

Suspense of Korean Family Ethic Drama

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When we were moved by the warmth of Korean ethic family drama, we began to fall into the feeling that these dramas were so real just as our daily life. But we tend to overlook the fact that the dramas which have been elaborated by authors are just a mirror of daily life. Suspense narrative, contrast narrative, and coincidence narrative are three main narrative techniques of Korean family drama. As an important narrative technique of Korean family ethic drama, suspense is a narrative skill organizing the plot and making dramas to be more charming. So this paper will analyze the suspense of Korean family ethic drama from these three aspects: story, plot, and metronome.

Keywords: Korean family ethic drama, suspense, event

Hitchcock who is the most famous suspense master in the world, but he didn't make a very strict definition of suspense; he just said that suspense was a relative element of all literary works and one of the tools that make up a story, which has transformed storytelling skills into an art since it comes into being. Although characters, backgrounds, and other elements are essential, after all they are modifiers.

The main clues in the story attract readers to read from the first line to the next and then from the next to the end of the story. Everyone wants to know what the end of the story is, and that is suspense. Human beings are born with the ability to tell stories. When telling their own stories, they often subconsciously regard suspense as an essential element.¹ Hitchcock emphasizes the essence and function of suspense in the above article, and clearly points out that suspense is a means of narrative structure and an essential element. Roland Bart thinks from the structuralism level: "suspense is a kind of structure game, which can be said to be used to make the structure take the risk and bring luster to the structure" (Zhang, 1989, p. 36). Suspense is defined by *CIHAI* as a psychological activity of appreciating plays, movies, or other literary and artistic works, that is, anxiety about story development and the fate of characters. Writers and directors often arouse the suspense feeling of readers (audience) by all kinds of methods, in order to show the contradictions and conflicts in the works and strengthen the artistic appeal. This definition further illustrates that to be as a narrative technique, suspense can cause anxiety and tension in the audience.

Based on the above definition of suspense, we can treat suspense as a narrative technique which is an essential element of the story, and can mobilize the audience to take part in psychological participation actively. The essence of suspense is that the information is withheld, which means that it does not present all of the

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¹ Hitchcock's suspense novel. *Movie Literature*, 5, 58.

information to the audience, but presents an incomplete, partial small part, which makes the audience nervous and uneasy to the undisclosed information on the basis of expectation.

Robert McKee put forward that rhythm, event, and story were three different concepts of story writing, and he pointed out that “beat is the smallest structural component of the event” and “event is a meaningful and valuable change which is accomplished through conflict in the life situation of a character” (McKee, 2001a, pp. 41, 45). “Beat → Events → Story” this mode represents three different levels of stories telling: The rhythm constitutes the event; the event constitutes the story. This section combines three different aspects of stories telling to focus on dissertating the suspense of stories, analyzes the suspense of Korean family ethic dramas, which is represented by *Golden Era of Daughter in Law*, *What Happens to My Family?*, *All Together*, and studies the role of suspense in the narrative structure of Korean family ethic dramas.

The Suspense of the Story Level

The story we refer here is the complete content which goes through all of the drama series, and the suspense at the story level is the suspense that continues from the beginning of the story to the middle and even the end of the story, and the whole story also can treat as a process which is creating, the expanding and the presenting of the suspense; we can interpret this kind of suspense as a great suspense which goes throughout the TV series.

Take *What Happens to My Family?* as an example, it can be said that the whole TV series revolve around father’s incurable disease; the incurable disease is not only the motivation of the father to decide to take his three children into court, but also is the reason of the three children to reflect on, grow up, and understand their father. The writers did not adopt a direct statement to present the incurable disease of that father, instead to adopt suspense, by the way of information detaining and gradual releasing. The aesthetic effect which brings about from releasing information is letting audiences to confirm the suspense of the fact of incurable disease of the father, thus creating a concern for the father’s life and expectations for the three uninformed children; audiences expected these children to discover their father’s incurable disease and take him to take treatment earlier, and looking forward to the plot will show a sudden change, which can present a happy ending for the audience.

(1) The presentation of local information and the beginning of suspense. At the beginning, the screenwriter did not tell the fact that the father was terminally ill. Instead, he presented the information through the course of the plotcaring out, which induces the audience step by step; the information included three progressive messages. First, the father had a taste problem that he always felt that the food is too salty when he was eating. Second, the father felt uncomfortable and suddenly covered his abdomen in the tofu room. At last, the father fainted in the tofu shop suddenly. The three progressive messages proved the audience’s guesswork over and over again and eventually presented the results of the father’s terminal illness.

(2) The development of withholding and suspense of the parties’ information. The emergence of suspense includes several common situations as far as the mechanism is concerned: One is that the audience and the parties do not know; the second is that the audience knows, but the parties do not know; and the third is that the parties know and the audience does not know. As far as this family play is concerned, the second model is adopted, that is, with the development of the plot, the audience is aware of the fact that the father is terminally ill, but the three children do not know that; this narrative technique has effectively aroused the sympathy, nervousness, and anticipation of the audience. At the middle of the show, the father filed a lawsuit against his children when he

knew that he was still alive for three months. The reason why the child did not understand the father's behavior was the withholding of the party's information.

(3) The presentation of the parties' information and the disclosure of suspense. At the end of the show, suspense was revealed progressively. At the beginning, the second son who was a doctor, discovered his father's condition firstly and he began to take active treatment to his father, and then his sister and younger brother discovered successively. The announcement of suspense is not only the basis of the plot turning point, but also the hint that the plot is coming to an end. When the whole suspense is revealed, the contradiction between the father and the children will be resolved, and the natural appearance of mutual understanding among the father and the children and summary of life followed by.

This kind of great suspense design appears not only in *What Happens to My Family?*, but also in *All Together*; the suspense of the whole TV series is about whether the youngest son Kang Shin Wook has passed away in the beach. Firstly, the partial information is displayed through 15 years of unsacrificial sacrifice, and then through the fact that the younger son's daughter Kang Na Yoon knew the facts to strengthen the audience's tension and expand the contradiction; finally, the choice of the younger son Kang Shin Wook becomes the core of narrative after the fact is made public.

The Suspense of the Event Level

"Events are significant, valuable changes in people's lives, and are accomplished through conflict" has been mentioned above. In addition, Seymour Chatman interprets that as an event that is also treated as an action and a happening, which are both changes of state (Chatman, 2013, p. 29). Treat an event as a changing which is achieved by action, and a resolution of a conflict is equivalent to the end of an event.

The narrative process of the story is realized through the generation and resolution of the conflict in essence. The disappearance of the original conflict and the emergence of the new conflict are the basis for the sustainable development of the story. Therefore, we can specify the event as the occurrence and resolution of a specific conflict. Seymour Chatman divides events into major events and minor events. The main events are the core, the hub, and the fulcrum, which are driving the plot forward, and are determining what the story is going to be, instead, the minor events can be removed without disturbing the logic of the plot. Their functions are to fill, explain, and complete the core (Lv, 2007, p. 175). If understood from the perspective of narrative clues, the core event is the event located on the main narrative clue, and its participants are the main characters; minor event is an event on other clues, and its participants are the minor figures.

Suspense will be involved in the development of both major and minor events. This paper will take the three TV dramas, the *Golden Era of Daughter in Law*, the *What Happens to My Family?*, and the *All Together*, as examples in the next, to study the application of suspense in Korean family drama at the event level.

(1) Suspense at the event level in *Golden Era of Daughter in Law*. In this TV series, the suspense at the event level is presented in a variety of forms that some very compact and some relatively loose. For example, the suspense about "Mother Dancing" in Episode 45, which appeared is rather tight. The incentive of suspense is that the mother has been criticized by her mother-in-law and she run to complain to her neighbor; the starting of the event is that the mother was egged by her neighbor on going to ballroom to dance, suspense has arisen in the process, and the audience's unease stems from concern for the character mother and fears that she will be

criticized by her mother-in-law. The progress of the information releasing was gradually; her daughter-in-law, her husband, and her son one after another found her dancing and expressed support; and the ending of the suspense was that the mother's mother-in-law discovered and redeemed them from the police station.

The suspense of another incident in this TV series "Grandma's Dream" is relatively loose. "Grandma's Dream" has already happened in the first episode of the TV series, and the suspense has been raised during the progress. So what is the meaning of the dream which is about the pig-catching? This suspense is not resolved in Episode 1, and until to the Episode 3, it turned out that the dream suggested that the family is about to welcome a new member.

(2) Suspense at the event level in *What Happens to My Family?*. There are also a lot of suspense at the event level in this TV series. For example, the fact that the person who saved Kang Seoul was not the youngest son, Cha Dal Bong, was an incident-level suspense. The audiences' concerns were the choice of Kang Seoul when she knew the truth of the matter. Another suspense is that who the chairman's Moon Dae Oh's lover is, besides of curiosity, audiences were paid more attention to conjecture the attitude of his son Moon Tae Joo. Next is to the specific analysis of the incident: The information was revealed at first, at this stage which his son Moon Dae Oh is often watching television in the office happily, the audience and the parties do not know the answer, then the audience knew the truth, but Moon Tae Joo did not, and at the same time caused a misunderstanding with Cha Kang Sim; finally, the suspense was revealed by the son to clearly expressed his opposition, which led to the next incident.

(3) Suspense at the event level in *All Together*. The TV series revolve around the mystery of Kang Shin Wook's identity, which contains a number of event-level suspensions, such as the identified progresses which are in order to reveal the mystery of Kang Shin Wook's identity, done by Han Jin Woo and Na Eun Hye, and Ha Yoon Jung, and Ha Yoon Jung determines the identity of himself; all of the event are relatively independent. Taking Na Eun Hye as an example which the process of setting and revealing suspense is included in. Firstly, it is the presentation of local information—Na Eun Hye found clues from the abnormal representation of Han Jin Woo, and then Na Eun Hye discovered the ring which enriched the information, finally, Na Eun Hye identified his conjecture by private detectives, which disclosed all of the information. The whole suspense process is a process in which an audience already knows that but the client has never known to know.

The Suspense of Rhythm Level

About the beat, Robert McKee defines it as the smallest structural component in the event. It is a communication in the action or response of a person (McKee, 2001b, p. 303). The mechanism of suspense usually consists of three situations as mentioned above. If the suspense at the story level and the suspense at the event level still exist that the audience knows but the parties do not, then there is absolutely no such situation at the rhythm level. Because the rhythm-level suspense not only does not know the other party's reaction, but also the audience can't know. The main reason for this situation is that the beat itself is an action and reaction, so that such a small narrative unit is impossible to carry out such a complex process, as discussed above, which contains to display a partial of information, to complete all of the information, and to reveals suspense. The value of tempo-level suspense is to arouse curiosity and expectation from the audience. Just take the three TV series as example, the *Golden Era of Daughter in Law*, the *What Happens to My Family?*, and the *All Together*, and study

the application of suspense in Korean family ethic drama at the level of rhythm.

(1) The suspense at the beat level in *All Together*. In this show, the triangular romance among Han Jin Kyung, Han Soo Hyun, and Lee Han is the very important clue, which is made up of a number of events, one of which is Han Jin Kyung's proposal of marriage. One beat of the incident was the father's reaction to Han Jin Kyung's request to marry Lee Han. The suspense of the beat is that the father is a very traditional, rigid person, and that Han Jin Kyung is a very modern, even rebellious woman, and the audience will be afraid of Han Jin Kyung being rejected by the future father-in-law.

(2) The suspense at the beat level in *Golden Era of Daughter in Law*. In the fourth episode of the TV series, when the eldest son and the eldest daughter-in-law had an argument, the eldest son seized the eldest daughter-in-law's hand and did not let her move. At that time, the elder daughter-in-law's reaction constituted a rhythm-level suspense; she hit her husband with her forehead at the end.

(3) The suspense at the beat level in *What Happens to My Family?*. At the end of the first episode of the show, Kang Seoul found the tofu shop of her Quasi-father-in-law and told him that she was the one who will marry with his younger son. The father's reaction was a source of suspense that audiences were filled with anticipation and curiosity about what the reaction the father was. Firstly, he confirmed many times to Kang Seoul's language, then he behaved nervous, at last he closed his eyes and threw away tofu.

The above analysis shows that Korean family ethic dramas even though seem unremarkable, they were used a lot of suspense writing skills, which seems to overturn our perception of Korean family ethic dramas. When most viewers think Korean dramas are characterized by daily life, the use of suspense reminds us that "if the Korean family ethic drama is an expression of daily life, it is also a daily life that the author carefully disguises with all kinds of narrative techniques".

In addition, the generation of suspense in TV dramas is not like literary relying solely on the power of the event itself to promote and present, other language elements of TV dramas, such as music, often participating in the creation of suspense. The media used in film and television narrative is different from that used in literature narrative. When we use the theory of suspense in literature narrative to explain suspense in TV series, we neglect the characteristics of TV series, which is a problem to be solved in the follow-up study.

Conclusion

Through suspense, the audience's concern for the fate of the characters and unknown expectations was set, and this is important means to make the story attractive. Korean family ethic drama not only uses suspense extensively to strengthen narrative rhythm and story attraction, but also modifies the use of suspense. Although the model of suspense in Korean family dramas makes the typification of family plays more obvious, it also makes the production of Korean family dramas more in line with the standards of modern cultural industry and the production system of Korean fast-paced TV plays. From this point of view, it is of great significance to analyze and establish the mode of suspense application in Korean family dramas, and it will be very meaningful to improve the narrative level of Chinese family dramas.

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