

THE SCIENTIFIC AND POETIC ASPECTS OF THE CHARACTER OF SHERLOCK HOLMES

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Abstract

An amazing character that has continued to intrigue and perplex the intellectual minds for more than a hundred and twenty-five years deserves an in-depth study and research to explore and unfold its various layers and traits. This paper ventures to examine the pure heart and bright brain of the brilliant detective Sherlock Holmes, a character created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. A possessor of some dazzling traits, he has immaculate insights that lead to the solving of various cases. The character and spirit of Holmes have been so skillfully sketched by the author that they engage the inquiring minds and keep them glued to the stories and novels with an unruffled concentration and dedication. His sharp observations, use of science and a rare logic, solve the unsolvable crimes. His language is at once scientific and poetic, and his use of metaphors, outstanding. This is a humble attempt to take a peek into one of the most admired and adored characters of all times.

Key Words: Character of Sherlock Holmes, Sharp Observation, Scientific Approach, Logic, deployment of Language

Introduction

The genre of the Detective Fiction is merely a century and a half old. Edgar Allen Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" was the first detective story that appeared in 1841 in Graham's Magazine in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, U.S.A. This made Poe the pioneer of this kind of fiction. However, Detective fiction also has its roots in the sensation novels of Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens from where it acquires its melodramatic element, which, as T.S.Eliot describes:

Is perennial...the craving for it is perennial
and must be satisfied. (Eliot, 133)

However, Eliot himself writes that the detective story is also a narrative that is,
As specialised and as intellectual as a chess
problem. (Eliot, 137)

Hence, Detective fiction is an untraditional blend of the scientific and the literary. An era of remarkable spread and acclaim of Detective fiction was commenced by Sir Arthur Ignatius Conan Doyle (1859-1930). Born in Edinburgh in Scotland in a family of Roman Catholics and educated in Jesuit schools, he used his friends and teachers from Stonyhurst College as inspiration for characters in his Holmes stories. While studying medicine at Edinburgh University, he met Dr. Joseph Bell, one of his professors, whose deductive skills served as a model for Doyle's most famous detective, Sherlock Holmes. In 1884, Doyle married Louise Hawkins.

His literary career took off out of his failure as a doctor. However, his first book was not accepted by any publishing house he turned to. He decided therefore to create something fresh and original. His first significant work was *A Study in Scarlet* which appeared in Beeton's Christmas Annual for 1887 and featured the first appearance of Sherlock Holmes. *The Sign of Four* followed in 1889. It was an enormous success, and Doyle began producing one story after another, published mostly in the pages of the Strand Magazine. Sherlock Holmes and his companion Watson soon became the world's most famous fictional pair of detectives. However, Doyle killed his immensely popular character in the story entitled *The Final Problem*, published in 1893. During the South African War (1899-1902) Doyle served as a physician in a field hospital, where he wrote *The Great Boer War* in which he defended the policy of his homeland. After the war, in 1902, Doyle returned to England and was knighted. His financial difficulties ended in the resurrection of Holmes who appeared first in Watson's memoirs in *The Hound of the Baskerville* (1902) and later personally, claiming that his death had been simulated, in *The Adventure of the Empty House* (1904). Doyle never tried to get rid of him again, and Holmes remained a part of his life until Doyle's death. He had realised that he could never do away with this character people fell so madly in love with:

it is plausibly said that Sherlock Holmes has appeared in more films, and been represented by more actors, than any other character. (Redmond 232)

In this paper, I set out to analyse and examine the character of Sherlock Holmes, his physical appearance, mental traits, methods of investigation, brilliant deductions and his relationship with his companion, Dr. Watson.

Inspiration for Holmes

Sherlock Holmes, the fictional detective who first appeared in 1887, was featured in four novels and 56 short stories. Various assumptions are made based on Doyle's life, acquaintances and reading as to where he may have derived inspiration for this immensely well-created character. Holmes in many aspects seems to be inspired by Edgar Allen Poe's Dupin and Gaboriau's Lecoq. Doyle himself commented that Holmes was inspired by Dr. Joseph Bell, for whom he worked as a clerk. Holmes's deductive powers resemble those of Bell. However, Bell himself wrote to Doyle that Doyle himself was the inspiration for his creation. Sir Henry Littlejohn, a Lecturer on Forensic Medicine, is also cited as a source. He served as Police Surgeon and Medical Officer of Health as well, which may have provided Doyle the idea to connect medical investigation and detection of crime.

Whereabouts & History

Most of the details about Holmes's life are identified from the adventures recorded by Dr. Watson. However, certain incidental references are also available. In the story "His Last Bow", he is described as 60 years of age, and the setting of this story goes back to 1914. This places his birth in 1854. Holmes is described to have his lodgings at 221B Baker Street, London. His family background remains quite obscure and his parents are unmentioned. However, he states that his ancestors were Country squires. His brother, Mycroft, who is seven years senior to him, is a government official, and appears in some stories.

Outward Appearance

Holmes's very first appearance makes a strong impact on the readers' minds. Watson describes him in *A Study in Scarlet* as a very attractive man:

In height he was rather over six feet, and so excessively lean that he seemed to be considerably taller. His eyes were sharp and piercing [. . .] and his thin, hawk-like nose gave his whole expression an air of alertness and decision. His chin, too, had the prominence and squareness which mark the man of determination. His hands were in variably blotted with ink and stained with chemicals, yet he was possessed of extraordinary delicacy of touch. (Doyle: SS, 20)

A deep esteem emerges from Holmes's description and the readers feel his immensely powerful presence. He looks and behaves like an Englishman of his time. It is difficult to identify with him or even find a similar person in neighbourhood. His scholarly look adds to his towering personality.

Mood Swings

One striking trait of Holmes's character is his change of mood. He has bouts of depressions. He confesses:

I get into the dumps at times, and don't open my mouth for days on end. (Doyle: SS, 19)

He seeks refuge in drugs or his pipe at times. In absence of challenging cases, his idle mind tortures him and keeps on hunting for something new.

A Worshipper of Science

As a consulting detective, Holmes adheres to scientific methods. He can solve unsolvable crimes by unthinkable means and he calls it "the Science of Deduction and Analysis" (Doyle: SS, 23). He calls it as his own invention and himself its only connoisseur. In his article "The Book of Life", he mentions:

From a drop of water, a logician could infer the possibility of an Atlantic or a Niagra without having seen or heard of one or the other. (Doyle: SS, 23)

His techniques may look very odd but they stem out of his accurate scientific knowledge, observation, logic and deduction. William Stowe, in *From Semiotics to Hermeneutics: Modes of Detection in Doyle and Chandler*, comments:

His goal is to consider data of all kinds as potential signifiers and to link them, however disparate and incoherent they seem, to a coherent set of signified, that is, to turn them into signs of the hidden order behind the manifest confusion, of the solution to the mystery, of the truth" (Stowe 367-8).

Holmes's scientific method works step by step. He first collects all the available data. Then he classifies it and takes whatever is essential to his investigation. Then he decodes it that leads to the unfolding of its logical significance. Finally, he unifies it all and joins the dots to give a complete picture. He is very confident in his findings and is never mistaken. His stories may seem implausible

but they are very carefully woven with a strong base of minutely studied detail. In “A Scandal in Bohemia”, he observes that Watson has been getting himself very wet lately and has a clumsy servant girl. When asked how he came to that conclusion, he explains:

It is simplicity itself. [. . .]My eyes tell me that on the inside of your left shoe, just where the firelight strikes it, the leather is scored by six almost parallel cuts. Obviously they have been caused by someone who has very carelessly scraped round the edges of the sole in order to remove crusted mud from it. Hence, you see, my double deduction that you had been out in vile weather, and that you had a particularly malignant boot-slitting specimen of the London slavery.’ (Doyle: SB, 162)

What helps Holmes with his findings is also his wonderful knowledge of the forensic sciences. He can prove an accurate analysis of footprints, hoof prints and bicycle tracks as evident in “A Study in Scarlet”, “The Adventure of Silver Blaze”, “The Adventure of the Priory School”, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, “The Boscombe Valley Mystery”. He can identify criminals by the use of tobacco ashes and cigarette butts as in “The Adventure of the Resident Patient”, *Baskervilles*. He can also utilize gunpowder residue to expose murderers as in “The Adventure of the Reigate Squire” and can make bullet comparisons as in “The Adventure of the Empty House”. He also has a profound knowledge of Chemistry and Anatomy along with a working knowledge of Geology. In addition to Sciences, he has a practical knowledge of British Law. He knows Latin too and needs no translation of the Roman epigrams in the original.

Holmes exhibits knowledge of psychology too on several occasions. For example, in “A Scandal in Bohemia”, he reads the mind of Irene Adler by the “premise” that an unmarried woman will try to save her most valuable possession in case of a fire whereas a married one would grab her baby instead.

Other Skills

Holmes is an expert with weapons. Both he and his companion Watson are described as carrying pistols with them. Watson describes the use of weapons many a times. Holmes also carries a cane with him. He is described as an expert at singlestick. In *A Study in Scarlet*, Watson also depicts him as a master in the use of sword. Holmes is a formidable bare-knuckle fighter and engages in a hand to hand combat with his adversaries. He also states that he has the knowledge of *Baristu*, or the Japanese system of wrestling.

Love for Music

An alluring trait of Holmes is his penchant for music. He is a brilliant violin player and a composer too. Music satisfies his wish to concentrate, as well as articulates his thought and mood at that moment:

Sometimes the chords were sonorous and melancholy. Occasionally they were fantastic and cheerful. (Doyle: SS, 22)

Duality of Character

Holmes's character is a surprising but refreshing amalgam of different traits. He is at scientific yet poetic. He has an amazing logical faculty and at the same time is capable of powerful emotions and fervour. He has brilliant powers of observation as well as a sensitive heart that can experience involvement in little things of life. He can get transported from total indifference to a feverish excitement:

In his singular character the dual nature alternately asserted itself, and his extreme exactness and astuteness represented [. . .] the reaction against the poetic and contemplative mood which occasionally predominated in him. The swing of his nature took him from extreme languor to devouring energy; and [. . .] he was never so truly formidable as when, for days on end, he had been lounging in his armchair amid his improvisations and his black-letter editions. (Doyle: RHL, 185)

When immersed in a thought process, Holmes appears so calm and lost. And when he finds a solution, he jumps with joy and displays an almost childish excitement. Though dealing with criminals, he has no bitterness in heart. Again, his ignorance and knowledge can be juxtaposed:

His ignorance was as remarkable as his Knowledge. (Doyle: SS, 21)

Holmes has a fondness for exact and definite knowledge and yet this knowledge is very unsystematic. Watson is shocked to discover that he had never heard about the Copernican theory and the composition of the solar system. His knowledge of Chemistry and Anatomy is accurate whereas that of Botany is variable. His knowledge of Literature, Philosophy and Astronomy is nil and yet that of Sensational Literature is immense.

Relationship with Watson

Holmes being an exceptionally gifted person is conceited as most scholars are. Many a time he looks upon others with contempt. His pride is a result of his self-sufficiency. His eccentricities and total absorption in work make him asocial. It is as if he has nothing to do with anyone. People don't exist for him at all. In spite of this, what perplexes us is his remarkable friendship with Dr. Watson. Holmes shares the majority of his professional years with Watson, who lives with him for some time before his marriage in 1887 and again after his wife's death.

Watson is Holmes's faithful companion as well as the narrator of many of his stories. He also is an intensifier of his brilliance. Holmes and Watson share a very warm and strong bond. Holmes admires Watson in many ways as he is a Doctor of Medicine and a highly educated man. The element of humour is also brought out by Holmes's teasing of Dr. Watson. Even Watson's description of Holmes sometimes becomes a substantial source of humour:

I have always held, too, that pistol practice should be distinctly an open-air pastime; and when Holmes, in one of his queer humours, would sit in an armchair with his hair-trigger and a hundred Boxer cartridges and proceed to adorn the opposite

wall with apatriotic V. R. done in bullet-pocks, I felt strongly that neither the atmosphere nor the appearance of our room was improved by it. (Doyle: MR, 386)

The fact that they tease each other confirms the warmth of their relationship. Holmes's relationship with Watson adds affection and smiles to his life. Many a times Holmes also asks for his friend's help with his cases. He addresses Watson as "my dear friend" and also confesses that he has no other friend in the world except him. Watson's immense fondness for his eccentric friend is visibly displayed when he sits down to pen Holmes's death. His heavy heart almost stops him from writing it down. When Holmes literally rises from the dead, Watson's delight knows no bound and he cries in excitement. Holmes calms him down and lights a cigarette for him, amused at the dramatic effect his appearance had led to. Hence, Watson is a narrator, companion, partner and the only friend Holmes has ever had.

Poetic Aspects

Though extremely devoted to the use of Science and logic, Holmes is incredibly poetic in many ways. We feel many a times that Holmes was conceptualized as a poetic and romantic hero rather than as a scientific one. He relies heavily on his instinct and imagination in addition to the scientific knowledge. He has a deep sense of justice and respect for the noble ideals. Lady Conan Doyle comments that Holmes's love for ideals motivates him to

take up the cudgel so indefatigably [as] a fearless fighter on behalf of the oppressed and the victims of injustice"
(Lady Conan Doyle, 85)

Holmes values emotion and imagination in coming to the right conclusion and also in maintaining truth and order in the society. Even Holmes's approach to his case combines the scientific and artistic ways of looking at the world. Even his way of construing the final mystery is done in a highly literary and poetic language. The way he sums up his mystery is a performance rather than an explanation:

At his command she consented to pass as his sister, though he found the limits of his power over her when he endeavored to make her the direct accessory to murder. She was ready to warn Sir Henry so far as she could without implicating her husband, and again and again she tried to do so. Stapleton himself seems to have been capable of jealousy, and when he saw the baronet paying court to the lady, even though it was part of his own plan, still he could not help interrupting with a passionate outburst which revealed the fiery soul which his self-contained manner so cleverly concealed.
(HB, 164)

Holmes's treatment of language is the outcome of his recognizing the value of every sentence, word, and letter. He also picks up linguistic clues in solving the case and poeticizes his explanations. He constantly uses grammatical metaphors such as the alteration in your face, that desperate struggle,

useless waste of life, this method of settling international questions, etc. And he adds humour to poetry as seen in his below-mentioned conversation with Watson:

This hat has not been brushed for weeks.
When I see you, my dear Watson, with a
week's accumulation of dust upon your hat,
and when your wife allows you to go out in
such a state, I shall fear that you also have
been unfortunate enough to lose your wife's
affection" ("The
Blue Carbuncle", 140-1)

Thus, his unraveling of mysteries was scientific as well as poetic at the same time. His methods, his principles, his explanations, his descriptions, his deductions, all betray not only his scientific exactness but also show that he was a romantic to the core.

Conclusion

It is a nearly impossible task to fully expose a character as interesting and unique as Sherlock Holmes. He has hypnotized and captured the readers' minds for forever. He has also aspired the making of hundreds of works- in media as well as other stories. Doyle has created the Great Detective that people will always put by their side when they come across any other detective characters. He is also the very embodiment of a Victorian Hero, the champion of justice and the man with the highest regards for science and logic. He simultaneously attracts us by his instinct and vivid imagination that characterize his speech, action and behavior. The unforgettable detective moving through the twists and turns on the bustling streets of London shall continue to haunt the readers' minds for all the centuries to come.

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