

JOANNA DRAŻKIEWICZ

Lublin

UNDERSTANDING SUSPENSE

The study presented here aims at discussing the already existing definitions of suspense and formulating a new definition as well as at illustrating the nature of this phenomenon and indicating the possible way of its examination.

Due to the far going restriction of the material analyzed (the conclusions are based on the examination of five "entertainments" by G. Greene and two short stories by A. Conan Doyle and J. Conrad) the study is concentrated mainly on theoretical issues. Nevertheless, it is hoped to inspire further research upon the discussed literary phenomenon on broader literary-historical material.

The problem of suspense in the novel has not frequently been subjected to systematic and thorough research. The lack of interest in suspense has brought about a relatively moderate number of theoretical studies and definitions of suspense which seem to be both imprecise and incomplete. Nevertheless, the available handbooks of literary theory dealing with suspense contain a number of important remarks and hints which should be considered in the present study.

The first significant point seems to be the recurrence of such words as 'uncertainty', 'doubt', 'expectancy', 'anticipation', 'curiosity', 'tension' and 'surprise' in all the definitions. These words are undoubtedly synonymous with the word 'suspense' and should be the key words in understanding the term itself. Unfortunately, a mere statement describing suspense as "uncertainty, often characterized by anxiety"¹ does not define this particular element of a literary work; it only explains the current meaning of the word 'suspense'.

Another common feature of the definitions is the attempt to discuss suspense in terms of the reception of a literary work, treating it as a response of the readers. Suspense "keeps the reader in doubt or in a state of expectancy as to the outcome of a situation or of the whole story"², it is "the piquing and sustaining of our curio-

¹ S. Barnet, M. Berman, W. Burto, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Boston 1960.

² H. L. Yelland, S. C. J. Jones, K. S. W. Easton, *A Handbook of Literary Terms*, New York 1965.

sity"³, or "poised expectancy in which *the receptor* is held"⁴. Such a treatment of suspense can hardly be useful in the analysis of a literary work as, according to Roman Ingarden, every realization of a literary work differs from the work itself⁵.

Although Perrinne and Danziger share the attitude of all other authors⁶, their definitions deserve attention since they try to discover causes of the readers' reaction. Perrinne says that it is "that quality of the story that makes the reader ask 'what's going to happen next'"⁷. Danziger formulates it more clearly saying that suspense "implies the arousing of a question in the mind of the reader and possibly in the minds of the characters"⁸. So, having made the proviso that a literary work (and not a reader) is the subject of literary research, suspense should be understood as a literary device which is based on arousing a question in the minds of the characters, the narrator and the addressee of a work. It is their reactions of uncertainty or anxiety which may be the signals of suspense in a work⁹.

As other authors suggest, the question aroused does not by itself constitute suspense. Almost all of the available definitions discuss the means of sustaining suspense and of postponing the answer. They all agree that suspense is sustained by means of postponement¹⁰. Hence, the conclusion may be drawn that postponement conditions suspense.

The author of the present study has examined a number of detective stories in order to establish various means of postponement¹¹. The analyses have shown that postponement of the answer may be achieved by the following means:

³ M. K. Danziger, W. S. Johnson, *An Introduction to Literary Criticism*, Boston 1961, pp. 20–21.

⁴ J. T. Shipley, *Dictionary of World Literary Terms*, London 1955.

⁵ Cf. R. Ingarden, *Z teorii dzieła literackiego*, [in:] *Problemy teorii literatury*, Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków 1967, s. 46.

⁶ Perrinne and Danziger consider suspense on the level of reception of a literary work. Cf. L. Perrinne, *Story and Structure*, New York 1959, pp. 63–64; Danziger, Johnson, *op. cit.*, pp. 20–21.

⁷ Perrinne, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

⁸ Danziger, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

⁹ The reaction of readers may be sometimes the same but it could hardly be the subject of the analysis.

¹⁰ Cf. W. Allen, *Six Great Novelists*, London 1962, p. 127; K. Beckson, A. Ganz, *A Reader's Guide to Literary Terms*, London 1961; D. Cecil, *Early Victorian Novelists*, London 1943, p. 138; Ch. Duffy, H. Pettit, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Denver 1951; E. Olson, *Zarys teorii poezji*, [in:] *Współczesna teoria badań literackich za granicą*, ed. by H. Markiewicz, Kraków 1970, p. 303; Z. Sinko, Introduction to the Polish translation of: M. G. Lewis, *Mnich*, Wrocław 1964, p. XXI; Yelland, et al., *op. cit.*, p. 200.

¹¹ The following works have been examined: G. K. Chesterton: *The Incredulity of Father Brown*, Leipzig 1926; *The Innocence of Father Brown*, London 1948. A. Christie, *The Secret of Chimneys*, New York 1959. W. Collins, *The Moonstone*, London 1932. J. Conrad, *The Secret Sharer*, [in:] *Twixt Land and Sea*, London 1947. A. Conan Doyle: *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, London 1964; *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes*, Harmondsworth 1955. E. A. Poe, *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*, London 1946. D. Sayers, *The Unpleasantness at Bellona Club*, Stockholm 1948.

- (1) shifts of points of view,
- (2) shifts of interest from:
 - (a) one constructional element¹² to another,
 - (b) one element of the work to another,
 - (c) one motif to another,
 - (d) one narrative structure to another,
- (3) retrospection,
- (4) accumulation of details.

It has also been noticed that the means listed above do not condition suspense. Accordingly, it has been concluded that postponement cannot be the most essential feature of suspense and the relation between sustaining and postponement is different from what has been suggested by Duffy¹³. The postponement of the answer is necessary but not sufficient. When the answer is postponed and the question is not sustained, suspense disappears or at least decreases. The question must be sustained by means of repetitions and hints.

Another matter discussed by the authors dealing with suspense refers to the kind of the question aroused. Undoubtedly, as many of the definitions point out, the most frequently encountered question is that about action. Danziger, noticing that it is not the only kind of question, goes on to divide them into types:

- (1) "What has happened" or "what will happen";
- (2) "How some [...] conflicts within the lives of characters will be resolved", including "conflict within one person's mind"¹⁴.

It can be said that he divides the questions into psychological questions — those connected with the characters — and questions connected with action. Perrinne shares Danziger's opinion¹⁵.

The last problem dealt with in the definitions under discussion is 'foreshadowing' — a term closely connected with suspense. All the handbooks of literary theory dealing with foreshadowing describe it as "hints of what is to come"¹⁶ or "hints of forthcoming events"¹⁷. The definitions offer no agreement as to the role of that element. Yelland and Danziger are of the opinion that foreshadowing diminishes suspense, while Barnet and Shipley treat it as a means of constituting suspense¹⁸. Both opinions seem to be true. When the hints are false or do not foreshadow the

¹² Constructional element is understood here as the element which has the dominant function in the composition of a work.

¹³ Duffy states that sustaining is achieved by means of postponement. Cf. Duffy, Pettit, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Danziger, Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

¹⁵ Cf. Perrinne, *op. cit.*, pp. 63–64.

¹⁶ Barnet, et al., *op. cit.*

¹⁷ Yelland, et al., *op. cit.*

¹⁸ Cf. Danziger, Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 21; Yelland, et al., *op. cit.*; Barnet, et al., *op. cit.*; Shipley, *op. cit.*

main answer they serve as signals of suspense. In the case when the hints foreshadow the main answer they diminish suspense.

On the basis of the definitions discussed above and the material analyzed, the author of the present study has formulated the following definition:

Suspense is a literary device consisting in repetitions of the question suggested to the addressee, narrator and/or character of a literary work. The repetitions result in sustaining the question and consequently in postponement of the answer.

The three component devices of suspense (arousing a question, sustaining it by means of repetitions and postponing the answer) are strictly interrelated and the lack of one of them damages the whole pattern. Though they are mutually related, each of them is achieved by different means in the text.

The first condition for the existence of suspense in a text is arousing a question. The question may be either asked directly or only alluded to. The question which may be immediately recognized appears in the narration already as an interrogative sentence (in direct or indirect speech). Such a question may be asked either by the narrator or a character of a story. E.g., "So now we must set ourselves very seriously to finding this gentleman, and ascertaining what part he has played in this little mystery"¹⁹ — said Sherlock Holmes.

The question very often arises from statements. A character's utterance expressing his decisions, suspicions, doubts, threats, claims or fears may immediately suggest a question.

E.g., Sherlock Holmes, after having read a paragraph from a newspaper dealing with a robbery of a valuable jewel and the arresting of an alleged thief, utters the following sentence: "Hum. So much for the police court"²⁰.

In this sentence Holmes expresses his doubt as to the verdict of the police court which has arrested Horner on the charge of robbery. Holmes's doubt as to the correctness of the verdict suggests that somebody else might have stolen the diamond. Hence the question 'who really stole it' may arise.

Pinkie in the dialogue with Spicer says: "When people do one murder, I've read, they sometimes have to do another — to tidy up"²¹. Pinkie has already committed a murder and is trying to remove the evidence of his crime. His words become then a threat that he may commit some more murders, and they evoke the question 'whom else will he kill?'.

A more precise threat of Raven, the professional murderer who has been deceived: "There's hell coming to somebody for this"²², also arouses the question 'will Raven kill his enemies?'.

Characters may not pronounce their decisions, suspicions, doubts, hesitations or fears, but think or feel them. When these thoughts or emotions appear in a text

¹⁹ Conan Doyle, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, p. 129.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 128.

²¹ G. Greene, *Brighton Rock*, London 1948, p. 56.

²² G. Greene, *A Gun for Sale*, London 1948, p. 20.

in the form of unuttered monologues²³ they may suggest questions in the same way as utterances do. E.g.: "he thought with fury of Spicer: he'll muddle once too often, we'd be better without him"²⁴. "If Mr Cholmondeley had been in the box with him, he wouldn't have cared a damn"²⁵.

Finally, the question may be suggested by a sentence or a paragraph of the narration presenting a situation.

E.g.: Anne Crowder is in an empty room with a man who may harm her. In such a situation the sentence: "Mr Davis went to the door and locked it"²⁶, suggests that from that moment on the girl is really in danger. Accordingly, the question 'what will happen to her?' arises.

Sometimes it is difficult to delimit a single sentence suggesting a question. It may happen, as is the case of the following example, that a few lines of narration with short, inserted utterances present a situation which arises the question.

E.g.: Raven, who after having committed a crime, comes to the place where he lives, hears strange voices talking about him: "he caught his name 'Raven'. The old man said: 'He always has a room here. He's been away'. 'You', a strange voice said, 'what's your name — Alice — show me his room. Keep an eye on the door, Saunders'"²⁷.

Here the utterances and the narration present a situation suggesting that the police are after Raven. (Saunders has been mentioned earlier as a policeman). Immediately the question 'will they catch Raven?' arises.

As has been mentioned before, the question aroused does not by itself constitute suspense. It is only the starting point, the preliminary stage. Suspense is created only when the question is sustained. The second component of suspense, and the most essential one, is sustaining the question by means of repeating it or bringing it up again and again. None of the definitions discussed at the beginning of this study touches upon the ways to maintain the question, claiming that retarding the answer is sufficient to create suspense. Such an approach is represented by David Cecil. When discussing Charlotte Brontë's craft of story-telling, he praises her for "the mastery of the art of awaking suspense" which he understands as a mere postpo-

²³ The term 'unuttered monologue' is to denote the narrative structure in which a character's thoughts are formulated. Even if there is no first person but a third person subject, it differs from the narrative by the peculiarities of language. It must be clear that the language is characteristic of the character and not the narrator. The same goes for the way of thinking. The narrative structure is sometimes called 'interior monologue'. Cf. M. Głowiński, A. Okopień-Sławińska, J. Sławiński, *Zarys teorii literatury*, Warszawa 1967, pp. 346–351. The author of the present study has decided not to use Głowiński's term in order to make it distinct from the 'interior monologue' which is one of the techniques of the stream of consciousness novels. Cf. R. Humphrey, *Strumień świadomości — techniki*, „Pamiętnik Literacki", 1970, fasc. 4, pp. 257–259.

²⁴ Greene, *Brighton Rock*, p. 30.

²⁵ Greene, *A Gun for Sale*, p. 15.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 79.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

nement of the answer²⁸. He supports the opinion with the following example which is a summary of an incident in *Jane Eyre*: "Jane Eyre, out walking, finds a gentleman in a trouble with horse"²⁹; and he comments on it: "it is not for ten pages that we find he is her employer, Mr Rochester"³⁰. Unfortunately, the example chosen by Cecil does not seem to contain any suspense at all. The character's (the stranger's) utterance, in which he shows his knowledge of Thornfield Hall and its inhabitants³¹ may suggest the question of his identity to the narrator-protagonist (Jane). It is also true that the revelation comes after a few pages³², but in spite of that nobody awaits this answer. There is no evidence in the text showing that Jane, the character and the narrator in one person, wants to know the identity of the stranger. She clearly states: "the incident had occurred and was gone for me", it just "marked with change one single hour of a monotonous life" and "the new face, too, was like a new picture introduced into the gallery of memory"³³. So, when the question is of no interest either to the character or to the narrator, then, accordingly, it cannot be of any interest to the addressee³⁴.

A conclusion may be drawn here that the nature of suspense consists in the repetition of a question. It is also the only proof of a character's or narrator's uncertainty or curiosity and signals their interest to know the answer. Accordingly, the lack of repetition means the lack of suspense.

Sustaining the question aroused may be realized in a text as a very close repetition of that question. E.g.: Q^{35} = "Hale knew, before he had been in Brighton three hours, that they meant to murder him". R^{36} = "It was then Hale realized that they meant to murder him"³⁷. Furthermore, the question is often repeated by keeping it alive. The following sentences may serve as signals of suspense:

(1) a sentence or a set of sentences in a character's utterance expressing his own or another character's doubt, anticipation, hesitation, suspicion, threat, decision or fear.

²⁸ Cf. Cecil, *op. cit.*, pp. 138–139.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 139.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 139.

³¹ Cf. Ch. Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, Leipzig 1953, p. 130.

³² Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 127–134.

³³ *Ibidem*, pp. 131–132.

³⁴ Although the example presented above does not show suspense created either by the narrator or to the narrator it seems that the device under discussion can exist in the passage in spite of what has been said. Yet, if so, it can appear in a different stratum of the work; namely, between the implied author and the addressee of the narration. The question suggested by the implied author to the addressee would be of course different to the one proposed above and would seem to concern the narrator. However, since the addressee is still another element of a literary work which has not been sufficiently analyzed so far, there are no criteria for examining signals of suspense in that stratum of a work.

³⁵ Q — denotes the question aroused or the sentence suggesting it.

³⁶ R — denotes a repetition of the question aroused.

³⁷ Greene, *Brighton Rock*, pp. 1 and 6.

E.g.: "I'm going to die. I'm scared"³⁸. The sentences express Hale's fear that the gang may murder him and signal the question 'will they murder him?'³⁹. "You are talking that way because you are scared"⁴⁰, says Raven to Anne, the girl whom he intends to murder. This time the utterance of the character shows fear of the other character and signals the question: 'will Raven kill Anne?'⁴¹;

(2) a sentence or a set of sentences in a character's unuttered monologue expressing the same emotions as listed above.

E.g.: "Oh, to know, to know"⁴², thinks Raven when searching the house of an old woman whom he saw carrying Anne's handbag. He anticipates that the girl is in danger or may even be killed. The sentence of his unuttered monologue expressing his anxious uncertainty about the girl's fate signals twice the question concerning Anne's fate⁴³ (each clause is a separate signal).

(3) narrator's comments upon the emotions of a character listed above. E.g.: "Don't stop. Go on back and round again". *He was like a man with fever*"⁴⁴.

"He was scared sick, but he told himself, 'I'm not going to die'"⁴⁵.

In the above examples the character's fear is expressed by both the character himself (in his utterance and in his unuttered monologue) and by the narrator who comments on it in his own words.

(4) sentences of narration presenting a situation which shows the narrator's uncertainty about or anticipation of the outcome of that situation which could be the answer to the question aroused. E.g.: "He got up and came towards her with his hands out; she screamed and shook the door, then fled from it because there was no reply and ran round the bed. He just let her run; there was no escape in the tiny cramped room"⁴⁶. A page earlier⁴⁷ the question concerning Anne's fate was aroused. Here the account of the character's actions and the suggestions of the narrator signal the danger the girl is in.

A whole situation is usually the multiple of a single repetition because almost each clause may signal the question, as it was in the case of the above example. The first sentence repeats the question, referring to the character in danger, seven times:

- (1) "He got up",
- (2) he "came towards her with his hands out",
- (3) "she screamed",

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

³⁹ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 1.

⁴⁰ Greene, *A Gun for Sale*, p. 58.

⁴¹ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 49.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 123.

⁴³ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 79.

⁴⁴ Greene, *Brighton Rock*, p. 20.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

⁴⁶ Greene, *A Gun for Sale*, p. 80.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 79.

- (4) she "shook the door",
- (5) she "fled from it",
- (6) "there was no reply",
- (7) she "ran round the bed"⁴⁸.

The above example shows the importance of the device of sustaining the question. The way of maintaining the question conditions the *intensity* of suspense: the more often the question is repeated, the greater the intensity of suspense turns out to be. In other words, intensity increases with the growing frequency of the signals.

The above list of the ways in which a question aroused may be repeated has exemplified the cases when the sustaining is achieved by repetitions of the same question only. The question aroused may also be maintained by means of suggesting new questions which are subordinate to the main one⁴⁹.

E.g.: The sentence: "So now we must set ourselves very seriously to finding this gentleman" (Henry Baker) "and ascertaining *what part he has played in this little mystery*"⁵⁰. Suggests q : 'did Henry Baker steal the diamond', which, although a new one, sustains the main question aroused previously (that is 'who stole the diamond?'). Accordingly its repetitions will also signal the main one.

The various means of sustaining the question constitute different types of constructing units of suspense. A unit of suspense is understood as a single device consisting of one main question, its repetitions and the answer. The basic type of suspense unit is: $Q \dots R^n \dots A$. Various realizations of each of the three components result in different variants of the basic type:

(1) The main question may not appear directly but it may result from subordinate questions: $q^n R^n A$.

(2) The sustaining may be achieved by arising subordinate questions: $Q q^n r^n A$ ⁵¹.

(3) The answer may consist of subordinate answers: $Q q^n r^n a^n (A)$. The above patterns have been given only by way of example. A literary work may realize far more numerous variants of the basic suspense unit.

Another important aspect of constructing suspense in a literary work is the relation of a suspense unit to the part of text it covers. One unit of suspense may cover:

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 80.

⁴⁹ The first question aroused will be called 'main question' — Q . The new questions, sustaining it, will be called 'subordinate questions' — q . The repetitions of q will be denoted — r .

⁵⁰ Conan Doyle, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

⁵¹ The pattern has been often encountered in the detective story, where the main question concerns the unavailing of the criminal, and the subordinate questions — the characters suspected of having committed the crime.

It seems that such a pattern may be also present in the serial novel (the particular adventures of characters may form the subordinate questions while the main question concerns the fate of the protagonist). The problem of suspense in the serial novel has been discussed by prof. Stefania Skwarczyńska, Cf. S. Skwarczyńska, *Wstęp do nauki o literaturze*, vol. 3, Warszawa 1965, pp. 236–238.

- (1) the whole text of a literary work (a work begins with *Q* and ends with *A*);
- (2) one 'part', 'book' or chapter;
- (3) units of the pattern of action:
 - (a) exposition,
 - (b) Vorgeschichte,
 - (c) action (*Q* = inciting moment; *A* = denouement),
 - (d) Nachgeschichte;
- (4) one event;
- (5) presentation of one character;
- (6) presentation of one idea or problem;
- (7) one aspect of the presented character or idea⁵².

In all the cases suspense and composition are interdependent and usually conditioned by the dominant element of the work.

As has been already mentioned the third component of suspense, that is postponement of the answer, is achieved mainly by the sustaining of a question. The answer is retarded by a mere fact that repetitions come after the question. The material examined shows also that the postponement of the answer may be achieved additionally by some other means. It is realized mainly by shifts of point of view and shifts of interest. The shifts serve suspense only when the question is signaled at the same time. In that way the same aspect may be presented several times for the sake of emphasis.

The means of creating suspense, discussed above, and its very nature indicate the method of examination. The analysis of suspense in the novel should mainly be focused on its intensity. Since suspense is functional in the composition of a work it is also advisable to examine it in connection with such elements of a work as the action and characters as well as with narrative techniques.

CO TO JEST „NAPIĘCIE”?

STRESZCZENIE

Praca niniejsza ma głównie na celu omówienie istniejących już określeń oraz sformułowanie własnej definicji napięcia, a także wyjaśnienie jego istoty, jak i wskazanie na możliwe sposoby badania go w dziele literackim. Praca ma charakter teoretyczny, uogólniający i opiera się na stosunkowo wąskim materiale badawczym. Poddano analizie pięć powieści G. Greene'a typu „entertainment” oraz dwa opowiadania Conan Doyle'a i Conrada. Wymienione ograniczenia wskazują, że praca jest tylko fazą początkową w badaniach napięcia. Autorce pozostaje wyrazić nadzieję, że praca ta umożliwi dalszą analizę tego typu na szerszym materiale historycznoliterackim.

W pierwszej części artykułu omówiono istniejące określenia terminu literackiego „napięcie”. Autorka neguje głównie metodologiczne podejście tych opracowań, które rozpatrują napięcie na

⁵² The case of one suspense unit listed as: (1), (3), (4) are frequent in the detective story; (4) may also be encountered in the serial novel.

plaszczyźnie recepcji dzieła. Proponuje badanie napięcia jako kategorii wewnętrznej utworu literackiego. Drugim zasadniczym punktem rozbieżności między dotychczasowymi opracowaniami a prezentowanym materiałem jest istota napięcia. Jak dotąd, istoty napięcia dopatrywano się w retardacji odpowiedzi na sugerowane wcześniej pytanie. Przeprowadzona została analiza różnych sposobów retardacji, przy czym stwierdzono, że istota napięcia leży nie tyle w retardacji odpowiedzi, ile w przypominaniu lub powtarzaniu pytania.

W miejsce istniejących określeń napięcia została zaproponowana definicja: „Napięcie jest zabiegiem stylistycznym polegającym na repetycji pytania zasugerowanego narratorowi, adresatowi lub postaciom. Skutkami repetycji są: podtrzymanie pytania i retardacja odpowiedzi”.

W dalszej części pracy ukazane zostały sposoby przejawiania się poszczególnych składników napięcia z podkreśleniem wagi repetycji będącej składnikiem warunkującym istnienie całego zabiegu artystycznego, jak i jego części składowych. Stąd też sposoby powtórzeń omówiono najdokładniej. Dla przykładu podano niektóre wzory realizacji jednostki napięcia i ich zależności wobec kompozycji utworu.

Znaczenie repetycji pytania dla wysokości napięcia (wysokość napięcia mierzona jest częstością powtórzeń w jednostce) wskazuje jednocześnie na sposób badania tego zabiegu. Napięcie pozostające w ścisłym związku z kompozycją utworu powinno być badane, jak się wydaje, w powiązaniu z poszczególnymi elementami i sposobami narracji dzieła literackiego.

Joanna Drązkiewicz