

PLOT LAWS IN JOHNSON'S *KNIVES OUT* MOVIE

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ABSTRACT

The article aims to identify and analyze the plot laws in the 2019 box office movie *Knives Out*, written and directed by Rian Johnson. William Kenney's plot theory (1966a) was applied in this study. The data source was taken from the movie *Knives Out* and it is applied qualitative research methodologies including observation and documentation using a note-taking technique. The results of the analysis are six plot laws, namely plausibility, surprise, suspense, plot and unity, plot as unity, and plot as expression.

Keywords: Plot, Plot Laws, Literature

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi dan menganalisis hukum plot dalam film box office tahun 2019 berjudul Knives Out, yang disutradarai dan ditulis oleh Rian Johnson. Teori plot oleh William Kenney (1966a) diterapkan dalam penelitian ini. Sumber data diambil dari film Knives Out dengan menggunakan metodologi penelitian kualitatif meliputi observasi dan dokumentasi dengan teknik mencatat. Hasil yang ditemukan dalam analisis adalah enam hukum plot yaitu plausibility, surprise, suspense, plot and unity, plot as unity, dan plot as expression.

Kata Kunci: Plot, Hukum Plot, Literatur

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature means creativity and time which invested in reading, rereading, exploring, analyzing, discussing, and interpreting it. (Jago et al., 2011, p. 1). Wellek and Warren (1984) claimed literature as a creative or artistic endeavor. Meanwhile, Klarer (2004, p. 1) stated that *literature* is a written expression that includes adjectives such as "aesthetic" to differentiate it from ordinary texts such as newspapers or official documents. In accordance, *literature* can also be defined as imaginative writing in the sense of fiction (Eagleton, 2005).

Thus, *literature* can be viewed as fiction or fact in imaginative and complex psychological and sociopolitical literature. As natural thinkers, humans will most likely manifest ideas and knowledge, leaving literary trails as the creators' goal. The literary production of the classical era,

such as novel, drama, poetry, and prose, evolved into painting, music, and film in the network century.

According to Klarer (2004, p. 56) film is the fourth textual manifestation after fiction, drama, and poetry. He defines film as a photographic depiction that outperforms the means of realistic portrayal in the theater.

In film, intrinsic elements such as plot, character, setting, time, and style, like in any other literary work, serve as the critical inquiry (Klarer, 2004, p. 14). Plot is what happens in a narrative (Jago et al., 2011, p. 56); in a narrative, including a film, plot is a relationship of specific elements that leads to a change in the actual situation (Klarer, 2004, p. 15). Brodwell and Thompson (in Indriani et al., 2018) think that plot is used to describe visual and audio present in the film. Plot is built of significant events in a given story with

important consequences, not some miscellaneous incidents (Dibell, 1988). Diyanni (1994, p. 782) divided plot into exposition, complication(s), crisis or turning point or climax, falling action, resolution, or denouement.

This article discusses about plot. In particular, it aims to analyze the plot laws in a movie. Constructing a story from beginning to end follows specific laws that enhance the plot in the story. Kenney (1966a) stated that when writing a story, authors must follow certain laws such as plausibility, suspense, surprise, plot and unity, subplot, plot as unity, and plot as expression.

Therefore, this article is interested in analyzing the plot laws in the movie *Knives Out* as the data source. *Knives Out* is an infamous classic “whodunit” movie in 2019. The movie was chosen because it was a box office movie that has been acknowledged by many critics because it revitalizes the whodunit formula with original ideas; moreover, it was well-made with a thought-provoking plot of revealing who the killer is. Thus, to identify what kinds of plot laws in *Knives Out*, plot analysis is carried out to dissect it.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

The data source of the study was taken from whodunit mystery movie entitled *Knives Out*. The script written by Rian Johnson's script was obtained online through lionsgate.brightspotcdn.com was used as the primary data. Premiering at the 2019 Toronto International Film Festival on September 7, *Knives Out* movie with all-star casts such David Craig, Chris Evans, Ana de Armas, and others, becomes an oasis to whodunit lovers. *Knives Out* is a story of the death of a famous mystery writer name Harlan Thrombey; the body was found the following day after Harlan's 85th birthday. Because of this case, all of Thrombey's family and his nanny-like-friend Marta Cabrera, with no exception, are being questioned as suspects and

investigated by the well-known detective Benoit Blanc.

Knives Out has already been awarded many nominations and becomes one of the best-reviewed movies in 2019 (Meslow, 2019). Hence, the brilliant commentary from critics, the epic unveil of Harlan Thrombey's killer; also the solid and exquisite plot writing for whodunit mystery film made this study choose *Knives Out* movie as the data source, moreover, because it meets the criteria required for this research.

The methods that were used in collecting data to meet the aims are observation and documentation methods alongside the note-taking technique. Afterward, data were analyzed using a descriptive qualitative method and described by explanation and interpretations of the data collected. The theory proposed by Kenney (1966b) was applied to classifying and analyze the plot laws within the chosen movie. My study's results and findings were presented using Sudaryanto's (1993) method, namely informal methods. The informal method presents the collected data into words or sentences (Sudaryanto, 1993, pp. 144–145). The technique to present the data in my study was using words and sentences as informal method to describe the identified plot laws information.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Seven laws are governing a story, according to Kenney (1966). These laws are fundamental principles that make the story a greater good that the readers or audiences could enjoy. Meanwhile, in *Knives Out*, six laws can be identified in total. Further analysis of plot laws in *Knives Out* as follows:

3.1 Plausibility

The critical law that is governing the story is plausibility. A story is recognized as plausible if it is convincing on its terms or true to itself. That means the story does not always present as realism; however, as

- Meslow, S. (2019). *How “Knives Out” Filmmaker Rian Johnson Revitalized the Whodunit*. GQ.
<https://www.gq.com/story/rian-johnson-knives-out-interview-2019>
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As in *Knives Out*, the exposition introduces the characters and setting as the essential intrinsic elements to support the plot's unity of the story. The exposition also contains inciting incidents besides the character and setting, this part gave the audience the story's background. Then, from inciting incidents, move to rising action, where the conflict and complication occurs. After that, the conflict between the characters and complication reaches its peak at the climax. Then, it is followed by falling action to the ending of the story. For this reason, *Knives Out* is identified as unity law, as the story is presented mainly structurally and delightfully.

3.4.3 Plot as Expression

Plot as expression is the last law governing the story; it contains the moral message to the audience or reader. Through this part of the law, the author conveys the raw experience to the audience. In *Knives Out* is not only a story about solving the mystery of Harlan Thrombey's death, but it also contains many implicit messages about racism, social inequality, paradigm, family, wealth, honesty, sincerity, and other topics throughout the storyline.

The plot as expression is clearly shown at the end of the story. As in

the *denouement* part in the movie. It is presented that, after the revelation of the guilty party of Harlan's death takes place, Marta stands at the balcony of the Thrombey's estate, staring down at the Thrombeys who lost all their inheritance.

The table has turned; Marta, a nurse from an immigrant family and not blood related with Harlan, inherits all his assets at the end of the day. Because Harlan in believes her more than his family, which is pure American, this is shown how the story successfully expresses the message from the author to the audience that everybody is equal, they can not define only by race or bloodline. Therefore, this is what distinguishes *Knives Out* as an excellent story.

IV. CONCLUSION

Based on the data analysis and discussion in the article, some points can be drawn as a conclusion. There are six plot laws found in the *Knives Out* movie: plausibility, surprise, suspense, plot and unity, plot as unity, and plot as expression. However, this study analysis did not find the subplot one of the plot laws stated by Kenney because *Knives Out* lacks the subplot characteristics.

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Therefore, the data can be identified as surprise law since it successfully shocked the audience and piqued their curiosity of what happens next to Marta, makes the story more interesting to reveals.

3.3. Suspense

The third law governing a story is suspense. *Suspense* defines as an expectation of the story's outcome. It requires uncertainty, awareness of possibilities, and tension, causing the audience to sit on the edge of their seats out of curiosity. As the data 1-3 below, suspense law was found in *Knives Out*.

(1-3) BLANC: The medical examiner was ready to rule this a suicide, but Elliott agreed to keep it pending for 48 hours. **Tommorow morning, I search the grounds and the house, begin my investigation. I want you to be by my side for it.**

MARTA: **What?**

BLANC: **My confidante. My eyes and ears.**

MARTA: **Hey. Wait, wait, Detective. Why me?**

BLANC: I trust your kind heart. Also, you're the only one who had nothing to gain from Harlan's death. So how about it, Watson?

MARTA: Hey, Detective. If you want my insight into the family, none of them are murderers.

BLANC: **And yet, be it cruel or comforting, this machine unerringly arrives at the truth. That's what it does.**

(*Knives Out*, 51:57 – 52:02)

After revealing to the audiences that Marta was the one who unintentionally killed Harlan, then as in data 1-3, the conversation between Detective Blanc and Marta occurs. He asked Marta to assist him in investigating the case. As being said that the elements of suspense contain uncertainty, awareness, and tension; Marta's condition appears perplexed by request, it is proven by her rushed

question, **Hey. Wait, wait, Detective. Why me?** the sentence displayed by Marta in a tone of nervousness and unease, thus she asked why Detective Blanc wants her help. This implicitly stated that Marta is trying to stay out of the case to avoid the police eyes. Even though Marta tries to persuade him to think of the case as suicide; yet since Detective Blanc here says that be it murder or suicide, he will find the truth behind Harlan's death, making Marta unable to turn down the request. This is why the data can be recognized as suspense because it has uncertainty and possibilities in future events.

3.4 Plot and Unity

Plot and unity refer to the synchronization of plot structure from beginning to end in the story, including the laws of plausibility, surprise, and suspense. *Knives Out's* plot has unity because it consists of five stages; exposition/beginning, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement. Besides, *Knives Out* are also built by plausibility, surprise, and suspense laws, as indicated by the data 1-1, 1-2, and 1-3, making *Knives Out* has unity and a captivating plot.

3.4.1 Subplot

Subplot usually occurs in long fiction. A subplot can be identified when there is a problem in the plot and unity. That means a sequence of events distinct from the main plot, originating a whole new story besides the main one. It is identified in *Knives Out*; there is no subplot found in the movie because the plot focuses on solving Harlan's death case from the start to the end.

3.4.2 Plot as Unity

Plot as unity implies that a story must be well structured to convey the story to the audience or reader properly. In this case, the plot is also aided in forming the beginning to end of the story by intrinsic elements. To discover the plot as unity, one has to see the whole story.

long as the story can be accepted by common sense with enough reasoning and consistency, it can be regarded as plausible. The occurrence in the *Knives Out* story is consistent and reasonable, as revealed in the climax and falling action part, every piece of events seems to make sense at the end. Each of the movie's events is intertwined—the analysis of the law of plausibility presented below.

(1-1) TROOPER WAGNER:
So I guess we can rule out Ransom, he wasn't there. And Marta, Harlan was alive after she left. But Meg got home during the time of death window.

LIEUTENANT ELLIOTT:
Except it was a suicide. **Harlan hit both carotids, we saw from the blood, blood splat patterns that they were uninterrupted.** Meaning, it's almost impossible for anyone to have been around him at the time. He's the one that cut his own throat.

(*Knives Out*, 31:07 – 31:29)

The conversation above takes place after Lieutenant Elliott tells about the chronological order of Harlan's death case. After the detectives went through everyone's whereabouts that attended the party before the accident, Trooper Wagner stated that he believes someone killed Harlan Thrombey. Therefore, he thinks that Ransom, Marta, and Meg can be ruled out from the suspect list. On the contrary, from the bold sentence, Lieutenant Elliot believes that Harlan has killed himself, proved by the blood-splattered pattern which uninterrupted. Nevertheless, the idea conveys by the detectives gave the audiences the probability of Harlan's death which can be a murder or suicide. Moreover, these ideas are supported with balanced evidence for each possibility, which is then consistently used to investigate Harlan's death. For this reason, the data can be identified as plausibility law because the data suited the terms of the law, which were acceptable and reasonable with

convincing shreds of evidence related to the case.

3.2 Surprise

The element of surprise is essential in a story; if there are no surprises, the story will become bland. This law perfectly works if it does not violate the law of plausibility; in a sense, the surprise elements entail reasonable explanation. Nevertheless, as in *Knives Out*, the movie is also full of surprises. It can be seen in data 1-2.

(1-2) MARTA: **This is what I just gave you 100 milligrams of. But I messed up.**

HARLAN: You gave me 100 milligrams of the good stuff. What's the good stuff dosage supposed to be?

MARTA: Lets not call it that right now –three milligrams.

HARLAN: That's much less. So what happens?

MARTA: I give you an emergency shot of Naloxone, so that you don't die in ten minutes.

HARLAN: **Marta. Do you have Naxostuff?**

MARTA: **Yes! I'm gonna find it. I have it because it comes with the kit, so it should be here. It has to be. It's like... It's not here Harlan. I don't know why it's not here.**

(*Knives Out*, 36:36 – 38:18)

The data above occurred in Marta's flashback when the detectives questioned her; that dialogue indicates that Marta gave Harlan the wrong medication. That is shown in the dialogue. ***This is what I just gave you 100 milligrams of. But I messed up.*** Later, Marta did not find the antidote that could save Harlan from an overdose. Thus, the fact that Marta is the one who triggered Harlan's death gave a shock to the audience. After the assumption whether Harlan was being murdered or kill himself previously in data 1-1, this accident convinces the audience that Harlan's death is an accidental murder caused by Marta.