

Detecting Meaning with Sherlock Holmes*

Reading Sherlock Holmes II

based on slides by Jane Wong Y. C.

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The Adventure of the Dancing Men

- Holmes, upholder of justice and drug addict?
- In the Victorian era, “sale of opium, laudanum, cocaine and morphine was legal. Victorian users took these dangerous drugs as selfmedication and as recreation” (VW)
- Holmes’s recreational use of drugs can be explained in two ways.

From A Study in Scarlet (1887)

Nothing could exceed his energy when the working fit was upon him: but now and again a reaction would seize him, and for days on end he would lie upon the sofa in the sitting- room, hardly uttering a word or moving a muscle from morning to night. On these occasions I have noticed such a dreamy, vacant expression in his eyes, that I might have suspected him of being addicted to the use of some narcotic, had not the temperance and cleanliness of his whole life forbidden such a notion. (The Complete Sherlock Holmes, vol. I, 13)

From The Sign of Four (1890)

Sherlock Holmes took his bottle from the corner of the mantel-piece and his hypodermic syringe from its neat morocco case. With his long, white, nervous fingers he adjusted the delicate needle, and rolled back his left shirt-cuff. For some little time his eyes rested thoughtfully upon the sinewy forearm and wrist all dotted and scarred with innumerable puncture-marks. Finally, he thrust the sharp point home, pressed down the tiny piston, and sank back into the velvet-lined arm-chair with a long sigh of satisfaction. (The Complete Sherlock Holmes, vol. I, 99) [not unusual for heroes to have fatal flaw—superman; more “relatable”]

The Adventure of the Dancing Men

- The introduction of Holmes “his long, thin back curved over a chemical vessel in which he was brewing a particularly malodorous product.”
- “If there is an afternoon train to town, Watson, I think we should do well to take it, as I have a chemical analysis of some interest to finish, and this investigation draws rapidly to a close.”
- Holmes brilliant or because others around him lack the skills of close observation?
- The drawings of the Dancing Men.
- Why are they not described in the narrative but illustrated?
- Hilton Cubitt’s family background:

“You’ll just ask me anything that I don’t make clear. I’ll begin at the time of my marriage last year; 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.”

The Adventure of the Dancing Men

- “I am only a simple Norfolk squire, but there is not a man in England who ranks his family honour more highly than I do.”
- The significance of Elsie Patrick.
- The marriage as irrational:

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 ...
- Holmes not simply a character that makes the characters from prominent families look foolish, he preserves their reputations.

The Adventure of the Dancing Men

- Legitimizing Holmes (as non-official source of authority).
- Representation of legal authority: Inspector Martin of the Norfolk Constabulary.
- “Then you must have important evidence of which we are ignorant, for they were said to be a most united couple.”
- The co-operation of police and detective.
- Inspector Martin impressed by Holmes genius.
- Authority undermined as Holmes orders the inspector around.
- The character traits of Inspector Martin.

The Hound of the Baskervilles

- The third (but most successful) novel
- serialised in The Strand Magazine from August 1901 to April 1902
- the Holmes story since his apparent death in "The Final Problem" (although set before the final problem)
- emphasizes the eerie setting and mysterious atmosphere of the moor
"The longer one stays here, the more does the spirit of the moor sink into one's soul, its vastness, and also its grim charm."

Some Classic Detective Fiction Tropes

➤ Supernatural turns out to be natural

➤ just like in Scooby Doo

➤ Red herrings throw us off the scent

➤ the escaped convict

➤ Punishment comes from fate

Somewhere in the heart of the great Grimpen Mire, down in the foul slime of the huge morass which had sucked him in, this cold and cruel-hearted man is forever buried.

The ungothic novel

- As soon as Dr. Mortimer arrives to unveil the mysterious curse of the Baskervilles, Hound wrestles with questions of natural and supernatural occurrences. The doctor himself decides that the marauding hound in question is a supernatural beast, and all he wants to ask Sherlock Holmes is what to do with the next of kin.
- From Holmes' point of view, every set of clues points toward a logical, real-world solution. Rejecting the supernatural explanation, Holmes decides to consider all other options before falling back on that one. Sherlock Holmes personifies the intellectual's faith in logic, and on examining facts to find the answers.
- In this sense, the story takes on the Gothic tradition, a brand of storytelling that highlights the bizarre and unexplained. Doyle's mysterious hound, an ancient family curse, even the ominous Baskerville Hall all set up a Gothic-style mystery that, in the end, will fall victim to Holmes' powerful logic.

The moon was shining bright upon the clearing, and there in the centre lay the unhappy maid where she had fallen, dead of fear and of fatigue. But it was not the sight of her body, nor yet was it that of the body of Hugo Baskerville lying near her, which raised the hair upon the heads of these three daredevil roysterers, but it was that, standing over Hugo and plucking at his throat, there stood a foul thing, a great, black beast, shaped like a hound, yet larger than any hound that ever mortal eye has rested upon.

- a quote from an old manuscript — distanced from the present
- In the present they are big, but not impossibly so:
Dr Mortimer looked strangely at us for an instant, and his voice sank almost to a whisper as he answered: 'Mr Holmes, they were the footprints of a gigantic hound!'

Class and hierarchy

- Throughout the story, the superstitions of the shapeless mass of common folk- everyone attributes an unbending faith in the curse to the commoners- are denigrated and, often, dismissed. If Mortimer and Sir Henry have their doubts, it is the gullible common folk who take the curse seriously.
- In the end, when Watson's reportage and Holmes' insight have shed light on the situation, the curse and the commoners who believed it end up looking silly.

Hound of the Baskervilles (1939)

- the 1939 adaptation *The Hound of the Baskervilles* by 20th Century-Fox, starring Basil Rathbone as Holmes and Nigel Bruce as Watson.
- First of 14 films with this pair
- Set in Victorian England (not remade as contemporary)

Bibliography

- John Scaggs (2005) *Crime Fiction* (CF), Routledge
- *The Victorian Web: Literature, History & Culture in the Age of Victoria* (VW) Holmes info. contributed by Dr. Andrzej Diniejko, <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/doyle/addiction.html>