

NARRATIVE TENSION AND THE STYLISTICS OF CRIME IN PATRICIA HIGHSMITH'S *THE BLUNDERER*

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to examine narrative tension and the stylistics of crime in Patricia Highsmith's early psychological crime thriller, The Blunderer (1956). The article is divided into three parts. In the introductory section the Author outlines the background of Patricia Highsmith's literary output. The second part is devoted to the generic elements of The Blunderer. The third and simultaneously main part of the article brings into focus the narrative perspectives of three protagonists of the novel, being three actors of the crime drama: the murderer Melchior Kimmel, the guilt-stricken innocent suspect Walter Stackhouse and the detective Lawrence Corby. The research proves that the narration of Highsmith's novel is not homogenous but constitutes an intriguing amalgam of various consciousnesses and conflicting narrative positions. This reflects both the structural and thematic complexity of the novel which builds and develops the suspenseful tension affecting the narrates and the reader.

Key words: Patricia Highsmith, narrative tension, suspense, crime, thriller, stylistics

1. INTRODUCTION

Patricia Highsmith (1921-1995), a gifted American novelist, short story writer and essayist, always defied simple categorisation in her violent, psychologically stimulating and morally complex books, and her critical reputation has been ambiguous. Despite being corralled by book-review editors into the “crime corner” slot that protects “literary” fiction from the perceived pollution of murder mysteries” (Clapp 1999), Highsmith was always deemed a stranger to convention. Depicted by Graham Green as a “poet of apprehension,” she “created a world of her own – a world claustrophobic and irrational which we enter each time with a sense of personal danger.” Therefore, the author filled a distinctive niche in American crime writing circles before her reputation began to rise following her death (Greene 1970, p. x).

Labelled as the grande dame of the thriller, Highsmith is undoubtedly a recognisable mapper of the topography of criminal psychopathology and “an anticipator, [...], of the collective obsession with serial killers and evil that has come to pass” (Self 1995). Her works often deal with questions of split and fluid identity, double personality, a man's wrenching sense of dislocation and aching void. In addition to portraying psychopaths, as evidenced in her Ripley series, Highsmith brings into light a psychologically destructive aspect of guilt and its impact on an average person. In this respect, the writer is an inheritor of Poe who considerably transforms Poe's motifs in a modern world. According to Cassuto (2009, p. 135), in Highsmith's universe: “characters never get comfortable with themselves or each other in an ominous-feeling world... They're always looking around as though something terrible is going to happen to them – and something frequently does.” Nevertheless, the themes and philosophical assumptions that a modern world is ruled by chaos, contingency and fate occupy a pivotal role in her fiction, mostly her novels, and thus mirror the bleak existentialist writings of Dostoyevsky, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Kafka, Sartre and Camus (Wilson 2010, p. 5).

It is the investigation of the criminal psychopathology intertwined with the problems of dislocation, existential angst and sense of guilt that lie at the heart of her early fiction, most notably her two novels, *Strangers on a Train* (1950) and *The Blunderer* (1954). The doubling motifs introduced in both texts along with the theme of disintegration in the Dostoyevskian mould in which, however, guilt leads to destruction instead of redemption paved the way for further exploration of the psychology of

guilt and abnormal behaviour of individuals in unforeseen, adverse circumstances as illustrated in Highsmith's later works (e.g. *Two Faces of January* (1964) or *The Tremor of Forgery* (1969)). A genuine talent of the American genre writer and the complexity of her works lie in the specificity of the narrative tension the author builds as well as in linguistic operable principles she uses and through which she dexterously manipulates, on the one hand, the psychological motivations and emotional relationships of characters affected by crime, and, on the other hand, the readers' ambivalent responses which produce opposite reactions, such as anxiety and pleasure, masochism and sadism, identification and detachment (Rubin 1999, p. 6). It is thanks to her hypnotic prose which Highsmith „puts the suspense story into a toweringly high place in the hierarchy of fiction” (*Times*, London).

2. THE BLUNDERER AS A PSYCHOLOGICAL CRIME THRILLER

When set beside a worldwide recognition of *Strangers on a Train* followed by the immense popularity of a Hitchcock film version under the same title, relatively little critical attention has been devoted to *The Blunderer*. The 1954 unjustly underrated novel, exemplifying Highsmith's interest in the psychology of domestic noir, explores the themes of an identity crisis, guilt, obsession and sado-masochistic relations between the victims, perpetrators and police investigators. The book's opening chapter vividly depicts a vicious crime scene in which Melchior Kimmel, an antique shop manager from Newark, stabs his wife to death. His murder turns out to be undetected until the perpetrator becomes drawn into the vortex of the novel's central character, Walter Stackhouse, a successful young lawyer and an amateur crime short story writer, who intuitively grasps the truth about the identity of the killer having read a newspaper account of Helen Kimmel's unresolved death case. Similarly to Kimmel, Stackhouse feels suffocated in a toxic love-hate relationship with his wife Clara and the murder of Mrs Kimmel induces him to fantasise about killing his own spouse. Stackhouse's obsession with Kimmel and his potential involvement in Helen's murder begins a chain of fateful events when Walter becomes soon suspected of Clara's death. Paradoxically, the protagonist turns out to be innocent as Clara committed suicide yet his feeling of guilt leads him to investigate Helen Kimmel's death and shadow the killer. In this astounding divorce of guilt from actual culpability, the American author „renders Kimmel as a murderer without conscience, and Walter as conscience-stricken, but not a murderer” (Cassuto 2009, p. 137). Contrary to the Dostoyevskian model, in *The Blunderer* it is the guilt which gives rise to the crime and punishment.

The Blunderer had two film adaptations over the years: the first, *Le meurtrier* (*Enough Rope*), was a French thriller film loosely inspired by the novel, released in 1963 by Claude Autant-Lara; the second was the 2016 film, *A Kind of Murder*, which more closely followed the themes and characters of Highsmith's original work.

There are several crucial factors that set this novel apart from other works by the American writer. It is the first and unique book by Highsmith in which the readers are introduced into a truly sadistic facet of femicide, shown in graphic, intimate detail, as well as into the arcana of the toxic marital relationships and the resultant disintegration of two unhappy and childless households. Furthermore, *The Blunderer* brings into focus police brutality exemplified by the police lieutenant Lawrence Corby who, fiercely determined to arrest both the suspects, revels in the power afforded to him by the badge. Yet the theme that lies at the heart of the novel is Walter Stackhouse's abnormal obsession with Melchior Kimmel, the murderer of his own spouse, the man with whom the main character becomes unavoidably linked till his tragic death. The incorporation of these key motifs, reflecting the currents central to the psychological thriller, like the presence of psychotic killers as antagonists or protagonists, frequently beyond the reach of the law and prompting obsessive investigation, respectable citizens, close family relations, or presumed innocents who become psychotic, misleading narratives and unreliable narrators whose unreliability is attributed to some form of psychosis as well as momentous scenes that depict psychological torture (Mecholsky 2014, pp. 1,3) constitutes the thematic components integral to the analysis of the narrative tension along with linguistic and stylistic effects which are created by Highsmith and which are in turn mediated and negotiated by the reader.

Despite being regarded as a classic psychological crime thriller, *The Blunderer* is a complex, ambiguous novel, both in terms of its generic components and its narrative structure. On the one hand, the book exemplifies a prototypical thriller. Firstly, the identity of the murderer (Melchior Kimmel) is disclosed at the beginning of the story (in the first chapter) which enables a more overt and meticulous depiction of the emotional tension experienced by the perpetrator, by his victim (his wife Helen), by those menaced by the criminal (most notably Walter Stackhouse), as well as by “those characters close to the criminal or victim) (Rubin 1999, p. 203). Secondly, the method of killing is straightforward and the murder scene exhibits Kimmel as a pathological criminal:

He lunged against her, bouncing her deep into the underbrush at the side of the road. He nearly fell himself, but he kept his grip on the wrist with his left hand. With his right, he struck the side of her head, hard enough to break her neck, he thought, yet he kept the grip on her left wrist. He had only begun. She was down on the ground, and his left hand found her throat and closed on it, crushing her scream. [...] Then he reached in his pocket for his knife, opened it, and plunged its blade down – three, four, five times. [...] He was aware only of pure joy, of a glorious sense of justice, of injuries avenged, years of insult and injury, boredom, stupidity, most of all stupidity, paid back to her (Highsmith 1956, pp. 3,4).

The above excerpt, displaying an exceptionally brutal murder of a woman, the scene that hardly ever saturates other works by Highsmith, illustrates a crime of passion committed within a domestic circle. Such a dimension of crime is to be considered as one of the integral elements of the psychological thriller. Nevertheless, the above fragment introduces the reader into the figure of the psychotic killer who yet turns out to be not the main character in the story but one constitutive part of the murderer-innocent suspect-detective trio profiled in the novel. In fact, it is the figure of the innocent suspect (Walter Stackhouse), the man fantasising about the crime he did not commit and becoming obsessed with Kimmel and his murder, whose perspective comes to the fore. The role of Stackhouse is highly ambiguous. On the one hand, he epitomises an innocent man, a mild-mannered lawyer, wrongly accused of his wife’s murder, thus constituting a counterbalance to Kimmel. On the other hand, due to his tremendous sense of guilt and frantic obsession with both Helen Kimmel’s murder and his own wife’s suicide, Walter is depicted as Kimmel’s double, an opposite, yet simultaneously his spiritual accomplice in the act of crime. As an unreliable narrator, mentally unbalanced and elusive protagonist, he fails to fulfil the role of an innocent victim chased both by the police and the killer, the category of the character that frequently populates numerous conventional thrillers. Similar to Highsmith’s other heroes, Walter’s fantasy, his fictional reconstruction of the murder scene and his psychological rehearsal of the crime lead to trapping him. Even though he is not Clara’s murderer, his obsession with Melchior contributes to his downfall (Wilson 2003, p. 188).

However, it is the figure of the policeman, the third member of the trio of the characters in *The Blunderer* which plays a decisive role in the course of events. Unlike in the majority of Highsmith’s psychological crime thrillers in which the detective figure, rather than being central to the action, is peripheral or entirely absent, in *The Blunderer* the character of detective Lawrence Corby is deemed particularly significant. Exemplifying a formidable, psychotic, morally ambiguous police officer, lieutenant Corby proves to be a dexterous psychological manipulator and an instrument of oppression for both Kimmel and Stackhouse.

3. SUSPENSE ELEMENTS AND THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE IN *THE BLUNDERER*

The essence of Patricia Highsmith’s novel lies in the abilities in which the author and the narrators shape the narrative and thus build the suspenseful tension in which the reader becomes (in)voluntarily involved rather than in the three characters’ power relations within the space of the text itself. In view of this, it is pertinent to pose the question about the agency of each character in the structure of the narrative. According to Moretti (1983, p. 146), in the course of a crime novel, the criminal produces

the syuzhet, or récit (Wales 2001, p. 301), which refers to the story as shaped and edited by the storyteller whilst the detective creates the fabula, or histoire which points to the story as a mere chronology of events. Due to the fact that the detective restores the relationship between the clues and their meaning, the critic claims that the criminal symbolises the literary pole, whereas the detective the scientific pole.

Moretti's postulate followed by Gregoriou in her investigation of the linguistic deviance in contemporary crime narratives is confronted with the system where more peculiar roles are ascribed to the protagonists of *The Blunderer*. In Highsmith's narrative, lieutenant Corby, embodying the detective whose role is to reconstruct the events so as to bring the readers back to the very beginning of the story (Gregoriou 2007, p. 5), only partly fulfils this function as he suspects and brutally interrogates both a genuine culprit and a wrongly accused suspect. Furthermore, the police officer is prone to violence and sadism, and his pathological inclinations challenge the "scientific" pole he apparently embodies and thus undermines the objective reconstruction of events. In fact, it is Walter Stackhouse, the eponymous blunderer, whose amateur investigation and unhealthy obsession with Kimmel's murder takes the first, vital step in revealing the identity of the criminal. Hence, he exemplifies a lonely sleuth who helps to bring a new light into the unsolved crime case and who also strives to prove his innocence via his narrative. In this respect, his role is two-fold. On the one hand, Stackhouse, whose perspective is central to the story, exemplifies the one who reinstates the link between the clues and their significance and he therefore is ascribed to producing the fabula. On the other hand, Walter, next to the criminal Kimmel, is attributed to shaping and editing the syuzhet, as his obsessive sense of guilt leads to his wife's suicide, his own destruction and, paradoxically, to the punishment of the perpetrator. Hence, they both embody the literary pole of the story.

Highsmith's novel is distinguished by the lack of any clear-cut boundary between the figure of the detective, the criminal and the victim and their overlapping narratives frequently meet with contradictory attitudes of the readers. In terms of the narrative structure, *The Blunderer* is neither a safe harbour nor a neutral territory but a dynamic intellectual battlefield between the author and the reader in which the manipulative, hypnotic quality of Highsmith's discourse is confronted by the reader's alternative interpretative framework of her text. The American writer gives each of her characters the voices of their own and allows the readers access to their consciousness. Nonetheless, all of these voices are tinged with the author's judgemental stance as evident in the stylistic forms involved in the production of the novel. The particular strengths of Highsmith's psychological crime thriller which accentuates internal pressures and forward construction lies in the contextualisation of the crucial principles and techniques of suspenseful tension such as tense ("interrogatory" questions posed in the future tense, present-tense questions which reflect judgemental aspects relating to identity and states of being as well as an interplay between macroquestions and microquestions), time (anticipation and protraction play crucial roles in the suspense which entails control over time), probability (the importance of probability factors in creating suspense is based on the formula: suspense will be more effective the more unlikely a desired outcome seems to be), knowledge (the knowledge factor determines two basic poles: the position of a character in the text and the position of the reader in relation to what is going to happen next) and identification (Rubin 1999, pp. 212-216), the final component being inextricably linked with the stylistics of crime.

On account of the limited spatial confines of this article, the author is forced to resign from a thorough analysis of the above four principles in the context of *The Blunderer* and instead bring into focus the last of the above-mentioned constituents of the suspense, identification (emotional factors, moral considerations, physical point of view, commonality, admiration, shared curiosity) which will be linked to the examination of the structure of 3 particular narratives in Highsmith's text. Such an interpretative strategy will hopefully fill a lacuna in the studies on the narration and language of Highsmith's texts, specifically in the context of the stylistics of crime in this early novel so far perfunctorily researched by the critics.

The following excerpts which allow access to the three characters' consciousness in the form of the third-person narration are not homogenous, oscillating between the internal and external types and displaying a varying degree of the authorial bias towards her protagonists. In the novel's introductory

chapter Highsmith invites us into the world of Melchior Kimmel, particularly Melchior's involvement in his wife's murder, as well as into the events preceding and following the crime scene:

The man in dark-blue slacks and a forest-green sportshirt waited impatiently in the line.

The girl in the ticket booth was stupid, he thought, never had been able to make change fast. He tilted his fat bald head up at the inside of the lighted marquee, read NOW PLAYING! *Marked Woman*, looked without interest at the poster of a half naked woman displaying a thigh, and looked behind him at the line to see if there was anyone in it he knew. There wasn't.[...]

[...]

People were still getting off the bus. He saw her descending, caught the clumsy, sidewise jerks of her stocky body as she took the few steps. He was beside her before she had walked six feet.

'You!' she said.

Her grey and black hair was dishevelled, her stupid brown eyes stared up at him with an animal surprise, an animal fear.[...]

[...]

'Mel, I don't want to go so far away from the-'

He lunged against her, bouncing her deep into the underbrush at the side of the road.[...]
(Highsmith 1956, pp. 1-3).

To begin with, the narration portraying Kimmel's consciousness appears to be of the "internal" type owing to the fact that it is mediated through the subjective viewpoint of this concrete character's consciousness (Simpson 1993: 39). To be more specific, the narrator is depicted here as well as in the previous fragment as omniscient, taking control of the narration of events and showing 'privileged access to the thoughts and feelings of the characters in a way that an ordinary external observer [would] not' (Fowler 1986, p. 127). As Gregoriou (2007, p. 67) correctly observes, this kind of narration builds a close relationship with the reader as well as arouses a feeling of sympathy which unavoidably prejudices the reader in favour of the character. Despite this effect, however, the fact that what is depicted in the above excerpt is a heinous crime committed by the victim's husband who meticulously planned his crime will presumably produce considerable tension for the reader. This tension is particularly strong on account of the events described.

When set beside Highsmith's other works, especially *The Talented Mr Ripley* where the reader becomes acquainted with the hero-criminal and the people surrounding him, in this short introductory chapter of *The Blunderer* in which the writer "started out with a sharp bang" (Highsmith 1990: 48) we do not know much about Kimmel, still less about his wife. He is introduced as an anonymous criminal whose name is never mentioned in this part of the text (Kimmel is referred to exclusively as "he" or "the man") except in short dialogues when he is addressed to as Kimmel or Melchior by other characters, like his employee Tony ("Hi Mr Kimmel!") and his espouse ("Mel") (Highsmith 1956, pp. 2, 3). This strategy carries some significant implications. Firstly, it creates the distance between the killer figure and the reader, which in turn contradicts the theory that the omniscient narration which allows the reader access to the internal world of the characters establishes an intimate link between the criminal figure and the reading public. In fact, the narration which brings into focus Kimmel's perspective, may bias the reader against this character: we are neither inclined to share his feelings (a negative emotional factor or the lack of it) nor to share his moral perspective (the absence of moral considerations principle) (Rubin 1999, p. 219). As for the remaining identity factors (commonality, admiration, shared curiosity), none of them, including the physical point of view which is more applicable to film studies, affect the reader's position towards suspenseful events in the context of this particular narration.

In case of Kimmel's narration, the readers' negative reactions are determined by the narrative tension in which the formal, distant, and apparently objective register (the adoption of a cool, matter-of-fact tone in describing the murder scene and the events preceding it) is intertwined with an evaluative and emotionally charged discourse (we have access to the criminal's irreverent, highly patronising attitude towards women, in particular his feeling of revulsion towards his wife and his aversion to all mankind). Kimmel is portrayed in a highly condescending way by the author and her derogatory remarks about him (referring to him via physical attributes, equating him with animals as well as "awarding" him with epithets like "old bitch") adequately reflects her assertion that she "rather like[s] criminal and find them extremely interesting, unless they are monotonously and stupidly brutal" (Highsmith 1990, p. 47).

The introductory part of Highsmith's novel stands in vivid contrast to the consecutive chapter where we are invited to the narrative perspective of Walter Stackhouse, the eponymous "blunderer". Although it is still the third-person internal narration and Walter, analogously to Kimmel, functions as the omniscient narrator, the narration portraying Stackhouse's consciousness, mediated by his point of view, is strikingly different. First of all, from chapter two onwards, Walter supposedly takes the control of the narration and thus all the events are depicted from his perspective. Nevertheless, his is rather unreliable and at times unbalanced narration, which challenges his narratorial authority and neutrality. On the other hand, Stackhouse's narration is a fertile ground for the analysis of the identification factors, one of the key determinants of suspenseful tension, much as for the exploration of the stylistics of crime. The above passages, mirroring the protagonist faced with four adverse situational moments, each of them bringing him closer to the impending doom and sealing his fate, and placing him in opposition with other characters, above all, his neurotic wife Clara and the murderer and simultaneously his nemesis, Kimmel, display the dynamics of his narration which gradually builds up a suspenseful tension until the book's climactic ending:

It was 8.10. Walter looked out of the car window at the front of the inn that was a little behind him. No sign of her yet. He looked down at his newspaper and read: BODY OF WOMAN FOUND NEAR TARRYTOWN, N.Y.

The woman had been brutally stabbed and beaten, but she had not been robbed. The police had no clues. She had been on a bus en route to Albany from Newark, had been missed after a rest stop, and the bus had gone on without her.

Walter wondered whether there would be anything in the story for his essays; whether the murderer had had some unusual relationship to the woman. He remembered an apparently motiveless murder he had read about in a newspaper that had later been explained by a lopsided friendship between the murderer and victim, a friendship like that between Chad Overton and Mike Duveen. Walter had been able to use the murder story to bring out certain potentially dangerous elements in the Chad-Mike friendship. [...] (Highsmith 1956, pp. 7-8).

[...]

Walter got into his car and headed for Lennert. [...]. He felt jumpy, on guard, against what he didn't know. He felt guilty, as if he had killed her, and his tired mind traced back to the moments of waiting around the bus. He saw himself walking with Clara by some thick trees at the side of the road. Walter moved his head from side to side, involuntarily, as if he were dodging something. It hadn't happened. He was positive. But just then the road began to wobble before his eyes, and he gripped the wheel hard. Lights skidded and blurred on the black road. [...] (104).

[...]

Walter stood with his hand on his car door, trying to collect himself. He felt shaky again, off his course, off the course he should be taking. Had he done the wrong thing again in talking to Kimmel? The obvious peril of it struck him now, and he looked all around him for Corby, for a plain-clothes spy. It's a little late to be thinking of spies, Walter thought. (196).

[...]

Kimmel's fist smashed against his cheek. Walter could smell, like another complicated world in the cold air, the musty, sweetish smell of Kimmel's shop, Kimmel's clothes, Kimmel. Walter's arms twitched unavailingly, and he felt Kimmel's hand grappling for a grip on his throat, taking it. Walter tried to scream. He saw Kimmel's right hand rise, and then in his open mouth felt the string of a knife blade through his tongue, felt the sting again in his cheek, and heard the blade's grate against his teeth. The hot pain in his throat spread down into his chest. This was dying. [...] (288-289).

The above series of extracts portray Stackhouse's consciousness in the protagonist's particularly dramatic moments: when he learns about Kimmel's crime, the time when he is overcome with remorse at Clara's suicide, the manner in which he reacts after his encounter with the killer, and finally, at the moment when he becomes murdered.

Contrary to Kimmel's brief narrative perspective, Walter's narration is by far more detailed and subjective. It allows the readers access to the consciousness of the narrator assuming the role of the amateur detective or writer-cum-private investigator and simultaneously a conscious-stricken, innocent suspect. Unlike Melchior Kimmel, introduced as an unnamed, almost one-dimensional criminal figure, whose narration fluctuates between subjectivity and objectivity, oscillating between the perspective of the omniscient and focal narrator, Walter Stackhouse emerges as a multi-dimensional character who develops, changes and collapses in the course of events. It is his perspective which the reader feels an affinity with and which determines four identification factors. The overlapping emotional and the moral considerations factors closely mirror the reader's sharing sympathy with Walter Stackhouse's feelings and his moral perspective, particularly at the moments of his mental torment and at the time of his fall. The commonality factor, which accentuates the character's and the reader's common experience, could be applicable in the context of Walter's marital problems and his reaction towards her suicide on the one hand, and in the light of his difficulties at work, on the other hand, yet with regard to the very arcana of the crime it is rather insignificant. Conversely, the shared curiosity factor is pertinent to our study as it accentuates the reader's desirability to unveil the mystery as much as the very protagonist does. According to Rubin (1999, p. 220), this explains the reason why detectives serve as such good identification figures because "they become our representatives with the story and find the things we want to know". In *The Blunderer* it is not the police officer Corby but the innocent suspect obsessed with guilt and the murderer with whom most of the readers identify, yet his willingness to discover the truth brings about his downfall and contributes to our disillusionment with the story's outcome. Stackhouse embodies an unsuccessful investigator whose actions are regrettable and whose narration is unreliable and unstable – the above fragments reveal countless moments of the protagonist's internal torment, constant emotional conflicts, distorted mental perceptions as well as tortured relationships with other psychotic characters, all of which reflect the disintegration of his world. In view of this, it is next to impossible to regard the narrator as attractive, all the more "worthy of emulation" as Rubin (1999, p. 220) emphasises in his study of the admiration identification factor.

The role of lieutenant Lawrence Corby, the last element of the murder-victim-detective trio turns out to be decisive in the course of events and in developing the relationship between the two main actors of the crime drama. As previously pointed out, in *The Blunderer* the position of the police officer figure is prominent and exceptionally strong, when set beside Highsmith's other novels where the detectives and investigators stand against a background of the events in which the main characters, most notably, the criminals, are involved. Despite the fact that we do not have access to detective Corby's consciousness and throughout the entire novel he is portrayed through Walter's and Kimmel's perspectives, his supreme confidence and overbearing arrogance serve as lethal psychological weapons for both the characters which affect their narratives' balance as seen in the following fragments:

‘The murderer hasn’t been found yet. *She* was very definitely murdered,’ he added with a pleasant smile. ‘But the similarity of the two cases struck me – that interval at the bus stop.’

Walter said nothing. He looked straight into Corby’s blue eyes. Corby was smiling at him, in the friendliest way his anaemic-looking, overbright schoolboyish face was able to smile, Walter supposed. It was not at all friendly. [...] (Highsmith 1956, p. 131).

[...] ‘Where you never suspected?’

Kimmel lifted his highbrows even higher. If Corby wanted to antagonize him, he would be unantagonizable. [...] (147).

[...]

‘What is more important, Kimmel? My work or yours? What are you doing tonight – reading the Marquis de Sade’s *Memoirs*?’ (169).

[...]

Walter looked at his conceited stance, his scowling, undersized face – little demagogue, safe behind his badge. [...] (254).

[...] he watched Corby’s lean, arrogant figure circle Kimmel’s chair as if Kimmel were an elephant he had trapped, an elephant not yet dead. [...] Walter saw Kimmel flinched as Corby passed at him, and he realized why Kimmel looked so ugly and naked; he hadn’t his glasses. Corby must have grilled him hard, Walter thought, probably all night. [...] (255)

[...] Corby’s voice went on and on, exhorting Kimmel to confess, hammering into him that he hadn’t a leg to stand on. Walter knew exactly what Corby was going to say when his turn came: he would go over the visits to Kimmel, he would pretend he believed Kimmel implicitly about the discussion of murder, his confession to Kimmel later, pretend to believe that everybody else believed it, too, and that his position was as hopeless as anyone’s could be. [...] (256-257).

Lieutenant Corby emerges as an invader of both the inner selves and the external worlds of Kimmel and Stackhouse. Devoid of his own narrative perspective, he mediates between the two characters’ consciousness, leading to the confrontation of their narrative spaces. At the same time, he vies for the control of their narrations, endeavouring to undermine the credibility of their stories. By encroaching on the internal world and closely guarded privacy of Kimmel and Stackhouse, the zealous police officer excavates the pathological nature of the former and the guilty paranoia of the latter.

Corby orchestrates presumably chance encounters with the two suspects during which he inflicts physical and psychological torture on them. While interrogating Walter and Kimmel, the detective exposes his diabolical cunningness and Machiavellian manoeuvres. In his first conversation with Stackhouse, Corby’s personal comments on the murder case makes the protagonist speechless and thus his narrative control threatened. Conversely, Melchior Kimmel, the murderer without conscience, the erudite convinced that he committed the perfect crime, initially underrates both the lieutenant’s physical agility and his ability to weave an intellectual net in which the criminal becomes involuntarily trapped. Kimmel is certain of his dominance over Corby and of the mastery of his narrative, yet the psychotic police office, embodying Melchior’s secret other self, starts to overwhelm him, first, by asking about his involvement in crime as well as making allusions to his amoral and sadistic inclinations (reference to Marquis de Sade) and then by using physical violence. In the last two fragments of the text (pages 255-257), the reader witnesses the consecutive scenes of Kimmel’s being subjected to the physical tortures and Walter’s suffering mental torments as a result of the lieutenant’s investigative methods. Both the psychopathic killer and the conscience-stricken suspect-victim are at the mercy of the devilish detective, yet Dostoevsky or Conrad’s hellscapes into which they are cast lead them to destruction rather than to atonement.

4. CONCLUSIONS

All things considered, *The Blunderer* is a complex and inspiring yet still underrated novel by Highsmith whose linguistic and stylistic merits are worthy of examination, especially in the context of the narrative tension and suspense studies. Due to the limited space of this article, the author focussed on the analysis of the key constituents of the suspense principles, such as identification factors which, linked with the stylistics of crime and narrative studies, brought into light the three criminal-victim-detective narrative perspectives. From the above studies on narration and the stylistics of crime it transpires that Highsmith's text is not homogenous but reflects considerable tension between all the narrators' perspectives. Furthermore, amid all the crucial aspects of the psychology of crime delineated during the above examination emerges one significant factor determining Highsmith's text. In this novel, as well as in her later books, the American author purposefully breaks the Dostoyevskian causal chain linking guilt to culpability and to punishment which entails the possibility of redemption. In this respect, her books do not function as a morality play, contrary to her movie adaptations, but rather as a masterfully created amoral internal psychodrama.

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