

# Detecting Meaning with Sherlock Holmes\*

## Reading Sherlock Holmes I

based on slides by Jane Wong Y. C.

Francis Bond

**Division of Linguistics and Multilingual Studies**

<http://www3.ntu.edu.sg/home/fcbond/>  
bond@ieee.org

Location: LT25

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# Genre & Historical Context

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- **Genre:** The French term for a type, species, or class of composition. A literary genre is a recognizable and established category of written work employing such common conventions as will prevent readers or audiences from mistaking it for another kind.
- Modern detective fiction as genre:
  - Biblical stories of crime and punishment
  - Greek tragedy
  - Renaissance revenge tragedy (16th-17th century)
  - Gothic horror stories (early 19th century)
  - Victorian crime stories (early 19th to late 19th century)

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- A story in which the principal action and focus of interest is the investigation of a crime ...by a detective figure, either professional or amateur. The centrality of this detective figure distinguishes the detective story proper from some other kinds of crime fiction in which the emphasis lies upon the actions of a crime's perpetrator or victim.
- Conventionally, the crime should be an especially baffling case that requires the uncommon ingenuity of the detective to find a solution and identify or pin the blame on the true perpetrator, who commonly has an apparently safe alibi or has left a false trail incriminating others. Various kinds of crime are possible subjects, although murder, and preferably multiple murder involving the elimination of witnesses to the original crime, has been found to be the most appetizing to readers addicted to the genre.
- All references to genre from *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (ODLT), 3rd Edition (Chris Baldick)

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- Dorothy Sayers identifies 4 early stories with the elements of the detective story (CF)
  - Two from the Old Testament from the Book of Daniel
  - One from Herodotus
  - Another from the Hercules myths (classical mythology)
- According to Sayers, common elements of these early stories include:
  1. A crime that has been committed
  2. “Locked-room mystery” involving an apparently impossible crime perpetrated within an enclosed space with ostensibly no exit or entrance (Poe’s Rue Morgue story being an example)
  3. Tampering of evidence
  4. False accusations
  5. Puzzles
  6. Uncovering truth

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- Some critics object to Sayer's categorization of early elements of the detective story.
- Julian Symons argues that while stories from the bible and Herodotus include puzzles, and that even though "puzzles are an essential element of the detective story, they are not detective stories in themselves" (CF 8)
- Symons main argument: the puzzles in the stories focus more on punishment than on detection:

The emphasis on right conduct, reinforced by the harsh punishments meted out in the stories from the Book of Daniel, is characteristic of most narratives of crime up until the mid-nineteenth century, including the stories of Edgar Allan Poe (CF 8)

# Elizabethan Revenge Tragedies (16th-17th c.)

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- Preoccupied with the restoration of social order, “as embodied by the act of revenge.”
- “The revenge pattern of injury and retribution creates a narrative in which the unity of justice and order prevails.”
- It is ironic that revenge narratives are produced when there is a lack of justice.
- “The revenger pursues a course of action that is itself unjust, in an attempt to restore the unity and social order that justice promises” but have failed.
- Francis Bacon refers to the early developments of the revenge tragedy as “a kind of wild justice” (CF 11)

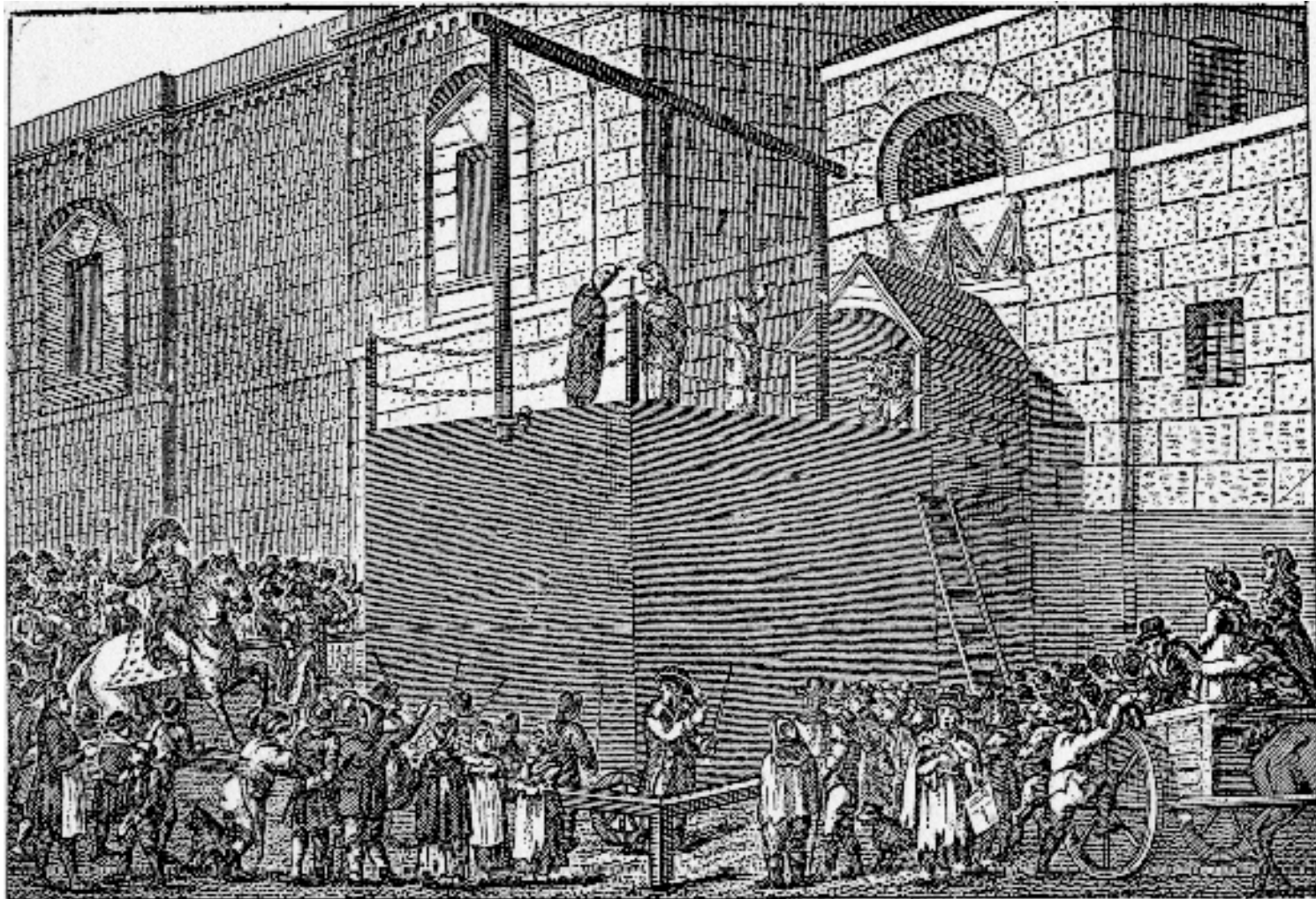
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- According to Gamini Salgado, there is a 5-part structure to Elizabethan revenge tragedies, and they are parallel to early Greek Senecan tragedies.
  - This structure is also commonly used in modern crime fiction today:
    1. Exposition
    2. Anticipation
    3. Confrontation
    4. Partial execution
    5. Vengeance (CF 11)

# The Newgate Calendar

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- In the 18th century, the [Newgate Calendar](#) stories provided the first large collection of cautionary tales; accounts of criminals arrested, tried, and punished captured popular imagination.
- Originally a monthly bulletin of executions, produced by the Keeper of Newgate Prison in London
- Then expanded with bibliographies and descriptions of crimes
- Rise in crime during the Industrial Revolution; large population shift from rural to urban areas; also caused by high unemployment rates.
- “Thief-takers” as predecessors to police; the Metropolitan Police Act in 1828 established a police force.
- Invention of photography in 1839; development of forensic sciences.





An Execution at the Debtor's Door of Newgate

# The Golden Age of Detective Fiction

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- The Golden Age in Britain started in 1920, with Agatha Christie's first novel *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* and finished with WWII.
- Country-house murder synonymous with the whodunnit.
- Classic British whodunnit: “character is usually sacrificed in favour of ingenious plotting, as the puzzle element of the challenge to the reader to discover ‘whodunnit’ before the book reveals it, is emphasized.”
- Four main authors
  - Agatha Christie: Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple
  - Dorothy L. Sayers: Peter Whimsey (younger brother of a duke)
  - Margery Allingham: Albert Campion (viscount)
  - Ngaio Marsh: Roderick Alleyn (brother of a baronet, and policeman)

# Across the Pond

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- Hard-boiled detective stories — USA
  - Does not use appeal and reason or logic and focuses on the detective character “normally characterised by violence and betrayal.”
    - \* Dashiell Hammett (1894–1961): Sam Spade, the Continental Op
    - \* Raymond Chandler (1888–1959): Phillip Marlowe
    - \* Mickey Spillane (1918–2006): Mike Hammer
- Sherlock Holmes also very popular!

## Post Golden Age

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- By the 1970s [post war generation], the aristocratic elements diminished in British detective stories and they developed more along the lines of hard-boiled American narratives; detectives are associated with professional police enforcement agencies.
- Police Procedurals — more emphasis on the process
  - Ed McBain: 87th Precinct
- Crime Thrillers — more emphasis on the criminal
  - Thomas Harris: Hannibal Lector *The Silence of the Lambs*
- Historical Crime Fiction — set in the past; a blend of genres
  - Umberto Eco: William of Baskerville *The Name of the Rose*

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# The Adventure of the Speckled Band (1892)

# The Adventure of the Speckled Band

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The Story (like most) is narrated by Watson

1. act[s] as a contrast to the abilities of the detective, emphasising in the detective's genius a difference in degree, rather than a difference in kind
  2. act[s] as recorder, not only of the story, but also the physical data upon which the detective's analytic ability depends
  3. embod[ies] the social and ideological norms of the period
  4. masks information from the reader because Watson is limited in knowing what Holmes discovers when he is away, or of knowing what Holmes is thinking.
- The narrator feeds the clues to the reader
  - But are they credible?

## Story as a window on society

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- Representation of social class, culture, and gender.
- Holmes as distinctly English (East India 1757-1858; Crown rule 1858-1947).
- Holmes and Roylott of Stoke Moran (Surrey); English aristocracy as a backdrop here, highlighted by the family's historical past, and how the family's wealth went through different phases.
- Watson's emphasis that Holmes is not interested in money, and Holmes' reassertion to the same: "As to my reward, my profession is its reward."

# Hero vs Villain

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- Watson's depiction of Holmes

“I had no keener pleasure than in following Holmes in his professional investigations, and in admiring the rapid deductions, as swift as intuitions, and yet always founded on a logical basis, with which he unravelled the problems which were submitted to him.”

- Holmes as the “perfect” English man; British empire

- Dr. Roylott's history and his qualities

- Reading Dr. Roylott alongside the colonial narrative; assumptions of those who spend time in India and are too friendly with the natives

- Dr. Roylott's behavior and his temperament  
even his name gives it away: Dr. Grimesby Roylott



## Britain vs the Other

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- Dr. Roylott's past in India is an important thread throughout the story.
- The exotic realm of India is associated with wickedness.
- The region is considered partially responsible for his violent temperament. As Helen remarks, Dr. Roylott's "violence of temper approaching to mania has been ... intensified by his long residence in the tropics."
- The creatures imported from India are dangerous:

The idea of a snake instantly occurred to me, and when I coupled it with my knowledge that the doctor was furnished with a supply of creatures from India, I felt that I was probably on the right track. The idea of using a form of poison which could not possibly be discovered by any chemical test was just such a one as would occur to a clever and ruthless man who had had an Eastern training ...

# Men vs Women

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- If the two male characters (Holmes and Roylott) stand on opposite end of the spectrum then we do we make of the women in the stories?
- Tensions; male and female spaces: “Was it your custom to always lock yourselves in at night?”
- The “locked-door” mystery.
- Helen Stoner approaches Holmes for help; her sister’s death and her appeal to Holmes contributes to the construction of Holmes as a hero figure, and specifically, Holmes’ masculinity as something that overcomes cowardice. (Consider the scene of Roylott’s confrontation of Holmes.)
- Helen’s trust in Holmes and his access of the female space
- Necessity; Holmes has access to the room and the description of Julia’s bed being clamped down to the floor is troubling.

# The conclusion

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- Possibly the most popular of the stories
- A classic locked room mystery
  - typical **red herring** “misleading clue”: the band of gypsies
- In solving the puzzle, Holmes in effect restores order
  - the order that has disrupted gender assumptions, civility (in removing the threat of that which is uncontrollable, corrupt, violent, etc.)
  - the damsel is freed from her distress and the villain gets his just deserts.
- The punishment comes naturally, not through the legal system

# Bibliography

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- John Scaggs (2005) *Crime Fiction* (CF), Routledge