

## FORMULA OF CLASSICAL DETECTIVE IN *KNIVES OUT* MOVIE DIRECTED BY RIAN JOHNSON

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### Abstract

This study aims to analyze the formula of classical detective in the *Knives Out* movie. The problem of this study is what are classical detective formula that appear in *Knives Out* movie. This study used descriptive qualitative method by using Cawelti's theory. The data source is taken from the *Knives Out* movie and analyzed the data by describing, interpreting, analysis, drawing a conclusion. Based on this analysis, the researcher found out 14 classical detective formula according to Cawelti. This formula includes 11 conventions as follows: situation, crime and clues, investigation, announcement of the solution, explanation of the solution, denouement, the victims, the criminal, the detective, those threatened by crime but incapable of solving it, setting. In addition, there are 3 inventions found as follows: the victims, the detective, setting and situation. Based on the analysis results, the classical detective formula that appear in *Knives Out* still maintained the prevailing pattern based on Cawelti's theory but there are new invention that exist as a response to the development of the classical detective genre from time to time.

**Keywords:** classical detective, convention, formula, genre

### INTRODUCTION

Genre is a type or kind of literary work and popular culture which differed from its characteristics, form, and nature (Adi, 2008; Kaminsky, 1985). Wellek and Warren (1956) stated that genre is basically a group of literary works which are theoretically based on external form (special structure) and internal form (attitude, tone purpose, subject and audience. Moreover, the criteria of genre can be seen from various factors such as themes, characters, and storytelling methods. Each genre of literary works has been following the basic standard of style to reveal the specific kind of stories, because it relates to the targeted audiences. Romance, criminal, gothic,

horror, or even in a specific type like slavery-themed novel (Rasiah, 2020); and Islamic themed novels or films (Rasiah, 2023) are engaged themselves to the recognized features and innovation as well.

Changes in people's tastes become one as Maltby (1995) said that genre is a subject to constant process of change and adaptation. For the reason that, different audiences will use a genre in different ways at different times, its boundaries can never be rigidly defined, and at the same time it is susceptible to extensive subdivision. The flexibility of the genre is determined by the tastes of the audience or readers, meaning here that the genre is basically run into developments to suit the audience from time to time, because tastes change along with changes and the growth in society. Therefore, genres also change following the evolution of these tastes.

Literary genre is composed of various literary elements such as characters, plot structure, setting, and theme but in the context of Popular Fiction these elements are referred to as Formulas. Cawelti defines Formula as a combination or synthesis of a number of specific cultural conventions with a more universal story form or archetype (1976: 6). Formula is a conventional system in structuring cultural products; it means that, culture is behavior, belief, culture including what people know. A culture becomes popular because it contains elements of entertainment that are liked by many people and easily understood by everyone, so that when this culture is produced in popular fiction, it conveys cultural reality in the form of symbols. This symbol is understood by the audience as a formula.

As mentioned before, the type of literature is not just a name, but there are conventions that apply to a literary work so that it forms the characteristics of the work. They are simply determined by particular type of structure or system of literature. One of them is detective convention, detective convention are easily recognized by the public because of their iconography, magnifying glass, books, distinctive hats, long jackets, intelligent investigator, even the thematic elements can be in the form of murders, hidden crimes, and clue puzzle. In other words, the detective story has established patterns so that various existing conventions become strong and tight bonds, including the conventions that apply in its literary structure.

The detective stories can be found in a movie called *Knives Out*. In *Knives Out*, there is a detective character named Benoit Blanc who is faced with a mysterious murder case named Harlan Thrombey who died of suicide at his home. Harlan Thrombey has a family member named Linda, his first daughter who has a husband named Richard, and they have a son named

Ransom. His youngest child named Walter has a wife named Donna and has a child named Jacob, and finally Joni, the widow of Harlan's late son named Neil who also has a child named Meg. All of these members became suspects who were eliminated by detective Blanc, as they were the last people with Harlan on his birthday. Harlan's medical nurse named Martha became a strong suspect because she was accused of manipulating Harlan to give her all of his inheritance. So that Martha is a person who deserves to be used as the perpetrator of Harlan's murder. After a lengthy investigation, Benoit Blanc finally managed to solve the murder with great difficulty uncovering the perpetrators of the crime that the Harlan's family did not suspect. The perpetrator of Harlan's murder became an element of surprise for them because after Benoit Blanc explained the results of his investigation, it turned out that surprisingly the murder did not come from Martha, but it came from Harlan's family himself named Hugh Ransom Drysdale.

Here, *Knives Out* movie has a formula in constructing the story. To create a detective story involves not only some understanding of how to make an interesting mystery story, but also how to use certain images and symbols such as analytical detectives, murders, investigations, clues, victims, isolated places and appropriate themes such as mystery, crime. This story pattern follows the story built in the *Knives Out* movie. For example, Harlan's character becomes a murder victim so the situation becomes confusing for the detective and those closest to him because Harlan dies strangely by killing himself.

The detective story has established formulas in accordance with the development of formula innovations, but this genre also seems to be experiencing changes which can be seen the way the characters are treated, the plot, theme and the different settings. This change is not something that is unreasonable, but this change was made because the creators are trying to adapt to changes in different audience and also because this genre has experienced different changing of times. Cawelti in studying popular fiction defines that every work of fiction has conventions and inventions, According to him all cultural products contain a mixture of two kinds of elements: convention and invention (Cawelti, 1971: 384). Elements within a genre that have become known to critics, creators and audiences over time are seen in terms of structure conventions which are repetitive plots, stereotyped characters, and acceptable ideas, whereas inventions are elements created by creators through their unique imagination such as types of characters, ideas, and new forms of narrative.

Genre research in this case means researching conventions and inventions of a genre in order to see the development of a genre. Conventions are intended to examine regularity within a genre, while inventions are intended to examine changes within a genre. Therefore, genre research is based on the existence of conventions in a genre which shows that the detective genre in the *Knives Out* movie still adheres to established detective conventions. The convention that is maintained in the *Knives Out* movie is the situation. The situation used in this movie is unsolvable crime. This situation can be seen in the scene when at the beginning of the movie it opens with the death of Harlan who is shown to have committed suicide. This incident made detective Blanc confused to solve the case because there was no connection and clear evidence that someone was involved in his death. Then the writer discover a new thing that appeared at this detective convention, namely the setting is taken in different place. This can be seen in the scene showing Martha in a car chase with the police in a small town.

As said above, it shows that there is a formula in *Knives Out* movie which relates to conventions and inventions in the detective genre movie, conventions and inventions have different cultural functions as stated by Cawelti (1971), Convention represents familiar shared images and meanings and they assert an ongoing continuity of value; inventions confront up with the new perception or meaning which we have not realized before. Both these functions are important to culture. Conventions help maintain a culture's stability while the inventions help it respond to changing circumstances and provide new information about the world (Cawelti, 1971: 28).

The data of this study is the text of *Knives Out*, Text here means motion picture and script of the movie. Data collected through watching, identifying the data, classifying the data and analyzed the data through descriptive qualitative method by approaching the theory of formula proposed by Cawelti.

## **THE CONVENTION OF CLASSICAL DETECTIVE GENRE IN *KNIVES OUT* MOVIE**

The convention of the classical detective genre in *Knive Out* movie is traced through the standard of elements that become the typical of detective. They are the crime, mystery of murdering, the typical of the detective character, the victims, the clue, the solutions and the settings.

In a classical detective story, Cawelti (1976:80) stated that a classical detective story begins with an unsolved crime and moving towards unraveling the mystery. The crime must be the main one with the potential for complex ramifications. Usually, the murder is an element used in assembling the storyline, the murder must be unsolvable.



Picture 1& 2. Unsolvable Murder

The movie shows the situation where Harlan Thrombey killed himself because he wanted to help his medical nurse Martha. The crime was committed by Ransom who wanted to take his grandfather's inheritance which fell to Martha. Ransom's actions are known to have swapped the contents of Harlan's medicine bottle with high morphine, so that Martha would give Harlan the morphine so he would die of an overdose. Harlan's death becomes difficult to solve because at the beginning of his meeting at the beginning of the film, he was found to have committed suicide, not to die from an overdose of morphine. Unsolved crimes become a classical pattern that the movie adopted.

Classical detective stories tend to place more emphasis on the complexity of the puzzles surrounding the crime. The effectiveness of crime depends on the relationship of the two paradoxes to each other where on the other hand the crime must be surrounded by a number of clear clues that make it absolutely clear, that some character is responsible for it, then on the other hand the crime must also be unsolvable (Cawelti, 1976). The way these instructions were made was by having several figures carry out these actions with indications that it seemed unlikely that there were figures involved so that the instructions reached an impasse, which can be ascertained that a crime has occurred but the identity of the perpetrator is still in doubt.

In *Knives Out* movie, the crime emerges when Harlan is found suicide in his room. But, the paradox appears when there are clues that reveal that Harlan's death was not a suicide but there is a motive for murder indicating that someone was involved in his death.



Picture 3. Detective Blanc found broken trellis and trace of dried mud

Detective Blanc: On the night of the party, somebody did not want to be heard climbing those steps went to a great deal of trouble to break into Harlan Thrombey's room.

Crime and clues is shown to detective Blanc's discoveries during his investigation of Harlan's house. Detective Blanc found a broken trellis outside Harlan's house and traces of mud on the carpet on the 3rd floor. The existence of these clues was caused by Martha who was carrying out instructions given by Harlan; on the other hand Ransom also did the same thing as Martha but with a different purpose. Ransom's actions left real physical evidence that he had committed the crime, but detective Blanc still doesn't know the true identity of the person responsible for the physical evidence. So it can be concluded that *Knives Out* applies the classical detective formula, namely crime and clues patterns.

Investigations are carried out with the aim of finding out who the perpetrators are and what actions the protagonist or detective should take. Investigations in classical detective are usually carried out because of the many cases that do not find a bright spot. Cawelti (1976: 85) stated that investigations in detective stories follow the sequence of crimes and clues that involve witnesses as well as suspects and solutions that are not necessarily true, thus making the mystery even more obscure and unclear. This investigation is marked when the solution to a problem didn't come to light, then it is time for the detective to intervene in trying the truth. In *Knives Out* movie, the investigation begins by detective Blanc by interrogating members of Harlan's family and got suspicion on Walter, Richard and Joni, when he learns that they were the last people beside Harlan at his birthday party before Harlan was found dead in the next morning. Initial evidence corroborating them as prime suspects is when, detective Blanc learns that Harlan has a strained relationship with three of these members.

Trooper Wagner : So she bumps him off for the inheritance? Come on, no, have you seen her insta? She's an influencer.  
Lieutenant Elliot : No. Allowance as a motive? Again, more weak sauce. You're just dumpin that vat of weak sauce one me.  
Detective Blanc : Granted. But she lied to me. All three of them did.  
Lieutenant Elliot : Three?  
Detective Blanc : Walter

The investigation involving the suspect in the *Knives Out* movie is shown to members of the Harlan's family who lie to detective Blanc in order to avoid being motive of murder. Walter, Richard and Joni were said to be a suspect when detective Blanc suspects them as murder suspects based on the evidence he obtained through their and Harlan's feud.

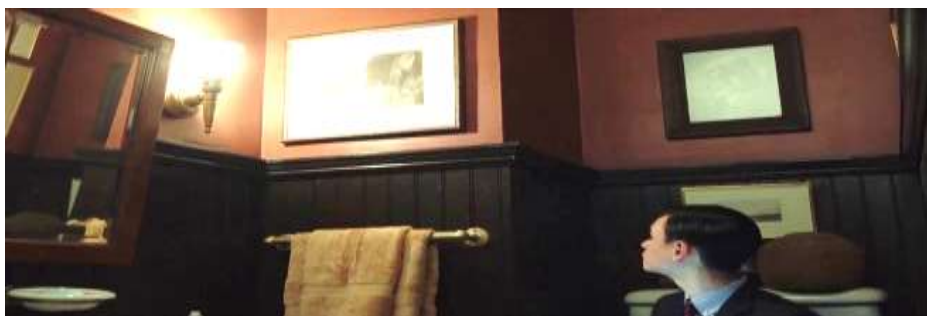
The investigation regarding the witness that happened in the *Knives Out* movie is shown by two character named Fran and Jacob. Witness regarding Fran can be seen in the conversation below.



Picture 4. Fran watches Ransom fiddling Martha's medical bag

Detective Blanc: Poor Fran. She witnessed you tampering with Harlan's medication in the medical bag, she did not know what you were doing. But she knew you were up to no good. So her mind begins to turn.

Martha : Oh god



Picture 5. Jacob heard Ransom and Harlan from the side room

Linda : You were in the bathroom next to Harlan's office,

where he had the fight with Ransom. Now you heard something. Spill it.

Jacob : I just heard to things. My will. And then there was more yelling, and then I heard Ransom say. I'm warning you.

The *Knives Out* movie presents the role of suspect and witness through the characters that are applied in this movie, so it can be concluded that the investigation part is still maintained the classical detective stories found in the *Knives Out* movie.

The action in a classical detective story focuses on solving the mystery of the crime, so the announcement from the detective that he has arrived at a solution to the crime is a climactic moment of the story. The announcement of the solution is the point at which the detective has solved the mystery of the crime after carrying out various investigations and gathering evidence in the field. Apart from that, it is at this point that detectives usually take the initiative to fight criminals, and at the same time it is the beginning of the completion part of the story.



Picture 6 & 7. Detective Blanc reveals the solution

Detective Blanc : Now with the entire solution in my field of view, the arc of this case is a tragedy of errors. Martha, it will not be easy for you to hear. But there is at least, one truly guilty party behind it all, guilty in the true sense of acting with malice and committing a heinous crime with selfish intent.

The announcement of the solution section is shown by detective Blanc who announces the solution that he has succeeded in solving the crime case of Harlan's death, by revealing Ransom as the person behind the murder. So it can be concluded that the announcement of the solution is still applied as a formula pattern to compose a classical detective story in *Knives Out*.

According to Cawelti (1976), explanation of solutions in detective stories is so important because to complete the investigation, this part indicates the direction in which the story is moving. An explanation of the solution is marked with a chronological explanation of how an event can occur. Usually, the detective character explains the chronology of the crime cases he handled, and the beginning of why the crime had to happen. Explanations rearrange events

according to logical positions in action sequences. This provides us with a clear and elicited order of events that appear to be random and chaotic. In *Knives Out* movie, detective Blanc explains the chronology of the crimes committed by Ransom. The crime started with his dispute with Harlan on the night of the birthday party. That night, Ransom knew in advance that Harlan had given all of his inheritance to Martha. The explanation of detective Blanc can be shown in the conversation below.

Detective Blanc : In the meanwhile, Mr. Hugh Ransom Drysdale, you might tell us all why you hired me?  
Ransom : Why I hired you?  
Detective Blanc : You're right. Let's back it up to the night of the party. You argument with Harlan. What were the overhead words by nazi child masturbating in the bathroom? My will, and I'm warning you. You and Harlan were drama mamas. You shared a love of twisting the knife into one another. You see I don't believe he would have slipped it in halfway. No, no, no. I submit Harlan told you everything.

This section shows the formula that is still used in classical detective stories where detective Blanc discusses the solution from the beginning of the crime that Ransom committed and how it is all connected to each other when he reveals it all. So, as we can see, in this part is still maintained as a detective formula to compose the story of the *Knives Out* movie.

The ending is marked by a scene showing the arrest and confession of the perpetrators of the crime. According to Cawelti (1976: 91), the tendency to create endings only breeds detective solutions rather than giving the reader a more complex interest in a criminal predicament, which points to an observation that has been made those detective stories focus more on the isolation and specification of guilt than on punishment of the criminal.



Picture 8. Ransom's arrest

The picture shows Ransom's arrest after found guilty of Fran's death. This arrested was initiated after detective Blanc revealed his deductions with Martha, Ransom and the police. Martha, who received a call from the hospital, stated that Fran's condition was still alive, thus cornering Ransom and accusing him of exploiting the good done by his family and trying to rob them of their birthright. Ransom who cornered and having lost his serenity due to being taunted by detective Blanc, finally admits to killing Fran, and rambles on punishable charges for him such as the arson of the Chief Medical Examiner's Office, the attempted murders of Harlan and Fran, not going to get him a long sentence. So he vowed to take revenge on Martha after he left later. However, at that very moment, Martha suddenly vomited on her face. Fran, in fact dead, Martha had lied long enough to trick Ransom into confessing to her murder. It turns out that Trooper Wagner secretly recorded his entire confession on his phone so that Ransom is guilty and will face life imprisonment.

The victims in classic detective stories have problems that are difficult for the creator of the work to deal with, because the victim has limitations that must be desired by the creator of the work. For example, as stated by Cawelti (1976: 91) regarding the treatment of victims in classic detective stories where the audience is not given too much information about the victim or he appears as a very important character because otherwise the focus of the story related to the investigation will become blurred so that it disrupts the formulation of the story. The way that Cawelti offers is a must that must be done for this victim to succeed; the victims meet strange and confusing endings, so that their characters do not involve the interest or sympathy of the audience but their final nature.



Picture 9. Harlan's flashback

It can be observed that the role of the victim has limitations that must be carried out in this movie. On the one hand, Harlan has to be important in order for the audience to pay attention to

the investigation into his death. In this way it is done to build the character of Harlan's victim through his flashbacks so that the audience starts to care about the investigation into his death. But on the other hand, Harlan's spotlight should not be excessive and take over the investigative process itself or it can be say the core of the story.

A criminal in a detective story is described by criminal acts that have complicated motives and their actions are interesting to the story. Their actions must be defined as evil or always bad in the eyes of others. A story in the classical detective usually presents the criminal as the enemy of a good character or detective. In *Knives Out* movie, it is explained that there has been a mysterious murder by Harlan. The criminal, in this case, was known by the detective character that Ransom was the perpetrator of the crime.



Picture 10. Ransom's personality

The criminal is shown by the character namely Hugh Ransom Drysdale, the grandson of Harlan. Ransom is a spoiled, eccentric boy whose livelihood is based on his family's wealth. This made him arrogant and haughty. Ransom is the only one who is truly evil because he is willing to do anything to get his share of the inheritance, call it murder. He is overall a selfish, emotionless, psychopathic and somewhat immature person. He behaved like a spoiled teenager even though he looked to be in his thirties. He even admits to seeking his birthright but not caring about the rest of his family as long as he gets his own. He is also described as having a lazy nature as seen by his refusal to work and having no intention of doing so.

The criminal is shown by Ransom's character who wants his grandfather's inheritance. In order to get that, he did everything he could to blame Martha so that he was not entitled to inherit

the property because he had been the one who killed Harlan and Fran. Based on the explanation above, it can be concluded that the criminal in *Knives Out* movie is described as having a criminal act complicated motives by Ransom's character. This also shows that the formula of criminal in *Knives Out* movies still maintained.

The detective character naturally gets the most attention in the story, because his character is so firm, has professional skills, and high intelligence. According to Cawelti (1976: 94), the detective character is a brilliant and somewhat ambiguous figure who seems to have an almost miraculous power to reveal the deepest secrets, but he chooses to use the power not to threaten but to amuse us.



Picture 11. Detective Blanc character

Detective Benoit Blanc is the main character in the movie. Benoit Blanc is described as flamboyant, boring but practical, polite, pleasant, very smart and intelligent, somewhat eccentric but overall a good detective. He is shown to be very kind, willing to convince others and really cares about others. Benoit Blanc is a private investigator who is often heralded as the world's greatest detective. His greatest accomplishment was when he solved the case of the tennis champion and he was named The Last of the Gentlemen Sleuths in the New Yorker magazine, which confirmed him as the world's most famous detective. He has a southern aristocratic accent as the Kentucky Fried Foghorn Leghorn Drawl, he has a tendency to use phrases and words that few people understand and also frequently uses metaphors during his cases.

Detective Blanc : But I was obviously right, Richard is having an affair. His father-in-law found out and confronted him. You tell her or I will.  
Lieutenant Elliot : Okay, but even if that were the case, I mean, protecting a relationship as a motive, that's weak sauce.

The conversation above shows how well detective Blanc's deduction skill is. Detective Blanc is able to correctly come to a conclusion regarding a secret that Richard did not confess to during the initial interrogation. He knew that there was something odd about Richard's answer, which he seemed to be trying to cover up. Detective Blanc gets a tip from the caterer who didn't see Richard helping with the food the day before the birthday party, but the caterer overhears Richard in Harlan's office arguing with Harlan. In the conversation the caterer was listening to, he heard a word that went "You tell her or I will". From hearing this catering, detective Blanc immediately concluded that Richard was having an affair with another woman. To prove his conclusion correct, Detective Blanc somewhat harshly tries to use Martha's compulsive vomiting which he has heard from rumors that Martha has a physical reaction disease if she thinks or tries to lie then she will vomit. The purpose of this detective blanc is to hear what he wants to hear about Richard's previous problems with Harlan, which in the end were all revealed through Martha.



Picture 12. Martha's shoes

Martha : Can I ask, when you knew I had something to do with Harlan's death.  
Detective Blanc : From the first moment you set foot in front of me.  
Martha :Oh shit.

Detective Blanc also has a good ability to read people's characters. He could conclude that Martha had lied to him about Harlan's death from the start, but he didn't tell or take it to the police or the family because he realized Martha was a good person, there must have been a certain reason behind it. His decision not to make Martha a suspect was when he saw bloodstains on Martha's shoes the first time he spoke to her and knew that she was involved with Harlan's

death somehow, but he just kept quiet because she knew that Martha was not the type of person who would kill Harlan directly.

The detective character is described by Blanc's character as a detective who has good deduction skills and has the ability to read people's characters well. Detective Blanc was able to come to a conclusion when Richard did not want to admit the problems he faced by his grandfather which made detective Blanc feel sure that there was something he were trying to hide. He was also able to come to the conclusion that Martha was the person who played an important role in Harlan's murder which he only saw through a small blood mark located on Martha's shoe. This shows that Blanc's character in *Knives Out* movie is a detective who has good deductive abilities and miraculous power to reveal the deepest secrets.

The setting can consist of several parts, namely the setting of the place, the atmosphere, and the time. Yet, the setting in classical detective according to Cawelti (1976: 97), setting is usually taken in an closed (isolated) place in a wider area, the setting is in a locked room in the middle of a city, an isolated village house in the middle of a swamp a strange and frightening swamp, or a lonely villa on the outskirts of town. Cawelti also revealed, the setting in a detective story has the main function, namely the setting completes a limited and controlled background where the clues and suspects become the center of the silhouetted story. Below, the author will describe the setting depicted in the *Knives Out* movie.



Picture 13 &14. The Atmosphere of settings in Harlan's House

The setting used in the *Knives Out* movie is depicted through Harlan's house which is in the middle of the forest. The location of his house is so isolated that almost no house or building lives next to it. Such settings ensure the frightening, mysterious and enigmatic atmosphere in the typical of detective movie.

## CONCLUSION

This paper concluded that the classical formula of detective genre in the movie *Knives Out* is depicted through the typical type of detectives; the crime should be arise, unsolvable murder (puzzle), the features of detective character, the victim, the solution and isolated settings.

Regarding the victim character from a conventional perspective, this movie still maintains its victim treatment that is a victim who has given not too much information or he can be a very important character. It can be seen in the very first minute of the movie, the victim is in the full spotlight through flashback scenes, and then, in the second minute of the movie, his spotlight is almost completely gone.

The detective character in the movie also prevent a convention formula as a clever, man, and deductive in solving problems. This can be seen when detective Blanc is able to correctly deduce the deepest secret that the Victim's family unable to identify. And he is also able to read someone's character just by looking at the codes, like, blood mark on Martha's shoe. The detective character as Benoit Blanc is described as an investigator who has excellent deduction skills and has the power to uncover the deepest secrets.

Meanwhile, in the setting of a classic detective movie, the writer still finds thing that is the identity of a classic detective movie, namely the setting where it takes place in a closed location far from the crowds, precisely in the middle of the forest. The location used is an isolated place where there are almost no houses or buildings around Harlan's house.

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