

Robert McKee's  
**COMEDy DAY**



Chile 2010

# ROBERT McKEE'S COMEDY DAY

## **COURSE OUTLINE**

- I. The Love of Comedy
- II. The Comic Vision of life
- III. Comic Structure Vs. Dramatic Structure
- IV. The Comic Character
- V. Comic Turning Point
- VI. The Comedy Genre - three grand conventions
- VII. The Comedy Sub-genres
- VIII. Mixed Genres
- IX. What is Laughter?
- X. Structure of a Joke
- XI. The Substance of Jokes
- XII. Comic Timing
- XIII. Comic Devices
- XIV. Analysis of a Comedy film

## **COMEDY**

Simply put, a *Comedy* is a funny story, an elaborate rolling joke. While wit lightens a telling, it doesn't alone make it a true *Comedy*. Rather, wit often creates hybrids such as a *Dramedy* (*Annie Hall*) or the *Crimedey* (*Lethal Weapon*).

You know you've written a true comedy when you sit an innocent victim down and pitch your story. Just tell him what happens, without quoting witty dialogue or sight gags, and he laughs.

Every time you turn the scene, he laughs; turn it again and he laughs again...until by the end of the pitch you have him collapsed on the floor. *That's* a Comedy.

# ROBERT McKEE'S COMEDY DAY

## SAMPLE PLOT TRACING OF A COMEDY FILM

### **RUTHLESS PEOPLE**

#### Sequence Titles

- |                          |                          |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| A. The kidnapping.       | F. The Bedroom Killer.   |
| B. Getting the money #1. | G. Getting the money #2. |
| C. Carol's first scheme. | H. The Chief chases Sam. |
| D. Cops hunt for Ken.    | I. The best revenge.     |
| E. The friendship.       | J. Carol's second scheme |

<b>Scene No.</b>	<b>End Time</b>	<b>Scene</b>	<b>Value</b>	<b>Sequence</b>
1.	02:00	Titles.	***	***
2.	04:35	Sam tells his mistress, Carol, that he has decided to kill his wife, Barbara.	(-)	A
3.	07:00	Sam discovers Barbara is missing.	(+)	A
4.	08:30	INCITING INCIDENT: Sam gets call from kidnappers, warning Him not to call the cops or the media.	(+/-)	A
5.	08:40	Sam calls everybody.	(-)	A
6.	11:00	Ken and Sandy subdue Barbara.	(+/-)	A
7.	11:10	Sam celebrates.	(-/+)	A
8.	13:25	Ken tries to convince Sandy that they've done the right thing and must be ruthless.	(-)	B
9.	14:50	SUBPLOT INCITING INCIDENT: Carol and Earl plot to blackmail Sam.	(+)	C
10.	15:17	Cops begin hunt for kidnapper.	(-)	D
11.	16:06	Sam pretends to grieve.	(-)	D

12.	17:50	Earl tapes Chief and Hooker.	(-)	C
13.	19:20	Sam tricks the cops.	(-)	D
14.	20:30	Carol doesn't realize that Earl taped the wrong guy.	(-)	C
15.	22:53	Sam frightens Carol.	(-)	C
16.	25:22	Barbara tries to escape.	(+)	E
17.	25:58	ACT I CLIMAX: Cops find clue that puts them on Ken's trail.	(-)	D
18.	27:40	Bedroom Killer set-up/Barbara turns the basement into a spa.	(-/+)	F/E
19.	28:13	Ken falls for Sam's trick.	(-)	B
20.	30:50	Sam stalls Ken.	(-)	G
21.	32:30	Sam tricks cops and mugger.	(-)	D
22.	34:13	Barbara scares Sandy.	(-)	E
23.	34:44	Carol sends tape to Sam.	(-)	C
24.	36:19	Barbara taunts Ken.	(-)	E
25.	37:46	Sam hunts for killer dog.	(o)	***
26.	39:15	Ken, the honest salesman.	(o)	***
27.	39:50	Barbara works out.	(+)	E
28.	41:17	Sam enjoys videotape.	(-)	C
29.	42:36	Sam makes Carol think that he's going to kill her.	(-)	C
30.	43:23	Carol sends tape to the cops.	(+)	H
31.	43:40	Sam dupes Ken again.	(-)	G

32.	44:36	Ken and Sandy realize that Sam doesn't love Barbara.	(-)	G
33.	46:45	Sam forces Ken to lower the ransom price.	(-)	G
34.	48:05	Cops find the wrong body.	(+)	D
35.	49:15	Barbara gets into shape.	(+)	E
36.	51:08	Carol blackmails the Police Chief into pursuing Sam.	(+)	H
37.	52:40	Chief plots against Sam/ but lab IDs Ken's tires.	(+) (-)	H D
38.	55:10	Cops nearly grab Ken but change minds and pursue Sam.	(+/-)	D&H
39.	56:30	ACT II CLIMAX: Sam dares Ken to kill Barbara.	(-)	G
40.	58:40	Ken tries to be a ruthless salesman but fails.	(o)	***
41.	60:55	Barbara loses 20 pounds.	(+)	E
42.	61:05	Sam is arrested.	(+)	H
43.	63:15	Barbara learns the truth about Sam.	(+)	E
44.	64:10	Sam gets bailed.	(-)	H
45.	65:45	Sandy lets Barbara go/Ken tries to run but is stopped by police.	(+/-)	E&F
46.	66:34	Police warn of Bedroom Killer.	(+)	F
47.	69:11	Killer invades house and dies in a fall.	(+)	F
48.	70:39	ACT III CLIMAX: Barbara, Ken, Sandy plot revenge.	(+)	I
49.	73:07	The trio demands \$2 Million.	(+)	I
50.	75:39	Carol discovers that Barbara was actually kidnapped.	(-)	J

51.	76:34	Sam raises the money.	(+)	I
52.	77:34	Carol plots to steal ransom.	(-)	J
53.	79:33	Barbara makes ransom call.	(+)	I
54.	82:22	Cops discover scheme and follow Ken.	(-)	J
55.	83:55	Earl tries to rip off Ken, but the cops intervene and Ken takes off.	(-/+)	J&I
56.	86:28	Cops chase Ken off Santa Monica Peer.	(-)	I
57.	87:56	ACT IV CLIMAX: Cops mistake Bedroom Killer's body for Ken/Sam thinks Barbara is dead.	(+)	I
58.	90:00	RESOLUTION: Barbara, Sandy and Ken celebrate their revenge.		

# ROBERT McKEE'S COMEDY DAY

## Comedy Clip List

1. Interpolative Narrative: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Turning Point: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Weak Comedy Writing: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Happy Ending: \_\_\_\_\_
5. Farce: \_\_\_\_\_
6. Comedy of Suffering: \_\_\_\_\_
7. Set-Up: \_\_\_\_\_
8. Inversion: \_\_\_\_\_
9. Trivializing the Exalted: \_\_\_\_\_
10. Exalting the Trivial: \_\_\_\_\_
11. Pun: \_\_\_\_\_
12. Impersonation: \_\_\_\_\_
13. Nonsense: \_\_\_\_\_
14. Repetition: \_\_\_\_\_
15. Double Entendre: \_\_\_\_\_
16. Site Gags: \_\_\_\_\_
17. Role Reversal: \_\_\_\_\_

## Comedy Terms & Definitions

<b>Callback:</b>	A joke that refers back to another joke performed earlier in the show; often presented in a different context.
<b>Flop Sweat:</b>	The over abundance of perspiration one experiences from a panic reaction to bombing.
<b>Gag:</b>	A joke.
<b>Hammocking:</b>	A technique for placing weaker material or improvisation between two strong comedy bits.
<b>Joke:</b>	A device for expressing humor that employs a setup which contains a target assumption to misdirect the audience into accepting a bogus 1 <sup>st</sup> story; and a punch which contains a reinterpretation which creates a 2 <sup>nd</sup> story that shatters the target assumption.
<b>To Kill:</b>	To give an excellent comedy performance
<b>Punch:</b>	The second part of a joke that contains a reinterpretation that creates a 2 <sup>nd</sup> story that shatters the setup's target assumption.
<b>Reveal:</b>	Within the punch, the pivotal word, phrase or action that exposes or presents the 2 <sup>nd</sup> story's interpretation.
<b>Running Gag:</b>	Multiple callbacks; a recurring joke within the same show.
<b>Schtick:</b>	A Yiddish word meaning a comic scene or piece of business; often implies physical comedy.
<b>Setup:</b>	The first major part of a joke that contains a target assumption to misdirect the audience into accepting a bogus 1 <sup>st</sup> story.
<b>Sight Gag:</b>	A physical joke meant to be watched.
<b>Timing:</b>	The use of tempo, rhythm, pause, etc. to enhance a joke, or tailor it to an individual performing situation.
<b>Comedy of Manners:</b>	Satirizes the manners and affectations of a social class, often represented by stock characters, such as the miles gloriosus in ancient times, the fop and rake during the Restoration, or an old person pretending to be young. The plot of the comedy, often concerned with an illicit love affair or some other scandal, is generally less important than its witty and often bawdy dialogue.  In modern television, Comedy of Manners became known as a Sitcom, aka Situation Comedy.
<b>Double Entendre:</b>	A figure of speech similar to the pun in which a spoken phrase can be understood in either of two ways. The first, literal meaning is an innocent one, while the second meaning is often risqué and requires the hearer to have some additional knowledge.
<b>Farce:</b>	A comedy written for stage or film which aims to entertain the audience by means of unlikely and extravagant – yet often possible – situations, disguise and mistaken identity, verbal humor of varying degrees of

sophistication, which may include puns and sexual innuendo, and a fast-paced plot whose speed usually increases even further towards the end of the play/show/movie, often involving an elaborate chase scene. Broad physical humor, and deliberate absurdity or nonsense, are also commonly employed in farce.

Examples of Farce: Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Noel Coward's *Hay Fever*, Alan Ayckbourn's *Bedroom Farce*, Michael Frayn's *Noises Off* Monty Python's *The Holy Grail*, Joseph Kessler's *Arsenic and Old Lace*.

**Bedroom Farce:** A type of light drama centered on the sexual pairings and recombinations of characters as they move through improbable plots. The bedroom farce is perhaps the most common form of farce.

**Black Comedy:** Also known as black humor, black comedy a sub-genre of comedy and satire where topics and events normally treated seriously – death, mass murder, sickness, madness, terror, drug abuse, rape, etc. – are treated in a humorous or satirical manner; black humor is similar to sick humor, such as dead baby jokes.

Examples of Black Comedy/Humor: Literature – *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner, *Candide* by Voltaire, *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller, *The Loved One* by Evelyn Waugh, *Slaughterhouse Five* by Kurt Vonnegut. / Films – *The Big Lebowski*, *Catch-22*, *Falling Down*, *Fargo*, *Harold and Maude*, *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*

**Parody:** These types of comedy, also called put-ons, send-ups, charades, lampoons, spoofs, take-offs, jests, mockumentaries, etc., are usually humorous or anarchic take-offs that ridicule, impersonate, puncture, scoff at and/or imitate the style, conventions, formulas, characters (by caricature) or motif of a serious work, film, performer or genre.

**Romantic Comedy Film:**

Movies with light-hearted, humorous plotlines, centered on romantic ideals, such as true love, able to surmount most obstacles. Romantic comedy films are a sub-genre of comedy films, as well as romance films. They're sometimes referred to as RomCom or Chick Flicks.

The basic plot of a romantic comedy is that two protagonists, usually a man and woman, meet part ways due to an argument or other contrived obstacle, then ultimately reunite. Sometimes the two protagonists meet and become involved initially, then must confront challenges in their union. Sometimes the two protagonists are hesitant to become romantically involved because they believe that they do not like each other, because one of them already has a partner, or because of social pressures. However, writers leave clues that suggest the characters are, in fact, attracted to each other and that they would be a good love match. The protagonists often separate or seek time apart to sort out their feelings or deal with the external obstacles to their being together.

While the two protagonists are separated, one or both of them usually realizes that they are ideal for each other, or that they are in love with each other. Then, after one of the two makes some spectacular effort to find the other person and declare love (sometimes called the Grand Gesture), or due to an astonishing coincidental encounter, the two meet again. Then, perhaps with some friction or awkwardness, they declare

their love for each other and the film ends happily ever after. The couple does not, however, have to marry or live together “happily ever after.” The ending of a romantic comedy is meant to affirm the primary importance of the love relationship in its protagonists’ lives, even if they physically separate in the end (examples: *Shakespeare in Love*, *Roman Holiday*).

There are many variations on this basic plotline. Sometimes, instead of the two lead characters ending up in each other’s arms, another love match will be made between one of the principal characters and a secondary character (example: *My Best Friend’s Wedding* and *My Super Ex-Girlfriend*).

Romantic Comedy examples: *Sex and the City* (TV), *The Apartment*, *Born Yesterday*, *Notting Hill*, *Romancing the Stone*.

**Satire:**

A literary technique of writing or art which exposes the follies of its subject (for example, individuals, organizations or states) to ridicule, often as an intended means of provoking or preventing change. The humor of satire tends to be subtle, using irony and deadpan humor liberally

Satire examples: George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (satire of Stalinist Russian), *Gulliver’s Travels*, *A Modest Proposal*, Voltaire’s *Candide* (satirizing optimism), Kubrick’s *Doctor Strangelove* and *A Clockwork Orange*, *The Onion* (website and newspaper), *The Daily Show*.

**Screwball:**

Screwball comedies, a sub-genre of romantic comedy films, were predominant from the mid-1930s to the mid-1940s. The word “screwball” denotes lunacy, craziness, eccentricity, ridiculousness and erratic behavior.

These films combine farce, slapstick and the witty dialogue of more sophisticated films. In general, they are light-hearted, frothy, often sophisticated romantic stories, commonly focusing on a battle of sexes in which both co-protagonists try to outwit or outmaneuver each other. They usually include visual gags (with some slapstick), wacky characters, identity reversals (or cross dressing), a fast-paced improbable plot, and rapid-fire, wise-cracking dialogue in the blossoming of a relationship (or the patching up of a marriage) for an attractive couple with on-going, antagonistic differences.

**Slapstick:**

Slapstick was predominant in the earliest silent films, since they didn’t need sound to be effective, and were popular with non-English speaking audiences in metropolitan areas. The term ‘slapstick’ was taken from the wooden sticks that clowns slapped together to promote audience applause.

Slapstick is primitive and universal comedy with broad, aggressive, physical and visual action, including harmless or painless cruelty and violence, horseplay, and often vulgar sight gags (example: a custard pie in the face, collapsing houses, a fall in the ocean, losing your pants, etc.). Slapstick often requires exquisite timing and well-honed performance skills. It was typical of Laurel and Hardy, Abbott and Costello, WC Fields, The Three Stooges, etc. Examples include: *It’s a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*, *Ace Ventura*, *Pet Detective*.

**A FISH  
CALLED  
WANDA**

Scene Summary & Cast Design

## A Fish Called Wanda

Start Value / End Value
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Scenes:

1. **THAMES:** Establish setting and genre.

<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
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2. **COURTROOM:** Intro Archie as barrister.

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3. **STREET:** Intro Wanda as master criminal.

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4. **WANDA'S FLAT:** Intro Otto as mad "intellectual".

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5. **KEN'S FLAT:** Intro Ken as animal lover.

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6. **KEN'S FLAT:** Titles--fish, sex, violence, McGuffin set-up.

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7. **KEN'S FLAT:** Otto and Wanda are secret lovers out to double-cross Ken and George.

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8. **ARCHIE'S HOME:** wife and daughter ignore his success. He's unloved and empathetic.

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9. **KEN'S FLAT:** Gang plans robbery.

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10. **JEWELRY SHOP:** Robbery. Set up glass. "William Tell."

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11. **GETAWAY:** Old Lady with dogs.

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12. **GARAGE:** Hiding the loot.

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13. **WANDA'S FLAT:** Wanda and Otto rat on George.

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14. **GEORGE'S HOME:** Cops bust George.

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15. **COURT/JAIL:** George will not tell Wanda where he hid the jewels.

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16. **STREET:** Wanda seduces Archie.

17. **JAIL:** George sets Ken to spy on Otto.

18. **KEN'S FLAT:** Wanda steals key. Otto makes pass at Ken.

19. **KEN'S FLAT:** Wanda gets Ken to tell all, but doesn't know the hiding place.

20. **LOCKSMITH SHOP:** Wanda learns that key is to safe deposit box.

21. **POLICE LINE-UP:** Old Lady identifies George.

22. **ARCHIE'S OFFICE:** When Archie won't talk to Wanda about case. She makes a direct pass that's interrupted by client.

23. **WANDA'S FLAT:** Wanda tells Otto what she's learned. He is no help.

24. **ARCHIE'S HOUSE:** Wendy complains that Archie is no help.

25. **WANDA'S FLAT:**

*--cross-cut--*

Point/counter-point: sex and feet.

26. **ARCHIE'S HOUSE:**

27. **COURTROOM:** George sends Ken to kill Old Lady.

28. **OUTSIDE COURT:** Otto discovers Ken's mission, and makes bet.

29. **OUTSIDE COURT:** Wanda turns on the tears and wins Archie over.

30. **OLD LADY'S FLAT:** Ken cases Old Lady.

31. **CAR:**

*--cross-cut--*

Point/counter-point--preparing for date.

32. **ARCHIE'S HOUSE**

33. **ARCHIE'S HOUSE:** Wanda suddenly appears.

34. **ARCHIE'S HOUSE:** Otto invades.

35. **STREET:** Wendy discovers flat tire.

36. **ARCHIE'S HOUSE:** Wendy and Portia invade. Otto reveals himself.  
Wendy mistakes Wanda's locket for a gift from Archie.

37. **ARCHIE'S HOUSE:** Archie gets call from Wanda.

38. **STREET:** Ken's first attack. Ken kills dog.

39. **CEMETERY:** Ken grieves for dog.

40. **KEN'S FLAT:** Otto discovers Wanda/Archie meeting.

41. **ARCHIE'S HOUSE:** Wendy won't give up locket.

42. **LOVE NEST:** Otto invades and forces Archie to apologize.

43. **STREET:** Ken's second attack. Ken kills dog.

44. **CEMETERY:** Ken grieves for dog.

45. **STREET:** Wanda forces Otto to apologize.

46. **ARCHIE'S HOUSE:** Otto interrupts Archie's "burglary" and repeatedly apologizes.

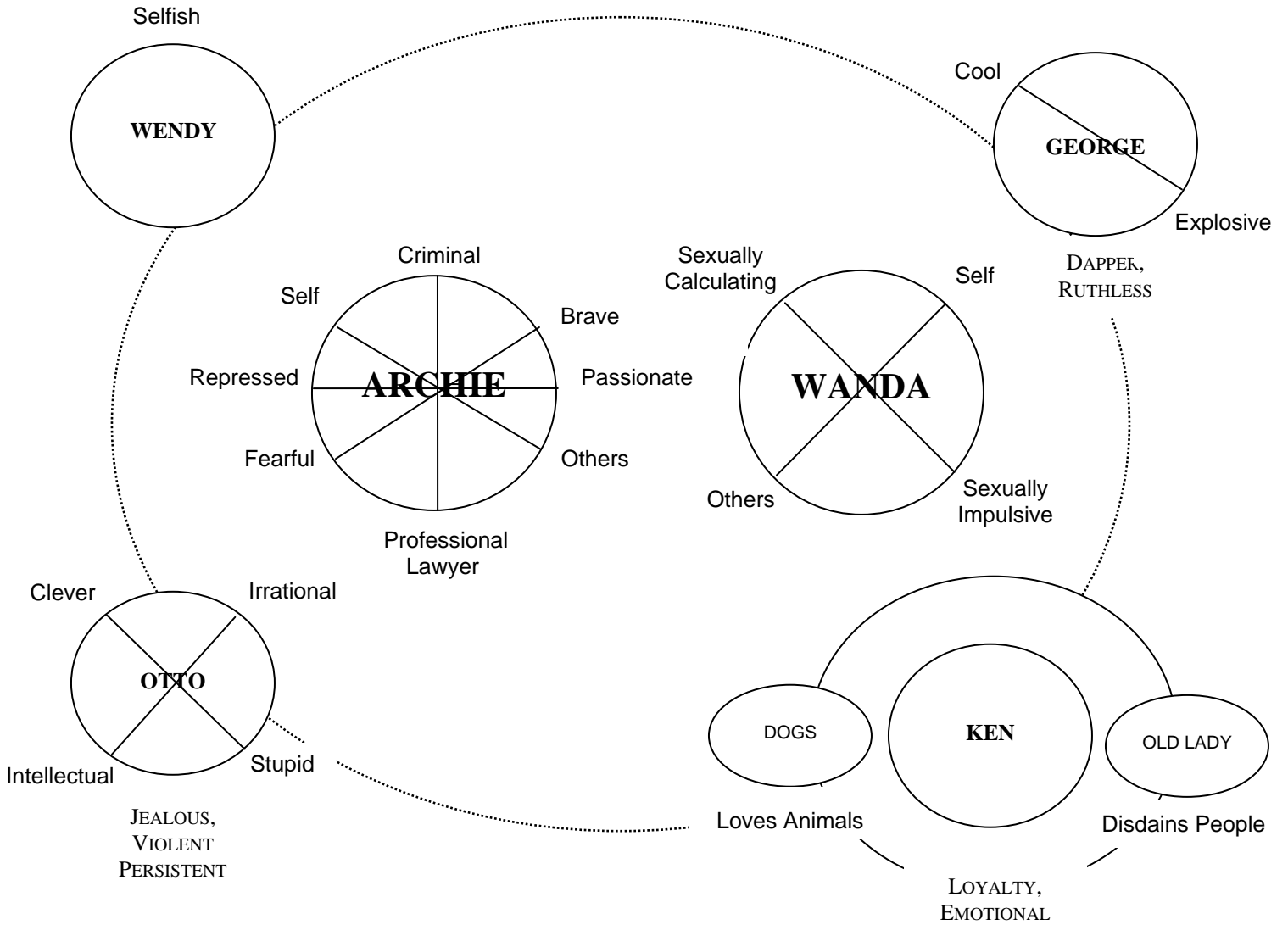
47. **ARCHIE'S HOUSE:** Wendy finds Archie and he runs out with McGuffin.

48. **LOVE NEST:** Wanda and Archie prepare to make love and a family enters.

49. **ARCHIE'S CAR:** Archie calls Wanda to break up affair.
50. **ARCHIE'S LAWN:** Otto apologizes and Wendy overhears about affair.
51. **STREET:** Ken's third attack. Ken kills dog but shock kills Old Lady.
52. **PRISON:** George tells Ken where the jewels are hidden.
53. **KEN'S FLAT:** Otto tortures Ken and learns jewels hiding place.
- cross-cut--*
54. **COURTROOM:** Wanda betrays George/Wendy divorces Archie. .
55. **HOLDING CELL:** Archie learns the truth about Wanda and Otto and gets a lead on the jewels.
56. **ARCHIE'S CAR:** Archie and Wanda reconcile but Otto grabs Wanda.
57. **KEN'S FLAT:** Ken tells Archie the hiding place.
58. **MOTORWAY:** Archie and Ken chase Otto and Wanda.
59. **HOTEL/AIRPORT:** Wanda knocks out Otto. Archie buys ticket. Ken boards via luggage.
60. **AIRPORT:** Otto gets loose, steals ticket, Archie gets the drop on Otto, Otto gets the drop on Archie, Ken's revenge saves Archie.
61. **INSIDE PLANE:** Lovers reunite.
62. **RESOLUTION TITLES:** Futures told.

# Cast Design



**A FISH CALLED WANDA**