

Breaking the Cycle: A Proppian Analysis of *It Ends with Us* as a Modern Hero's Narrative

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the narrative structure of the film *It Ends with Us* (2025), adapted from Colleen Hoover's novel, using Vladimir Propp's theory of narrative functions. Through a descriptive qualitative method, the research examines how the 31 narrative elements proposed by Propp are present, adapted, or subverted in the film's storyline. The findings reveal that the story maintains several classical components of the hero's journey, such as trials, confrontation, and symbolic resolution. However, it also reinterprets certain roles and plot movements to emphasize contemporary themes like female autonomy, psychological healing, and the cycle of domestic violence. The protagonist's journey reflects both internal and external conflict, resulting in personal transformation rather than a traditional heroic conquest. This analysis proves that Propp's structural framework remains applicable in analyzing modern narratives, especially those centered on social and emotional resilience. The film stands as a powerful example of adapting folkloric structure to modern-day storytelling.

Keywords: Proppian functions, narrative structure, modern hero, domestic violence

INTRODUCTION

Stories have long served as vessels for human experience, transmitting values, lessons, and cultural norms across generations. From oral traditions to contemporary cinema, narrative patterns often follow recognizable structures that help audiences interpret characters' journeys and outcomes. One of the most influential structuralists in narrative theory, Vladimir Propp, identified a consistent sequence of thirty-one narrative functions within Russian folktales. These functions, according to Propp (1928), form the building blocks of many heroic stories, regardless of their cultural or temporal origins. His approach, often referred to as Proppian morphology, provides a systematic lens through which both classic and modern narratives can be dissected and understood (Fajrin & Lestari, 2022).

In the context of contemporary storytelling, particularly in film and literature that centers around complex human emotions and societal challenges, Propp's model is often both reinforced and reimaged. The 2025 film adaptation of *It Ends with Us*, directed by Justin Baldoni and based on Colleen Hoover's best-selling novel, presents a compelling case study for the application of Proppian analysis to a modern narrative. Unlike traditional heroic tales that focus on external battles and quests, *It Ends with Us* revolves around the internal struggle of a woman—Lily Bloom—who confronts trauma, domestic abuse, and generational pain in her quest for self-liberation (Bellotti et al., 2021).

The film presents a layered exploration of personal boundaries, love, and emotional endurance. It speaks not of dragons or villains in the literal sense, but of psychological trials, emotional confrontations, and the courage required to end toxic cycles. Though on the surface it may appear to diverge from the classic hero's adventure, when analyzed through the lens of Propp's morphology, it becomes evident that Lily's journey reflects many of the core narrative functions traditionally attributed to folkloric heroes. However, these functions are

not always literal. Instead, they are embedded in symbolic representations of conflict, transformation, and resolution (Kenasri & Sadasri, 2023).

What distinguishes *It Ends with Us* from other romantic dramas is its unapologetic engagement with issues often silenced in both popular media and academic discourse—most notably domestic violence and the societal pressure on women to maintain appearances in the face of personal harm. Through Lily’s evolving relationships, especially with her abusive partner Ryle and her first love Atlas, the narrative challenges traditional conceptions of loyalty, heroism, and feminine strength. Her eventual decision to “end” a cycle of violence is not merely a personal triumph, but a significant thematic statement that redefines what it means to be a hero in a modern world (Martinez et al., 2020)

This study aims to examine the film’s structure using Propp’s narrative framework to identify how each function operates or is subverted throughout Lily’s journey. By doing so, it not only demonstrates the enduring relevance of Propp’s theory in analyzing contemporary narratives but also illustrates how such classical models can be adapted to tell deeply human stories that address present-day social realities. In particular, this research will focus on how the protagonist’s path corresponds with key Proppian functions—such as interdiction, transgression, struggle, and symbolic return—and how those functions manifest in a context shaped by psychological trauma and emotional resilience.

The significance of this study lies in bridging literary narrative theory with modern film analysis to show that even the most intimate and socially driven stories can follow timeless narrative arcs. By analyzing *It Ends with Us* through this lens, the research seeks to expand our understanding of how classical narrative structures can be retooled to serve contemporary themes of empowerment, resistance, and healing.

METHOD

This research adopts a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze the narrative structure of the film *It Ends with Us* using Vladimir Propp’s theory of folktale morphology. This method was chosen because it enables a detailed, interpretive understanding of narrative patterns, especially when applied to a film that is rooted in emotional realism rather than fantasy. Unlike quantitative analysis, this approach focuses on interpreting meaning, character roles, and plot progression in relation to Propp’s thirty-one narrative functions.

The primary data source for this study is the 2025 film *It Ends with Us*, directed by Justin Baldoni, with supplementary references drawn from Colleen Hoover’s original novel. Additional support comes from related scholarly literature that discusses narrative structure and adaptation. The film was viewed multiple times, and key scenes were documented and analyzed in order to identify narrative shifts and their correspondence with Proppian functions. This process included creating a structured outline where each scene was matched with potential narrative roles or functions.

The analysis involved dividing the film’s plot into major sequences and mapping these sequences to specific functions within Propp’s framework, such as interdiction, violation, struggle, recognition, and symbolic resolution. It also examined how certain elements—like the absence of magical agents or the reinterpretation of the villain figure—reflect the modernization of classic narrative forms. Propp’s functions were not applied rigidly but instead interpreted within the emotional and social context of the story.

This method allowed for a flexible yet structured reading of the film, revealing how traditional storytelling mechanics are maintained and transformed in contemporary cinema. By applying Propp’s structural model through a qualitative lens, the study was able to uncover how *It Ends with Us* adapts the classic hero narrative to a story of emotional endurance, psychological transformation, and the pursuit of personal freedom.

RESULTS/FINDINGS

The findings from this analysis reveal that *It Ends with Us*, while rooted in contemporary romantic drama, exhibits significant structural parallels with Propp's folktale morphology. Although the narrative omits fantastical elements typical in traditional tales, the emotional journey of the protagonist—Lily Bloom embodies a restructured hero's path where psychological struggle replaces physical battles, and emotional clarity replaces magical resolution. The following sub-sections break down key Proppian functions found within the narrative, with detailed references to scenes, character actions, and thematic developments.

Initial Situation and Interdiction

The film begins by establishing a stable yet emotionally complicated background for the main character. This aligns with Function 1: Initial Situation, where the protagonist is introduced in her "normal" world. Lily Bloom, a young entrepreneur in Boston, is shown delivering a eulogy at her abusive father's funeral. This moment not only introduces her emotional scars but also symbolically disconnects her from her past, creating a thematic baseline for transformation.

Soon after, Lily meets Ryle Kincaid, a neurosurgeon who initially appears supportive and charming. However, during their first rooftop conversation, Ryle directly states that he is not interested in a serious relationship. This scene represents Function 2: Interdiction, where a warning or prohibition is presented to the hero. In this case, the interdiction is emotional: Lily is cautioned against deep involvement with a man who openly admits his emotional unavailability.

This interdiction also holds symbolic weight: it mirrors Lily's mother's past warnings about abusive relationships, implicitly foreshadowing Lily's journey into a similar dynamic. Thus, the warning functions on both narrative and thematic levels (Papalampidi et al., 2019).

Violation of Interdiction, Villainy, and Lack

Despite the warning, Lily chooses to pursue a relationship with Ryle. This constitutes Function 3: Violation of Interdiction, where the protagonist disregards the warning, leading to negative consequences. Their romance initially blossoms, and the audience is drawn into an emotionally rich love story. However, subtle red flags begin to appear, such as Ryle's possessiveness and emotional volatility.

As the relationship progresses, the narrative introduces Function 8: Villainy, though not in its traditional form. Ryle does not represent a villain in an overt, folkloric sense. Instead, he becomes the source of escalating emotional harm, culminating in physical violence. The film portrays these incidents with disturbing realism—Ryle's sudden aggression after a minor trigger, followed by manipulation and remorse. This complexity adds moral ambiguity to his character, reinforcing that modern "villains" can be those closest to us.

Simultaneously, Function 9: Lack emerges in the form of Lily's internal dissonance. She begins to lose her sense of safety, identity, and control—elements essential to her psychological wellbeing. The "lack" is not of an object, but of autonomy, peace, and emotional security. Her growing awareness of this loss intensifies the narrative tension and prepares the ground for transformation (Sijaya et al., 2024).

Mediation, Recognition, and Beginning of Counter-Action

The turning point begins with Function 10: Mediation, when Lily starts to connect her current experience to her mother's past. Reading her old journal entries to Atlas Corrigan—her childhood friend and former protector—she realizes she is reliving the very abuse she once

condemned. This internal mediation acts as a call to action, prompting self-examination and doubt about her decisions.

The Function 27: Recognition becomes pivotal when Lily acknowledges that Ryle's abusive tendencies are not momentary lapses but part of a dangerous pattern. The recognition is not triggered by an external event, but by emotional introspection and personal history. Her moment of clarity occurs after a particularly violent episode that jeopardizes her pregnancy. Unlike Propp's tales where recognition often leads to a confrontation with the villain, here it leads to Function 12: Beginning of Counter-Action. Lily consciously distances herself from Ryle, seeks legal consultation, and opens communication with Atlas—marking the start of her effort to change the course of her life.

This segment of the narrative underscores a major theme of *It Ends with Us*: that recognition of abuse is a courageous and transformative act in itself. The protagonist's decision to begin counteraction is emotionally difficult, layered with guilt, societal judgment, and fear, but it marks the true start of her heroic journey (Simmons et al.,2023).

Struggle, Victory, and the Unmasking of the False Hero

In traditional tales, Function 16: Struggle often involves physical confrontation. In Lily's case, the struggle is deeply psychological. She must navigate conflicting emotions: her love for Ryle, the promise of a family, and her commitment to never tolerate abuse. The internal battle becomes externalized when Ryle pleads for another chance, claiming that the incident will not happen again. The film portrays this moment with nuance—Ryle is remorseful, but Lily, despite her pain, resists.

The Function 18: Victory manifests not as a triumph over a monster, but in her refusal to continue the relationship. This choice is an act of emotional strength that requires self-sacrifice, as she is aware that it will upend her life and her child's future. Lily's victory is the reclaiming of her agency and her decision to break a generational cycle of silence and submission.

Furthermore, Ryle embodies Function 24: The False Hero. Initially perceived by both Lily and the audience as a savior figure—educated, attentive, and loving—he is eventually revealed to be the source of harm. This unmasking deepens the audience's empathy for Lily and reinforces the theme that abusers are not always externally “monstrous,” but often wear the mask of ideal partners (Suwarno & Suparto.,2023).

Return, Resolution, and the Symbolic Wedding

Lily's Function 20: Return is not a return to a physical home, but to emotional stability. She gives birth to her daughter and, despite the immense difficulty, allows Ryle to be present as a father while clearly delineating emotional boundaries. This act of balancing co-parenting with self-protection is part of her evolved identity.

The Function 26: Resolution arrives when Lily formally ends the romantic relationship. She articulates her choice not only to Ryle but to herself, confirming her decision to prioritize safety over sentimentality. The moment is understated but emotionally profound, especially when she utters the titular words, “It ends with us,” signifying a conscious end to the cycle of abuse.

Unlike traditional tales that conclude with a literal marriage, the film ends with a Function 31: Symbolic Wedding. Lily meets Atlas again in a public space, and while their conversation suggests hope for a future together, it is not framed as a fairytale ending. Instead, the “marriage” symbolizes Lily's union with her own healed self. Her emotional maturity and readiness to love from a place of strength—rather than desperation—serve as the true culmination of her hero's arc (Tama & Colleagues,2023).

Subversion of Functions and Psychological Substitutions

Though many Proppian functions are identifiable, the film subverts or modernizes several traditional elements. Function 14: The Receipt of a Magical Agent is reinterpreted as Lily's inner strength, her journal, and emotional memory. These serve as "tools" that empower her to overcome her trials. Unlike classic folktales, no mentor, wizard, or magical item appears—instead, the protagonist draws from personal experience and intergenerational wisdom.

The journey also lacks spatial movement. There is no "departure" to a foreign land or return from exile. Instead, the transformation is entirely internal. This internalization of narrative space aligns with contemporary psychological storytelling, where the terrain of change is the human mind and heart. By adapting Propp's functions into symbolic and emotional equivalents, *It Ends with Us* proves that structural archetypes are not bound by genre or medium. Rather, they can evolve to accommodate stories centered on mental health, gendered violence, and personal boundaries—making them powerful tools for dissecting modern narratives (Zhang, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This research has demonstrated that *It Ends with Us* follows a narrative pattern that aligns with many of Vladimir Propp's structural functions, even though it is grounded in a contemporary, realistic setting. The film's storyline illustrates a modern adaptation of the hero's journey, where the protagonist's struggle is not with mythical antagonists, but with emotional trauma, inherited pain, and the complexity of human relationships. Through this lens, the traditional folktale structure proves to be adaptable and insightful when analyzing present-day stories of resilience.

Lily Bloom, as the central figure, embodies a new form of heroism—one that requires emotional courage rather than physical conquest. Her process of recognizing patterns of abuse, asserting personal boundaries, and choosing to break the cycle reflects several key Proppian stages such as interdiction, struggle, recognition, and symbolic resolution. Though these functions appear in reimagined forms, their presence affirms the timeless nature of narrative progression.

The symbolic elements of Propp's theory, such as the "false hero" and the "magical helper," are redefined in the context of Lily's psychological development. Ryle is unmasked as a figure of harm despite his initial appearance as a savior, while Lily's inner strength and memories serve as tools for transformation. These reinterpretations suggest that classical models can evolve while still retaining their core analytical value in understanding human stories.

In conclusion, the application of Proppian analysis to *It Ends with Us* illustrates that traditional structural frameworks remain relevant in analyzing modern narratives, especially those addressing social issues like domestic violence and female empowerment. This approach highlights how universal storytelling patterns can be leveraged to reveal the deeper emotional journeys of characters in contemporary media, offering both structural coherence and thematic depth.

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