


Agatha Christie's Poirot novels as fairy tales: Two case studies

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The popularity of detective stories may result from the attraction of the hero, the entertaining thrill of the plot or the comforting power of the overall message which promises that evil will be defeated in the end: there is always someone able to fight it and determined to do so. But the immense success of detective stories can also be explained otherwise, which is the purpose of this article. In this research, Vladimir Propp's narratemes – understood as recurring, genre-specific structure elements of the plot – are evidenced in two successful detective novels by Agatha Christie. The nature of detective novels in general and the uniqueness of the detective Poirot as a character are outlined, followed by the presentation of Propp's narratemes. Then, the contents of two selected works by Christie, *The mysterious affair at Styles* and *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, are scrutinised and retold in terms of the narratemes identified in them. It is thereby claimed and confirmed through selected examples that the detective novels examined draw on a modified morphology typical of fairy tales, as is described by Propp. Consequently, further research is postulated to verify the hypothesis of similarities between detective novels and fairy tales as a factor contributing to the tremendous success of the former as a genre.

Keywords: Christie; Poirot; crime fiction; mystery; fairy tale; narrateme; Vladimir Propp.

Introduction

Agatha Christie's writings, alongside the works by John Carr and Ellery Queen, laid the foundations of the Golden Age of detective fiction that started in Britain around the 1920s and lasted until the outbreak of the Second World War. Within crime fiction, the Golden Age revived forms longer than a short story. As observed by Van Dover (2005:30), this longer form opened room for descriptions of the detective's subtle observations. Two complex distinctive features are typical of crime fiction of that period. The first concerns the detective (with few exceptions, usually a man) and his social relations. He stands in opposition to a society in which a crime has been committed and where the law has been broken, with his crime-solving faculties occupied in solving the 'whodunnit' for the duration of the plot. The second typical characteristic concerns the context of the committed crime: a picture of a society is provided, together with some secondary characters, each having their own stories that are partly tracked back and partly develop alongside the detective's principal investigations.

Review of the relevant literature

As emphasised by Seago (2014):

[W]hat is central to all crime fiction is the disruption and restitution of equilibrium, a stereotypical plot where crime threatens the social order and the narrative arc is about restoring that social order (fully or partially). (p. 5)

This observation seems to reinforce Grossvogel's (1983) opinion of Christie's popularity, according to which:

Christie's first readers read her in order to purchase at the cost of a minor and passing disturbance the comfort of knowing that the disturbance was contained, and that at the end of the story the world they imagined would be continued in its innocence and familiarity. (p. 4)

Based on the work by Hunt, Van Dover (2005:23) pointed out that detectives created by crime fiction authors can be roughly divided into two categories: the hard-boiled and the cold, scientific types. The former mostly struggle with problems such as addiction, debts or family disturbances. They act out of instinct and experience. The latter are free of personal complications; at work, they rely on cold, scrupulously analytical thought processes.

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This division goes hand-in-hand with the generally acknowledged split of detective stories into classical and hard-boiled, the latter following the former in the course of the development of the genre. With his love for order and symmetry, immaculate attire and sophisticated taste, Poirot appears as a perfect exemplification of the latter.

As rightly observed by Dobrescu (2013:43–45), crime fiction as a genre is still frequently perceived as a source of pure entertainment, and the iconic status within popular culture of some successful crime writers (like Christie) only confirms this fact. It should be added that, despite her unquestionable notoriety, Christie is often viewed as a ‘lowbrow’ author (Ewers 2016:97), with no merit to be studied as a serious writer. However, regarding her lasting popular influence, ignoring her work in research would boil down to academia’s disregard for the audience, and as such be indefensible, at least since the sociological turn in humanities.

According to Escott (1997:23), the immense popularity of crime fiction results firstly from the ludic factor; namely the pleasure with which the reader takes in the mystery and tries to solve it before the detective does. In Van Dover’s (2005) opinion, the success of the detective story is connected to its message of objectivity: that there is a way to determine the real causes and effects and it is within human power to do so (p. 133). Rowland (2001:17) argued that the detective story ‘crucially supplements the culturally authoritative texts of the law’ in that it approaches crime from an angle which legal texts neglect. Similarly, York (2007:91) emphasised that the image of justice in Christie’s novels appears ‘more flexible than the justice of the law courts’. Grossvogel (1983:14) referred to the attractiveness of Christie’s novels as documents of her times: ‘Agatha Christie mediated for her reader unattainable worlds: now her archaic books have become those worlds’. In the meantime, this value has undoubtedly increased. It was reiterated more recently by Acocella (2010) for a wider circle of readership:

For today’s readers, one pleasure of Christie’s books is her portrait of the times: the period between the two world wars and, above all, the changes that took place after the second war’. (n.p.)

Method

In what follows, Vladimir Propp’s morphology of a fairy tale¹ will be discussed in terms of the narratemes that constitute the structure of the fairy tale as a genre. However, the last group (except for number 31: ‘wedding’) will be omitted, not only because Propp himself calls them facultative in relation to folktales, but mainly because they do not occur in the detective novels examined here. It is claimed that a detective story displays some relevant features of a fairy tale, which contributes to the attractiveness and popularity of the genre. The claim does not include the application of the chronology of Propp’s narratemes. On the contrary, as will be shown

1. Propp’s seminal work *Морфология сказки* (1928) was published in English in 1968 under the title *Morphology of the Folktale*. In his introduction to the American edition, Dundes (1968:3) noted: ‘The English title *Morphology of the Folktale* is misleading. Propp limits his analysis to only one kind of folktale, that is, to fairy tales’. Consequently, in relevant English-language research, the genre discussed by Vladimir Propp is referred to as the fairy tale.

below, in the crime fiction under investigation, Propp’s narratemes appear in a sequence different from the prototype of storytelling on which his work is based. This results from the plurality of the stories involved. Apart from the crime investigation story, there is always at least one more story involved, namely that of the crime itself together with its motive. Therefore, the investigator cannot be perceived as the only hero. Instead, it seems justified to speak about several heroes: the detective as the main hero of his investigation story, as well as another character in any other trackable subplot. Finally, the contents of two selected novels by Christie, *The mysterious affair at Styles* (1926) (hereinafter *Styles*, the first Poirot novel) and *The murder of Roger Ackroyd* (hereinafter *Ackroyd*, the work that launched Christie’s fame), will be dissected by Propp’s narratemes, with the aim of proving that in both cases, the story design reflects – in a modified manner – the narratemes identified by Propp in fairy tales.

Poirot

The detective Hercule Poirot, the protagonist of numerous works by Christie, is described as follows:

Poirot was an extraordinary-looking little man. He was hardly more than five feet four inches, but carried himself with great dignity. His head was exactly the shape of an egg, and he always perched it a little on one side. His moustache was very stiff and military. The neatness of his attire was almost incredible: I believe a speck of dust would have caused him more pain than a bullet wound. Yet this quaint dandified little man who, I was sorry to see, now limped badly, had been in his time one of the most celebrated members of the Belgian police. (*Styles*:35)

Poirot’s working method comes down to the use of his grey cells (e.g. *Styles*:228; *Ackroyd*:178). Based upon his mere appearance, although, he could pass for an anti-hero, which is important to remember because his condition makes him unfit for physical combat and completely dependent on his mind. This is important, as will be argued below, in the context of the application of certain narratemes to Christie’s work.

Propp’s narratemes

A narrateme is a structural unit of the narrative that is relevant for the text cohesion and puts the story forward. Schmid (2009:95) defined it as a ‘smallest unity of interest and concern’ that is ‘ready-made’ in that it is well known. In Propp’s ([1968]2009:25) original writing (dated 1928), the term narrateme, which is still relatively new² from today’s perspective, does not appear: he discusses what he calls ‘the functions of dramatis personae’, meaning that the characters’ actions are the structural elements of the story. In narratology, action is considered a fundamental narrateme (Wolf 2014:63);

2. The term narrateme was introduced by Prince (1996), as an obvious derivative of ‘narrate’. It often manifests itself as an action within a plot but is not identical with an action. Not every action mentioned in the narrative constitutes a narrateme as not every action really matters. Not every narrateme is an action; it can be a condition or circumstance, too. For instance, the fact that everybody is suspected will pass for a narrateme but not for an action. Nowadays, it is common practice in research to refer to Propp’s 31 functions as narratemes.

therefore, it seems justified to refer to Propp's functions as narratemes (as do, e.g. Hsieh & Chang 2019; Soto y Koelemeijer, Janssen & Kop 2018 and Alberski 2012, to name just a few), provided that the former do not pretend to exhaust the much wider range of the latter.

Based on his examination of Russian folktales, Propp ([1968]2009:26–64) proposed 31 functions or narratemes in a chronological order of appearance. They follow 'some sort of initial situation' (Propp [1968]2009:25) and can be divided into four groups, according to the progression stage of the plot.

The first group encompasses: (1) abstention: someone has left or the parents are dead and (2) interdiction: the hero receives a warning or a suggestion. At this stage, a villain (wrongdoer) enters the stage; (3) violation: the warning is ignored; (4) reconnaissance: the villain seeks information about the whereabouts of the victim; (5) delivery: the villain obtains the desired information about the victim; (6) trickery: the disguised villain deceives the hero or the victim; (7) complicity: the deceived victim helps the villain accidentally. Through the above-mentioned actions, the situation is outlined and some characters are introduced.

The second group is composed of: (8) villainy and lack: the villain harms a family member, (8a) a family member lacks or desires something or somebody and (9) mediation: the hero is asked or commanded to act once the lack is made known. He may do so as a seeker, (10) counteraction: the hero agrees to take the action and (11) departure: the hero leaves for action.

At this stage, the proper story is triggered and the hero starts working towards resolving the problem.

The third group of narratemes occurs when the hero meets a donor or provider who will test him before granting his help. This group is constituted of: (12) the first function of the donor (testing, interrogation, asking favours, etc.), (13) the hero's reaction to (12), (14) provision or receipt of a magical agent: the hero acquires a magical object, (15) guidance: the hero is led to the location of the sought after object, (16) struggle: the hero faces the villain in a direct combat, (17) branding: the hero is wounded or otherwise marked, (18) victory: the villain is defeated and (19) resolution: the misfortune or lack is eliminated.

As mentioned before, the fourth group contains only one element of interest for the present research, namely (20) wedding: the hero marries the princess and becomes king.

Limitations of applying a narrateme-based analysis to detective fiction

Several reservations must be stated at this point to defend the claim spelt out in the title of this article against possible accusations of absurdity. First of all, it should be emphasised that Poirot's connection to magic is explicitly alluded to in

other novels by Christie. For example, in *Sad Cypress* (Christie [1940]2015:320), Dr Lord expresses his admiration for the detective's brilliant mind in these words: 'It was Hercule Poirot. The fellow's a kind of magician!'. In *Five Little Pigs* (Christie [1942]2011:223), Poirot referred to himself as a magician: 'I want to show you, mademoiselle, that even in a small, unimportant matter I seem something of a magician. There are things I know without having to be told'. So, the mere idea of perceiving Poirot as a kind of magician, which additionally relates him as a character to fairy tales, is Christie's own.

Further, it goes without saying that magic can occur in detective stories in a metaphoric sense only. In his famous decalogue of detective fiction, Knox (1929) banned any supernatural agencies from a detective story. Knox's rules, however, prescriptive in form, seem only descriptive in content: They are meant to state facts, not to establish norms. The only 'magical' power involved in a detective story comes down to the detective's admired and extraordinary abilities that include – but are not limited to – his acquired skills. Similarly, there is no magic in the objects obtained by the detective which enable him to apply his 'magical' powers. There are two types of such objects, both natural in substance, namely a material piece of evidence that was left behind or hidden by the perpetrator, as well as a piece of information procured through the detective's clever inquiries and brilliant deduction.

In addition, because a detective story as a whole contains a few subplots with their own protagonists, it seems legitimate to accept that the work features several co-heroes who drive the plot and whose fates relate to the crime that lets the detective enter the scene. Moreover, the detective is frequently accompanied by a devoted helper (like Sherlock Holmes's assistant Dr Watson and Poirot's companion Captain Hastings) who should be recognised as co-heroes, too. At the same time, a villain has often at least one accomplice. Therefore, in the following analysis, the narratemes will be allocated to a plurality of heroes (co-heroes) and villains. Importantly, in a detective story, the demarcation line between co-hero and villain is blurred, which obviously results from the thrill-based nature of this genre. As the same character may act as both a co-hero and villain, they may do so as narrateme bearers, too.

Narrateme-based text analysis

In what follows, Propp's narratemes will be attached to the corresponding actions of each of the novel's characters whenever a match is detected. I expect to be able to establish three types of respective relations: (1) one to zero: a narrateme has no match, (2) one to one: a narrateme has one match and (3) one to several: a narrateme has several matches, and one and the same action can be matched with more than one narrateme. In the case of (3), no attempt will be made towards identifying all the possible matches. The examples will be limited to the most convincing or salient instances.

The mysterious affair at Styles

Outline of the plot: The narrator and co-hero of this novel is Captain Hastings, Poirot's acquaintance (but not yet associate),

who is invited by John Cavendish to spend his sick leave with his family at Styles Court during the First World War. When John's stepmother Emily dies from strychnine poisoning, many suspect her new husband Alfred Inglethorp to be behind the murder. Evelyn, Mrs Inglethorp's trusted companion, is known to have warned her about this man. Hastings offers to ask Hercule Poirot to solve the murder. The detective scrutinises the scene and interviews the household members. It is only because of his intervention that Alfred, who seems to want to be arrested, is not charged with murder at this stage. In the meantime, numerous family secrets are revealed. John's wife Mary, who is believed to be in love with Dr Bauerstein, a family friend, suspects her husband of adultery and seeks evidence. Cynthia, Mrs Inglethorp's young protégée, believes that Mary and John's brother Lawrence dislike her, and is afraid of being kicked out, although in reality, Lawrence loves her. Alfred is accused of flirting with a neighbour's wife, but actually, it is John who feels attracted to this woman. When new evidence speaks against John, Poirot deliberately delays the trial – and the confirmation of John's innocence – in order to give Mary and John more time to appreciate the weight of their bonds. Now he can prove Alfred and Evelyn's guilt. An earlier trial was likely to end with acquittal and thus excludes, according to English law, the defendant's renewed accusation of the same crime.

Distribution of narratemes

1. **Abstention:** The Cavendish brothers' (co-heroes') father is dead. His last will favours their stepmother and causes a tense atmosphere at home.

The narrateme is modified (hereinafter: NM): Mr Cavendish passed away before the plot started.

The established relation between the narrateme and actions (hereinafter: ERNA) is one-to-one.

2. **Interdiction:** Mrs Inglethorp (co-hero) is warned by Evelyn (co-hero and villain) who accuses Alfred (co-hero and villain) of wicked intentions, including the plan to kill his wife.

Narrateme is modified: As will be known later, these suggestions are not genuine and Evelyn herself will prove to be one of the villains. At this stage, although they are taken for what they seem to be. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-one.

3. **Violation:** Mrs Inglethorp reacts with indignation. She adores her husband who, on his side, treats her with utmost care and reverence. She does not believe in his malice.

Narrateme is modified (no specific measure is suggested in [2]). Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-one.

4. **Reconnaissance:** The villain (Evelyn) does not *seek* information but *provides* false information: She 'predicts' a murder that is in process already (she herself handled the

victim's medicine in a manner that caused the fatal end), accuses Alfred of adultery and suggests (to Hastings) a possible attempt on Mrs Inglethorp's life.

The narrateme occurs in a modified and reversed (hereinafter: NR) shape. The villain is not seeking but giving information (reversed variety) that does not concern the victim's whereabouts but rather her situation (modification). Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-one.

5. **Delivery:** The villain (Evelyn) is successful in spreading false information. She reinforces people's belief in Alfred's guilt, which is the purpose and part of the overall scheme at this stage.

NR, resulting from the nature of (4). She is the one who delivers the desired information, and the others receive it according to her intention. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-one.

6. **Trickery:** The villain (Evelyn) – not yet recognised as such – acts as the victim's devoted and concerned friend. Therefore, she can easily follow her plan and leave the house pretending to be truly worried, keeping the back door open for a later return. The same villain dissimulates unlimited disgust at Alfred. Moreover, as will be found out by Poirot, it is Evelyn who disguised herself to impersonate Alfred Inglethorp when she purchased strychnine from a pharmacy.

Narrateme is modified: The disguise is partly metaphorical. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-one.

7. **Complicity:** As reported by John, it was Evelyn who introduced Alfred Inglethorp – her relative – to her hostess and thus made the whole plot possible. Through her marriage to Alfred, Emily sealed her own fate and helped the criminals to convert their scheme. Besides, her indignation facilitated the accomplishment of Evelyn's plan to leave the house with the option to return at any time. The victim facilitates the villain's actions by accident, out of her own sentiments, but not through revealing information. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-several.

8. **Villainy and lack:** Emily (co-hero) dies from poison.

8a. A family member lacks or desires something or somebody. All the family members are worried for their future; moreover, with her benefactor's death, young Cynthia lacks security in her life and is prepared to be denied any further stay in the mansion.

Narrateme is modified: What the characters desire are not objects or people but certain conditions or circumstances to become reality. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-one.

9. **Mediation:** Hastings (co-hero) offers to engage his acquaintance, the private detective Hercule Poirot, to conduct discreet investigations and thus is asked to do so.

Narrateme is modified: Hastings's mission is directly related to the villainy (murder), rather than the existing lacks, and results from the natural need to pursue the killer. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-one.

10. **Counteraction:** Hastings pays Poirot a visit and presents the situation, including all of the details he can remember. The detective agrees to investigate.

The narrateme is employed without modification (hereinafter NOM). Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-one.

11. **Departure:** Both men proceed to Styles Court to examine the case.

Narrateme is employed without modification. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-one.

12. **The first function of the donor:** Poirot (the hero) is not tested, interrogated or asked favours but is testing, interrogating and asking other people's favours himself. He interviews the housemaids and the gardener and elicits information from people in seemingly casual conversations. In addition, he examines the murder scene for hints to help him resolve the puzzle.

NR: The hero is not the target but the performer of the actions in question. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-several.

13. **The hero's reaction to (12):** People (co-heroes) provide the detective, directly or indirectly, with information that is (mostly) truthful and helpful (e.g. the housemaids' reports about the overheard arguments, the gardener's confirmation of witnessing Mrs Inglethorp's last will) but are partly false and misleading, for example, Mary's claim to have heard a noise (*Styles:134*), Lawrence's testimony about Cynthia's door being bolted (*Styles:194*). He uses his unique abilities to process it and select the useful parts.

As resulting from (12), NR and NM have been established. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-several.

14. **Provision or receipt of a magical agent:** Because of his extraordinary, 'magical' ability to listen carefully, analyse, link facts and draw conclusions, the detective manages to recognise the suggestive hints. The same extraordinary facility enables him to collect material evidence, like the false beard used by Evelyn when impersonating Alfred (*Styles:180*), Cynthia's cup hidden by Mary (*Styles:226*) or decisive information like Alfred's alibi for the time of the strychnine purchase (*Styles:163*), which are used in their 'magic', ground-breaking function of keys to resolve the mystery.

Narrateme is modified: The agents are not really magical. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-several.

15. **Guidance:** Through further application of his abilities, the detective reconstructs the probable course of events preceding the murder. He gives an account of part of his reasoning in his exchange with Hastings. The remaining details are provided in his final speech at the end of the novel. The location of the missing object is tantamount to the identification of the murderer.

Narrateme is modified: The guidelines are reconstructed and retold on several occasions. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-several.

16. **Struggle:** The struggle is of a psychological and intellectual nature. Through his impertinent behaviour during the inquest, the villain (Alfred) is trying to reinforce the jury's impression of his own guilt, in order to be arrested and be soon acquitted for lack of convincing evidence. He does not manage to outsmart Poirot, who figures out his intentions.

Narrateme is modified: the struggle is psychological. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-one.

17. **Branding:** This narrateme does not have a match within the characters' actions, which results from the nature of (16). Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-zero.

18. **Victory:** The perpetrators are identified and arrested.

Evelyn and Alfred are identified as the perpetrators. All the other suspects are wholly exonerated.

Narrateme is employed without modification. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-one.

19. **Resolution:** The Cavendish brothers inherit Mrs Inglethorp's fortune, and their future is secured.

Narrateme is employed without modification. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-one.

20. **Wedding:** No wedding is celebrated or announced. However, Lawrence's love for Cynthia stops being a secret: they are a declared couple now and are likely to get married in the future.

Narrateme is modified: Only the circumstances related to wedding or marriage occur. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-one.

As can be seen, only one of the narratemes scrutinised is not reflected in *Styles* in any form, namely that of branding. This results partly from Poirot's aforementioned physical

condition, which makes him unfit for combat, but also from the lack of attempts on his life during the course of the plot. It should not be surprising that, as will be confirmed below, no kind of branding can be encountered in *Ackroyd*, either.

The murder of Roger Ackroyd

Outline of the plot

The narrative is presented as the diary of Dr Sheppard, and begins with the suicide of Mrs Ferrars, a local VIP. She is said to have poisoned her husband and also maintained a romantic relationship with Roger Ackroyd, a wealthy businessman, who shares with Dr Sheppard that Mrs Ferrars confessed to him that she had murdered her husband and had been blackmailed since then. Her posthumous letter to Roger Ackroyd, in which she names her blackmailer, arrives in Dr Sheppard's presence, but the addressee wishes to read it in private. Once back at his home, Dr Sheppard receives a phone call, confirming that Roger Ackroyd has been murdered. The victim's stepson Ralph is suspected of the crime because of strongly incriminatory circumstances. Poirot examines the scene and the surroundings carefully, interviewing the household members and checking their backgrounds. He finds out that the housekeeper has a son who is a drug addict, the butler blackmailed his former employer, the family friend Major Blunt is in love with Roger Ackroyd's niece Flora, who is engaged to Ralph at her uncle's wish, and finally, that Ralph is secretly married to the parlourmaid Ursula. Provided with all this knowledge and with the use of his famous grey cells, Poirot arrives at the conclusion that Dr Sheppard is guilty of both blackmailing Mrs Ferrars and of killing Roger Ackroyd, who was just about to learn the blackmailer's name. Poirot decides to give the murderer, who happens to be his friend, a chance to escape public prosecution and take his own life.

Distribution of narratemes

1. **Abstention:** Ralph Paton, who is Roger Ackroyd's stepson and probable heir, is believed to have left for London but is seen in town before he disappears, much to his family's concern.

Narrateme is modified. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-one.

2. **Interdiction:** Roger Ackroyd receives a letter sent by Mrs Ferrars before her death. She reports being blackmailed because of having poisoned her husband. Only the latter information is new to the addressee; the former she had already confessed to him in person.

Narrateme is employed without modification. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-one.

3. **Violation:** On receiving the letter in Dr Sheppard's (the villain's) presence, Roger Ackroyd does not read it all the way to the end, and thus misses the blackmailer's name.

Narrateme is employed without modification. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-one.

4. **Reconnaissance:** There are two direct victims of Dr Sheppard's criminal actions: Roger Ackroyd, whom he killed, and Ralph Paton, whom he framed for the murder. The villain does not need to *seek* information about Ralph Paton's whereabouts because he is given it accidentally by his sister, who knows all the local news and gossip (*Ackroyd*:16), and Dr Sheppard meets the young man in his hotel room. Before that, also by pure accident, he runs into Roger Ackroyd who invites him to dine at his home (*Ackroyd*:13) and thus offers a most convenient opportunity to obtain updates about the family's affairs.

Narrateme is modified: On the one hand, no effort on the villain's part is required, and, on the other hand, the information sought is not limited to the victim's whereabouts. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-several.

5. **Delivery:** Ralph tells the villain (Dr Sheppard) about his desolate financial situation. As will be reported later, he also tells him about his secret marriage.

Following Roger Ackroyd's invitation, the villain (Dr Sheppard) pays him a visit and obtains decisive information, namely that his host knows about the blackmailer and expects to learn his name from the letter that has just arrived.

Narrateme is modified: The information does not concern anybody's whereabouts but solely the victim's condition. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-several.

6. **Trickery:** The villain (Dr Sheppard) acts all the time as a devoted family friend.

Narrateme is modified (no material disguise involved). Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-one.

7. **Complicity:** Roger Ackroyd, who considers Dr Sheppard a trustworthy friend, shares with him the news about Mrs Ferrars's crime and the resulting blackmail.

Narrateme is modified: The victims provide the villain with the information that is necessary for him to fulfil his plan but it does not concern anybody's whereabouts. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-several.

8. **Villainy and lack:** Roger Ackroyd is killed and Ralph Paton is framed for his murder.

Narrateme is modified: The crime has been committed and the evidence is not satisfactory. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-one.

8a. A family member lacks or desires something or somebody;

Flora and Ralph desire freedom and financial independence; Ralph's wife Ursula wants their marriage to stop being a secret, and Major Blunt, the family friend, dreams of Flora, despite her engagement to Ralph.

Narrateme is modified: The lack established is only partly identical with 'something or somebody': it comes down to a large extent to some desired circumstances. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-several.

9. **Mediation:** Flora asks Poirot to investigate.

Narrateme is modified: The investigation of the murder will reveal the lacks, too. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-one.

10. **Counteraction:** Poirot agrees to investigate.

Narrateme is employed without modification. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-one.

11. **Departure:** Poirot visits Roger Ackroyd's home, which is the murder scene.

Narrateme is modified. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-one.

12. **The first function of the donor:** The detective is the one who interrogates people and asks them for favours. In addition, he secretly checks their backgrounds.

Narrateme is modified. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-several.

13. **The hero's reaction** to (12); the hero (Poirot) processes the information obtained and advances hypotheses regarding the possible course of events. He successfully provokes the family and household members into confessing their secrets.

Narrateme is modified. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-several.

14. **Provision or receipt of a magical agent:** Poirot finds an engraved wedding ring with an instructive hint, as well as a piece of starched white cloth.

Narrateme is modified: The findings are not really magical. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-several.

15. **Guidance:** Using the available information, Poirot is able to locate Ralph Paton.

Narrateme is employed without modification. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-one.

16. **Struggle:** No physical combat takes place: Poirot speaks to Dr Sheppard face-to-face and reconstructs the course of

events. The perpetrator surrenders and agrees to commit suicide.

Narrateme is modified. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-one.

17. **Branding:** This narrateme has no match. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-zero.

18. **Victory:** Poirot proves Dr Sheppard's guilt. The perpetrator confesses and is given a chance to avoid public prosecution by taking his own life. He chooses to do so.

Narrateme is employed without modification. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-one.

19. **Resolution:** Ralph and Ursula's marriage stops being a secret. Ralph and Flora will receive their shares of Roger Ackroyd's legacy. Major Blunt is happy to know that Flora is free to love.

Narrateme is employed without modification. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-several.

20. **Wedding:** No marriage is celebrated or announced, but Flora is happy to learn about Major Blunt's affection, so that their marriage is probable.

Narrateme is modified. Established relation between the narrateme and actions is one-to-one.

Conclusion

As can be seen, some of the narratemes, namely (12)–(14), are linked to a variety of manifestations which seems inherent to the nature of the genre: the detective takes multiple actions that are triggered by a multitude of 'magical objects' and inspired by a plurality of involved people. Moreover, as part of the plot design, he is initially led in some wrong directions before he enters the right, mystery-solving path(s), which naturally multiplies the number of his actions. At the same time, because of their nature, some of the narratemes – namely (9)–(11) – can relate to just one action. As expected, most narratemes occur in a modified version. This can be accounted for by the principle regarding the absence of supernatural powers, as well as the multitude of heroes involved and their varying stories that are meant to increase suspense and delay the end.

What appears particularly noteworthy as a link between the detective fiction examined and fairy tales is the fact or option of 'wedding', which stops the chaos caused by the crime, restores people's optimism and lets the heroes hope to 'live happily ever after', as is promised in many fairy tales.

Both of the detective novels scrutinised in this research – and presumably many other representatives of this genre – can be perceived as structural adaptations of traditional

fairly tales. However, a dedicated research study covering more works by more authors is necessary to establish a complex applied range of narratemes in crime fiction. If similarities between both genres are to be confirmed, it will be justified to assume that adult audiences reach for detective stories for the same reasons that they read fairy tales to their children, recalling them with nostalgia from their own childhood. In both genres, the world is presented in an honest way; that is, as a battlefield of 'good' and 'evil', where evil cannot be prevented but can be recognised, branded and defeated as such.

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The author has declared that no competing interests exist.

Author's contributions

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