

# Creating Suspense: A look at two classic tricks

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When I have something good for my children I don't like to share it right away. I always want to hold it a little longer and keep them in suspense, to drag out the anticipation of whatever I have to offer—whether it be a story or a bowl of ice cream. Sometimes I teeter too long on that line between savoring suspense and teasing them, but I try to give them whatever I have before venturing too far into teasing.

My tendency to hold back is something writers do as well. It's a key to something called **suspense**. There are quite a few definitions of suspense floating out there, but the one I like best is the one from M.H. Abrams, that suspense is “a lack of certainty, on the part of a concerned reader, about what is going to happen” (225).

The way I see it, there are a handful of ways writers classically increase suspense in their works of literature, ways that create a lack of certainty. Essentially, they do the same thing in their writing that I do with my children—they try to give us just enough to make us incurably curious, and they try to withhold the item of curiosity as long as they can without losing our interest.

## Fear and Intensity

One type of suspense writers often create is the kind of suspense that increases the intensity of the story, often creating fear for the reader. This is often the first thing people think of when they hear you say suspense. Thus, I searched online for the top suspense movies of all time, and the list is almost entirely horror films.

Usually what a writer does here is bring us to the point of intensity and then tell the story on a microscopic level. That is, the closer you get to the most intense part, the more the writer slows down.

Movie directors do the same thing. Take for example the first Lord of the Rings movie, *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Early in the movie Frodo Baggins and his fellow hobbits are running away from the Shire and they meet for the first time a ring wraith—an incredibly large and scary creature, draped in a black cape, riding a black horse. Frodo and the other hobbits jump into a ditch to hide and as the wraith approaches, the film slows down. We see shots of the horse's hoof, a bug crawling on the hobbits, and the

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horse breathing, seemingly in slow motion. We watch Frodo reach for the magic ring, and we see a shot of his finger twitching as he considers putting it on. Each microscopic element is dragged out to lengthen the intensity and keep us in suspense. If the entire movie showed all these details it would have been 150

hours long. But it isn't that long, because it only moves to that microscopic level when the director wants to draw out the suspense particularly. In those moments, though, we are left hanging there in our fearful curiosity: will they escape? Will the wraith see them?

In literature the strategy is often the same. In a story called “The Monkey's Paw” W. W. Jacobs creates a fearful scene around an elderly couple. Near the end the old man fears that his son, recently deceased, has risen as a gory, zombie-like corpse. His wife, meanwhile, is eager to see her son no matter what state he is in. We, the readers, don't know what the son is like, but we want to know, and as *something* approaches the couple's door, Jacobs draws us out by telling many tiny details:

There was another knock, and another. The old woman with a sudden wrench broke free and ran from the room. Her husband followed to the landing, and called after her appealingly as she hurried downstairs. He heard the chain rattle back and the bottom bolt drawn slowly and stiffly from the socket. . . . [He] was on his hands and knees groping wildly on the floor in search of the paw. If he could only find it before the thing outside got in. A perfect fusillade of knocks reverberated through the house, and he heard the scraping of a chair as his wife put it down in the passage against the door. He heard the creaking of the bolt as it came slowly back, and at the same moment . . .

I won't give away too much of the story because you should read it sometime, but you can see from the example that Jacobs is telling the minute details: the constant knocking, the sound of the bolt and the chair, the movements of the husband and his wife. He doesn't use all these details in every part of the story, but he does here, because he wants to increase the suspense.

### Choices

Fear and intensity are not the only kinds of suspense writers create, however. This is why I like Abrams's definition so much. It doesn't mention fear or intensity, just that the reader has "a lack of certainty . . . about what is going to happen." Another kind of suspense develops when a reader anticipates what a character is going to do. This anticipation is built around a choice the character needs to make. This feeling is similar to what I feel when I tell my children to pick a color of freezy-pop and I wonder what they'll choose, but they drag out their decision. All the while I am hoping they don't leave me with the green one—again.

Here, the writer often creates a choice for the character early in the plot and keeps us wondering how the character will decide. Which way will they go? How will they choose? For a classic example of this we can look to a children's movie most of us have seen, *Aladdin*. Early on we know Aladdin gets three wishes from the genie, but he saves that last wish as long as he can. As he goes through trials of the film—defeating Jafar, winning Jasmine's love, we continue to wonder what he'll do with that last wish. Will he use it on himself to gain riches, or will he do something kind for someone else, as we know he is capable of doing? We're left to wonder until the very end of the

movie. Leaving the choice open for a long while creates a suspense that holds us until he decides.

There are other ways to create suspense—we'll study later this year how Shakespeare uses dramatic irony (when the reader knows something the character

doesn't) to create the suspense in *Romeo and Juliet*—but for now I thought it was worth looking at these two ways:

1. Pausing on microscopic details around the points of highest intensity.
2. Presenting the character with a kind of choice or challenge and helping us to wonder how the character will decide.

We're not all going to be writers, but when we recognize writers' tricks for creating suspense, we can steal their tricks for our own purposes, even if the purposes are just to toy with the children in our lives.

### Reference

Abrams, M.H. "Plot." *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 7<sup>th</sup> ed. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1999.

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