Ugo Anidi

The Parallel Plot:
An Effective Tool for Creating Suspense

Parallel narratives employ the simultaneous use of multiple dramatic plots in one story. Baudinet describes the parallel narrative as involving multiple separate stories connected by a common theme, character or event. (Baudinet, 1) These narratives are famed for crafting dramatic irony, exploring multiple viewpoints and particularly, creating suspense. This essay proposes that the parallel plot structure is an effective tool for creating suspense in stories, it analyses *Holes* by Louis Sachar to buttress this point.

In Holes, three parallel plots are interwoven throughout the book. The plots, one contemporary, one fairy tale and one folktale, tell the stories of three generations of Yelnats. The main character in the contemporary story (first plot thread), Stanley Yelnats IV is plagued by bad luck, a curse brought about by his great great grandfather who broke a promise he made to an old lady, Madame Zeroni (second plot thread). The third plot thread features Stanley's great grand-father (also plagued by bad luck) and the outlaw who robbed him.

In this book, Sachar intertwines these plot threads to create a suspenseful masterpiece. But what is and what constitutes suspense?

" … a feeling of worry or excitement that you have when you feel that something is going to happen …' (Hornby). It is the secret ingredient in successful stories which enables the author keep the reader's interest from start to finish. Suspense is typically easy to find in mysteries where the reader tries to find clues to solve the book's mystery. However, in dramas, suspense is achieved if the reader is faced with the unanswered question "What will happen next?"

To create suspense, a story must have the following elements: alternative (contrasting) outcomes, uncertainty of outcome, expectation/anticipation and delayed outcome. Therefore, to create suspense for the reader, firstly, the characters in a story must be faced with two contrasting outcomes, one desirable and one undesirable. Then the reader must be uncertain as to the outcome which is most likely to occur. This is further heightened when the undesirable outcome seems more likely to occur. This creates a feeling of expectation/anticipation and sometimes anxiety which is further heightened if the resolution of the conflict is delayed. (Dibell 89).

In Holes, Sachar explores this perfectly. In the first plot thread, Stanley is faced with two options: serve time in Camp Green Lake for a crime he didn't commit and then leave or get into trouble multiple times and dig holes at the Lake indefinitely. While he struggles towards the first option, the second is more likely because he keeps getting into trouble. In the second plot thread, Sachar leaves the reader wondering what would become of the man who broke his promise? would himself and his descendants really be cursed forever? In the third plot thread, Sachar drives the reader crazy, wondering if the love between white school teacher Katherine and her beau, black onion picker Sam will conquer the rage of the racists inhabitants of 18th century Green Lake?

The reader in a state of anxiety as a result of the wait to determine whether a character in whom he is emotionally invested will suffer either a desirable or undesirable outcome is one under the spell of well-crafted suspense.

Parallel narratives have some common ingredients: multiple characters, multiple problems, multiple plots, interconnectivity of the plots, similar or contrasting themes, etc. However, the two most common features of all parallel narratives are the presence of multiple plots and the interconnectivity of those plots. How do these features build suspense in stories?

Multiple plots

Multiple plots are the primary constituents of parallel narratives. All parallel plot narratives must have two or more plots. Two major types of the multiple plot structure exist. The simplest version is the Consecutive Plot Structure. Here, two or more plot threads are explored consecutively, that is, one after the other (Baudinet 1). The more complicated version, the Braided Plot Structure features two or more plot threads which the author weaves in and out of each other (Baudinet 1). Here, the narrative focus goes back and forth from one plot to another within the narrative.

Irrespective of the nature of the plot structure used (consecutive or braided), the presence of two or more different unresolved plot threads, lead to twists and turns which add mystery and ultimately suspense in a story. Suspense is therefore created when the narrative shifts from one plot to another particularly if this is done at critical moments in the stories' trajectory. Cliff hangers are one of the major elements employed by parallel narratives to create suspense.

Sachar also explores this masterfully in the way he glides between the first and third plot threads. First he cuts off the story from the third plot thread with a cliff hanger …

> He (black onion picker) of both of her hands and kissed her (white school teacher). Because of the rain, there was nobody else on the street. Even if there was, Katherine and Sam wouldn't have noticed. They were lost in their own world. That's moment however, Hattie Parker stepped out of the general store. They didn't see her but she saw them. She pointed her quivering finger in their direction and whispered "God will punish you!" (Sachar 111)

… then he jumps to the first plot thread and then ends that chapter with a cliff hanger as well before jumping back to the third plot thread. In this cliffhanger, the reader discovers that

Stanley's friend Zee is the descendant of Madam Zeroni, the woman who cursed Stanley's great great grandfather. (Sachar 119).

By the end of the first part of the book, there are three different stories which have ended with cliffhangers. Until the last chapter where the stories are tied up together to make a neat little bow, the reader is left in a state of perpetual suspense. See the penultimate paragraph of this essay.

Another device frequently used in parallel narratives is the extended flashback. These are flashbacks that are fleshed out enough to become full-blown plots. Suspense can be achieved in parallel narratives through the use of these extended flashbacks. In the framework of the story, flashbacks uncover the past. They therefore deepen the mystery in a story, making the reader try to find the connection between the present and past plots. This is an effective way of building suspense. Sachar uses the extended flashback extensively in Holes. For example, Camp Green Lake, where Stanley Yelnats IV is confined, is a desert (Sachar 10). Before arriving at the Camp, Stanley imagined a picturesque mini town with a beautiful lake and lush greenery. (Sachar 10) When Stanley and the reader wonder what happened to Green Lake, a mystery is created, followed by suspense. The reader eventually discovers in the flashback plot that a gruesome racial murder was committed on the lake and this brought a curse on the region. The mystery of the desert with the contrasting name is therefore resolved when the past's effects on the present are revealed through the flashback.

Intertwined Plots

In all parallel narratives, all the plot threads in the narrative are connected. This connection can be used to create suspense in stories. Plot interconnectivity can be achieved through a variety of methods.

i. *Echoes and Mirrors:* The plots may be connected through the use of echoes and mirrors. This involves repeating the same elements in two or more seemingly unrelated plots

in a narrative. This could be accomplished by creating similar beginnings and endings, similar subjects and emotions and possibly, similar settings. (Dibell 98 – 100). Note that the author need only repeat two or more elements. This example is evident in Sachar's Holes.

In the story, parallel settings show up in the present day 'God's Thumb' and the past mountain which Stanley's great great grandfather climbs. Sachar connects the first and third plot threads involving the making and breaking of a curse with the singular action of climbing up a hill. In the third plot thread, Sachar shows the Yelnats patriarch break a promise to carry an old lady up a hill. In the first plot thread, the Yelnat patriarch's great great grandson carries the old woman's great grandson up another hill, God's thumb, thus fulfilling the promise and breaking the curse. The repeated action of climbing the hill thus connects two seemingly unrelated plot threads.

ii. Connection through a character, theme or event. Another method of achieving interconnectivity is through the use of the same character, theme or event. In Holes, connection is created through events and characters. For example, when Stanley Yelnats IV carries Zero up God's thumb, he fulfills the promise his great great grandfather made to Zero's ancestor and thus, the curse on the Yelnats' is lifted. Then good things start happening to Stanley: he is vindicated and he finds Stanley Yelnats I's treasure.

Again, irrespective of the mode of plot interconnectivity employed, that quest to discover the connection between the plot threads enables the creation of suspense. As one becomes embroiled in the mysteries of each story, one becomes aware of a deeper mystery: how are the characters in all three plots connected? This builds suspense for the reader. In Holes, one wonders how the 18th century love story between an onion picker and a school teacher affects the present-day story or how it is connected to the story of the first Yelnat who brought a curse upon his lineage.

In a finale which reeks of genius, Sachar makes the connection between all the plot threads! He uncovers the third plot thread as the foundation of the entire story. Stanley's great great grandfather makes a promise to an old lady Madame Zeroni to carry her up a hill. He fails to fulfill this promise and is cursed by the old lady. Years later, his son makes a fortune but because of the family curse, he loses it to an outlaw, Kissing Kate Barlow. The origin of Kissing Kate Barlow is the foundation of the second plot thread. She is a white school teacher, she falls in love with a black farmer in a racist community, Green Lake. Unfortunately, the son of the richest man in Green Lake, Trout Walker wants Kate. Jealous, he incites the occupants of Green Lake try to kill the lovers in the lake. Sam dies but Kate escapes and becomes an outlaw, the scourge of the West. Cursed, the lake dries up and the town becomes a desert. Years later, Trout attempts to rob Kate of her fortune. And we discover that the modern-day warden of the Camp Green Lake is Trout's granddaughter! She has been making the boys at the camp dig holes in a bid to find the treasure her father tried to steal from Kate! Better yet, the curse on the Yelnats is lifted when Stanley carries Madame Zeroni's great grandchild, - Hector Zeroni (Zero) one of the inmates at Camp Green Lake – up a hill, God's thumb.

From the above, one can deduce that parallel narratives, when executed perfectly as in Holes by Sachar are able to create suspense. Furthermore, they can take the suspense and drama available in single plot narratives and double or triple them. When skillfully executed, they are basically, two to five (suspenseful) stories for the price of one.

Works Cited

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