

NARRATEMES IN AGATHA CHRISTIE'S POIROT NOVELS

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ABSTRACT. *Narratemes in Agatha Christie's Poirot Novels.* In this paper, Agatha Christie's selected Poirot novels are examined for recurring narratemes, limited, for the purposes of this research, to actions and results of actions as important constituents of the plot. As point of departure, Propp's narratemes, structural elements of Russian folktales are referred to. Then, ten recurrent narratemes are identified in twenty-two Poirot novels and their functionality is established. The need of further research on this topic is articulated. It is likely that more narratemes be recognised and localised and thus they broaden our knowledge about the componential aspects of Christie's work.

Keywords: *Agatha Christie, Poirot, detective novel, narrateme, plot, suspense*

REZUMAT. *Naratele din romanele Poirot ale Agathe Christie.* În această lucrare sunt analizate câteva dintre romanele Poirot ale Agathe Christie pentru a afla naratele recurente, mai ales cele care sunt acțiuni și rezultatele unor acțiuni și care devin, astfel, elemente constitutive ale conflictului. Se pornește de la naratele lui Propp, elemente structurale ale basmelor rusești. Apoi, cele zece naratele recurente sunt identificate în douăzeci și două de romane Poirot și se stabilește funcționalitatea lor. Se precizează că mai e nevoie de cercetarea acestui aspect. E probabil că mai multe naratele să fie recunoscute și localizate și astfel, cunoștințele noastre despre aspecte componențiale ale operei lui Christie să devină mai ample.

Cuvinte-cheie: *Agatha Christie, Poirot, roman polițist, naratem, conflict, suspans*

1. The concept of the narrateme

According to Schmid (467) a narrateme is a "smallest unity of interest and concern" in the flow of the narrative. It is "ready-made", which means that

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it follows a well-known pattern. Wolf (467) explains narratemes as the “core traits of narrativity”. In relevant literature (e.g. Hsieh et al. 2019, Soto y Koelemeijer et al. 2018, Alberski 2012), the term narrateme is sometimes applied to Vladimir Propp’s thirty one “functions of dramatis personae” in Russian folktales (25). These functions are identical with either the actions taken by the characters or the situations they face in the course of events. Here go some examples: (1) someone has left or the parents are dead, (2) the disguised villain deceives the hero or the victim, (3) a family member lacks or desires something or somebody, (4) the hero agrees to take the action, (5) the villain is defeated.

As pointed out by Wolf (163), action is perceived as a fundamental narrateme in narratology. However, as can be derived from the foregoing examples, Propp’s narratemes, at least perceived as such in contemporary research, encompass not only direct actions but also their immediate consequences (someone has left) as well as lasting conditions (someone’s strong desire). The present research is focused on the narratemes limited to dynamic structural element of the narrative, where a person takes action, something happens or has happened with plot-relevant results.

2. Poirot and Poirot-based narratemes

Apart from over fifty short stories and two plays about his adventures, Agatha Christie produced thirty-three detective novels featuring a private investigator Hercule Poirot. This protagonist figure was created in Christie’s first novel *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920) that founded her fame as a detective novelist. The mere series character of Poirot-novels accounts for some recurrent narratemes, due to the main hero’s established working and communication methods as well as the frequent company of his friend and associate Captain Hastings. Poirot often shares his thoughts with Hastings with the reference to his reliable “grey cells” (e.g. in *The A.B.C. Murders*, Chapters 3 and 31, *Lord Edgware Dies*, Chapter 30, *The Big Four*, Chapters 1 and 4 and *Tragedy in Three Acts*, Chapters 6 and 25) and assembles the interested audience at the end to reveal the perpetrator and explain his reasoning (e.g. in *Lord Edgware Dies*, Chapter 30, *Three Act Tragedy*, Chapter 27, *Five Little Pigs*, Conclusion, *Murder on The Orient Express*).

In what follows we shall not focus on Poirot-related narratemes since they are inscribed in the series character of the novels.

3. Narratemes in Poirot-Novels

In this section, the narratemes encountered in twenty-two Poirot-novels will be discussed, without the ambition to provide their exhausting list.

The ones resulting from the genre itself, like crime, its specific type or intervention of the police forces will not be taken into consideration. An attempt will be undertaken to determine their function(s).

3.1. A character receives or finds a letter (12)

The novel *Sad Cypress* (1940) begins with an anonymous letter that the main character Elinor receives from a declared "well-wisher". The writing roughly outlines the initial situation in that it mentions a dying aunt who is likely to favour another person in her last will. Another crucial letter is mentioned in the same novel is the one sent by Eliza Gerrard to her sister whom the reader gets to know as Nurse Hopkins. From this letter, the alleged Nurse Hopkins gets information about what motivates her to kill for money.

In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), the actual killer Evelyn manages to mislead her victim's family by presenting the victim's letter with a forged date. This diverts the investigators' attention from the real criminal, lets them put forward wrong hypotheses and arrest an innocent man before the case is solved.

In *The Murder on the Links* (1923), a love letter is found in the victim's coat pocket that points at a wrong person as the perpetrator. It takes some time until Poirot finds out that the coat belongs to the victim's son and the real addressee of the letter.

In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), Mr. Ackroyd receives a posthumous letter from his lover, in which she confesses to her husband's murder but also reveals the name of the man who has known about it and blackmailed her since then. It is this letter that induces the blackmailer to kill him in order to avoid disclosure.

In *Peril at End House* (1932), on Michael Seton's fatal accident, the main character Magdala, nicknamed Nick, kills her cousin of the same name who was secretly engaged to him. Then, she claims to be his fiancée and heir herself, presenting some love letters he sent to the victim. The letters are found and quoted in full length in Chapter XIV. They help uncover the murder motive.

In *The A.B.C. Murders* (1936), Poirot receives letters in which the killer announces the murders in alphabetical order of the victims' initials. The entire story is built upon these letters. The detective travels to the places indicated to face the crime committed and collect information that helps him identify the perpetrator.

In *Evil under the Sun* (1941), a young girl Linda writes a letter to her father in which she admits to her stepmother's murder, based upon her fantasy. This confession occupies the investigators for a while, diverting them from the real perpetrators.

In Chapter III of *The Mystery of the Blue Train* (1928), the rich Mr Van Aldin opens a letter from his daughter Ruth and hurries to see her immediately. As turns out soon, Ruth is facing severe problems in her marriage. Thus, when Ruth is killed on board of a luxury train, her husband becomes the main suspect who finally proves innocent. Another letter, found in the victim's handbag, written by her declared admirer and travel companion Comte de la Roche, quoted in full length in Chapter XIV, makes the investigators suspect the sender who will prove innocent, too.

In *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936), before she is killed, Mrs Leidner receives threats in a series of letters. It is also reported that it had happened to her before her marriage to Dr. Leidner, too. Since she suffers from a psychological disorder, the investigator does not rule out a fabricated story. His other hypothesis includes a person from her remote past staying near her. A mistaken identification of the sender's handwriting as her own causes additional perplexity and wrong conclusions. Therefore, the letters outline the victim's situation but also complicate the investigation, introducing additional thrill to the events depicted.

In *Dead Man's Folly* (1956), the woman who pretends to be the murdered Hattie receives a letter from Hattie's cousin with information about his unexpected visiting plans. She disappears in order to avoid confrontation but first she kills a young girl who has learned about her secret.

In *Five Little Pigs* (1942), before she is executed for her husband's murder, Caroline Crale writes a letter to her daughter Lucy in which she pleads innocent. Sixteen years later, as a grown-up woman in possession of the due inheritance, Lucy engages Poirot in order to learn the truth about her father's death.

In *Three Act Tragedy* (1934), the multiple killer Sir Charles Cartwright fabricates some letters in the name of the victim's non-existing servant Ellis whose identity he created himself by playing his role.

In sum, the letters introduced in Poirots fulfil the following functions: they provide information about the characters' situation (informative function), generate hypotheses about the possible perpetrators (suggestive function), help understand the criminals' motives and thus verify the hypotheses (explanatory function), mislead the investigators and thus increase the thrill (suspensive function) or trigger the detective's action (provocative function).

3.2. A character inherits or can inherit a fortune (9)

In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), Alfred Ingelthorp marries a rich elderly woman with the intention to kill her and take possession of her property. The prospective inheritance proves a murder motive. At the same

time, since Mrs. Ingelthorp is in the habit of changing her last will frequently, her stepsons and relatives appear as suspects, too, which intensifies the thrill and complicates the investigations.

In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), the victim's nephew Ralph Paton is generally considered the main suspect because of his unquestionable main heir's status. At the same time, like in *Styles*, the other family members (sister-in-law and niece) are not ruled out as perpetrators for their probable benefits.

Similarly, in *The Murder on the Links* (1923), the victim's son and heir is wrongly suspected of his father's murder. The inheritance would solve his existential problem and render him the freedom to settle a private life of his preference which was not accepted by father.

In *The Mystery of the Blue Train* (1928), Katherine Grey inherits a fortune from her employer, which allows her to travel on the luxury train, meet Poirot and the victim Ruth as well as being recognised by her cousin Lady Tamplin, who hopes to get a share in Katherine's newly obtained wealth.

In *Peril at End House* (1932), the pilot Michael Seton inherits a fortune after his uncle's death and bequeaths it to the woman he loves. The female protagonist of the same name kills the beneficiary in order to claim the wealth. So, the prospective inheritance becomes a murder motive.

In *Sad Cypress* (1940), the woman known as Nurse Hopkins kills the rich Laura Welman and her illegitimate daughter Mary to frame Laura's official heir Elinor in Mary's murder and claim the inheritance herself on grounds of Mary's manipulated last will. The inheritance provides a multiple murder motive as part of an elaborate plan.

In *Evil under the Sun* (1941), Mrs Marshall inherits a fortune from her former lover. When she is murdered, her husband and legal heir who finally proves innocent becomes number one on the initial list of suspects. Thus, inheritance that does not play a role in murder affects the investigation and occupies the detectives for a long time.

In *Death on the Nile* (1937), Simon Doyle's plan includes wedding the rich Linnet Ridgeway, killing her and conducting the life of his dream with his beloved woman. So, inheritance constitutes a direct murder motive.

In *After the Funeral* (1953), all the numerous family members and heirs of the deceased Richard Abernethie seem to have a motive to have killed him for inheritance before it is established that he died of natural causes. The suggestion of murder was meant to confuse the investigators of his sister's murder.

In sum, inheritance serves as a real or assumed murder motive (explanatory function). It has impact on the investigation and thus on the thrill in that the detectives follow this hint and neglect other available evidence

(suspensive function). Moreover, it is a crucial factor in the outline of a character's situation (informative function) that triggers a chain of actions as a plot design (provocative function).

3.3. A character commits adultery or is suspected of it (9)

In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), Mary Cavendish wrongly suspects her husband John of a love affair with a neighbour Mrs Raikes, whilst she herself is said to maintain a romantic relationship with the family's friend Dr. Bauerstein. When John's wealthy stepmother is killed and he is framed with her murder, Mary's actions that result from her care about her marriage suggest her possible involvement in the crime. Therefore, the assumed adultery complicates the investigation. In the same novel, the victim's husband Alfred Ingelthorp and her companion Evelyn are lovers who have planned the crime long ahead. The crime involved both Alfred marriage to the rich elderly woman as well as the continuation of his relationship to his accomplice.

Similarly, in *Death on the Nile* (1937), Simon's lucrative marriage is part of a big plan to kill his wife and appropriate her fortune. The revelation of the continuation of his then extramarital love relationship to his former fiancée Jacqueline provides the key to the murderer's and his accomplice's identification.

In *The Mystery of The Blue Train* (1928), both Derek Kettering and his wife Ruth maintain extramarital relationships. As a result, when Ruth is murdered during a pleasure trip in her lover's company, both the lover and husband are taken into consideration as possible killers. In this way, adultery constitutes a remarkable factor in the investigators' approach, leading to false conclusions and delaying the revelation of the truth, which increases suspense.

In *The Hollow* (1946), the victim Dr. Christow has a love affair with the family's friend Henrietta. Moreover, he is known to have had numerous passing romances with nurses. Nevertheless, it is not his repeated unfaithfulness but a one-night adventure with his former fiancée that induces his wife to shoot him. So, adultery proves a real murder motive but it also misleads the investigators towards his other lovers, including Henrietta, as possible killers.

In *Sad Cypress* (1940), Mary Gerrard, Laura Welman's illegitimate daughter from extramarital relationship to the late Sir Lewis, does not know about her real origin and her resulting title to inheritance. The whole story as well as the inbuilt intrigues and crimes are based upon this fact. In this way, an adultery from the past entails a chain of tragic events that include a double murder. At the end, its revelation helps the detective reconstruct the circumstances and identify the perpetrator.

In *Five Little Pigs* (1942), the victim, who is a talented painter, is known to have extramarital love affairs generally tolerated by his wife Caroline. One of them, to a teenager Elsa, seems serious enough to put their marriage in jeopardy. When Amyas Crale is poisoned, his wife is charged with murder and executed. Poirot examines the case after fourteen years, hired by her daughter Lucy. Adultery creates a frame for the tragedy and helps the real perpetrator, Caroline's sister, frame the cheated wife.

In *The Murder on the Links* (1923), a married woman Mrs Beroldy incites her lover to her rich husband's murder to abandon him once the crime is committed and to blackmail him years later when they both become neighbours in France under false names. Thus, it is the initial adultery that generates the successive fatal circumstances lead to a crime.

In *Appointment with Death* (1938) the victim Mrs Boynton's stepdaughter-in-law Nadine, a nurse by profession, is in love with a family's friend and she thinks of leaving her husband to escape her stepmother's tyranny. When her stepmother is found dead, suspicion is shed on Nadine who had a good opportunity and skills to poison the woman.

In *Evil under the Sun* (1941), the actress Mrs Marshall is generally believed to develop a love relationship with a fellow holiday maker Patrick. These appearances make the investigators consider the husband's jealousy as the obvious murder motive when she is found dead on a remote beach. In this way, the assumed adultery confuses the detective and contributes to the overall suspense and thrill.

In sum, adultery that implies the involved person's wish to get rid of the partner or their spouse/lover has the following functions: it provides a real murder motive (explanatory function), implies an assumed murder motive and thus increases the suspense and thrill (suspensive function), suggests fake circumstances (creative function) or constitutes a part or real circumstances (informative function).

3.4. A character is acting under a false identity (11)

In *The Mystery of The Blue Train* (1928), the victim's maid known as Ada Mason is in reality an actress Kitty Kidd, known for her advanced skills to impersonate men. She uses these skills to leave the train disguised as a man and thus mislead the investigators.

In *Sad Cypress* (1940), as has been mentioned above, Mrs Welman's nurse known as Nurse Hopkins proves to be Mary Riley, sister of Mary Gerrard's foster mother. She uses her false identity to get close to her victims, poison them and frame their relative.

In *The Murder on the Links* (1923), both Mrs Beroldy and her lover Georges Conneau take on false identities on having killed Mr Beroldy and

escaped the justice. It is meant to prevent them from a possible punishment in case of being found guilty in future.

In *Elephants Can Remember* (1972), an unbalanced woman called Dorothea kills her twin sister Margaret Ravenscroft who obliges her husband to protect the killer. In order to fulfill her wish, Mr Ravenscroft reports Dorothea dead and allows her to play Margaret's role. When he commits suicide on having shot Dorothea, the false identity of the woman impedes the investigators in reconstructing the crime. In the same novel, a young American woman accepts a secretary position at Professor Willoughby's Institute of Psychiatry and becomes his son's lover because she is seeking an opportunity to kill the professor and thus avenge her mother's death as a result of the treatment methods.

In *Death on the Nile* (1937), a young man introduced as Mr. Ferguson who supports the communist ideology proves to be Lord Dawlish. Until Poirot discloses his identity, the young man seems to have an ideological motive to kill the rich Linnet. In the same novel, the passenger known as an Italian archaeologist, Mr Rachett, is finally unmasked as a wanted terrorist, but not as Linnet's killer.

In *Dead Man's Folly* (1956), the wealthy Sir George Stubbs is hiding his real identity of James Folliat and his disgraceful past as a deserter, bigamist and murderer of his illegally wed rich wife, whose identity has been adopted by his legitimate wife Hattie.

In *Cat among the Pigeons* (1959), the school secretary Ann Shapland, who commits three murders of teachers, proves to be a skilled espionage agent nicknamed Angelica. She saw the precious jewels being hidden in a girl's tennis racket and followed them to England, to the girl's boarding school.

In *Murder on The Orient Express* (1934), the victim who travels as a businessman, Rachett, proves to be a child kidnapper and killer. He is murdered collectively by the child's relatives, one of them identified as a famous actress Linda Arden, travelling under the false name of Mrs. Hubbard.

In *After the Funeral* (1953), Miss Gilchrist kills her employer Cora Lansquenet to take possession of a valuable painting from her collection. Then, she impersonates the dead woman at a family gathering that follows the funeral of Cora's brother, where she suggests that the man was murdered.

In *Evil under the Sun* (1941) the holidaymaker Patrick Redfern is finally identified as Arlena's murderer. His real name is Edward Corrigan and he killed his wife Alice. The woman he introduces as his wife Christine turns out to be his accomplice in both murders.

In *The Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936), one of the main characters in the archaeologist introduced as Dr. Eric Leidner who in reality is Frederic Bosner, who married his adored wife under a false identity. In the same novel, a notorious thief Raoul Menier pretends to be father Lavigny, a reputable epigraphist.

In sum, a false identity has the following functions: it helps the murderer approach the victim (auxiliary function), creates fake circumstances (creative function), misleads the investigators and increases the thrill (suspensive function).

3.5. An actor enters the scene (6)

In *Three Act Tragedy* (1934), the actor Sir Charles Cartwright impersonates a servant at his victim's party and uses this opportunity to commit murder. Then, he fabricates letters meant to suggest Ellis's guilt and let the police chase a non-existent person.

In *The Mystery of the Blue Train* (1928), the actress Kitty Kidd takes up the job of the victim's maid. When Ruth is killed by her accomplice, she employs her skills to first impersonate Ruth, and then leave the train in men's disguise.

In *Cat among the Pigeons* (1959), a hired actress plays the role of an Oriental princess at a boarding school, where she looks for some invaluable jewels hidden in another girl's tennis racket. Her presence, and then her staged kidnapping occupies the investigator's work when three teachers are murdered one after another.

In *Lord Edgware Dies* (1933), the actress Carlotta agrees to impersonate another actress, Lady Edgware, at a private party, without being aware of providing the latter with an alibi for Lord Edgware's murder time. Using her own actress's skills, Lady Edgware in the person of a fictive American friend, an elderly Mrs van Dusen, meets Carlotta at a hotel to pay her for the performance that impedes the investigation, complicates the plot and increases the thrill.

In *The Big Four* (1927), the actor Claud Darrel, nicknamed Destroyer, appears in different roles and commits several murders before he is identified as "number four", the fourth wanted member of a transnational criminal association.

In *Cards on the Table* (1936), Poirot hires an actor who pretends to be a window cleaner and to have seen Dr. Roberts killing Mrs. Lorrimer. The intention is to provoke the perpetrator's confession, which actually happens.

In sum, the actors enter the scene in the following functions: they use their professional skills to create fake circumstances (creative function) in order to confuse the investigators and intensify the thrill (suspensive function). Their intervention usually explains the murder design (explanatory function).

3.6. A character performs an act of love and care (6)

In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), the victim's stepson Lawrence Cavendish smashes a cup that, in his opinion, might give evidence against Cynthia, whom he loves secretly.

In *The Murder on the Links* (1923), Bella Duveen, who is in love with the victim's son Jack, confesses to the murder when Jack is charged with the crime.

In *Death on the Nile* (1937), the admitted killer Jacqueline shoots her beloved accomplice Simon to save him and herself the inevitable trial and death sentence. In the same novel, Rosalie Otterbourne suppresses the fact of having seen Tim Alerton at the fatal night since she feels affected to him and wants to save him in the case of his guilt.

In *The Hollow* (1946) the dying Dr. Christow, shot by his humiliated wife Gerda, utters the name of his lover Henrietta as a plea to protect the killer. As a result, it is not only Henrietta but also the entire family who intentionally mislead Poirot, suggesting their own possible involvement in the crime.

In *Three Act Tragedy* (1934), Charles Cartwright's housekeeper Miss Milray, who is in love with him, tries to destroy evidence of his guilt, the distilling equipment for nicotine poison production.

In *Cards on the Table* (1936), Mrs. Lorrimer confesses to the murder of the party host Shaitana because she believes to have seen her daughter stabbing him to death.

In sum, the acts of love and care have the following functions: they boil down to false confessions or false testimonies (creative function), confuse the investigators and increase the thrill (suspensive function) but also reveal real feelings (informative function).

3.7. A character may commit a crime but does not kill (7)

In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) the victim's niece Flora confesses to having stolen forty pounds from her uncle's room at the night of his murder. Having been seen near his office door she is initially not ruled out as the murderer.

In *The Mystery of The Blue Train* (1928), the man known as Comte de la Roche, has elaborate plans to steal Ruth's precious ruby, without the intention to kill her.

In *Death on the Nile* (1937), Tim Allerton, who proves to be a serial jewel thief, steals Linnet's valuable pearls but does not murder her.

In *Lord Edgware Dies* (1933) the victim's butler Alton disappears with the money stolen from his employer's office. He only uses the murder as an opportunity to steal.

In *Evil under the Sun* (1941), the holidaymaker Horace Blatt, one of the suspects of murder, is finally arrested for drug smuggling. He is not involved in Arlena's murder.

In *Peril at End House* (1932), the main character's lodgers, the Crofts, prove to be forgers and are known to the police as such. They do not play any role in murder.

In *The Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936) the man who impersonates Father Laviny steals valuable items from the dig but does not intend or attempt to murder anybody.

In sum, another crime committed by a character in the direct environment of the murder scene has the following functions: it suggests fake circumstances (suggestive function) and misleads the investigators and thus increases suspense and thrill (suspensive function).

3.8. A character overhears important conversation (6)

In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), the narrator Hastings overhears Mary Cavendish's argument with the victim, her husband's stepmother. It is about a piece of writing the elderly lady refuses to show to her stepdaughter-in-law. Mary supposes the writing confirms her husband's infidelity and his mother is trying to shield him.

In *The Murder on the Links* (1923) Marthe overhears their neighbours' conversation and learns about their plans to leave France on having staged his kidnapping and death.

In *Five Little Pigs*, the painter Amyas Crale's young lover Elsa overhears a dispute between him and his wife Caroline to learn that, against his promise, he is not going to abandon Caroline. Deeply disappointed and hurt, she puts poison in his drink.

In *Appointment with Death* (1938), Lady Westholme overhears a conversation from which she gets to know that she was identified as Mrs. Boynton's murderer. She commits suicide to avoid public scandal and punishment. Earlier in the same novel, Poirot overhears a talk between two siblings who speculate about their stepmother's murder. When Mrs Boyton is really found dead, they are taken into consideration as possible perpetrators.

In *Death on the Nile* (1937), Poirot overhears two conversations between Jacqueline and Simon. From the first one he gets the impression that she cares about him much more than he cares about her. The second one confuses him because he is convinced that Simon is talking to his then wife Linnet.

In *Lord Edgware Dies*, Lady Edgware overhears Donald Ross's phone talk with Hastings and realizes that the speaker is about to inform Poirot that she was substituted by Carlotta Adams at the dinner party that gave her strong alibi for the time of her husband's murder. She kills Ross and delays the detective's revelations.

In sum, overhearing a piece of information has the following functions: it reveals details about the situation (informative function) and thus helps advance hypotheses (auxiliary function), misleads the investigators and increases the suspense and thrill (suspensive function) and triggers criminal action (provocative function).

3.9. A character is hiding a crime committed in the past (7)

In *Murder on the Links* (1923), the characters known as Mr Renauld and Mrs Daubreuil killed her husband and managed to escape punishment. They took on new identities.

In *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), the victim who travels as a businessman called Rachett is a child kidnapper and murderer Cassetti.

In *Five Little Pigs* (1942), Lady Dittisham who poisoned her lover Amyas when she was a teenager known as Elsa Greer is identified as the murderer after sixteen years. Amyas's wife was charged with murder and executed.

In *Cards on the Table* (1936), Mrs. Lorrimer killed her husband in order to marry another man, and her daughter poisoned her former employer. They are both invited by Mr. Shaitana who knows their secrets.

In *Appointment with Death* (1938), the British woman introduced as Lady Westholme is recognised by Mrs Boynton as a former prisoner. She kills Mrs. Boynton to avoid scandal and commits suicide when identified as the killer.

In *Dead Man's Folly* (1956), Sir Georges Stubbs proves to be a bigamist who killed his illegally wed second wife.

In *Evil under the Sun* (1941), the holidaymaker Patrick Redfern is identified as Edward Corrigan who killed his wife and escaped punishment with the help of his accomplice who gave him an alibi. She now pretends to be his wife.

In sum, the fact that a character is hiding a crime committed in the past has the following functions: It increases suspense and thrill (suspensive function) and provides explanation for a character's behaviour (explanatory function).

3.10. A character faces or makes up an attempt at his or her life (5)

In *Death on the Nile* (1937), before she is killed, Linnet Doyle is nearly hit by a falling heavy stone. What is initially interpreted as an accident proves to be a premeditated action by her lawyer and friend. In the same novel, Jaqueline pretends to shoot at Simon, whilst in reality she deliberately misses him. He badly hurts his leg himself with another shot, to reinforce the appearances.

In *Peril at End House*, (1932), Nick informs Poirot that the brakes in her car were manipulated with the perpetrator's obvious intention to kill her. She stages another attempt at her life when she eats a safe portion of poisoned chocolate.

In *After the Funeral* (1953), Miss Gilchrist eats a bit of a poisoned cake to create appearances of an attempt at her life.

In *Cards on the Table* (1936), Ann Meredith is trying to drown her friend Rhoda who knows about her secret.

In *The Murder on the Links* (1923), Paul Renauld's murderer Marthe is trying to kill his wife to stop her from disinheriting her son, Marthe's intended husband.

In sum, real or fabricated attempts at somebody's life have the following functions: they reinforce the initial suspicions (informative function), create fake circumstances (creative function) and make the investigators advance wrong hypotheses, intensifying the thrill and suspense (suspensive function).

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The research has established recurrent narratemes, ten of which have been listed above. For the presentation in this paper only those have been selected that were encountered in at least five novels. The most frequent among them proved a letter (encountered in 12 works), a false identity (in 11), inheritance (in 9) and adultery (in 9). The others occur in seven, six or five works. The identified narratemes have the functions labelled as: (a) suspensive, applying to all the ten depicted narratemes, (b) informative, postulated for six of them, (c) explanatory, attached to five (c) creative, proposed for another five (e) provocative, claimed for two, and (f) suggestive, postulated for another two narratemes. Clearly, the suspensive function dominates, which cannot surprise in the light of the discussed genre. It seems that the writer draws from a certain limited repertoire of narratemes that are rearranged and modified in different novels. Naturally, an assumption instead of certainty, a hypothesis instead of a thesis may disappoint in the concluding part of a study. However, a generalisation based on an instructive but narrow range of samples would abuse the valid standards of honest research.

It must be added that some more narratemes were noted in the course of this research that were not scrutinised or mentioned above because of space limits but seem worthy of scholarly interest, like a broken love relationship (e.g. *Sad Cypress, The Elephants Can Remember*), a commoner marrying an aristocrat (e.g. *Lord Edgware Dies, Appointment with Death*) or a doctor acting as a family friend (e.g. *The Mysterious Affair at Styles, Appointment with Death*). Therefore, further investigations are recommendable in order to verify the above hypothesis.

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