

THE CONVENTIONS OF NOIR THRILLER IN HARLAN COBEN'S *THE STRANGER* (A STRUCTURALIST STUDY)

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Abstract

This research aimed to (1) identify the general conventions of noir thriller in Harlan Coben's *The Stranger* and (2) the conventions of point of view used in the novel. This research used a descriptive qualitative study and content analysis. The data were sentences and discourses related to the conventions of noir thriller found in the novel. To gain the credibility of the analysis, the researcher used triangulation method. The result of this research showed first, the general conventions of noir thriller in the novel. Those were having a flawed protagonist, focusing on the character's conflicts, employing the suspense-based plot, revealing the critique of socio-political milieu of the novel and using the subjective point of view. The second result showed the conventions of point of view in the novel. In order to obtain subjectivity, the novel used third person limited and third person objective point of view.

Key words: conventions, point of view, noir thriller, Harlan Coben's *The Stranger*

INTRODUCTION

Literary texts do not merely employ humanity issues, but are also patterned and classified in genre. Genre is shown by the common characteristics of the texts constructed by literary elements employed in the work. In fact, literary elements focus not only the theme embodied the story, the character and its characterization who build up the story and the level of complexity, but also how those are united to construct the idea of the story. It is also supported by Roche (2004: 37) who suggested about how literary elements are significant in writing technique:

a work of literature interests us not because it was written by person X or Y but because person X or Y was able to write something of general interest that provides a vision, a critique, an epiphany, a mood, something of value to a broader consciousness—and yet in a style that belongs uniquely to person X or Y.

A story is not written just as how the events are happening, but it has been created through decision. Wayne Booth (in Hoffman and Murphy, 1996: 2) mentioned that relying on point of view is one of the notable technique used by the authors. In addition, point of view, which he termed as “the relation in which the narrator stands to the story”, also works to help the readers to understand the flow of the story, as well as to stay still until its end. Thus, point of view is not merely the representation of human being, but also the way the representation itself is

The Conventions of Noir Thriller... (Juzi Ammalilia) presented. Even to Mark Schorer, point of view is more than just a technique as it enables the story to be intense by either limiting or developing the idea (Levitt, 1965: 3).

Limiting information through point of view to increase the readers’ curiosity is often used in thriller novels as it requires higher suspense than other genres. David Morrell (2007) argued that thriller intends to build the tension, agitation, anticipation, enthusiasm and breath-taking action rather than focusing on the contribution of the mythical creatures in order to raise the readers’ curiosity. Thriller is a work of fiction which is highly structured as well.

Thriller is varied into many sub-genres. One of them is noir thriller. Taking from the relation among the internal elements, noir thriller is formulated by having a flawed protagonist, focusing on the character’s conflicts, employing the suspense-based plot, revealing the critique of socio-political milieu of the story, and using the subjective point of view.

Generally, noir thriller is a genre which explores the use of point of view to build the mood and create the excitement. Harlan Coben’s *The Stranger* is a work of which the tension is created through the way each character perceives the issue in the story. It is also supported by Steven James in *How to Write Thrillers that Actually Thrill* (2011) who proposed that the information about the characters is deeply explored to invite the readers in experiencing the

suspense. In addition, the characters involved may have the same chance in perceiving the same issue in the story through their own perspectives. Thus, as the various employment of point of view is getting explored in thriller writing, Steven James also noted that the switching point of view showed a great result in exploring the suspense.

This research has two aims namely (1) to identify the general conventions of noir thriller in Harlan Coben's *The Stranger*, and (2) to identify the conventions of point of view in Harlan Coben's noir thriller *The Stranger*.

This research is expected to deliver a deeper understanding about a genre construction, especially in thriller. It is one of great genres as most of the conventions are meticulously crafted, such as in the use of point of view. It does not necessarily about whose vision used to guide the readers, but also about creating plausible actions in order to make the readers stay until the end of the story.

As this research focuses on the deep structure of noir thriller rather than its meaning which is seen on the surface, this research employs structuralist approach. It is an analytical methodology which avoids the interpretation of the meaning. The content of a work is the structure of the work itself. The elements related within are able to create its meaning (Eagleton, 1996). Identifying literary genres is one of the focuses of Structuralism in literature which mostly deals with narrative texts. According to

The Conventions of Noir Thriller... (Juzi Ammalilia) Frye, this attempt is obtained through *intertextuality*. The meaning of a text is perceived through its deep structure which is internally related to the other similar works (Tyson, 2006: 222-223).

Noir thriller is the literary genre which is focused on this research. The term 'noir' in America is associated with 'blackness', representing the crime in the story which is influenced by the way an author namely Jim Thompson intensely delivered the crime in his work of thriller. Gifford (in Tuttle, 2006) argued that 'noir' is also the best word to describe the world of the stories (despair, devastation, and bad luck) which is tougher than the characters of detective novels live in. Noir thriller is less interested in the role of a detective as written in *Little Caesar* (1929) by W.R. Burnett in which he put a gangster as the protagonist of the story. Noir thriller shows the intense involvement of the protagonist—who is not necessarily a detective—in decision making. Moreover, rather than leaning much on the detective's procedures, it deeply explores the characters' fear and anxiety.

Lee Horsley (2001) summarized the conventions of noir into four: the shifting roles of the protagonist, the lack of relationship between the protagonist and society, the ways in which

noir functions as a socio-political critique, and the use of the subjective point of view.

On the other hand, George Tuttle (2006) argued that noir thriller is mostly noticed through these two characteristics: first, the protagonist who is not a detective and he can be either a criminal, a victim, or someone who is directly related to the crime; and second, the protagonist is described as having self-destructive qualities. However, to have a clearer and more specific explanation, this research made a summary from both scholars above, as well as the previous scholars mentioned in the previous discussion. Thus, the conventions of noir thriller are (1) having a flawed protagonist, (2) focusing on the characters' conflicts, (3) employing the suspense-based plot, (4) revealing the critique of socio-political milieu, and (5) using the subjective point of view.

THE RESEARCH METHODS

This research used qualitative research design. Qualitative research focuses on naturally approaching the phenomena within a particular context instead of getting through some statistical procedures. Vanderstoep and Johnston (2009: 7) mentioned that qualitative research focuses on producing the textual description from the research participant's experience, so that the data taken are in the form of words or pictures rather than numerical.

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Furthermore, content analysis is used to analyze the data. According to Krippendorf (in Denscombe, 2007: 237), content analysis is basically used to examine the 'hidden' aspects of what is being delivered through the written text. There are ideas which are deeper than what the writer has consciously intended.

The data source of this research is a PDF version of Harlan Coben's novel entitled *The Stranger* published by Penguin Group (USA) in 2015. This research involves the researcher as the instrument. As the main instrument, the researcher has several roles in this research such as collecting the data, analysing data, interpreting the data related to the conventions of noir thriller employed in Harlan Coben's *The Stranger* and the conventions of point of view employed in the novel. Finally, the researcher reported the findings of the research.

The data collection in this research was processed through these four steps: reading, note taking, interpreting and categorizing. As the first two steps are the most fundamental ways in collecting the data, the researcher comprehensively read Harlan Coben's *The Stranger* to obtain a clear understanding about the content of the text. Then, the researcher wrote down the sentences and expression related to the topic and made into simple notes. After that, the researcher carefully read the data to have a clear interpretation. Then, the researcher categorized the data. Moreover, the data of this

research were triangulated by two English Literature students.

THE RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data related to the general conventions of noir thriller in Harlan Coben's *The Stranger* and the conventions of point of view used in the novel are divided into two tables which are explained further in the following.

The General Conventions of Noir Thriller in Harlan Coben's *The Stranger*

The first convention of noir thriller in Harlan Coben's *The Stranger* is having a flawed protagonist in which its significance is shown through two focuses, the kind of flaw and the impacts of the flaw. The stranger, whose name later known as Chris Taylor, is the protagonist in the story as he blackmails people. He traces the people's secret on the internet and approaches those who have the secrets. He also demands a big amount of money from them. If they do not pay, he will use the secret to threaten them. He will make the secret go public or pass it to their close relatives.

The stranger had given Heidi the link to FindYourSugarBaby.com as well as her daughter's user ID and password. With a heavy heart, Heidi signed in as Kimberly and found out all she needed to confirm that everything the stranger had told her was true (Coben, 2015: 67).

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It is the stranger's attempt to approach his victim. He does not merely tell Heidi Dann about the secret of her daughter. He can even make it stronger by delivering the evidence. In this case, he persuades Heidi Dann that her daughter is working as a sugar baby by letting her signs in to the website through her daughter's account that he had hacked.

As the stranger focuses only on hiding his identity and taking the money from the people, he does not really aware of the impact of his operation until his friend delivers information that there is one of his victims who try to reveal his operation.

Chris read Adam Price's business card and Gabrielle's short message again: HE KNOWS

In a sense, the shoe had been put on other foot. Chris now had a secret, didn't he? But no, his was different. His secret was not for the sake of deception but protection—or was that just what he told himself? Was he, like so many of the people he encountered, simply rationalizing the secret? (Coben, 2015: 169).

It has never been in the stranger's thought that there will be his victim who runs an investigation to find him. Even though he shows up in front of his victims, it is uneasy for them to find his real identity since he keeps the protocol in being anonymous unless they are as good as him in accessing the IP address. Thus, when the stranger sees the text about his operation which is getting revealed, it troubles him. He is

attacked back without getting prepared. He is so worried of being revealed as his identity has a big impact for his company as well.

The second convention of noir thriller found is focusing on the character's conflicts. The character whose conflicts are deeply explored is Adam Price. His problems are caused by the conflicts with other characters and his inner conflicts.

Adam's conflict with the stranger started since the beginning of the story in which the stranger approaches Adam in American Legion Hall, telling him about Adam's wife who faked her pregnancy.

"I'm the stranger," he said. "The stranger with important knowledge. She lied to you, Adam. Corinne. She was never pregnant. It was all a ruse to get you back." (Coben, 2015: 10)

The stranger not only tells Corinne's fake pregnancy, but also provokes Adam to leave her. The stranger says that Adam had been fooled. Adam is told that Corinne did that in order to keep Adam on her side. Since it is convincing to Adam, he starts to ask about the stranger and his motive in telling him the secret. However, Adam cannot accept any single information about it.

After being told about his wife's fake pregnancy by the stranger, Adam cannot see straight on his marriage life. He is not only told about the secret, but he is also provoked that he should check his boys.

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Thomas looked like Adam. Everyone said so. He had the same walk, the same laugh, the same second toe bigger than the first toe. No way. No way he wasn't Adam's. Even though the stranger had said that. Now you're listening to a stranger? (Coben, 2015: 18).

The passage above shows that Adam starts to doubt whether his boys are really his biological children even though he sees that both of them are almost physically similar to him. Worse than that, he starts to doubt his wife.

The next convention of noir thriller is employing the suspense-based plot in noir thriller means that the characters' series of actions in facing the inevitable despair should be presented. In addition, the obstacles faced are getting complicated in each scene. In Harlan Coben's *The Stranger*, Adam Price is the character whose struggle in overcoming the problems is deeply explored.

Adam sent several desperate texts to try to get Corinne to reply. They included: "this isn't the way to handle this," "please call me," "where are you," "how many days," "how can you do this to us"—stuff like that. He tried nice, mean, calm, angry. But there was no reaction (Coben, 2015: 62).

It is an interesting part of the novel for treating the readers the same as Adam—the character who pursued the goals of the story, by giving equal information. It creates more plausible plot since the readers should tag along Adam's every single actions. The passage above is Adam's first attempt to solve the problems.

However, in the middle of his discussion with Corinne, she immediately leaves. Corinne does not even show up in their dinner time. She only sends him a text saying that she needs time to be away from him without any further explanation. She even asks him to not worry. However, she does not come home after several days. Since she does not give any answers, Adam gets into more curiosity and suspicion that she is giving another denial of her fake pregnancy.

Why? If she'd been blackmailed, wouldn't she have at least suspected that the stranger would tell Adam?

She had also reacted by, what, running away? Did that make sense? She had run so quickly and haphazardly, barely contacting him and the school and, most surprising of all, just leaving the boys in the lurch. That wasn't Corinne. Something else was going on here (Coben, 2015: 107).

Adam tries to gain any information about Corinne through Suzanne Hope, Corinne's friend who introduced her fake pregnancy site. From the site, Adam finds the correlation between Corinne's and Suzanne Hope's case. Both of them are caught up by the stranger for accessing the site and having transaction for the fake pregnancy stuff. Adam assumed that they both are blackmailed, but this clue is still confusing for Adam and blurred for the readers to decide who should be accessed later regarding to Corinne's absence. Adam gives this scene a tension by being not sure that Corinne will be that easy to believe in a stranger. It is also

The Conventions of Noir Thriller... (Juji Ammalilia) emphasized by Adam's feeling upon Corinne by regarding that she is not that kind of woman who will run away from the problem. Even though Adam is not really sure, he is being open for the possibility that Corinne's absence is related to the stranger. He comes into conclusion that it is important to find the stranger first, as he possibly knows about Corinne's recent position.

As the mysteries faced by Adam are getting complicated, there is more hanging information found in the plot as well. Besides giving clues that lead the readers into a single bewilderment to other bewilderments, Harlan Coben's *The Stranger* also put the twisted ending as the final of the suspense-based plot.

"So I went to Bob and Cal and then, with great pretend regret, Len. I told all of them Corinne had stolen the lacrosse funds. Strangely enough, Bob was the one who didn't really buy it. So I told him that when I confronted Corinne, she said it was him."

"And then Bob went to his cousin."

"I didn't count on that."

"Where is Corinne now?"

"You're standing right where I buried her."

Just like that (Coben, 2015: 200).

The suspense continues as Adam tries to have Tripp's own confession. It is then admitted that Tripp made the accusation to cover up his sins. He is the one who stole the money and manipulated the fact by taking the blame on Corinne. However, Tripp's confession does not satisfy Adam at all since he faces another bitter truth, that after being frustrated of looking for Corinne, he finds Corinne is dead.

The fourth convention of noir thriller is revealing the critique of socio-political milieu. In the novel, the kind of critique is categorized into two. The first is the critique of hypocrisy. It is the state when someone pretends to believe something that he/she does not really believe or when he/she showing an attitude which contrasts to what had been said other times (*Cambridge Advance Learner's Dictionary*).

They were in the American Legion Hall in Cedarfield, New Jersey. Cedarfield was a town loaded up with wealthy hedge fund managers and bankers and other financial masters-of-the-universe types. They liked to drink beer in the American Legion Hall because it was comfortable slumming, a way to pretend that they were salt-of-the-earth good ol' boys, like something in a Dodge Ram commercial, when they were anything but (Coben, 2015: 9).

Cedarfield, the setting of the story, is at first admitted as the promising city to live with a strong financial state, but it does not merely make it the good place to run the living. American Legion Hall, for example, represented the people's hypocrisy. They follow the lifestyle (drinking beer in the building) to show that they are able to fit in the society instead of willing to enjoy it.

The second critique is cynicism. Basically, cynicism is a person's negative perspective upon something. Influenced by the tendency of fulfilling the dreams which were based on the social agreement rather than personal standard, the characters in Harlan Coben's *The Stranger*

The Conventions of Noir Thriller... (Juzi Ammalilia) easily judge others' attempts even though they do not really know them.

"It's perspective, Adam." Tripp smiled at him. He took off his cap, smoothed down the receding wisps of hair, put it back on his head. "We humans can't see straight. We are always biased. We always protect our own interests."

"One thing I notice about all those examples . . .," Adam said.

"What?"

"Money."

"It's the root of all evil, my friend." (Coben, 2015: 16).

The conversation takes place when Adam is so curious of why Bob Baime wants Jimmy Hoch so bad to be in the lacrosse team even though his score does not let him. It is such a surprise for Adam that Bob Baime does it because Jimmy's father helps him to find a new job. Tripp Evans makes it clear for Adam about the fact that Bob, and even other people, have been manipulated by money. He tries to criticize that the life now is about impression. People are nowadays measuring the people's existence through the things they have rather than how they behave. It then influences Adam in perceiving Bob Baime. In the story, it is narrated about how much Adam does not really respect him even though he is the lacrosse team's coach.

The Conventions of Point of View in Harlan Coben's Noir Thriller *The Stranger*

Among the two ways of using subjective point of view which are typically used in the works of noir thriller, the first person point of view and the third person point of view, Harlan

Coben's *The Stranger* employs the second one. Using the third person point of view means that the narrator of the novel does not take part in the story, but the readers are able to access the characters' feeling and thought through the outside voice.

The guy was younger than most of the fathers, thinner, almost gaunt, with big, piercing blue eyes. His arms were white and reedy with a hint of a tattoo showing beneath one of the short sleeves. He was wearing a baseball cap. He wasn't quite a hipster, but there was something of a wonk attitude coming off him, like some guy who ran a tech department and never saw the sun. The piercing blue eyes held Adam's with an earnestness that made him want to turn away. "She told you she was pregnant, right?"

Adam felt his grip on the bottle tighten. (Coben, 2015: 9)

The passage above shows that there are two characters who participate in the scene, the stranger and Adam. From the passage, the readers can access both the stranger's physical appearance and Adam's feeling upon the stranger. However, none of them are delivered through the mind of a particular character in the story. The scene is narrated through an outside voice which can move its focus from one character to other characters. The significance of the third point of view in the novel is further explained through the use of limited and objective third person point of view.

For the first time, the man smiled. It was, Adam couldn't help but notice, a kind smile,

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the smile of a healer, of a man who just wants to do the right thing. (Coben, 2015: 10)

It is the first scene between Adam and the stranger. It shows that the point of view is limited only on Adam's perspective. On the other hand, the readers cannot access the stranger's thought about Adam and about the fake pregnancy news. The readers will only know the stranger's action through Adam's opinion about him. The limited point of view in the context above also aims to create the mystery upon the stranger's real identity.

The stranger sat at a corner table at the Red Lobster in Beachwood, Ohio, just outside of Cleveland. He nursed his Red Lobster "specialty cocktail," a mango mai tai. His garlic shrimp scampi had started to congeal into something resembling tile caulk. The waiter had tried to take it from him twice, but the stranger had shooed him away. Ingrid sat across the table. She sighed and checked her watch. (Coben, 2015: 44)

The passage above explains right exactly like what actually happened, describing the participants and the setting of the scene without an elaboration about the characters' mind as there is no words explaining about emotion. The significance of using third person objective point of view in this passage is showing the characterization of the stranger. The readers are being left wondering about what the stranger's next attempt will be.

CONCLUSION

There are five general conventions of noir thriller. Those are having a flawed protagonist, focusing on the character's conflicts, employing the suspense-based plot, revealing the critique of socio-political milieu, and using the subjective point of view. The protagonist in noir thriller is a person who has bad intentions in harming people for the sake of his own personal traits.

The significance of having a flawed protagonist in Harlan Coben's *The Stranger* is shown through the data which are focused into two, the kind of flaw possessed by the protagonist and the impacts of the flaw on both the protagonist and other characters in the novel.

Noir thriller focuses more on the character's conflicts instead of the investigation in order to be different from detective stories. It is also intended to show the character's resistance in struggling from the obstacles. In the novel, the character whose conflicts are deeply explored is not the protagonist. Yet the researcher found that there is another character whose conflicts and struggle are explored more than the protagonist's. In order to show the significance of the character's conflicts upon the goals of the story, the researcher focused on his inner conflict and his conflicts with other characters in the story, including with the protagonist.

The suspense-based plot in the story is intended to arise the readers' curiosity so that they can stay from pages until the story is done.

The suspense-based plot also supports the significance of the character's struggle in overcoming the obstacles. The novel employs these several plot devices in order to make the suspense-based plot: mystery (the problems that should be resolved throughout the story), dilemma (decisions made by the main character which affects the problem solutions), and cliff-hanger (information which leave the reader hanging and craving more explanation. It is revealed only then the events are done), and surprised ending (the mysteries are resolved in twisted way yet it still fulfils the readers' crave for explanation).

Noir thriller is interested as well in delivering the critique of social or political surroundings in the novel. There are two forms of critiques shown in the novel. They are the critique of hypocrisy and cynicism.

The last convention of noir thriller is using the subjective point of view. The significance of point of view used in the novel is explained further in the second research objective below.

The use of subjective point of view in noir thriller aims to show the plausible actions. It also supports the notion that noir thriller is interested in exploring the crime and conflicts faced by the characters. The conventions of point of view in noir thriller are either shown by the use of first person or third person point of view. Yet the novel used the third person one. In order to show each character's subjectivity in contributing to

the conflicts, the novel used third person limited and third person objective point of view.

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