



What connects  
**Detective fiction's**  
history and growth to

- The growth of:
  - Magazines
  - Medicine
  - London city
- French Revolution
- Colonization

## Arthur Conan Doyle



A medical doctor who needed a supplementary income

Wrote science fiction, historical fiction, non-fiction (spiritualism, travel) and detective fiction

Holmes, the detective, modelled on his teacher in medical school

## The Genre of Detective Fiction

### **A Genre that (was) consolidated (by) the “Reader”**

- Origins [Anglo-American and other]

### The late 19<sup>th</sup> century in England

- The city (as a node of global-local transactions)
- Print culture – magazines, newspaper and the “penny dreadfuls”
- Establishment of the Police department (1829 London, 1845 New York City)

### Social anxieties and the “Sensation” of Crime

London’s social geography (countryside, colonies, East-end)

Class, Race and Criminality,

“Sensational” Crime

The debased reputation of the Police

### The Figure of the Detective

The re-assurance that the detective can re-establish social order

# The Adventure of the Dancing Men



- Published as *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* (1905)
- First published in *The Strand Magazine*, UK (1903) & in *Collier's*, USA (1903)
- “Close Reading” the story
  - —The “appreciation” of the story
  - —The summary of the story

## The “Typical” Holmes Story

- Someone comes to visit the famous Sherlock Holmes
- The visitor spells out the details of a story, a confusing sequence of events
- The detective is asked to “make sense” of it. To read the signs, unravel the puzzle, solve the mystery
- In other words, to create a relationship between “fact” and “meaning”

**“Literary Recipe”**

*a)* the victim *(b)* the criminal; *(c)* the detective and *(d)* those threatened by the crime but incapable of solving it"

"A successful detective tale . . . must not only be solved, it must mystify"—John Cawelti

The “plot” where readers detect vicariously

## 2. Reading "The Adventure of the Dancing Men"

Holmes had been seated for some hours in silence with his long, thin back curved over a chemical vessel in which he was brewing a particularly malodorous product. His head was sunk upon his breast, and he looked from my point of view like a strange, lank bird, with dull grey plumage and a black top-knot.

“So, Watson,” said he, suddenly, “you do not propose to invest in South African securities?”



## 2. Reading “The Adventure of the Dancing Men”

...this sudden intrusion into my most intimate thoughts was utterly inexplicable.

“How on earth do you know that?” I asked.

He wheeled round upon his stool, with a steaming test-tube in his hand and a gleam of amusement in his deep-set eyes.

Setting (when? where?)

Point of View

Mood

Characterisation

## 2. Reading “The Adventure of the Dancing Men”

“Holmes’s curious faculties”

“You see, my dear Watson”—he propped his test-tube in the rack and began to lecture **with the air of a professor addressing his class**—“it is not really difficult to construct **a series of inferences**, each dependent upon its predecessor and each simple in itself. If, after doing so, **one simply knocks out all the central inferences and presents one’s audience with the starting-point and the conclusion**, one may produce a startling, though possibly a meretricious, effect.

## 2. Reading "The Adventure of the Dancing Men"

Inferential chain

...the very simple chain: 1. You had chalk between your left finger and thumb when you returned from the club last night. 2. You put chalk there when you play billiards to steady the cue. 3. You never play billiards except with Thurston. 4. You told me four weeks ago that Thurston had an option on some South African property

# Reading “Clues” & Meaning Making

Making significance  
Making a “sign”

Sign: Signifier-Signified

1

2

## 2. Reading “The Adventure of the Dancing Men”

Reading Clues



...“Every problem becomes very **childish** when once it is explained to you. Here is an unexplained one. **See what you can make of that**, friend Watson.”...

I looked with amazement at the **absurd hieroglyphics** upon the paper.

“Why, Holmes, **it is a child’s drawing**,” I cried.

“Oh, that’s your idea!”

“What else should it be?”

[...] “These hieroglyphics have evidently a meaning” [Holmes].

## 2. Reading “The Adventure of the Dancing Men”

### Rising Action

**The Visitor: Mr. Hilton Cubitt, of Ridling Thorpe Manor, Norfolk**

A heavy step was heard upon the stairs, and an instant later there entered a tall, ruddy, cleanshaven gentleman, whose clear eyes and florid cheeks told of a life led far from the fogs of Baker Street. He seemed to bring a whiff of his strong, fresh, bracing, east-coast air with him as he entered.

**& the mystery he unfolds—the “plot-less” details**

“I’m not much of a story-teller,” said our visitor, nervously clasping and unclasping his great, strong hands.

# Reading as Meaning Making

Making significance; Making a “sign”

## Denotation

Literal meaning

Sign (Signifier-Signified)

- cheap, inexpensive
- skinny, gaunt, slender

## Connotation

Emotional, Socio-cultural,  
Associational weight of a word

- plump, buxom, heavy-set
- bright, clever, cunning

1

5

## 2. Reading “The Adventure of the Dancing Men”

**Rising Action**

### **Mr. Hilton Cubitt’s “Story”**

...but I want to say first of all that, though I’m not a rich man, my people have been at Ridling Thorpe for a matter of five centuries, and there is no better known family in the County of Norfolk.

[...]

**In/Direct Characterisation**

You’ll think it very mad, Mr. Holmes, that a man of a good old family should marry a wife in this fashion, knowing nothing of her past or of her people; but if you saw her and knew her it would help you to understand.



## 2. Reading “The Adventure of the Dancing Men”

### **Mr. Hilton Cubitt’s jumbled “Story”—contd.**

The Jubilee celebration & a quick marriage

The bride’s opaque past

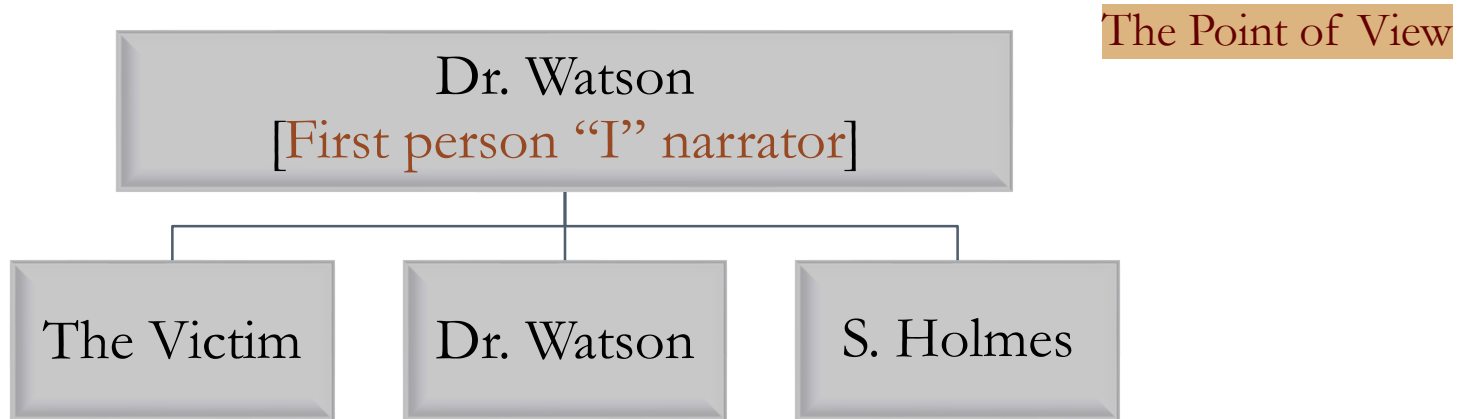
A happy marriage

**A letter from America; Dancing men appear**

“It was not a thing that I could take to the police, for they would have laughed at me, but you will tell me what to do.”

## 2. Reading “The Adventure of the Dancing Men”

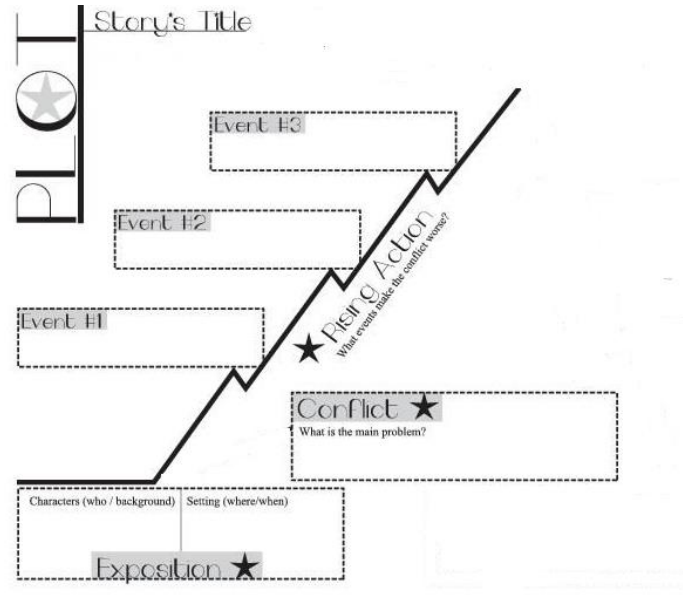
“He was a fine creature, this man of the old English soil, simple, straight, and gentle, with his great, earnest blue eyes and broad, comely face. His love for his wife and his trust in her shone in his features.”



## 2. Reading “The Adventure of the Dancing Men”

### The “Conflicts” so far

“It’s bad enough to feel that you are surrounded by unseen, unknown folk, who have some kind of design upon you; but when, in addition to that, you know that it is just killing your wife...”



## 2. Reading “The Adventure of the Dancing Men”

The many “Readers” of signs/texts

**Dr. Watson:** “absurdly simple”; “a child’s drawing”

**Mr. Hilton Cubitt:** “queer mystery”, “absurd tricks”

**Elsie Patrick:** terrifying incident

**We:** The Readers of  
(outside) the story

**Sherlock Holmes**

- “a curious production”
- “I fear it is too deep a case for such simple remedies”

## Reasoning: “Subjective”, “Objective” ...

### **Deductive reasoning**

also known as ‘top-down’ logic, where the reasoner begins with an accepted premise and seeks to prove another statement based on previously “known” information.

### **Inductive reasoning**

to extrapolate from the information observed in order to arrive at conclusions about events that have not been observed.

### **Abductive reasoning**

to reason from incomplete observations to arrive at a plausible, or most likely conclusion

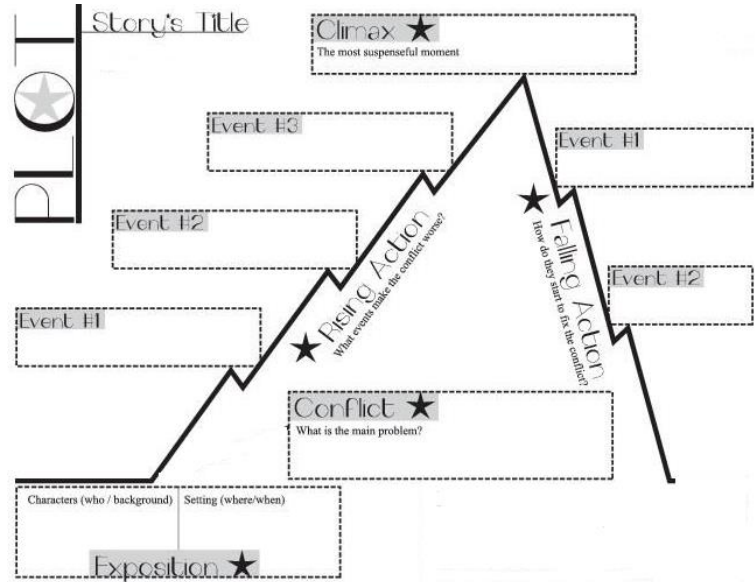
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## 2. Reading “The Adventure of the Dancing Men”

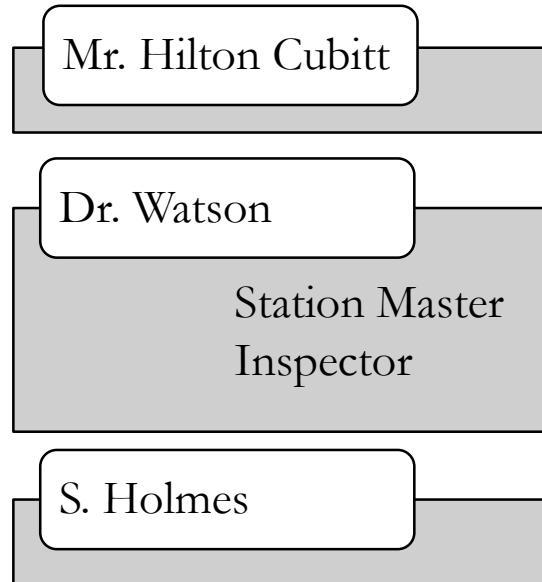
### The Suspense, the “Climax” & the Falling Action

“We have let this affair go far  
enough” (Holmes)



# The Many Readers and their Readings (2)

Or, how the suspense builds up



## Reading Signs

Coded  
messages

Emotions

Elsie's past

## Reading Character/s

Mr. Hilton

Elsie Patrick

S. Holmes

The "Villain"

"a dark, creeping  
figure"

## Reading Events / Conflicts

The appearance  
of dancing men

The deaths

## 2. Reading “The Adventure of the Dancing Men”

### The “Climax” & Falling Action

...the station-master hurried towards us. “I suppose that you are the detectives from London?” said he.

A look of annoyance passed over Holmes’s face.

“What makes you think such a thing?”

[...]

“It’s a terrible business,” said the station-master. “They are shot, both Mr. Hilton Cubitt and his wife. She shot him and then herself—so the servants say. He’s dead and her life is despaired of. Dear, dear, one of the oldest families in the County of Norfolk, and one of the most honoured.”



## 2. Reading “The Adventure of the Dancing Men”

### The Falling Action

The old hall, oak-panelled and high-windowed, had been turned into a court of investigation. Holmes sat in a great, old-fashioned chair, his inexorable eyes gleaming out of his haggard face. I could read in them a set purpose to devote his life to this quest until the client whom he had failed to save should at last be avenged

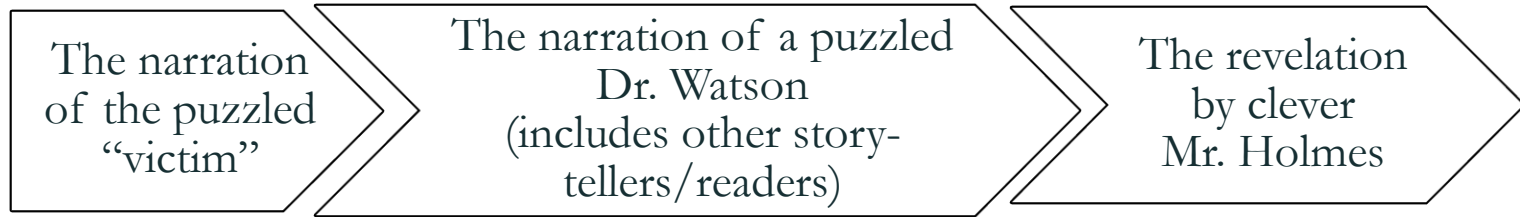
[...]

“I rather think, Inspector Martin, that we have now exhausted all that this room can teach us.... we shall see what fresh evidence the garden has to offer.”

[Reading Setting]

- The “Reading” of the story

Re-reading to Re-pattern

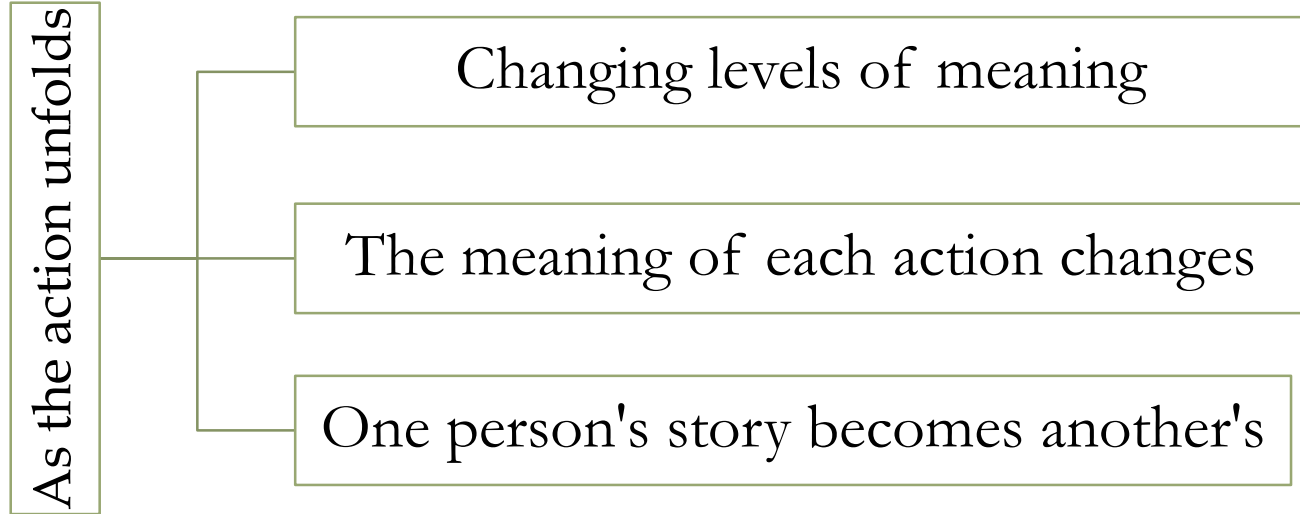


## 2. Reading “The Adventure of the Dancing Men”

**Reading-Reasoning:     Deductive     Inductive     Abductive**

“I had every reason to suppose that this Abe Slaney was an American, since Abe is an American contraction, and since a letter from America had been the starting-point of all the trouble. I had also every cause to think that there was some criminal secret in the matter. The lady’s allusions to her past and her refusal to take her husband into her confidence both pointed in that direction.”

“I have here in front of me these singular productions, at which one might smile had they not proved themselves to be the fore-runners of so terrible a tragedy.”



## 2. Reading “The Adventure of the Dancing Men”

Only one word of epilogue. The American, Abe Slaney, was condemned to death ...; but his penalty was changed to penal servitude in consideration of mitigating circumstances, and the certainty that Hilton Cubitt had fired the first shot

The idea of Criminality

“...these are the chronicles of fact” (Dr. Watson)

# Becoming a Reading Detective

Investigating

mis/cues,  
clues,  
signs, connotations,  
associations  
patterns

and all that is in/visible



Mariusz  
Stawarski