



# The Character Network in Detective Fiction: A Dialogic Analysis of Mihail Sadoveanu's *The Hatchet*

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**Abstract:** Mihail Sadoveanu's *The Hatchet* (*Baltagul*, 1930) has been repeatedly assigned a wide and often contradictory range of generic labels, from realist and pastoral novel to philosophical, initiatory, tragic, and detective narrative. Rather than clarifying the text, this accumulation reflects a critical strategy of generic inflation aimed at securing canonical legitimacy while avoiding the low-prestige category of detective fiction. This article aims to provide a blueprint for a possible character network structure of detective fiction by revisiting the minority position advanced by G. Călinescu, who classified *The Hatchet* as a detective novella, and tests this hypothesis through a digital analysis of character dialogue. Using a manually annotated dataset and dialogue-based character network visualizations, this study shows that the narrative is highly centralized around Vitoria Lipan, whose investigative interrogations drive the plot, while secondary characters function as episodic holders of clues. The linear succession of encounters, absence of autonomous social networks, and procedural accumulation of knowledge align the text structurally with detective fiction and formally with the novella. This article argues that acknowledging *The Hatchet* as a detective novella offers a more precise generic reading and exposes the canonizing biases of Romanian literary criticism.

**Keywords:** genre theory; detective fiction; Romanian literature; character network; dialogue analysis.

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"The novel of a mountain woman's soul"<sup>1</sup>, "a realist novel in the strictest sense and can be read as such"<sup>2</sup>, "a romance novel, [...], a novel of intelligence [...], a novel of judiciary action [...], a social novel [...], a philosophical novel [...], an initiatory novel"<sup>3</sup>, a "pastoral and peasant novel"<sup>4</sup>, a "naturalist novel"<sup>5</sup>, a "novel of the prehistoric mentality of the mountain peasant"<sup>6</sup>, and, finally, "a mix of tragedy and detective novel"<sup>7</sup>. All of these descriptors are attached, at one point or another, to a famous Romanian fictional narrative, *The Hatchet* (*Baltagul*)<sup>8</sup>, first published in 1930 and currently a steady presence in Romanian high-school read lists. Taken together and read consecutively, however, these classifications do not point to a coherent generic profile, but rather to a symptom of critical indecision: the text is repeatedly renamed in order to avoid confronting the limits of the category under which it is being placed. Rather than clarifying what *The Hatchet* is, the variation of labels functions as a compensatory cumulative strategy. The seemingly endless proliferation of (sub)generic categories attached to *The Hatchet* is not just the effect of different theoretical and interpretive positions, but it also betrays a megalomaniacal reflex of Romanian literary criticism, driven by a deep need to secure canonical legitimacy through generic classification.

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1. Perpessicius, "Baltagul," *Cuvântul*, December 1930, repr. in *Scriitori români [Romanian Writers]*, vol. 4 (Bucharest, 1990), 104-105.

2. Nicolae Manolescu, *Sadoveanu sau utopia cărții [Sadoveanu, or the Utopia of the Book]* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1976), 159.

3. Alexandru Paleologu, "Anti-Miorița sau coborârea în Infern" ["Anti-Miorița, or the Descent into Hell"], in *Treptele lumii sau calea către sine a lui Mihail Sadoveanu [The Steps of the World, or Mihail Sadoveanu's Path toward the Self]* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1978), 102-103.

4. Nicolae Manolescu, *Arca lui Noe* (1001 Gramar, 1998), 175.

5. I. Negoșescu, *Analize și sinteze [Analyses and Syntheses]* (Bucharest: Albatros, 1976), 142.

6. Pompiliu Constantinescu, "Mihail Sadoveanu la 65 de ani" [Mihail Sadoveanu at 65], in *Scieri [Writings]*, vol. 4. Minerva, 1970, 544-549.

7. Alexandru Paleologu, *Treptele lumii sau calea către sine a lui Mihail Sadoveanu [The Steps of the World, or Mihail Sadoveanu's Path toward the Self]* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1978), 82.

8. Mihail Sadoveanu, *Baltagul* (Cartea Românească, 1930); first English translation in Mihail Sadoveanu, *The Hatchet*, trans. Eugenia Farca (The Book Publishing House, 1955).

Faced with a compact albeit rather dense narrative whose plot, functional and reduced character system, and investigative logic resist novelistic amplitude, critics repeatedly responded by multiplying and duplicating attributes like philosophical, initiatory, social, tragic, pastoral. There is certain and constant overbidding on the main generic attribute – novel –, best shown by the ambivalent back-and-forth that Nicolae Manolescu seems to go through when describing *The Hatchet*:

“In *The Hatchet*, in the beginning you have a *povestire*: the novel itself will be a *povestire*. Sadoveanu does not focus on a model of the world, but rather on a model of the *povestire*: well-knit and full of substance. [...] This summarizing character is the main artistic feature of *The Hatchet* and Sadoveanu’s other short novels, and it is indebted to the introduction of a realistic vision into the classic *povestire*. In this way, two sets of conventions come together: some originating from the realistic and naturalistic novels of the 19th century – richly epic, descriptive, illusionist (because they claim to compete with reality), psychological, – and others originating from the “novel” of the 17th-18th centuries, which is usually a *povestire* [...]”<sup>9</sup>

Here, the internal generic conflicts are in plain sight: the narrative is at the same time a “novel”, a “short novel”, and a specific genre of short fiction, “*povestire*.” Different genres are overlapped, and complex ancestries are built to describe what simply cannot not be a “novel.” At the same time, critics constantly minimized or briefly moved over the “detective” label. Even when acknowledged directly, something “bigger” had to be found there, and probably the paradigmatic example for this approach is Ovid S. Crohmălniceanu’s: “The plot, of a true detective novel, is based on a simple pattern: the woman tracks down the traces of the assassins and forces them to betray themselves. But the narrative has a dimension that surpasses all this apparent simplicity, situating *The Hatchet* in the area containing the major works of our literature and, without any shadow of doubt, those of world literature”<sup>10</sup>. It is transparent here how the “detective novel” is downgraded and *The Hatchet* is promoted to something “surpassing” it, and that something that enables it to surpass the “simplicity” of the form makes it a “major work.”

Significantly, there is one position that contradicts the majority on both the main genre designator and the subgenre designators. While acknowledging that “many value this short narrative as a novel, speaking of the writer’s creative power and of the psychological plausibility of the heroes,”<sup>11</sup> G. Călinescu classifies *The Hatchet* as a “true detective novella”<sup>12</sup>, doing so by assessing rather than inflating the text. He is partly shown right by the subtitle of the first English edition, published in Bucharest with the subtitle “a short story. Yet this cautionary stance was drowned out by a critical tradition for which *The Hatchet* could not simply be a detective story, since detective fiction, by definition popular, formulaic, and anti-canonical, was deemed structurally incapable of generating national literary prestige. The solution, as such, was not necessarily to deny the investigative core of the text, but to sublimate it: to reclassify murder as tragedy, clue-finding as initiation, or clues as signs. In this sense, the overwhelming refusal to read *The Hatchet* mainly as a detective narrative reveals less about the text itself than about a critical culture unwilling to accept that a prominent literary work might derive its coherence from mechanisms usually excluded from the literary canon. Walking in the steps of Călinescu, and using dialogue mapping and character dialogue networks as a method, this study aims to question whether *The Hatchet* is in fact a novella, and even more so, a detective novella.

### 1.1. What is a Novella?

It is not the purpose of this inquiry to analyse the conceptual framework and the historical evolution of the uses of “novella,” but rather just delineate as best as possible, for the sole purpose of validating the hypothesis, a few features that are recurring in most theoretical descriptions of novellas. For that limited goal, I will outline some of the traits revisited by Gerry Kimber in her contribution to *The Cambridge History of the Short Story*<sup>13</sup>. The novella

9. Nicolae Manolescu, *Arca lui Noe* (Pitești: 1001 Gramar, 1998), 190. Here, Manolescu specifically mentions the term “*povestire*,” which in Romanian literary theory is a type of short fiction, defined by the Romanian dictionary as a “specie epică de dimensiuni relativ reduse, în care narațiunea se centrează pe întâmplări relatate din perspectiva unui participant, într-o pronunțată notă de oralitate” [“epic subgenre relatively reduced in size, in which the narrative is centered around events related from the perspective of a certain participant, with acute orality”]. I have explored the ambiguity around various definitions of narrative forms in Romanian and Romanian narrative theory before in Vlad Pojoga, “Narațiune și interacțiune: preliminarii teoretice comparate,” *Transilvania*, no. 11-12 (2021): 53–58. Therefore, the statement “the novel itself will be a *povestire*” is self-contradictory, but quite telling.

10. Ovid S. Crohmălniceanu, *Literatura română între cele două războaie mondiale [Romanian Literature between the Two World Wars]*, vol. 1 (Bucharest: Minerva, 1972), 205.

11. G. Călinescu, *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent [The History of Romanian Literature from Its Origins to the Present]* (Bucharest: Fundația Regală pentru Literatură și Artă, 1941), 559.

12. Ibid.

13. See Gerri Kimber, “The Novella: Between the Novel and the Story,” in *The Cambridge History of the English Short Story*, ed. Dominic Head, 530–46 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).



is likely the most “slippery” of the short story – novella – novel trio, sliding between and borrowing from the other two. Generally viewed as a small-scale narrative, longer than a short story, but shorter than a novel, and focused on a single, remarkable situation that generates a tightly organized chain of events. Stemming from Italian and German traditions preceding the novel and marked by internal contradictions and focusing on a concentrated plot rather than expanding the fictional world through subplots, the novella uses concision to achieve a powerful emotional impact. Its endings are generally decisive, the number of characters is limited and compositionally it revolves around a “center.” Of all these, size could be the clearest indication a text is a novella rather than a short story or a novel, but where exactly is the line drawn? In research and criticism, it can be more flexible and focus on other features as well, but, for instance, when it comes to literary prizes and their need for clear criteria, the answer needs to be stricter. Most seem to have a mutual understanding that the genre limit should be somewhere a little less than or at most 40000 words (Nebula, Hugo, and Rita Awards have limits of exactly 40000 words for novellas, whereas other prizes such as the Paris Literary Prize has a 35000-word threshold<sup>14</sup>). To put this in perspective, *The Hatchet* stands at a little over 40000 words, whereas another famous Romanian work, almost unanimously classified as a novella, *Moara cu noroc*, stands at 38000 words. Naturally, this in itself cannot be proof, but it can be a start. But to try and be more specific, rather than approach the novella too abstractly, in a 2011 article, Tony Whedon mentions a series of clear-cut features of novellas, which he claims are “thriving on travel and adventure”<sup>15</sup>, “voyages of dark discovery”<sup>16</sup>, “often products of cultural/familial dislocation, or reflect the disintegration of established social orders”<sup>17</sup>, and centered around “a conflict between its doomed ‘soloist’ and his/her environment”<sup>18</sup> while “thriving on the margin of high culture, not at its center.”<sup>19</sup>

A detective novella would then be detective fiction taking the form of a novella. Which translated, quite obviously, to a novella centred on a crime/mystery and the investigation that leads to its solution, generally carried out by a detective figure using observation and logic to uncover clues. It would also have a schematic, formulaic structure while opposing good to evil<sup>20</sup>.

## 1.2. What are Character Networks?

The study of character networks has become more and more popular in the past few years, providing a computational lens through which the complex social architectures of narratives can be examined. Initially focusing on the analysis of movie scripts and plays, given their highly formal structure, the field now encompasses a broad spectrum of media, including novels, television, and multimodal storytelling. This expansion has been driven by a central premise: that mapping the relational dynamics between characters, be it through dialogue, co-presence, or more nuanced interactions, provides a structural mapping of the narrative itself, revealing patterns of plot, theme, and genre. One of the earliest instances of using character networks in literary studies is Moretti’s 2011 analysis of dramatic works<sup>21</sup>, but since then, varied attempts and experiments have been made, and several extraction pipelines have been proposed. Almost all of them are surveyed by Labatut and Bost<sup>22</sup>, who provide the most comprehensive survey to date of fictional character networks. While early studies often relied on simple co-occurrence within a scene, research has demonstrated that more fruitful insights can be provided by dialogue-based networks. For instance, Park et al.<sup>23</sup> showed that directed, weighted networks built from speech acts offer a more nuanced basis for role classification and community detection in films than co-presence alone. These two approaches show possible directions that at the same time generate conceptual tensions regarding the definition of “interaction” in storyworlds. Co-presence models tend to equate spatial proximity with social significance, whereas dialogue-based networks privilege verbal exchange and risk marginalizing narratively salient relations.

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14. <https://nebulas.sfwa.org/about-the-nebulas/nebula-rules/>; <https://web.archive.org/web/20120414071645/http://www.wsfs.org/bm/const-2009.pdf#page=5>; <https://web.archive.org/web/20130118091919/http://www.rwa.org/p/cm/ld/fid=532>; <https://web.archive.org/web/20130729013226/https://www.parisliteraryprize.org/eligibility-conditions.htm>

15. Tony Whedon, “Notes on the Novella,” *Southwest Review* 96, no. 4 (2011): 565.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, 568.

18. *Ibid.*, 566.

19. *Ibid.*, 570.

20. For an in-depth look at features of detective fiction, see Peter Hühn, “The Detective as Reader: Narrativity and Reading Concepts in Detective Fiction,” *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 33, no. 3 (1987): 451–466. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/mfs.0.1310>.

21. See Franco Moretti, *Network Theory. Plot Analysis*, Stanford Literary Lab Pamphlets (2011).

22. Vincent Labatut and Xavier Bost, “Extraction and Analysis of Fictional Character Networks,” *ACM Computing Surveys* 52 (2019): 1–40. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3344548>.

23. Seung-Bo Park, Kyeong-Jin Oh and Geun-Sik Jo, “Social network analysis in a movie using character-net,” *Multimedia Tools and Applications*, 59 (2012): 601–627. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11042-011-0725-1>.

Recent work further extends character network research through a set of analytical orientations and infrastructural developments that foreground scale, participation, and automation. In terms of collaborative and citizen-science methodologies, Piper, Xu, and Ruths<sup>24</sup> propose a large-scale, crowdsourced model of narrative social networks. At the same time, data visualization tools like the one proposed by Xanthos et al.<sup>25</sup>, an open-source web application that models theatrical texts as sequences of evolving character-network states dynamically linked to the dramatic text or the web-based platform proposed by Lenz et al.<sup>26</sup> further advance participatory analysis. At the opposite end of the spectrum, large-scale automated extraction is exemplified by CREFT<sup>27</sup>. But irrespective of their choice of measuring interaction, and whether applied on films<sup>28</sup>, on plays<sup>29</sup>, on novels<sup>30</sup>, or even on novels vs. their film adaptations<sup>31</sup> (Chowdhury et al. 2019), character network extraction and analysis have become a rapidly consolidating area of research in literary and cultural studies, with increasingly explicit theoretical ambition. All of these explorations have shown that character networks can function as transferable analytical models for narrative structure, social configuration, and plot dynamics across media and cultural contexts.

## 1.2. Dataset and methodology

The empirical foundation of this study is a manually constructed dataset of character speech extracted from Mihail Sadoveanu's *The Hatchet*, by using CATMA 7 (Computer Assisted Text Markup and Analysis)<sup>32</sup>, a digital, browser-based annotation tool developed by a collective of researchers based at various institutions in Germany. CATMA allows users to tag and classify textual segments by directly marking them in the digital edition uploaded to the platform. Because, as previously mentioned, 1. mapping dialogue in Romanian narratives poses significant automatic detection challenges mainly due to its omission of quotation marks and impossibility to clearly isolate narratorial interventions, and 2. my current project is a limited one, and does not plan on providing algorithms for dialogue identification, but rather using network character visualisations to uncover and contradict/confirm previous hypotheses regarding Romanian canonical works, I chose a fully manual approach in order to ensure accuracy. Therefore, I first imported a "clean" digital transcription of the novel<sup>33</sup> into CATMA and proceeded to link every instance of dialogue to the speaking character. The character list was built on-the-go, and names were added when characters appeared in the text. This step required careful interpretation of contextual indicators, so basically it involved a rereading of the whole work. Secondly, I exported the resulting data (the speech in itself) and metadata (speech context, character tag, speech start and ending location – spanning from the number corresponding to the first character of the first uttered word to the number corresponding to the last character

24. Andrew Piper, Michael Xu, and Derek Ruths, "The Social Lives of Literary Characters: Combining citizen science and language models to understand narrative social networks," *Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Natural Language Processing for Digital Humanities* (2024): 472–482. <https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/2024.nlp4dh-1.45>.

25. <https://maladesimaginaires.github.io/intnetviz/>. Aris Xanthos, Isaac Pante, Yannick Rochat and Martin Grandjean. "Visualising the Dynamics of Character Networks." *Digital Humanities* 2016: 417–419.

26. Kai Lenz, T. Ito, Tsukasa Kikuchi and Yuriko Takeshima, "Development of a User-Participatory Narrative Analysis and Visualization Platform," *2025 Nicograph International (NICOInt)* (2025): 59–64. <https://doi.org/10.1109/nicoint67466.2025.00019>.

27. Ye Eun Chun, Taeyoon Hwang, Seung-won Hwang and Byung-Hak Kim, "CREFT: Sequential Multi-Agent LLM for Character Relation Extraction," *ArXiv*, abs/2505.24553 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.48550/arxiv.2505.24553>.

28. Pete Jones, Eithne Quinn and Johan Koskinen, "Measuring centrality in film narratives using dynamic character interaction networks," *Social Networks*, 63 (2020): 21–37, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socnet.2020.03.003>; O-Joun Lee, and Jason J. Jung, "Story embedding: Learning distributed representations of stories based on character networks," *Artificial Intelligence* 281 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.artint.2020.103235>; Rhishikanya Batswa, Parthajit Borah, and Subrat Jyoti Neog. "Exploring Character Networks in Assamese Cinema: A Graph-Based Analysis." *2025 International Conference on Innovation in Computing and Engineering (ICE)* (2025): 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1109/ice63309.2025.10983966>.

29. Samya Muhuri, Susanta Chakraborty and Sabitri Nanda Chakraborty, "Extracting Social Network and Character Categorization From Bengali Literature," *IEEE Transactions on Computational Social Systems*, 5 (2018): 371–381, <https://doi.org/10.1109/tcss.2018.2798699>; Aura Cristina Udrea, Stefan Ruseti, Laurentiu-Marian Neagu, Ovio Olaru, Andrei Terian, and Mihai Dascalu, "Who Speaks to Whom? An LLM-Based Social Network Analysis of Tragic Plays," *Electronics* 14, no. 19 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.3390/electronics14193847>.

30. R. H. Chen, C.-C. Chen, and C.-M. Chen, "Unsupervised cluster analyses of character networks in fiction: Community structure and centrality," *Knowledge-Based Systems* 163 (2019): 800–810. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.knosys.2018.10.005>; Vlad Pojoga, Laurentiu-Marian Neagu, and Mihai Dascalu, "The character network in Liviu Rebreanu's *Ion*: a quantitative analysis of dialogue," *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* 6.2 (2020): 23–47; Chao Fan, and Yu Li, "Network Extraction and Analysis of Character Relationships in Chinese Literary Works," *Computational Intelligence and Neuroscience* (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1155/2022/7295834>.

31. Tapan Chowdhury, Samya Muhuri, Susanta Chakraborty, and Sabitri Nanda Chakraborty, "Analysis of Adapted Films and Stories Based on Social Network," *IEEE Transactions on Computational Social Systems*, 6 (2019): 858–869. <https://doi.org/10.1109/tcss.2019.2931721>.

32. Evelyn Gius, Jan Christoph Meister, Malte Meister, Marco Petris, Dominik Gerstorfer, Mari Akazawa, and Stefanie Messner. 'CATMA'. Zenodo. 10 March 2025. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15000951>.

33. Based on the first version available for research in *The Digital Museum of the Romanian Novel*.



of the last uttered word in every intervention<sup>34</sup>). Thirdly, I used formulas to calculate numbers of characters with spaces and words spoken by each character. Fourthly, in another cycle of annotation, I manually identified the interlocutor or interlocutors for each spoken intervention, thus establishing who is spoken to, in order to build a dataset capable of supporting network analysis. Lastly, I added character genders to each character. All exported data was cleaned, structured, and validated manually at least twice, once originally and once in spreadsheet format, ensuring consistent character attribution and interaction labelling. At the end of the process, every intervention by every character became a data point with clear metadata linking it to a speaker, an addressee, and a precise narrative location, allowing for subsequent calculation of speech frequency, lexical volume, and temporal distribution per character, as well as the construction of a weighted directed dialogue network. This careful annotation workflow provides a high degree of precision in representing the novel's dialogic structure and in calculating how much every character speaks.

### 1.3. Findings

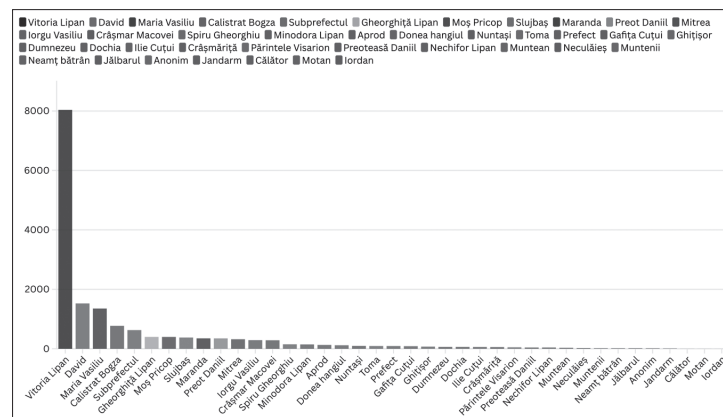


Fig. 1. Bar graph of words spoken by character in *The Hatchet*

Fig. 1 and 2, displaying in different manners the number of words spoken by each character in *The Hatchet*, reveals a dramatic imbalance in the distribution of voice, a structural asymmetry that fundamentally shapes the storyworld. Vitoria Lipan, the main character who investigates the case of her husband, Nechifor (who at first is missing and then is found dead) overwhelmingly dominates the charts, with almost half of all the words spoken. As a matter of fact, only 25% of all words spoken in *The Hatchet* are not spoken by or addressed to Vitoria Lipan. This makes her the focal point of knowledge dissemination about the fictional world, and the plot seems to advance almost exclusively through her interrogations, assertions, interpretations, and social manoeuvres. It also makes *The Hatchet* one of the few Romanian canonical narratives in which women speak more than men (male characters utter 39% of the uttered words, whereas female characters utter 61% of the uttered words – it needs to be emphasized that Vitoria Lipan utters 48% of these words, with the rest of the female characters uttering the other 13%). This is even considering that only 20% of the total number of characters are women. All speech expectation patterns are exceeded or even turned on themselves in terms of gender. Vitoria Lipan is undoubtedly “a woman in the land of men”<sup>35</sup>. Of the other characters, four seem to stand out: David, Maria Vasiliu, Calistrat Bogza, and the Subprefect, and one stands out by not standing out: Gheorghita Lipan. David, the merchant, and Maria Vasiliu, the wife of one of the innkeepers, emerge as the two main “helpers”, the two characters who speak the most after Vitoria Lipan, with 9%, and 8% of the total uttered words, respectively.

They do not appear together, but rather at different times in the narrative, and they provide Vitoria with different types of assistance: David appears closer to the beginning and introduces Vitoria to and accompanies her in an unfamiliar world, whereas Maria Vasiliu offers her the biggest number of clues to solve her husband's murder. The other two men, Calistrat Bogza, the more talkative of the murderers, and the Subprefect, the “voice” of law and state power, appear as characters rather from the other side, ones that need to be either uncovered or convinced. The most striking position is, indeed, the one of Gheorghita Lipan, the son who accompanies Vitoria during her journey and is always by her side. It turns out that he is a quiet presence, a character who has other narrative roles than speaking: he seems to be the one who assists Vitoria with actions rather than words – mostly physical activities or

34. Numbers are provided by CATMA based on document location – with the first character of the document being character no. 1, and then progressing by 1 with each character.

35. Manolescu, *Arca*, 170.

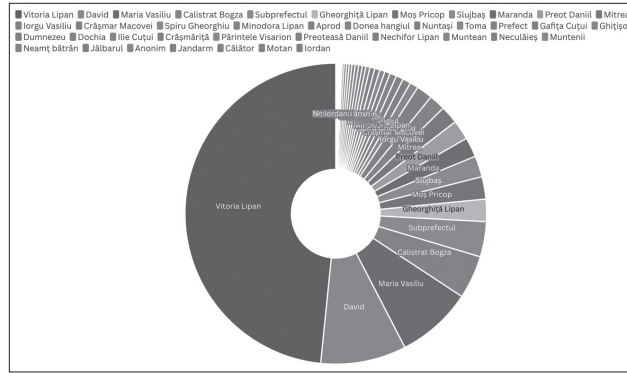


Fig. 2. Pie chart of words spoken by character in *The Hatchet*

small errands ran at the behest of his mother. As the graph and pie progress beyond Gheorghită, the distribution quickly becomes a “long tail” of characters with very limited (at most 2% of the total words uttered) or even minimal (the least represented character utters only one word) speech, each seeming to fulfill single-purpose roles in the investigative progression: witnesses, innkeepers, bureaucrats, or passer-by figures that activate a specific piece of information before receding from the storyworld. The bar chart therefore not only quantifies words spoken, but also visualizes the novel’s core power structure: a socially traditional but narratively unexpected framework in which a peasant woman, through sheer persistence of voice, appears to temporarily bend a patriarchal environment around her quest for truth.

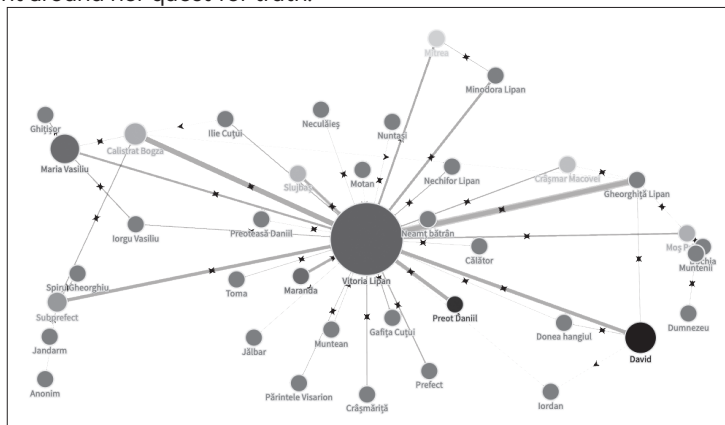


Fig. 3. Character dialogue network in *The Hatchet*

The second graph (Fig. 3) shows the novel’s dialogic structure as a directed character network. Here, characters are nodes, and dialogue exchanges between them are links. The size of the nodes is determined by the number of relationships established through speech, the width of the links is based on the number of exchanges, and the arrows on the links show the directions of the exchanges (if only one character speaks to another, then there is only one arrow; if characters speak to each other, the arrows are two-way). The character network makes immediately visible the extent to which *The Hatchet* functions as a centralized, single-hub narrative system in which Vitoria Lipan holds a position of overwhelming structural dominance, not just as the protagonist but as the main gate through which all relevant communication must pass. Positioned at the centre of the network as the largest, most visually prominent node, she directly speaks to or is spoken to by nearly every character in the story, and the density and width of the edges connecting her to others reveals that narrative importance in this storyworld is measured by relational proximity to her investigative trajectory. Three other loose communities can be found in the network, one being a two-character community between Minodora, Vitoria’s daughter, and their house servant, Mitrea; the second being a four character community consisting of David, Gheorghită Lipan, and two other innkeepers encountered at the beginning of their journey; the third is another four character network that includes the other major helper, Maria Vasiliu, her husband Iorgu Vasiliu, their house servant Ghițșor and one of the murderers, Calistrat Bogza. Most other characters are not connected, with very few exceptions. Also an exception is the outside network exchange rendered at the start of the narrative, in which God speaks to the Mountainpeople. This absence of autonomous sub-networks confirms that the fictional world, though populated,



is not self-sustaining; instead, every character's narrative relevance emerges only when Vitoria activates them through dialogue, appropriating their knowledge to push the plot forward. The nodes floating around Vitoria illustrate the procedural nature of the novel: once their informational role is fulfilled, they do not speak to others. The network visualization therefore captures the deeper narrative logic that readers intuit but cannot see: *The Hatchet* is not a sprawling social novel; it is the narrative of a network being built in real time by a protagonist who inserts herself into its every node, compelling each character to participate in the production of narrative knowledge. Given the insights from the first three figures, a different type of graph seems to be needed now, to visually represent something else than quantity or relationships.

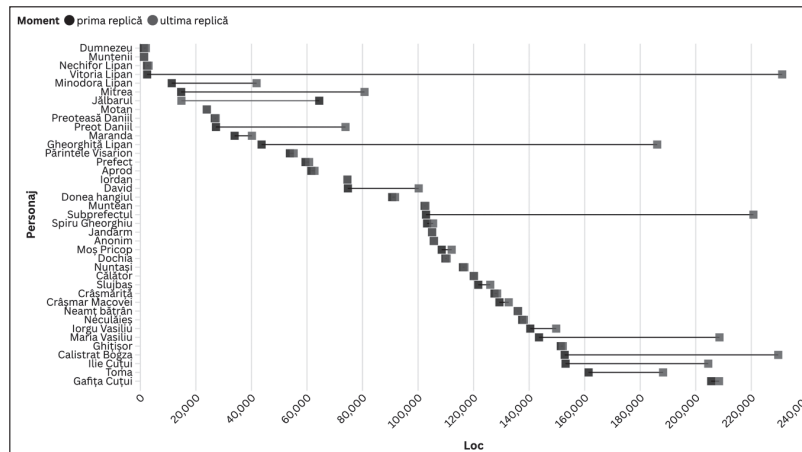


Fig. 4. Location of character speech in *The Hatchet*

Enter Fig. 4, which plots the precise textual positions at which each character utters their first and last words. It offers an unusually clear window into the temporal architecture of *The Hatchet* and the degree to which each character is distributed across the narrative. By mapping presence as a continuity between two events (an initial appearance of voice and a final verbal exit), this graph turns the novel into a temporal landscape of interpersonal encounters that can easily also map Vitoria's spatial journey. The narrative "stages" can be seen in a quite straightforward manner: from the two brief recollected exchanges in the beginning – the one between God and the Mountainpeople and the one between Nechifor Lipan and his wife –, the dialogues progress to the initial "stage" – the exchanges before the journey, in Măgura Tarcăului, where few local characters overlap –, then to the first "stage" of the journey, where Vitoria and Gheorghită are accompanied by David, who then leaves them behind for another "stage" in which, after becoming familiar with the world outside her village, Vitoria quickly goes through a palette of minor characters that eventually lead her to Maria and Iorgu Vasiliu, where the final stage, at the end of which she uncovers the crime and makes the murderers confess, begins. Naturally, Vitoria Lipan spans almost the entire length of the plot, her dialogic presence beginning early and extending nearly to the novel's conclusion, underscoring her function as the central axis around which the narrative revolves. Other characters are temporally limited: their first and last utterances clearly indicate that their roles crystallize in specific narrative segments. Midway through the graph (what was earlier called the second "stage" of the journey), a densely packed cluster of characters appear in succession, and their speech acts occur in tight proximity, often beginning and ending within a short textual range; this visual density maps onto the middle chapters of the novel, in which Vitoria traverses the country and encounters a rapid gallery of informants, each contributing small increments to the broader reconstruction of Nechifor's case. The absence of extended overlapping timelines among these secondary characters shows that *The Hatchet* does not construct a complex narrative network, but rather a strictly linear chain of dialogic encounters, each bound by a particular space. The graph also reveals the asymmetry of speech persistence: only a handful of characters (Vitoria and Gheorghită mainly, but also one or two others) are present for longer, while the majority appear only once or twice, never to speak again. This temporal visualization confirms that *The Hatchet* is a narrative driven by progression rather than simultaneity; its realism stems not from vast social networks or complex interpersonal dynamics but from the incremental accumulation of voices encountered along a journey. Knowledge seems to be distributed across time, locked within characters whose dialogic windows open and close with precision, and Vitoria's task is to traverse these windows in the correct order. This scenario aligns closely with the narrative's architecture as a procedural search for truth: every minor character holds a micro-fragment of the larger enigma, but only Vitoria accumulates, interprets, and contextualizes these fragments into a coherent resolution.

#### 1.4. Interpretation of Findings

The purpose of this study was to test a simple hypothesis, i.e., that *The Hatchet* is a detective novella, using a manually extracted and digitally visualized dialogue character network. Arguably, it did more than it set out to, and I will show why.

1.4.1. *The Hatchet* turned out to be a highly dialogic narrative dominated overwhelmingly, across all metrics, from number of words spoken to number of interactions, from frequency of exchanges to temporal distribution of dialogue by a woman protagonist, Vitoria Lipan. No unexpected findings here, the critical consensus being that she is the ever-expanding centre of the fictional world. However, it needs to be brought forward that through almost ubiquitous coverage of the storyworld, Vitoria Lipan provides an almost unprecedented level of representation of women characters in Romanian canonical lists.

1.4.2. The fictional world of *The Hatchet* is, therefore, not built through extensive descriptions or panoramic realism (as Sadoveanu is actually famous for), but rather through a sequential and procedural uncovering of narrative information by Vitoria Lipan herself. The network visualization reveals a striking structure, where interactions and conversations almost never occur without the involvement or presence of the protagonist, underscoring a functional depiction of social links.

1.4.3. *The Hatchet* seems to perfectly fit into the novella category as defined in this study. Its size, albeit at what can be considered the upper limit of a novella, is small-scale enough to fit the genre. It does not expand the world through subplots, which are impossible without separate interactions between secondary characters. It does have a highly organized chain of events that is traversed by a paradigmatic heroine, structured around a journey and the ensuing adventure (Fig. 4). It has a limited number of characters and clearly revolves around a narrative centre (Fig. 3). And, moreover, in terms of contents, it appears to be the perfect glove for the hand described by Tony Wheldon: Vitoria undergoes a “voyage of dark discovery”, she is “dislocated”, the established patriarchal “social order” “disintegrates.”

1.4.4. *The Hatchet* is, without a shadow of doubt, a prime example of detective fiction: a story taking shape from the investigation of a mystery (Nechifor Lipan’s disappearance) that becomes a crime (Nechifor Lipan’s murder) by a detective figure (Vitoria Lipan) uncovering clues. Fig. 4 shows exactly how these clues work: they are information held by episodic characters who have reduced or no psychological profiles at all and whose only narrative function is that of knowledge holders waiting for the detective figure to extract said knowledge from them. The absence of horizontal communication among them (Fig. 3) indicates that there is no conspiracy of shared knowledge and no communal awareness about the crime, which forces Vitoria to personally traverse the landscape and stitch these isolated pieces into a full account of the murder, providing the solution and answers at the end.

1.4.5. Therefore, it becomes clear how Romanian literary criticism inflated the generic attribution of *The Hatchet* to force it into categories deemed as more canonical than others, and for this another prime example is the final dramatic scene, the uncovering of the crime. While this type of scene has gradually become almost cliché in the formulaic structure of detective fiction, a scene in which the detective gathers everyone together to contextualize their findings and uncover the murderer, Romanian critics repeatedly likened the scene to the one in Hamlet and even dubbed Vitoria a “female Hamlet,” not talking about resolution and demonstration, but rather tragic fate.

1.4.6. The structure of the character network of dialogic exchanges in *The Hatchet* and the succession of character interventions (Fig. 3 and 4) provide a possible blueprint for character networks and interactions in detective fiction. Of course, at this point it remains only a hypothesis that needs to be tested against larger corpora, and will most likely not provide any definitive results without the integration of LLMs for large-scale character attribution.

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