

NARRATIVE SUSPENSE IN SHIRLEY JACKSON AND JORDAN PEELE

Juwita Dwi Aprianti

Juwita Dwi Aprianti| juwitaaprianti16@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper explores how narrative suspense is constructed in the works of Shirley Jackson and Jordan Peele. A central technique employed by both artists is the use of layered storytelling that builds tension through the interplay of two interconnected narrative strands. An analysis of Jackson's fiction and Peele's films demonstrates that the suspense in their works does not rely on traditional Gothic tropes, but rather on carefully designed plots that deliberately guide and manipulate audience attention. The article begins by outlining the concept of narrative suspense, followed by an examination of the structural techniques employed by Jackson and Peele, and concludes with an analysis of specific narrative strategies in their respective works. By adopting a comparative approach, this study offers insights into the mechanics of suspense storytelling across different media.

Keywords: Shirley Jackson; Jordan Peele; narrative suspense; double narrative; short story; horror film.

1. Double Articulation: The Core of Short Fiction and Narrative Suspense

Suspense, like many emotional and psychological states, is inherently difficult to define. It is commonly associated with feelings of uncertainty, anticipation, anxiety, and dread. Etymologically, the term "suspense" relates to the idea of being "suspended," evoking a sense of interruption or delay. Thus, crafting a suspenseful narrative requires more than simply posing mysteries; it involves skillful manipulation of audience perception to evoke a sustained emotional experience.

Despite working in different eras and media, Shirley Jackson and Jordan Peele are both renowned for their mastery of narrative suspense. While much critical attention has focused on the themes and imagery of Jackson's literary fiction and Peele's psychological thrillers, relatively little has been said about the structural strategies they employ to generate suspense. This article argues that both Jackson and Peele use a double-layered narrative structure that lies at the heart of what might be called *narrative suspense*, a concept that resonates with Ricardo Piglia's theory of the short story.

In his essay *Theses on the Short Story* (2011), Piglia asserts that every short story contains two concurrent narratives. The dynamic balance and tension between these two levels define the essence of the story. In classic short fiction—such as that written by Jackson—the primary narrative conceals a secondary narrative that is gradually revealed through fragments, implication, and ellipsis, culminating in a climactic twist. In contrast, contemporary narratives

like Peele's films present both layers more openly, while deliberately leaving the tension between them unresolved.

It is important not to confuse this double narrative with allegory or overt symbolism. Rather, the "hidden" story is embedded in the text through subtle cues and informational gaps. As Piglia explains:

"The strategy of the tale is in service of this coded narrative. How do you tell one story while implying another? This is the technical challenge of the short story. [...] The classic short story told one story while announcing that another was present; the modern short story tells two stories as if they were one. Hemingway's 'iceberg theory' was an early synthesis of this transformation: what matters most is not said. The secret story is constructed out of what is left unsaid, through implication and allusion."

While a broader investigation would be necessary to apply Piglia's framework to the entire short fiction genre, it offers a highly useful lens for examining the works of Jackson and Peele. Jackson's layered storytelling enhances the emotional and intellectual impact of her fiction, reinforcing her commitment to controlled narrative effect. Similarly, Peele's films are marked by a deliberate narrative architecture that manipulates audience perception through visual cues and structural complexity.

Both Jackson and Peele—through their influential contributions to literature and cinema—have demonstrated that suspense is not merely the product of terrifying content, but the result of how a story is constructed and presented.

2. Jackson and Peele: Masters of Audience Manipulation

Understanding the influence of one artist on another does not always require a direct line of textual borrowing. However, when a prominent filmmaker openly acknowledges being deeply affected by a writer's life and works, it strongly suggests an element of inspiration. Although Jordan Peele has never explicitly adopted a work by Shirley Jackson, many critics have identified striking parallels between their approaches to storytelling. Peele himself has expressed admiration for Jackson's work, though he often downplays this influence by citing differences in medium and historical context—Jackson as a 20th-century literary figure, and himself as a 21st-century filmmaker.

Yet for those familiar with intermedial studies and the enduring relevance of Gothic and psychological elements in contemporary culture, this explanation is unconvincing. Peele's reluctance may reflect what Harold Bloom describes as the *anxiety of influence*, or it may simply result from focusing more on what Jackson wrote about than on how she structured her stories. If Peele's engagement with Jackson were limited to her fiction alone, this would be understandable. However, had he delved into Jackson's essays on storytelling, he would have discovered a deep kinship with his own cinematic philosophy.

In a widely discussed interview, Peele observed that audiences enjoy being one step ahead of the story—this anticipation is something he consciously leverages to guide their thoughts. Decades earlier, Jackson emphasized the importance of total authorial control over the reader's

experience, particularly in meticulously structured short stories like *The Lottery*, where she carefully regulates when and how readers reach key revelations.

Unlike Peele, Jackson lacked a champion like François Truffaut to popularize her technical mastery. While she is appreciated for her unsettling themes and distinctive style, she is not always recognized as a formal innovator. Scholars such as Benfey, Peeples, and Zimmerman have sought to correct this perception by highlighting the sophistication of Jackson's narrative technique. Nonetheless, her work is still often misread as simply atmospheric or genre-bound.

3. Narrative Suspense in the Psychological Works of Jackson and Peele

Before delving into the specific narrative techniques used by Shirley Jackson and Jordan Peele, it is worth noting that not all of their works employ narrative suspense in the same way. Both authors have created diverse bodies of work with varying styles and artistic aims. However, Jackson's short stories tend to focus on psychological tension and social critique, while Peele's films combine horror with pointed social commentary.

Both artists build narratives that manipulate audience perception and expectation not primarily through Gothic or supernatural tropes, but through deliberate structural design. This is the essence of *narrative suspense*. Jackson's stories—such as *The Lottery* and *The Possibility of Evil*—are often classified as psychological suspense with a social allegorical dimension. Similarly, Peele's films—*Get Out* and *Us*—bring these tensions to life through cinematic techniques.

It is a misconception that suspense derives solely from shocking or frightening content. In truth, suspense arises from how a story is structured and presented. Themes and motifs can certainly enhance tension, but without careful narrative construction, even the most disturbing material can fall flat. As Jackson and Peele demonstrate, elements such as tone, timing, narrative focus, and manipulation of time are crucial to building suspense.

Their narrators or protagonists frequently provide subjective, limited, or unreliable perspectives, prompting audiences to question the surface narrative and search for a deeper story beneath. This encourages active interpretation, as contradictions and narrative clues invite readers and viewers to “read between the lines.”

For example, *The Lottery* gradually reveals a horrific communal ritual through a deceptively mundane lens, creating a chilling contrast between appearance and reality. Likewise, *Get Out* delivers biting social commentary beneath a suspenseful horror narrative, requiring viewers to interpret symbolic and narrative cues to grasp its full meaning.

This dual narrative structure—two intertwined stories running in parallel—is key to sustaining suspense. The audience experiences a gradual buildup of tension as they anticipate revelations while navigating conflicting signals within the narrative. This approach echoes Hitchcock's famous distinction between surprise and suspense: suspense extends anticipation over time, rather than relying on sudden shocks.

Ultimately, Jackson and Peele's brilliance lies in their ability to control narrative focus, pacing, and tone to maintain suspense throughout their works, making them enduring models of psychological and structural sophistication in storytelling.

3.1 Comparative Analysis: The Evolution of Suspense Techniques

The evolution from classical to contemporary suspense can be clarified through a systematic comparison of the techniques used by Poe and Hitchcock versus those employed by Jackson and Peele. This comparison reveals not merely stylistic differences, but fundamental shifts in the function of suspense in relation to audience engagement and social commentary.

Information Control vs. Structural Ambiguity

Poe and Hitchcock excel at controlling the flow of information to generate suspense. Poe's *The Cask of Amontillado* builds tension through the gradual revelation of Montresor's murderous intent, while Hitchcock's *Psycho* manipulates the audience's understanding of Norman Bates' psychology. Both rely on carefully staged revelations within a single narrative layer.

By contrast, Jackson and Peele create suspense through structural ambiguity. In *The Lottery*, the horror arises not from withheld information, but from the collision between the ordinary surface narrative and the ritualistic violence beneath. Similarly, *Get Out* generates tension through the dissonance between polite social interactions and the sinister racial commodification operating underneath. Suspense emerges from the structural tension between these narrative layers, not simply from withheld knowledge.

Psychological Interiority vs. Social Dynamics

Classical suspense often centers on individual psychology. Poe's protagonists descend into madness in isolation, and Hitchcock's characters grapple with personal obsessions and fears. Even when social elements are present, the primary source of tension remains internal.

Jackson and Peele shift the focus toward social dynamics and collective psychology. Jackson's *The Possibility of Evil* derives its power from the protagonist's relationship with her community, while Peele's *Us* explores suspense through familial and class dynamics. Their suspense emerges from social tensions, making their work more politically and culturally resonant.

Resolution vs. Ambiguity

Traditional suspense tends to build toward revelation and resolution. Poe's stories conclude with dramatic disclosures, while Hitchcock's films resolve their central mysteries through climactic confrontations, offering closure.

Jackson and Peele deliberately resist such closure. *The Lottery* ends with the communal stoning, leaving readers to confront the implications of collective complicity. *Get Out* ends with Chris's escape, but the broader systems of racial exploitation remain intact. Their works generate lasting unease precisely because they refuse to offer the comfort of complete resolution.

4. Conclusion

The works of Shirley Jackson and Jordan Peele reveal that true narrative suspense arises not merely from themes of horror, mystery, or shock, but from precise narrative construction. Both artists employ a layered storytelling structure that manipulates audience perception through controlled pacing, selective disclosure of information, and the deliberate use of limited or unreliable perspectives. By embedding a hidden narrative beneath the surface, they invite their audiences into an active interpretive process that sustains tension and deepens engagement.

This approach aligns closely with Ricardo Piglia's theory of the short story and Meir Sternberg's concept of suspense as a narrative universal. In Jackson's stories and Peele's films, suspense is built not through spectacle, but through a calculated orchestration of narrative devices that provoke uncertainty and anticipation. As a result, their works transcend the boundaries of genre and medium, offering a model of suspense that is both psychologically rich and structurally complex. Their contributions affirm that effective storytelling depends not only on what is told, but on how it is told—and, just as importantly, on what is left unsaid.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to extend profound gratitude to Mr. Deri Fikri Fauzi, S.Pd., M.Hum., for his invaluable guidance, insightful suggestions, and unwavering support throughout the course of this research. His expertise and constructive feedback have significantly contributed to the quality and completion of this study.

References

- Alber, J., Iversen, S., Nielsen, H. P., & Richardson, B. (2010). Unnatural narratives, unnatural narratology: Beyond mimetic models. *Narrative*, 18(2), 113–136. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.0.0042>
- Benfey, C. (1993). Poe and the unreadable: *The Black Cat* and *The Tell-Tale Heart*. In K. Silverman (Ed.), *New essays on Poe's major tales* (pp. 27–44). Cambridge University Press.
- Bloom, H. (1973). *The anxiety of influence: A theory of poetry*. Oxford University Press.
- Cortázar, J. (1993). *Valise de Cronópio*. Perspectiva.
- Eliot, T. S. (1949). From Poe to Valéry. *The Hudson Review*, 2(3), 327–342. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3847788>
- Hemingway, E. (1971). *Death in the afternoon*. Penguin.
- Hitchcock, A. (1997). Why I'm afraid of the dark. In S. Gotlieb (Ed.), *Hitchcock on Hitchcock: Selected writings and interviews* (pp. 142–145). University of California Press.
- Kaplan, L. (1993). The perverse strategy in *The Fall of the House of Usher*. In K. Silverman (Ed.), *New essays on Poe's major tales* (pp. 45–64). Cambridge University Press.
- KyaBakwaasHai. (2014). *Hitchcockian movies: The best Hitchcockian movies not directed by Alfred Hitchcock*. IMDb. <http://www.imdb.com/list/ls071418428/>
- Leitch, T. (1991). *Find the director and other Hitchcock games*. University of Georgia Press.
- Leitch, T. (2011). From stage to screen. In R. B. Palmer & D. Boyd (Eds.), *Hitchcock at the source: The author as adaptor* (pp. 11–32). SUNY Press.
- May, C. (1994). *The new short story theories*. Ohio University Press.
- Morris, C. (2000). Reading *The Birds* and *The Birds*. *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 28(4), 250–258. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43797000>
- Olson, G. (2003). Reconsidering unreliability: Fallible and untrustworthy narrators. *Narrative*, 11(1), 93–109. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2003.0001>
- Peeples, S. (2004). *The afterlife of Edgar Allan Poe*. Camden House.
- Peeples, S. (2002). Poe's "Constructiveness" and *The Fall of the House of Usher*. In K. Hayes (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Edgar Allan Poe* (pp. 178–190). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/ccol0521793262.012>
- Perry, D. R. (1996). Imps of the perverse: Discovering the Poe/Hitchcock connection. *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 24(4), 393–399. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43796752>
- Perry, D. R. (2003). *Hitchcock and Poe: The legacy of delight and terror*. Scarecrow Press.

- Phelan, J. (2007). Rhetoric/ethics. In D. Herman (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to narrative* (pp. 203–216). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/ccol0521856965.014>
- Piglia, R. (2011). Theses on the short story. *New Left Review*, 70. <https://newleftreview.org/II/70/ricardo-piglia-theses-on-the-short-story>
- Poe, E. A. (2004). *The selected writings of Edgar Allan Poe* (G. R. Thompson, Ed.). W. W. Norton & Co.
- Richter, D. (2005). Your cheatin' art: Double dealing in cinematic narrative. *Narrative*, 13(1), 11–28. <http://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2005.0006>
- Rothman, W. (2012). *Hitchcock: The murderous gaze*. SUNY Press.
- Rothman, W. (2014). *Must we kill the thing we love? Emersonian perfectionism and the films of Alfred Hitchcock*. Columbia University Press.
- Simper, D. (1975). Poe, Hitchcock, and the well-wrought effect. *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 3(3), 226–231. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43795622>
- Spoto, D. (1992). *The art of Alfred Hitchcock: Fifty years of his motion pictures*. Anchor Books.
- Sternberg, M. (1992). Telling in time (II): Chronology, teleology, narrativity. *Poetics Today*, 13(3), 463–541. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1772872>
- Truffaut, F. (1985). *Hitchcock*. Simon & Schuster.
- Twigg, B. (2015). Hitchcock, master maker of mystery. In S. Gotlieb (Ed.), *Hitchcock on Hitchcock: Selected writings and interviews* (Vol. 2, pp. 61–65). University of California Press.
- Wilbur, R., & Cantalupo, B. (2003). Interview with Richard Wilbur. *The Edgar Allan Poe Review*, 4(1), 68–86. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41506167>
- Zimmerman, B. (2005). *Edgar Allan Poe: Rhetoric and style*. McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Hitchcock, Alfred (Director). (2000). *The Birds* [Film]. Alfred J. Hitchcock Productions; Universal Studios Home Video. (Original work published 1963)
- Hitchcock, Alfred (Director). (2001). *Vertigo* [Film]. Alfred J. Hitchcock Productions; Universal Studios. (Original work published 1958)
- Hitchcock, Alfred (Director). (2002). *The Man Who Knew Too Much* [Film]. Paramount Pictures; Universal Pictures. (Original work published 1955)
- Hitchcock, Alfred (Director). (2004). *Stage Fright* [Film]. Warner Bros.; Warner Home Video. (Original work published 1950)
- Hitchcock, Alfred (Director). (2004). *The Wrong Man* [Film]. Warner Bros.; Warner Home Video. (Original work published 1956)

-
- Hitchcock, Alfred (Director). (2007). *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog* [Film]. Gainsborough Pictures / Carlyle Blackwell Productions; Mill Creek Entertainment. (Original work published 1927)
- Hitchcock, Alfred (Director). (2008). *Rear Window* [Film]. Paramount Pictures; Universal Pictures. (Original work published 1954)
- Hitchcock, Alfred (Director). (2014). *Blackmail* [Film]. British International Pictures; FilmRise. (Original work published 1929)
- Benshoff, H. M. (2020). Jordan Peele's *Get Out*: Political horror and social satire. In *A companion to the horror film*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Hattenhauer, D. (2003). *Shirley Jackson's American Gothic*. SUNY Press.
- Murphy, B. M. (Ed.). (2005). *Shirley Jackson: Essays on the literary legacy*. McFarland.
- Nash, T. (2021). The double narrative in *Us*: Jordan Peele's subversive suspense. *Journal of Contemporary Cinema Studies*, 5(1), 55–68.
- Olson, G. (2003). Reconsidering unreliability: Fallible and untrustworthy narrators. *Narrative*, 11(1), 93–109.
- Phelan, J. (2007). Rhetoric/ethics. In D. Herman (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to narrative* (pp. 203–216). Cambridge University Press.
- Piglia, R. (2011). Theses on the short story. *New Left Review*, 70.
- Sternberg, M. (1992). Telling in time (II): Chronology, teleology, narrativity. *Poetics Today*, 13(3), 463–541.