden than it would otherwise be, and much more so than necessary.

Oddly enough, the angst does not stretch to planning the wedding itself. When Lily and Marshall were about to marry, there were months of “bridezilla” story lines, while they worried about bands, and dresses, and honeymoons, and money - and what’s more, they did it all twice, since Lily ran away to San Francisco, therefore cancelling one wedding, before returning to start again, planning a second.

In Robin and Barney’s case, the not-inconsiderable feat of producing a high-level wedding in around five months, is skirted over. Ted has a large ring-binder, and is cheerfully planning everything, while Robin and Barney quietly leave him to get on with it. Ted has strong feelings over whether a DJ would be better than a band, but they reflect his own issues over losing Robin to Barney, and don’t really seem to bother anyone else much.

Robin and Barney’s commitment to each other hits only two bumps in the road, at least until the last week before the wedding. When Robin discovers that Barney has a backup copy of the Playbook, and is using it to help Ted get laid, she says that she can’t live with his lies. He replies that a liar is what he is, what he has always been, and that, perhaps wise from his previous experiences with Nora, that he’s never going to change. However, he also insists that those lies all rest on a fundamental truth that outlasts them all - the truth that he loves her, and would never try to hurt her. There is no doubt that this position is a problematic one, but nonetheless, Robin accepts it.

The second event comes when they agree to sell Barney’s apartment, and look for something together without his history, but he changes his mind. Briefly, Robin insists that she needs this gesture as evidence that he has stepped away from his previous life, but then realises that Barney’s apartment represents everything she loves about him - his many gadgets and devices, designed to secure and then dispense with hundreds of one night stands, are, in their own way, a kind of repulsive genius. Robin sees that as reflecting Barney’s ingenuity, creativity and brilliance, and decides that she is actually immensely proud of him for those things, even if he used them for fairly nefarious goals.

Both these incidents are about highlighting that, whilst Barney has, indeed, come a long way, that he will always be Barney, and Robin needs to accept these quirks about him, if they are to have a future. In both cases, it really seems that Robin sees this, and does accept it.

Barney and Robin’s relationship always seems a little odd. She has played the role of his bro for so long, she seems unnervingly comfortable in joining in with his checking out of other women at the bar. Ted is concerned that she’s faking it, and might be more upset by this than she appears, but this suggestion makes Barney furious at the presumption that Ted knows her better, and leads to a significant weakening of their relationship. The sad truth is, Ted DOES know Robin better than Barney - he has dated her for longer, he has lived with her as a flat-mate for years, and he has remained her go-to adviser for all her major life decisions, for most of the time since they met. Ted apologises to Barney, and it

seems that things are OK, but Barney is now hesitant to trust Ted, realising that there is a special bond between him and Robin, and that his own relationship with her may never be quite the same.

This fear is confirmed when Robin has what amounts to a pre-wedding breakdown, over a locket she once buried in Central Park, planning to dig it up and use it as something old, when she eventually marries. Digging up chunks of Central Park, and increasingly desperate at being unable to find it, she calls Barney for help, but he doesn't recognise the signs that she is upset, and fobs her off. Instead, she calls Ted, who instantly does recognise that she's having some kind of crisis, and comes to the park to help her. He assures her that the universe is not sending a message, that there is no significance to the locket, that there is no supernatural message telling her not to marry Barney. He does it exactly right, even while Robin is starting to say that he is so much better for her, and that maybe she should marry him. We know that Ted is devastated that Robin is marrying Barney, and it would be very easy for him to make a move, but he doesn't. Robin gratefully - flirtatiously? - takes his hand, and they sit in the rain, hand-in-hand. This gesture is what Barney sees, when he finally arrives, and this confirms to him that Ted has feelings for Robin, and that, apparently, Robin has feelings for him (although Barney seems less upset about this - as ever, it is the perceived betrayal of his bro that hurts most).

Barney confronts Ted in the bar of the hotel, at the beginning of the wedding weekend. Ted explains exactly what happened in the park, insists that he was just being a good friend, and that there was nothing weird about it, and Barney appears to accept this - but then spends the rest of the afternoon tricking Ted into volunteering for a range of increasingly demeaning "best man" duties, before finally handing the "best man" poker game visor to another guest. Ted accuses him of being upset after all, and they fight over whether the Bro Code has been contravened. In the end, Ted is honest about his feelings for Robin, but is determined never to let those feelings get in the way of Barney's happiness with her, and Barney accepts this. They literally never mention it again.

Season nine is hugely problematic, like this. Each episode plays out in near-real time, but the format of the show doesn't change much, so we're expected to believe that these relationship problems arise and then are resolved in a few hours of narrative time - the same number of episodes as might have been used to cover the plot-line previously, but instead of representing weeks of evolving feelings and emotions, the stories are now shot like bullets. It's hard to think about character development under such circumstances. If we learn anything about Barney, here, it is that he is determined not to let his marriage to Robin slip away from him, and sees Ted as a threat, suddenly. At every previous point, he has pursued Robin only with Ted's blessing - explicitly, on early occasions, and implicitly, by assuming that when Ted tells Robin he's proposing to Patrice, it's a sign of his having given her up. Yet, suddenly, now he has actually won her, he seems angry and resentful of Ted, for having the audacity to care as much about Robin now as he always has.

We've never seen the jealous side to Barney before. Even when he was going crazy over Quinn's stripping, he was not angry, either with Quinn, or with her customers. He was just sad and frustrated, and wished it could be different. This sequence seems less like

character development, and more like behaviour that is out of character altogether. Fortunately, it's over quickly, and leaves no apparent ramifications, in itself, though the fact the Ted still loves Robin does continue to get narrative arcs in later episodes.

Early on the Saturday of the wedding weekend, Robin's feud with Barney's mother comes to a head, culminating in Loretta's verbalising a concern that Robin isn't a good enough cook to be the mother of her grandchildren. Barney tells his mother that Robin can't have children, and they talk about the implications of this for a while. Loretta insists that Barney always wanted children, though this is in no way borne out by the viewer's experience of him. Presumably, Loretta's view is skewed by the several years of pretence around his fake, actor-family. Barney, in any case, corrects her, and says that he has always *liked* children (a fact that *is* borne out by his responses to his brother's children), but that's not the same thing as wanting his own. In any case, he says, he's marrying Robin because he loves her, not as a conduit to a hypothetical future family. The viewer really gets to see how clear Barney is in his own mind about Robin. He loves her, as she is, and if children are not in her future, he loves her enough to put them out of his own, too.

It's hard to say whether this is really a development of Barney's character, so much as an improvement of his mother's understanding of him. There's very little evidence to support her statement that he'd always wanted a family, and he has always talked about the possibility of one of his 250-plus conquests getting pregnant as a worst case scenario. Maybe, if Robin had wanted and/or been able to have children, he would have found that, just as he loves her enough to go without a family, he loves her enough to have one. And Barney is, in fact, good with children, with a great capacity for love and affection for them. But since this isn't the case, it doesn't seem to matter very much. He comes across as very much at peace with this part of his life, because this is a price that is worth paying, several times over, to be Robin's husband.

At the rehearsal dinner, Robin and Barney revisit the issue of Barney's tendency to lie to her. No new information really comes about, at this point, though - he has spent the whole day talking of their "obvious" plan to throw him a surprise laser-tag themed rehearsal dinner, as a cover to both drive Robin nuts, and allow him to dart off to what turns out to be his own surprise rehearsal dinner for her, with a Canadian ice-skating theme, instead. Again, in his big denouement speech, he tells her that he reserves the right to lie to her, in the interests of a good surprise, and again, she is so breath-taken by the surprise, she accepts it. We see flashbacks to less successful lie-surprise events, however - the clumsy way in which he pretends to break off the wedding, in order to make the box of puppies seem more magical, is ill-considered. Barney is going to have to learn what topics need to be off-limits for this sort of thing, or risk undermining his earlier idea, that the lies all rest on the one huge truth of his love for her. This might be tricky, since he has never had a good sense of boundaries, and when he is on the receiving end, there really don't seem to be any boundaries - his stag night started as the dullest night ever, before escalating into a fiction in which he believed he had gambled away \$80,000, and that Marshall's life was in danger if he didn't pay up, and when he learns that none of this was true, he recounts these things, in a tone that makes the viewer, as well as the other characters, worry that they have, in fact, gone too far. If Barney is angry at all, it seems that he would be

entitled to view the situation as unforgivable. But then he breaks into a beaming smile, and declares that he loves it, highlighting how different his values and expectations are from everyone else's - and how well understood he is by his friends and his fiancée. He does seem to struggle to see how differently such a thing would appear to Robin, though.

The best thing he has in his favour for working it out, is fifteen years of sociopathically using psychology to get other women into bed. He does have a skillset, here, and if he can turn those skills around, with a goal of making Robin happy, rather than using her and walking away, he can probably make it work.

We see how much Barney needs and values Ted, an element of their relationship which has, perhaps, always been true, beneath the surface, but which doesn't often show, when he learns that Ted is planning to move to Chicago the day after the wedding. Barney is truly and genuinely hurt, and reacts to this with anger. He tells Ted that he had believed they were best friends, but that, clearly, he's just some guy Ted used to know in New York. They make up again, shortly afterwards, but it's one of the few occasions when we see the depth of Barney's relationship with Ted, in terms of how he needs and values him. For almost nine seasons, he has seemed to use Ted, and to dictate to him, whilst Ted in return has worried about him, supported him, and done all the emotional labour of their relationship. Now, we have seen Barney genuinely angry and upset with Ted, twice in twenty-four hours, in a way that we have simply never seen before. Maybe getting married has made Barney uniquely vulnerable, or maybe this, too, is a development - Barney knows that he needs Ted, and sees how both Ted's love for his wife, and subsequent move away, could destroy this friendship forever.

Within the unique alcohol-related science of the show, the most convincing evidence of Barney's transformation into the man who can be Robin's husband, comes the night before the wedding, when he reaches a level of inebriation described as "truth-serum" drunk. Ted and Robin take the opportunity to ask him any number of questions that he has always previously evaded, including regarding the great mystery of his job, but when Robin goes to bed, Ted asks him how he really feels about Robin. Too drunk to lie, Barney tells him how much he loves Robin, how he could never love anyone as much, and how she completes him - he no longer feels that he is "broken". She has made him whole.

Ted is satisfied. His trust in Barney has always been more limited than his affection for him, and he has wondered all along if Barney is good enough for Robin, but even he can see, now, that he is. We're only eight or nine episodes from the end of the series, now, and the pieces are coming together. Barney is good enough.

Barney doesn't feature much, between this point and the actual wedding. We already know, from flashbacks stretching back across two seasons, that he's freaking out a little immediately before the ceremony, but really, these episodes are about Lily and Marshall's rocky patch, and Robin's unshakable fear that marrying Barney would be a mistake. Immediately before the ceremony, she tells Ted that she thinks she should be marrying him instead, and when he refuses to have anything to do with this line of reasoning, she attempts to run away from the wedding, only to bump into Barney, who clears up the last

question of his suitability - he promises her that, despite what he has said before on the subject, he will undertake from now on to always tell her the truth. He sees that Lily and Marshall hit one of the worst parts of their marriage when Marshall failed to be honest about his job offer, and that dishonesty can undermine even the best of marriages.

Given how many times Barney has insisted that he simply *can't* promise to tell Robin the truth, that tricks and subterfuge are too integral a part of him to be changed, this seems like a big ask. It's certainly what Robin needs to hear at this point, but it does not seem terribly realistic. The extraordinary thing is that, so far as we can tell, Barney keeps this promise. The marital problems that they subsequently face have nothing to do with honesty - his change, unlikely though it may seem, is real, and lasts the length of his relationship with Robin.

Once the wedding is over, the last two episodes of the season become heavily involved in flash-forward, and wrapping up the events between May 2013, and narrator's Ted's present day of 2030. This is where the writing decisions become implausible, and interfere with the suspension of disbelief, especially where Barney is concerned.

Three years into their marriage, which was eight years in the making, Robin and Barney divorce. The point of contention is Robin's job - at an earlier point, Barney is seen in McLaren's, clearly struggling with the amount of travel that Robin is doing. Now, we see them together, in Argentina, arguing about the amount of the trip she is obliged to spend working, and about how the hotel's WiFi is insufficient to meet Barney's needs regarding his new blog enterprise, which one presumes is his main business activity, now that his former employer has been shut down by the FBI. They are struggling to find a compromise that meets both of their needs, and after a night of excessive drinking, Barney tells her, in honour of his honesty vow, that he isn't happy. He doesn't say he wants a divorce, but Robin offers it to him, and he seems to acquiesce.

This is one of the most frustrating twists in all the nine seasons of the show. It's as if nothing has changed in the seven years since they broke up for the first time, and as we've seen, everything has changed in that time. Things are difficult, and rather than work out a solution, they just give up and walk away. This is completely out of character for Barney, now.

There were no lengths to which Barney would not go to achieve his goals. No scheme was too elaborate to attract a girl at a bar, no transcontinental flight too expensive to stop him talking Lily into coming back, or to rescue Robin from a drunken bender in Toronto, or to track down the identity of the teenage crush she stalked in her youth. No proposal scheme was too much, and no surprise ice rink rehearsal dinner beyond reason. And yet now, even though he says he still loves Robin, he has no desire, no imagination, and consequently no plan.

Barney has had any number mantras and catchphrases, but one of his primary ones is "Challenge accepted." He never shirks from a challenge, and the idea that this, the biggest, most important challenge yet, is something from which he just walks away, flies

in the face of everything he always was, as well as everything he has become. Echoing their failed attempt get together on the boat ride, Robin presents him with “an escape ramp”, and asks if he wants to take it. She doesn’t say that *she* wants a divorce, just like she doesn’t ask him to run away with her, on the previous occasion. She asks him what he wants, and then leaves him to deduce what answer she is hoping for. Maybe he agrees to the split because he believes it’s what she wants. Given that Robin drops out of the group altogether, for about four years, because of how painful it is to see him, it seems unlikely that this is really the solution she was seeking.

Barney’s response to the breakdown of his marriage is equally implausible. He has spent years becoming the sort of person who could settle down with Robin, through a rollercoaster of seeing how broken and unhappy the incessant stream of one-night-stands had made him. By the time he is in his forties, and trying to pull girls half his age, the whole charade seems more sad and broken than ever, but Barney insists that his hard-won reformation was an aberration, that he was never broken, and that this is the real Barney, whom his friends should just accept. Ted, Lily and Marshall are deeply saddened, but as always, do accept him.

The final lurch in Barney’s character comes when he finally and inevitably gets one of his conquest’s pregnant. We find out nothing about her, except that she is Number 31 in his “perfect month” (a different girl every night for 31 nights), and becomes the mother of his daughter. He isn’t allowed in the delivery room, suggesting that no long-term relationship arises from this development, but he is the legal father of her baby girl, with whom he falls in love instantly. All subsequent interactions with Barney refer to how exhausted he is by fatherhood, but it’s never explained how his relationship with this child is worked out - does he live with the mother, or share custody for part of the week, or even take full custody from the mother, for reasons we can only guess? None of it is revealed. All we know is that Barney loves his daughter, is kept awake at night by her, and has responded to fatherhood by sending scantily clad girls home from the bar with a stern lecture about life decisions, instead of trying to score with them. He is, it seems, finally cured, but by a daughter, rather than a partner.

The first time I watched this, I was horrified. Barney had worked so hard to change, and to become a better person, and he was rewarded with a life alone. Essentially, Robin was taken away from him by the writers for no good reason, other than to free her up for Ted, fourteen years later, when his wife has died, and he’s free to date again. It was an incomprehensible betrayal of Barney’s journey, and he deserved so much more.

About Ted

By contrast with the extraordinary journey that Barney has travelled, Ted seems to have made no progress of any kind. At the beginning of season one, Ted is twenty-seven years old, overly romantic, often kind and sweet, apparently desperate to find “the one” and settle down, whilst living an actual day-to-day life of pick-ups and one-night-stands, some of which he explains away as part of the epic search for the mother of his children, but

many of which are simply a good time on the night. He tells Marshall, early in season one, that the only way he can find his future wife is to “do stupid singles stuff with Barney”, when the truth is that none of his serious relationships start that way - he meets people he has something in common with at the weddings of his friends, or at the doctor’s office, or standing in the street, gazing lovingly at an old building. He might believe that bars and clubs are the best place to meet women, but evidence does not bear this out. Even Marshall and Lily met in a University halls of residence, over a broken stereo.

By season eight, Ted has been in four serious relationships (five, if we count Victoria twice), and any number of less serious ones, and slept with dozens of women. At the end of every relationship, he enters a period of Barney-like promiscuity, before sighing deeply about how he’s ready to settle down, now, and when will he finally meet “the one”? He is thirty-five, and exactly where he started.

Much is made, in the narration, of Ted’s sense of his own growth and development. He makes reference to how it’s just as well that he didn’t meet The Mother at certain points in that time, since he’s certain she would not have liked the person he was, just then. That may be true, but it isn’t a reflection of his permanent growth. He wavers between good, kind, thoughtful, romantic Ted, and a selfish, misogynistic, lesser version of Barney at his worst. He spends around three months with Victoria, and they seem very happy together, but within four weeks of her being taken out of New York, he has attempted to cheat on her with Robin. He then spends a year with Robin, and again, they seem well suited and happy together, but Robin is afraid of being tied down, doesn’t want children, and wants to travel the world, while Ted sees his future as a married New York architect with a family. They conclude that their relationship has no future, and separate amicably, but the contrast is stark between Ted’s view, and Barney’s when he addresses the thorny issue of grandchildren with his mother. Barney isn’t marrying Robin as a route to a future family, he’s marrying her because he loves her, as she is. Ted, apparently, doesn’t love Robin enough to sacrifice his image of how his life should work out.

After a short grieving period, Ted meets Stella, a dermatologist with an eight year old. As is his way, he wins early on with his big romantic gestures, but for a man who is desperate to have a family, he reacts very strongly against the idea of moving to Stella’s New Jersey suburb, where she lives with her daughter. To any logical person, it’s really a no-brainer. Ted’s moving in with them would minimise the disruption of a new step-parent to the child, keeping her home, friends and school the same while she adjusts. The house is enormous, compared with the tiny Manhattan flat that Ted shares with Marshall and Lily, and since Ted’s life goals will almost certainly lead him to a house in the suburbs, Stella really represents a ready-made package of what he has always wanted. Ted, however, reacts petulantly to the idea of leaving the city to live in his hated New Jersey, and is ungracious in the extreme, before conceding that he loves Stella enough to make the move.

After Stella leaves Ted at the altar, Robin moves in to Lily and Marshall’s vacated room, as Ted’s room-mate. They find each other difficult to live with, and conclude that the difference between this arrangement, and the ease with which they shared the space

when they were a couple, is sex. For a while, they diffuse all their domestic niggles with a no-strings friends-with-benefits sex life, much to Lily's disapproval, but in the end, Lily is right - someone gets hurt. The someone is neither Ted nor Robin, though, but Barney, who begins coming round to clean the apartment, in the hope that Ted will stop having reasons to argue with Robin. Ted realises that this is because Barney still loves Robin, and so quietly stops sleeping with her, to spare his feelings. How Robin feels about this is not discussed - as ever, it is the morals of the Bro Code that dominate. However, Ted is tenderly careful of Barney's feelings, when he realises what they are, and comes across as a good friend in this way.

Ted reverts to playing the field, until he meets Zoey. Zoey is demonstrating against the demolition of the building that Ted has been commissioned to replace with a new skyscraper, and at an early stage, he produces a design that incorporates the facade of the original building. Sadly, Zoey annoys him, so, petulant as before, he throws the plans away, and reverts to the version that requires the tearing down of the older building. He is cutting off his nose to spite his face, here, since even Ted is sad about the loss of the architectural features of the older building, which was designed by one of his architectural heroes. When it emerges that Zoey is actually married to a New York billionaire, Ted attempts to back away from her, but the instant she leaves her husband, his scruples disappear, and they date for a few months, before the ongoing issue of the building finally comes between them. He loves her, but not enough to sacrifice the job. Come to that, he loves the building, too, but not enough to sacrifice his ambition of being the youngest architect ever to build a Manhattan skyscraper.

There follows a long period of singleness, or at least, of short and inconsequential relationships. Ted becomes increasingly frustrated by the non-appearance of The One, and reverts to telling Robin that he loves her. It seems, briefly, that she might reciprocate, since even she realises that nothing she has done in the last five years has justified their separation. The moment passes, however, and she tells Ted that she does not love him in the way that he loves her, and she moves out.

Shortly afterwards, he bumps back into Victoria. Inadvertently calling her on the morning of her wedding day, he is somewhat shocked to have her turn up to meet him in McLaren's wearing a wedding dress. During the day, he wavers between wanting to whisk her away from the wedding she has apparently abandoned, and wanting to steer her back to doing the right thing, and going through with the wedding - he is conscious of how terrible it is to be left at the altar, and does not want to be part of doing that to someone else. Nevertheless, Victoria does not get married, and they get back together.

Eventually, they reach a point of needing to commit themselves further, and Victoria points out that Ted left her for Robin once, and asks that he end his friendship with her, to insure against that happening again. Ted is not prepared to do that, and they break up. Again, he loves Victoria, but not enough to sacrifice anything important to him. Victoria is probably right to be cautious - in the seven years since he first met Robin, he has dated her once, declared undying love to her, been her friend, been her boyfriend, been her devastated ex-boyfriend, been her friend again, fallen out with Barney for sleeping with

her, been her room-mate with benefits, been her room-mate without benefits, declared his undying love again, and had Marshall insist that she move out to avoid hurting him. In between all the other women, Robin has been constant, but even his apparently abiding love for her has not prevented him from seeing her as a conquest. When she has a one-night stand with Barney, nearly a year after she and Ted broke up, he is furious with Barney. The idea of Robin having agency, and the perfect right to choose for herself who she sleeps with, gets no traction at all. It is a violation of the Bro Code, and until Barney is run over by a bus, shocking Ted into forgiveness, he remains intransigent.

In fact, most of the women that Ted and Barney come across have little or no agency. Barney's moral code is enshrined in the Bro Code, but whilst it is certainly his document, when he tries to get Marshall to use his lawyer skills to prove that Ted has broken the code, it transpires that he never has. We have seen all manner of morally questionable treatment of women from Ted, and morally outrageous treatment of women by Barney, but none of this is of any consequence, because their moral code only extends as far as "Bros". One of the reasons Robin is able to get under Barney's skin so effectively is because she is his bro - she engages in "bro" activities with him, and having been brought up largely as a boy, relates to him in a masculine way, in a lot of ways. She high-fives his conquests, and plays "Have you met Barney?" in bars, when she wants to treat or reward him. To Ted, however, she remains an object, and his anger is directed at Barney, not her. She might well be his favourite object, but she is an object, nonetheless.

At the end of the series, when Ted finally meets the Mother, and they start to flash forward into their life together, everything seems to come together rather easily. She is three days out of a relationship, he has just watched Robin finally marry Barney, but none of this baggage seems to get in the way of their sweet little love story. When it becomes apparent that Narrator Ted is telling this story in part because Tracey has since died, it is particularly sad that he only got eleven years with the love of his life, for whom he had waited so long. Throughout those scenes, Ted is at his best, the romantic, silly, generous person we have seen him be, sporadically, all the way along. Knowing what we know about him, though, it seems that the main difference between this Ted, and the man who has fluctuated so much in his behaviour, is that Tracey never put him under pressure. She didn't ask him to give up his friends, or move to New Jersey. She doesn't appear to bring any of her own friends into their life together, instead slotting into the group, even as it starts to drift apart. She lives in the house he bought, years before, to live in with his future wife and children, and she bears him the two children he always craved. Maybe they would have lived happily ever after, or maybe it was just as well that their only major test was her illness and death - Ted could find a heroic role for himself as the devastated husband and widower, left to raise two children alone. If the stress of that told on their relationship, the problem was short-lived, because Tracey herself did not survive.

In the final scene, when Ted is standing below Robin's window, holding a stolen blue french horn, consciously echoing the very first episode, he has lived twenty five years of life, but it is not clear that he's changed at all. It's almost as if those twenty-five years were a blip, and a distraction, and that this was where he was destined to end up all along - precisely where he began.

About Robin

Robin does not so much grow, as reveal herself, before gradually sinking into a lesser version of herself. At first, she's fairly ordinary. She's a pretty girl in the bar, who works as a reporter on a low-grade local cable channel, and who is understandably alarmed when Ted declares his love to her on their first date. As time passes, however, we learn that her Canadian roots hide a love of guns that the others find terrifying, a complicated relationship with her father, a history being brought up as a boy that has left her wary and uncomprehending of most female friendships (Lily being the main exception to this, perhaps because, until Robin comes along, Lily, too, has been surrounded by men). It also emerges that she has a history as a Canadian teen pop idol, performing in malls across Canada, in a thinly veiled imitation of real-life eighties pop star, Tiffany.

At the beginning of the series, Robin is afraid of commitment, and therefore terrified of Ted's willingness to commit. She tells Lily, early in season one, that she is only interested in casual relationships. Ironically, this marks the beginning of her absorption into one of the most intensive, co-dependant, all-consuming friendship groups imaginable. She is so busy avoiding committing to a boyfriend, that she becomes inextricably committed to her friends, without even noticing.

Robin knows, from day one, that Ted is looking for a life-partner, and a commitment, and she resists him, on the grounds that these things make them incompatible. However, as she settles into the group, Ted's attractions only grow on her, and it seems that whilst their goals remain as incompatible as ever, her desire to be with him overrules the logic of this. Even when she spends an extraordinary evening with Barney, fulfilling the role of his "bro", and having more fun than she's ever had with anyone, she resists Barney's inevitable advances. When Barney points out how great they could be together, she stops herself, murmurs, "Actually, that does make a lot of sense," but still insists that they can only be friends - and Barney is quick to realise that this is because she has feelings for Ted. In a pattern that we will come to recognise, seeing Ted taken off the market by Victoria appears to make Robin want him more than she ever did.

Robin's attraction to Ted is temporarily dented when he lies to her about his relationship status - believing that Victoria is about to dump him, he tells Robin that she already has, and that he is consequently free to embark on a relationship with her instead. Within minutes, Robin discovers the truth, and is furious with him for several weeks. Her moral code, it seems, does not stretch to being tricked into sleeping with another woman's boyfriend. It does not take long, however, for her to revert to being his friend, and with another of his grand romantic gestures (surprise blue-instrumented string quartet in her living room), he manages to secure her at last.

Almost immediately, *How I Met Your Mother* ceases to show much interest in Ted and Robin, becoming engrossed in the complexities of Lily and Marshall's relationship instead. Happy couples do not make for interesting television, and the narrative chooses to leave

Ted and Robin alone to be happy, and focus on the unhappy couple, rather than the only alternative, of making them immediately miserable together.

Robin is mostly hesitant to embrace the commitment side of the relationship. She disturbs Lily by being disinclined towards jealousy, when they think Ted has been out with another woman, and then disturbs herself, when it starts to look like he has slept with the woman, by being briefly jealous, after all, until they discover it was Barney all along. It takes her more than seven months to get around to telling Ted she loves him, even though it's fairly clear that she does. She has never said it to a partner before, never having been in such a serious relationship before, and Ted is thoroughly patient and understanding about it, thereby exhibiting his willingness to support and compensate for her emotional illiteracy.

Apparently, they spend most of a year together, with very few points of friction, until they realise that their underlying problem that has always existed - Ted's desire to marry and have children, conflicting with Robin's desire to travel and focus on her career - still exists. They break up, not because they are currently unhappy, but because they cannot see a future, and Ted, particularly, risks missing his chance of marriage and children with someone else, for as long as he is with Robin.

Robin could, theoretically, stay with Ted until a real decision point arose - a job offer elsewhere, for example. She could choose to marry him, even if she did not want children. Maybe, when that crisis emerged, they would work through it, and find a way to make it work. Maybe there would be change, or growth, or compromise from one or both of them. The viewer never finds this out, though, because they decide that their plans are incompatible, and choose not to try.

The irony of Robin's inability to commit to Ted, is that apart from a brief and reactionary trip to Argentina (three months long, but definitely considered a holiday rather than a lifestyle choice), and an even briefer job in Japan, which she quit within weeks, to return to the security of her familiar New York culture and friends, Robin never does leave. Five years after she ends it with Ted, she is still in New York, doing similar work, and spending all her free time with the same people. Ted is desperate to be a father, and Robin is equally desperate not to be a mother. It may be that this friction would have doomed their relationship in the long term, but one does feel that it was a wasted opportunity that they spent those five years failing to find the happiness they had together, with a succession of people who were never quite as good.

As the series progresses, she dates Barney, but is unwilling to even describe herself as his girlfriend, at first, then equally unwilling or unable to work out how to make their relationship work, when it is failing. Her ability to function in a relationship has certainly deteriorated. She had no difficulty viewing herself as Ted's girlfriend, but three years later, her fear of commitment has escalated significantly. It would appear that her relationship competence is dependent on the emotional skills of her partner - with Ted, she copes well, but cannot bring herself to commit to the life he has envisioned for himself. With Kevin, a psychological therapist, she is helped along by his willingness to do the emotional labour, until he, too, seeks a commitment from her, and she bails. Her other

boyfriends are classically good looking, but tend to offer little in terms of either emotional support, and demand little in terms of emotional need. Essentially, she's with them for the sex, and stays with them for as long as things are fun and easy. They are as disposable to her as Ted's many relationships are to him, and one wonders if the different moral standards applied to women societally than to men are all that stands between Robin's lifestyle, and Barney's.

The one exception to this rule, is Robin's relationship with Don, in season 5. Don is her co-anchor at work, and she briefly moves in with him. Indeed, she is so committed to him that she puts her relationship with him ahead of a dream job offer in Chicago, only to see him subsequently offered the same job, and take it. Her commitment to him was greater than his to her, and he does not appear to have thought twice about dropping her for a career opportunity.

Robin is devastated, and this represents a turning point in her development. She has always maintained that her career takes precedence over her relationships, but when the moment to choose actually arose, she chose the boyfriend. Clearly, this was a mistake, since she was immediately badly hurt as a result - *and* she missed the career opportunity. She has reneged on her own value system, and in doing so, has proved that the values were right all along, and that prioritising her relationship with Don was a mistake.

Robin becomes a much more fractured, brittle character from this point. Early in season six she "becomes a real New Yorker" (as distinct from a mild-mannered Canadian) by engaging with a number of things described as characteristic New York behaviours - taking a cab from someone who needs it more, for example. It is from this point that she becomes the Robin who assaults someone and ends up in court mandated therapy (where she meets Kevin), and the Robin who screeches constant abuse at Patrice.

As Robin's relationship with Barney evolves, it becomes clear that she loves and values him as a friend. She enjoys his sense of showmanship, and enjoys many of the things he enjoys. They drink whiskey together, they occasionally play laser tag together, they spend a delightful week screening strip clubs together, and there is no doubt that Barney truly cares about her. At first, Robin sees Barney as a friend, because his treatment of women is such that he could never safely be anything else. As he evolves, though, he gradually becomes good enough for her, and she finds that she wants more from him.

When Robin cheats on Kevin with Barney, she is sure that she has made a mistake. She does not, broadly speaking, consider Barney a safe bet. Kevin is kind, thoughtful, and considerate, with enough emotional intelligence to support them both. Barney is untruthful, unreliable, promiscuous, and difficult to trust. Nevertheless, when it becomes clear that Barney does, in fact, want to run away with her, she finds him difficult to resist. Unfortunately for Barney, Robin is increasingly influenced by the man in front of her in the moment. When she is with Barney, she agrees to end her relationship with Kevin, but since Barney cannot reasonably be there when she does that, Kevin will always win. She cares about both, but it seems that Robin's sense of self has deteriorated to the point that she cannot make a decision between them. Her agency is withering away at this point. When

Barney says, “Dump Kevin and be with me,” she agrees. When Kevin says, “Don’t tell me what you did, just stay with me,” she agrees. She is acquiescing with whatever is suggested by the man in front of her at the time. If Ted had chosen this moment to offer to take her away from them both, she would probably have gone with him.

Her relationship with Kevin only ends when Kevin realises that it has no future - when Robin makes clear that she genuinely does not want children, of any sort, he sees that whilst he is prepared to make that sacrifice now, he may regret the choice, later. In any case, Robin has been working hard to talk him out of his commitment to her, which she has clearly been apprehensive about, ever since she accepted his engagement ring. The issue of children has been a good get-out clause for Robin for a long time. It is not terribly clear whether these are her real reasons, or good, workable excuses to get her out of an engagement which scares her.

Robin’s agency evaporates almost completely, when Barney engages on his biggest “play” yet, entitled, “The Robin”. For some months, he positions and manipulates her into wanting him, believing him to be unavailable, and declaring herself to him. It works a charm - at the end of this process, she agrees to marry him. But not before she has felt anger, humiliation, frustration, and host of other negative, and largely unnecessary emotions. Barney would argue that Robin needed this complex process to help bring her into awareness of her own feelings, to which she is generally oblivious. The fact remains that he tricks her into every step of the way, knowing that Patrice will push Robin’s buttons more than anyone else could, knowing that his unavailability will only make her want him, and knowing that Robin herself was always vulnerable to a grand, romantic gesture. By the time Barney is on bended knee, holding a ring, he has persuaded her that she wants and needs him. Her own agency in this is lost completely.

Rather than growth, Robin shows a certain amount of character deterioration, during the course of the series. At the beginning, she is confident, and ambitious, and sure of what she wants, and is presented as the sort of person Lily and Ted would want in their lives. By the end, she describes herself as “a mess”, regularly, and so she is. She cheats on Kevin with Barney, she is persistently cruel and unkind to Patrice, who has never done anything to hurt her, and she spends her wedding day wondering if she is marrying the wrong man. She is uncertain, and anxious, and has no clear sense of what she wants, any more. Rather than gain self-knowledge and autonomy, she seems to have lost what little understanding of herself she ever had, and to have become a victim of events, with a breathtaking loss of agency and control.

Having known Barney for so long, Robin’s pre-wedding jitters mostly take the form of fear that his transformation is a facade, that he would spend their married life deceiving her, or disappearing off on wild missions that he hasn’t thought to mention. To Barney’s credit, none of this turns out to be true. Barney does not lie to her, and he does not make elaborate plans which forget to include her. Instead, their separation rests on her inflexibility - her commitment to her job prevents her from making any compromises in favour of how much Barney misses her, and craves being the centre of her attention.

Barney becomes good enough for Robin, but when it comes to it, Robin simply isn't good enough for Barney.

That being the case, it seems that maybe she is, just about, good enough for Ted. Ted, who is, himself, not really good enough for the marriage he's been craving, and whose eventual relationship with the Mother only works because she manages to be good enough for both of them. Robin and Ted were excellent together, in season two, and if either of them could have shown just a little compromise on their life goals, they could have remained so.

About Lily

Lily makes only small developmental changes. At the beginning she is bubbly, and a bit naive, and describes herself as cute. By the end of the series, she has developed a death glare, and is generally a bit scarier. She exhibits a tendency to run away from difficult situations throughout, but she learns to control it. In season one, she runs away from her engagement to Marshall, to San Francisco for three months. Three or four years later, she almost runs away to Spain, to get away from Marshall's career crisis, but changes her mind at the airport, and comes back before Marshall realises she's gone. In season eight, she tells Ted how trapped she feels by her new life as a mother, but doesn't attempt to leave it, and in season nine, when they are fighting over Marshall's judgeship, and how it affects their plans to go to Rome for a year, she runs away again, to the Captain's house. It transpires that she suspects she is pregnant, and is feeling trapped by that thought, and that the prospect of losing the trip to Rome makes her feel even more hemmed in, but in the end, she only stays at the Captain's house for long enough to take the pregnancy test, before returning to Marshall, and telling him that he can take the judgeship, and not go to Rome.

The majority of these occasions centre on Ted, as the friend she trusts to tell the truth to. Ted knows she's applied for the course in San Francisco before anyone else, Ted is tricked into taking her to the airport on a pretext, when she nearly goes to Spain, and it is Ted who is the only one to hear how she feels about motherhood - in exchange for his confession that he still loves Robin, which Lily already suspects. Ted and Lily have a special relationship, that reflects well on them. There is absolutely no sexual tension between them, and they are genuinely good friends, with an understanding of each other, and a deep trust. When Lily comes back from San Francisco, Ted is delighted to see her, and delighted for Marshall to have her back, but also surprisingly angry - not just on Marshall's behalf, but on his own account, asking her why she had never called him in all that time, and what value she placed on their friendship in it's own right. From that point onwards, Lily never overlooks Ted again, though she occasionally has to tell him to butt out of her marriage.

About Marshall

The only character who does not appear to change at all, is Marshall, but actually, this is not a weakness. Marshall is as solid as a rock, as fully formed at the beginning of the series as he is at the end. He traverses through life stages, forming a career, getting married, becoming a father, but his view of the world was carved from his Minnesota upbringing. He is polite to strangers, kind to everyone, respectful of women (mostly), and unfailingly in love with Lily from start to finish. His points of stress hit when different elements of that fully-formed character come into conflict - the idealist who wants to be an environmental lawyer who saves the world, versus the provider who wants to make decent money in corporate law, to give Lily and their family the best he can offer. Neither is a change to who he is, so much as a failure to keep those two parts of himself separate.

In an environment obsessed with Ted's and Barney's rampant sex-lives, Marshall never strays in his faithfulness to Lily - even when she has left him, and gone to San Francisco, and Marshall is persuaded that he *should* date again, Barney successfully steals his every date, so that he never gets the chance to sleep with anyone else. It is regularly stated that Lily and Marshall have only had sex with each other, and whilst their relationship does face ups and downs, this never ceases to be true.

Marshall's biggest weakness, morally speaking, he shares with both Lily and Robin, in that they condone the activities of Barney and Ted. They are prepared to accept their goals, however questionable those goals may be, and whilst they are all prepared to intervene if they think Ted, particularly, has taken a self-destructive path, they are mostly prepared to high-five misogynistic jokes, applaud conquests, and accept the treatment of women as objects, in a way that Marshall himself would never engage with, and that none of them would accept had the victim been Lily or Robin. They applaud Barney's "perfect week", in which he seeks to sleep with a different woman every day for seven days, without ever considering the effect of this abstract and gamified goal on the women in question. Marshall takes Ted to task, when he feels that he has come too close to absorbing Barney's values, because he considers that he's better than that. As we have already seen, Marshall's faith in him may be ill-founded, but he walks a fine line between making Ted be a better person, and enabling Ted to be a worse one.

Conclusion

The writers of *How I Met Your Mother* boxed themselves into a corner that they would never be able to escape from. They always intended that the titular Mother would die, and the children end the series in encouraging Ted to go after Robin - those scenes were shot at the same time as season two, to mitigate against the young actors aging too much to be convincing. I'm not sure they ever envisaged Barney and Robin becoming so entwined with one another, but I can see how it became a beguiling story arc - they are both so damaged, that really, they are the only ones who can understand the other properly. Ted, Marshall and Lily look on in sympathy, and love, and huge affection, but they simply cannot comprehend what it is really like to Robin or Barney.

Robin inspires Barney to be his best self. Sadly, Barney doesn't really inspire the same in Robin. Perhaps Ted does - his reliable attentiveness give her a sense of safety that Barney's sleight-of-hand showmanship never quite delivers. The truth is, Robin is a better person, with Ted, than she is with Barney. She is Barney's perfect woman, and he surely deserves to have his perfect woman, but he is not her perfect man.

She is only nearly Ted's perfect woman. Tracey, "the Mother", is presented in the whistle-stop tour of Ted's post-2013 life as his truly perfect woman. Their eleven-year run of happiness is only marred by Tracey's illness and death, and one pities the children on the receiving end of this story, if this faultless creature is what they are expected to live up to. Ted's fallibility is often referred to in his narration, but Tracey never puts a foot wrong, either before or after they finally meet. That Ted is happy with her is without doubt. That Robin would have made him miserable in that time also seems likely, particularly if she took the same inflexible approach with him as she took with Barney.

It's not clear why Ted thinks that a relationship with Robin can work, now. Barney has been out of the picture for some fourteen years, and we have no evidence that Robin has found anyone in between who could meet her exacting requirements of totally committed to her, whilst accepting her total commitment to her work, instead. Ted has achieved the suburban family life he always wanted, but if being with Robin still means travelling the globe, he is no more likely to do that now than he ever was, given that doing so would mean leaving his motherless 15 and 13 year old children behind. Presumably, parenting his grieving children when they were only nine and seven, took all his time and attention for quite some time, and this is the first time that he has been able to come up for air, and see a life beyond the children. The next five years at least, though, are still going to be dominated by his sole responsibility for their welfare, and that limitation will affect how available he is to be at Robin's beck and call.

The irony is, of course, that he is now in the directly opposite position to the one he found himself in, with Stella. He is the one in the suburbs with the children to consider, cautious to get involved with anyone if it might affect them detrimentally. In the final episode, Penny is explicit that the entire narrative of Ted's life to his children, all nine seasons of *How I Met Your Mother*, is a long-winded attempt to get their consent for him to date Robin again. The children will always come first, and one can only hope that Robin has grown up enough in the interim to be able to work with that.