

**Detection, Desire and Contamination:  
The Strange Case of Sherlock Holmes**

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## ABSTRACT

Arthur Conan Doyle's famous creation, Sherlock Holmes, is often viewed as a fictional embodiment of justice and order in nineteenth-century Britain, a fantasy of epistemological mastery precisely calibrated against the social flux and uncertainty of the *fin-de-siècle*. Holmes solves perplexing crimes through logic and reason, and affirms a positivist conservative ideology that upholds the status quo. This thesis will challenge this comforting reading of Holmes by arguing, firstly, that he is in fact a highly ambivalent figure - morally problematic, culturally marginalised and sexually ambiguous. Secondly, it will demonstrate how Holmes should be situated within the context of various historical and contemporary discourses, including inquisitorial modes of punishment and surveillance, the discourse of atavism, contemporary anxieties about degeneracy in the upper classes and the cultural problematics of bachelorhood and bohemia in Victorian society. Finally, it will trace a continuum in which Holmes, as an archetype in a discourse of detection extending back to the work of earlier writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, sets the pattern for the legion of brilliant, eccentric and ambiguous detectives who have followed in his wake. Understood in terms of this genealogy, the detective's characteristic flaws, traits, eccentricities and methodologies can be seen to have a specific relation to their historical moment: indeed, part of the lingering appeal of the eccentric detective lies in the fit between their eccentricities, the nature of the crimes they solve, and their ability to restore order. This thesis will demonstrate the fit in the case of Sherlock Holmes, but will also demonstrate that he is more ambiguous, ambivalent and even subversive than his consoling conservative appeal might suggest.

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## Introduction

Sherlock Holmes first appeared in *A Study in Scarlet*, which was published in November of 1887 in *Beeton's Christmas Annual*. It was the first of what would eventually comprise sixty adventures featuring the famous detective and his faithful sidekick, Dr John Watson: between 1887 and 1927, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930) produced fifty-six short stories and four novels describing their exploits together. Holmes was to become something of a publishing phenomenon, establishing a definitive archetype for the modern detective in the literary imagination. The stories largely eclipsed the rest of Conan Doyle's work in the eyes of both critics and the public, so much so that Conan Doyle developed a famously ambivalent attitude towards his creation. In his preface to the last collection of short stories, *The Case Book of Sherlock Holmes* (1927), he confessed: "That pale, clear-cut face and loose-limbed figure were taking up an undue share of my imagination."<sup>1</sup> Despite attempting several times to kill off Holmes, Conan Doyle was continuously obliged to revive him in order to satisfy an insatiable public appetite. The detective held an enduring fascination for his late-Victorian and early Edwardian readers, one which has hardly abated: there has since been an endless proliferation of theatrical productions, film and radio adaptations, merchandise, video games, fan fiction and parodies. Holmes is arguably one of the most recognizable fictional characters worldwide, and certainly one of the most reproduced. His incredible popularity is both historically specific and yet also, in some ways, broadly generic: he is at once inextricable from a particular historical moment at the end of the Victorian era and yet he has undergone a remarkable process of dissemination through a wide range of pop cultural discourses and contexts, functioning as both a detective archetype and a kind of popular metaphor for ideas and qualities associated with detection and detectives, such as perceptiveness, deductive reasoning and, frequently, a kind of eccentric genius.

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle, "Preface" to *The Case Book of Sherlock Holmes* in *The Penguin Complete Conan Doyle*, ed. Christopher Morley (Great Britain: Penguin, 1981), p. 983. Subsequent references are to this edition, and appear in parentheses in the text.

A number of theories have been put forward to explain the mystery of Holmes's enduring popularity for generations of readers. His appeal is frequently attributed to the positivist ideology which underlies his methods: in times of uncertainty, or so the theory goes, the public want to have their faith in the power of reason and logic restored, and Holmes represented a comforting fantasy of infallible epistemological mastery for his nineteenth-century readers. Armed with a science of deduction that allowed him to solve even the most baffling of mysteries, the detective worked to assuage a kind of existential and epistemological angst that had arisen in Victorian society in the wake of new discourses like Darwinism, which destabilised the traditional Christian worldview with its revolutionary ideas earlier in the century. This thesis will argue against this conservative reading of Holmes, however, by demonstrating that the secret behind his enduring popularity is more complex, and his appeal more ambivalent, than might at first be apparent. Holmes is, in fact, a highly ambiguous, contradictory figure, in whose characterization a number of potentially subversive influences can be identified. He is one of the most famous examples of a particular character taxonomy that can be traced back to the stories of Edgar Allan Poe in the 1840s: the eccentric private investigator. This archetype reemerged in a somewhat altered form in the work of later writers such as Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers in the first half of the twentieth century, and continues to inform modern literary representations of detectives and private investigators. This thesis will demonstrate that although Holmes's particular eccentricities, methodologies and influences relate to a specific historical moment at the end of the Victorian era, he can also be situated in the context of an ongoing discourse of detection that focuses particularly on the relationship between the detective's eccentricities and his or her crime-solving abilities. As the following discussion will demonstrate, this tension between Holmes's ambivalent, potentially subversive character traits and his ostensibly conservative function as a detective can be seen as one of the key elements in his enduring appeal. From the very first chapter of *A Study in Scarlet*, Sherlock Holmes is an object of intense curiosity as Dr Watson tries to understand the habits and quirks of his unusual new acquaintance. Watson is invalided out of the army during the second Afghan war, and finds himself without family or employment. He gravitates towards London, "that great cesspool into which all the loungers and

idlers of the Empire are irresistibly drained” (15). A mutual friend introduces him to Sherlock Holmes, who is looking for a flatmate, and Watson moves in at 221b Baker Street: “As the weeks went by, my interest in him and my curiosity as to his aims in life gradually deepened and increased. [ . . . ] The reader must not set me down as a hopeless busybody, when I confess how this man stimulated my curiosity, and how often I endeavored to break through the reticence which he showed on all that concerned himself” (20). Initially, it is Watson, rather than Holmes, who plays at being the detective. Watson gathers clues, as though the detective himself is a puzzle to be solved: “Under these circumstances, I eagerly hailed the little mystery which hung around my companion, and spent much of my time in endeavoring to unravel it” (20). He notes that Holmes has a keen interest in poisons, he avidly reads the gossip columns in the London papers, he conducts eccentric medical experiments, and, most strikingly of all, he can make startlingly accurate deductions based on apparently insignificant details. The mystery is eventually solved in the second chapter of the novel, when Holmes reveals his unique career choice: “I’m a consulting detective, if you can understand what that is” (24). The narrative structure which builds up to the point of this disclosure - the clues and prolonged speculations, followed by the revelation - is almost like a condensed version of the structure that defines the genre of detective fiction more generally. The success of any detective story depends on the degree to which the author is able to create, prolong, exploit and satisfactorily resolve the tension that he or she creates around the mystery, just as Conan Doyle creates and then resolves the suspense around the initial question of Holmes’s identity. Essentially, the underlying project of detective fiction is invested in discourses of secrecy and disclosure; the author’s task, much like that of the detective himself, is to slowly reveal the hidden factors in a given scenario.

This investment in the processes of concealment and disclosure gives detective fiction a powerful discursive and metaphoric charge, and this is especially true of the Victorian detective story, arising as it did from a social context in which the idea of privacy was a particularly compelling concern. In this respect, it is interesting to note that the rise of the detective as a cultural and literary figure in the nineteenth century coincided with the almost contemporaneous birth of another specifically defined and historically situated subjectivity: the homosexual. The

very term was coined only a few decades after the word “detective” had entered into common parlance, and there is a curious relationship of continuity between the two terms, both of which reflect a conceptual transition from a legally defined activity to a discursively produced subjectivity.<sup>2</sup> The person who had detected a clue, for instance, had previously been fulfilling a certain investigative function, but the detective was a specific type, a species in his own right. The idea of the homosexual underwent a similar transition. According to Michel Foucault, the nineteenth century saw a shift in medical and legal discourse from a practical focus on the physical act of sodomy to an institutional one on homosexuality as a scientifically determinable condition: “Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul.”<sup>3</sup> The Oscar Wilde trials in 1895 had the effect of consolidating the emerging medical and legal discourses around this new category of prohibited sexuality, but they also represented a watershed moment for Victorian discourses of privacy more generally, marking a new era of public and institutional interest in the personal life and private behavior, particularly the sexual behavior, of the individual. These two subjectivities - the investigator and the homosexual - can, in some respects, be seen to represent different extremities on a continuum of anxieties about private behavior and the level of scrutiny to which it was increasingly subject in the nineteenth century. On the one hand, we have the interior secret of the newly identified homosexual condition: a specific type of criminalised potential that was becoming increasingly difficult for any one man to disprove as a possibility within himself; on the other, there is the figure of the detective, equipped with a penetrating science of deduction to examine the minutiae of private behavior and uncover that which was previously kept hidden. In a sense, the homosexual can be seen as the negative of the detective in nineteenth-century discourse: the detective was an agent of discovery, while the homosexual embodied a secret identity that the discourses of criminology and sexuality sought to expose; indeed, the

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<sup>2</sup> OED records the first use of “detective” in 1842 and “homosexual” in 1892: <www.oed.com> [accessed 18 July 2012].

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (United States: Penguin, 1984) p. 43.

homosexual secret is arguably one of the most important metaphors for discourses of concealment and exposure in Victorian culture.

This eroticised idea of the secret - eroticised not only because of its specifically sexual potential, but also because of its placement as the desired object in a chain of investigation - provides a context for understanding how the relations between men operate in the Holmes adventures. While Conan Doyle's stories seldom address the issue of male homosocial desire, let alone of homoerotic bonds, in a direct way, his protagonists operate in a predominately homosocial environment in which the relations between men are played out as part of a discourse of exposure, secrecy and epistemophilic desire. Sherlock Holmes is, first and foremost, a figure of authority among other men, the centre of a male homosocial community whose relations with one another and with him are negotiated during the pursuit of a criminal who is, more often than not, also a man: men like his loyal Watson, or Holmes's professional rival Inspector Lestrade, who admire the detective, follow his movements and desire the kinds of knowledge that he possesses. These male communities form the basic social and institutional unit in Conan Doyle's stories, as well as their emotional core. The most important of these relationships is undoubtedly the one which develops between Holmes and Watson after their meeting in *A Study in Scarlet*. Their friendship is the most famous example of a particular kind of homosocial, potentially homoerotic, male friendship that frequently appears in Conan Doyle's work, often between a dominant man and a younger or less experienced one. Such bonds represent, to some extent, a kind of idealised paternal relation, but they are also dependent on a more formalised pedagogical structure which codifies the intellectual difference between the master and his sidekick as domination and submission. As the submissive partner in the duo, Watson offers a kind of model for the way the reader imaginatively relates to the detective. Like all magicians, Holmes needs both an assistant and an audience, and Holmes gains both in Watson, a sidekick-narrator who functions as a sort of bumbling Boswell to Holmes's Johnson. Watson represents an ideal reader - and, indeed, an ideal writer - for Holmes: a portable audience who follows his progress with bated breath, always trusting in the detective's brilliance and ready with effusive praise: "It is wonderful!" Watson exclaims in "The Boscombe Valley"



(1891), after Holmes solves another mystery. “It is obvious,” (214) the detective replies.

Watson’s obliging obtuseness serves to enhance the sense of mastery that Holmes exudes, and one of the principal devices that Conan Doyle uses to achieve this effect is Watson’s restricted point of view: the reader’s knowledge is always confined to what Watson reports. For example, he often describes irrelevant parts of a crime scene in great detail, but fails to mention the one feature or clue that is actually essential to the solution of the problem. Because the reader is obliged to align their perspective with Watson’s conventionally circumscribed viewpoint, the stories can be seen to enact a set of power relations that are based on the production and circulation of knowledge. The investigation situates epistemological mastery with Holmes while Watson - and, through Watson, the reader - is relegated to a relatively passive position of vicarious partial identification with the detective. One obvious, and yet unformalised, aspect of this power-knowledge relation between Holmes and Watson is its markedly homosocial character: the way that the stories embed this relation of epistemological domination within the context of an intimate male friendship which is remarkable for the explicitness with which certain kinds of desire are articulated. Watson’s role as narrator is shaped by the desire that he experiences for the fascinating, mysterious detective who is the subject of his reports, although this desire is primarily epistemophilic; that is, it is chiefly to do with the production of knowledge and with the relations enacted in the dynamics of its circulation between the duo. Even after Watson moves out of his old quarters in Baker Street in order to marry Mary Morstan, whom he meets in the second novel, *The Sign of Four* (1890), this epistemophilic desire for Holmes still haunts him: “As I passed the well-remembered door [ . . . ], I was seized with a keen desire to see Holmes again, and to know how he was employing his extraordinary powers. His rooms were brilliantly lit, and, even as I looked up, I saw his tall, spare figure pass twice in a dark silhouette against the blind” (161-2). The thought that Holmes might be on a new case proves too appealing, and Watson cannot resist stopping in to hear the news. While Watson’s desire is primarily epistemophilic, Holmes’s is exhibitionistic, but neither experiences their desire for one another as, in any straightforward way, erotic. Nevertheless, Holmes’s sexuality, especially as it

bears on his relationship with Watson, has long been a popular topic in certain branches of fan fiction, which often persist in inscribing a more unequivocally homoerotic interpretation on the relationship between the detective and his sidekick, and often with a bluntness that overlooks the more subtle terms in which Conan Doyle frames their homosocial relationship.

Holmes can be seen to represent a recuperation of the character taxonomy of the bohemian bachelor, which had been expanded upon and consolidated in the fiction of the first half of the nineteenth century. Bohemia provided a social context within which Holmes's unspecified sexuality and some of the more eccentric aspects of his persona, such as his narcotic use, could be explained and, to some degree, reconciled with his function as a detective. His exoticism is offset by the stolid English propriety of Watson, who, by way of contrast or of apology, provides a relatively stable model of an uncomplicated male subject. As a married man, a soldier and a doctor, Watson is more easily situated within the patriarchal economy of power. His relationship with Holmes is structured in terms of a series of oppositions: the mainstream middle-class and the bohemian; the unimaginative and the visionary or artistic; the married man and the bachelor. This contrast is, in fact, essentially worked out in terms of the same oppositions which often structured the distinction between homosexual and heterosexual men in Victorian discourses of sexuality. As I observed earlier in this discussion, the detective represents a kind of positive inversion of the homosexual subject, and in particular of the bourgeois or middle-class homosexual: he is situated in the same bohemian social space, but he operates out of this context as the enforcer, rather than the challenger, of cultural norms. Furthermore, the social and institutional space in which the detective operates, much like the social category of bohemia, allows the negotiation of bonds between men that are potentially homoerotic. The libidinal charge of these relations becomes elided in the structures of the criminal investigation, but it often resurfaces in Gothic terms as a process of doubling, especially between the sleuth and the suspect. This becomes particularly clear in the way that Holmes interacts with his nemesis, Professor Moriarty, during their grand showdown in "The Final Problem" (1893). In some respects, Moriarty can be seen as a Gothic twin or double for the detective, or as a refraction of the contradictory or binary nature which often appears to characterize Holmes.

Holmes's peculiarly polarised temperament is first noted by Watson in the second chapter of *A Study in Scarlet*: "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" (20). In *The Sign of Four*, this characteristic duality is figured in more obviously physical terms as a symptom of various kinds of addiction. Holmes states that he craves the surge of adrenaline which he experiences when he is on the scent, but in the absence of such "mental exaltation" (90), he falls into a depressive state and resorts to the use of drugs such as morphine or cocaine: "Give me the most abstruse cryptogram, or the most intricate analysis, and I am in my own proper atmosphere. I can dispense then with artificial stimulants. But I abhor the dull routine of existence" (90). This is simultaneously figured as a reflection of an internal duality and, in Watson's terms, as a "pathological and morbid process" (89) of the body; that is to say, it manifests in both body and mind. This somewhat bipolar tendency that Holmes exhibits originates with the Byronic heroes of Gothic romance, certain generic elements of which reappeared in a number of Gothic-inflected texts at the *fin-de-siècle*. Holmes is not the only character from the late-Victorian period to be marked by a profound psychic ambivalence. In particular, men who conceal darker sides to their character or who struggle with some kind of internal conflict haunt the fiction of writers such as Bram Stoker (1847-1912), Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894) and Oscar Wilde (1854-1900). Texts like Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) feature eponymous male characters who are fantastic, monstrous, or, at the least, morally ambiguous. Holmes might seem a strange addition to this list of monstrous Victorian males, but his character appears to contain something of the moral and psychic ambivalence of the Gothic hero and also, speaking more broadly, of the Gothic genre itself.

There is an interesting point of continuity between the detective and Gothic genres, both of which are ostensibly invested in censuring and suppressing violence, monstrosity, excess and crime, while simultaneously depending on the exploitation of these same elements for sensational effect. In this sense, the Gothic

mode can be seen as an inversion of the positivist ideology that underpins modern detective fiction, or alternately, in Freudian terms, as its id - a suppressed element or a monstrous supplement - that haunts the younger, more conservative genre as a barely contained element of generic and discursive alterity. As Christopher Craft has observed, the Gothic text generally operates according to a tripartite structure in which a monster - such as Dracula in Stoker's novel, for instance, or the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) - is first admitted, then entertained, and finally expelled or destroyed.<sup>4</sup> This structure is also central to the enterprise of detective fiction, in fact: in the typical plot, a suspect commits a crime, becomes engaged in a game of cat-and-mouse with the detective and is finally apprehended or eliminated. There is something of the push and pull of this structure in the tension that surrounds the question of Holmes's moral and psychic ambivalence, although his monstrous potentialities are never fully confronted. These potentialities remain, rather, as a partially suppressed element of his character which is often exploited in the stories as a source of interest, excitement and mystery, and of a kind of exotic appeal, and then repressed by the dominating ideology of his science of deduction.

### The Double-Bind: Crime-fighting and Contamination

This science of deduction - the ratiocinative process Holmes uses to form elaborate conclusions based on the analysis of small details - is one of the detective's most powerful tools. In *A Study in Scarlet*, Watson reads an academic paper on the subject, unaware that Holmes is the author: "The writer claimed by a momentary expression, a twitch of a muscle or a glance of an eye, to fathom a man's inmost thoughts. Deceit, according to him, was an impossibility in the case of one trained to observation and analysis" (23). Watson later gets an opportunity to observe this theory in practice, when Holmes analyzes the scene of a murder and deduces at once that the suspect "was more than six feet tall, was in the prime of life, has small feet for his height, wore coarse, square-toed boots and smoked a Trichinopoly cigar" (32). The science of deduction is essentially a means of

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<sup>4</sup> Christopher Craft, "Kiss Me with Those Red Lips: Gender and Inversion in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*," *Representations*, 8 (1984), pp. 107.

discovering the secrets of the body, and in this sense its aim is identical to that of a number of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century criminological discourses which also sought to reveal the presumed secrets of so-called abnormal subjects, such as the criminal and the homosexual body. Holmes's science combines the methodologies of criminal detection with those of medical diagnosis and forensic analysis, which profile an individual body by reading its symptoms or reconstructing its physical details based on material clues and signs. Indeed, Conan Doyle can be credited with popularizing an imaginative analogy between the technologies of the detective's magnifying glass and the scientist's microscope, one of the few central elements of the Holmes stories that was not anticipated in the work of earlier writers. In this sense, he is one of the forefathers of any number of modern crime shows, such as the long-running American series *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, which represent the criminal investigation as a simultaneously deductive and forensic exercise. Such methodologies appear to undermine the classical Cartesian dualism between body and mind: they operate on an assumption that actions, desires, secrets and diseases (including, ideologically speaking, the social diseases of crime and unsanctioned sexuality as well as infections of the body), can be read in the physical body and the traces it leaves behind. Carlo Ginzburg has also compared Conan Doyle's concept of the science of deduction with Freud's psychoanalysis, which was almost contemporaneous (*Studies on Hysteria*, Freud's collaboration with Josef Breuer, appeared in 1895, a year after *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*). Both methodologies signal a shift in focus from traditional *psyche-soma* oppositions to a properly psychosomatic elaboration of the subject.<sup>5</sup> The detective reads a latent content in the manifest content of his subject's behavior. His analysis essentially forces the body to disclose, to become legible, by transforming it into a text encoded with clues about the subject's inner life. At first glance, this science of deduction appears to represent a less invasive, less obviously tyrannical means of obtaining information than the classical methods and apparatuses of examination such as the torture chamber and the confessional, which, in some respects,

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<sup>5</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, "Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: clues and scientific method," in *Popular Fiction Technology, Ideology, Production, Reading*, ed. by Tony Bennett (Great Britain: Routledge, 1990), pp. 277-289.

represent antecedents of its underlying methodology. The first chapter of this discussion will argue, however, that Holmes's science of deduction is, in fact, strongly indebted to the inquisitional models of bodily interrogation that were developed, perfected and exploited during preceding centuries, particularly in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Spain. Like the techniques of the Inquisition, the science of deduction represents a secretive, coercive and potentially sinister means of collecting hidden information, and one that is fundamentally invested in discourses of concealment rather than transparency.

Holmes's technique is indebted to a number of nineteenth-century discourses, including the ideas of Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909), whose theory of anthropological criminology held that criminality was an inherited condition and that the criminal type could be identified by various physical traits.<sup>6</sup> Like the suspect subjected to Holmes's science of deduction, Lombroso believed that the body of the criminal testified to his or her degenerate nature. In his first major work, *L'Uomo delinquente* (1876), translated in 1891 as *Criminal Man*, Lombroso drew on social Darwinism and early eugenics and psychiatry to argue that the so-called criminal type was an atavistic throwback to an earlier stage of evolutionary development. Max Nordau (1849-1923) later elaborated upon Lombroso's theories and proposed the existence of a sub-type, the "privileged degenerate," whom he described an educated, upper-class man whose atavistic propensities manifested despite his upbringing.<sup>7</sup> According to Nordau, one of the most revealing manifestations of this degenerate potential was homosexuality, and in *Degeneration* he targeted the members of the Aesthetic movement that had flourished in the 1880s, especially its chief exponent Oscar Wilde. This suggests that the secret of the throwback - his hidden atavistic potential - can be seen as homologous with the secret of the homosexual; indeed, Nordau appeared to view them as symptomatic of each other. Lombrosian theories of atavism were soon superseded in academic circles, but the theoretical construct of the born criminal took a powerful hold upon the public imagination, and it influenced depictions of

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<sup>6</sup> David Horn, *The Criminal Body: Cesare Lombroso and the Anatomy of Deviance* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (London: William Henemann), p. 102.

monstrosity and violence in the Gothic fiction of the era: thematics of degeneracy recur, for instance, in texts like Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, in which the eponymous Transylvanian vampire is portrayed as a degenerate, parasitic aristocrat. The concept of the throwback also influenced the way the public viewed London's most famous criminal: the serial killer dubbed Jack the Ripper, who allegedly murdered at least six women in Whitechapel in 1888. In the climate of hysteria that followed the crimes, the press drew on some of the iconic images and character archetypes in Stevenson's novel, and on contemporaneous discourses around the idea of the throwback, in order to contextualize the crimes. A popular theory held that the murders were the work of a deranged doctor on the loose in the East End, and this theory gained traction after the inquest into the death of the second victim revealed that some of her organs had been surgically removed. The second chapter of this discussion will explore the idea of the degenerate doctor in more detail, and will argue that such an archetype, definitively embodied in the historical spectre of Jack the Ripper, also provides a highly suggestive interpretative framework for the character of Sherlock Holmes, who can be seen as a kind of fictional double for the Whitechapel murderer.

In some ways, Holmes is attracted, rather than repelled, by the idea of criminality: he is drawn to the work of detection precisely because he finds a peculiar sort of fascination in the nature of crime as social phenomena. His interest in the criminal underworld has a strongly marked aesthetic dimension, in that he constantly seeks out the most remarkable or outré crimes and ignores those which seem more commonplace. This hint of the connoisseur in Holmes seems to echo Oscar Wilde's aestheticism, in some respects, and it also owes a stylistic and discursive debt to Thomas De Quincey (1785-1859), who in his essay "On Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*" (1823), had provocatively suggested that murder could be enjoyed as an art form. Holmes can also be compared to the French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), whose 1857 masterpiece, "Les fleurs du mal," explored an attraction to evil and the macabre, as well as the themes of alienation, corruption and isolation in the modern city. Baudelaire's work provided one of the definitive examples of a certain character typology, the *flâneur*, which Charles

Rzepka sees as a prototype for modern representations of the detective.<sup>8</sup> The *flâneur* is a dandy, a lone male who wanders through the metropolis in search of a kind of melancholy poetic inspiration that the urban environment evokes in him; like Holmes, he is drawn to the chaos of the modern metropolis and the sense of anonymity that the crowd provides. The figure of the *flâneur* carries its own unspecified but volatile erotic charge, not only because his position as a social outsider is also suggestive of the sexual outsider, but also because of the strongly voyeuristic compulsion that underlies the activity he performs. This element of voyeurism is also evident in Holmes, although Holmes's surveillance of the city is legitimized by his disciplinary function as a detective, or at least it appears to be at first glance; in reality, the disciplinary project underpinning his activities is somewhat problematic.

Critics such as Ronald R. Thomas have been quick to associate Holmes's science of deduction with the mechanisms of discipline and surveillance that Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish* (1975).<sup>9</sup> Foucault argues that modern society since the early eighteenth century comprises a series of increasingly prisonlike institutions, the aim of which is to individualise subjects in order to have better control over them. Individuals are kept under constant surveillance by a deindividualized omniscient power which Foucault describes as "panoptic." He adapts the term from the writing of Jeremy Bentham, the English jurist, who designed a hypothetical prison called the "Panopticon." In Bentham's penal model, each inmate would at all times be in view of a central tower which represented the "eye of authority."<sup>10</sup> The idea was to generate a set of conditions in which subjects would internalize their consciousness of being under constant surveillance, and eventually become implicated in a set of relations which achieved the depersonalization of power precisely through the same motion in which it individualized those who were made subject to it. The detective appears to

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<sup>8</sup> Charles J. Rzepka, *Detective Fiction* (United Kingdom, Polity Press, 2005), p. 64.

<sup>9</sup> See Ronald R. Thomas, *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science* (United Kingdom: Cambridge Univ Press, 1999), p. 73-74.

<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, "Panopticism," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. by Paul Rabinow (United States: Penguin, 1984), pp. 206-214.



embody this same panoptic function within the non-institutional population by subjecting the city to a controlling gaze: “He loved to lie in the very centre of five millions of people, with his filaments stretching out and running through them, responsive to every little rumor or suspicion of unsolved crime” (423). In the case of Sherlock Holmes, however, the disciplinary project that underlies and appears to legitimize this surveillance is undermined, not only by his own potentially contaminated status, but also by the way he appears to identify intimately with the criminals he pursues. Those who command his attention are usually the criminals with the most original ideas or strategies, the most refined techniques or the most political power, such as Professor Moriarty, who, as I suggested earlier in this discussion, can be seen as a kind of double for Holmes. The last chapter of this discussion will consider this doubling in more detail, and will also demonstrate that Moriarty represents an embodiment of certain atavistic or degenerate potentialities that are intimated in Holmes, but never made explicit. In this respect, it is significant that Holmes’s nemesis is Irish: an Irish super-villain represents a cultural other for the English super-detective, but on another level he can also be seen to embody a repressed cultural heritage for the Anglo-Irish author Conan Doyle. Moriarty expresses, therefore, an uncanny dynamic of simultaneous attraction and repulsion: a superficial appearance of difference is undermined by a lurking suspicion of homology.

In this sense, his confrontation with Holmes at the end of “The Final Problem” particularizes a more general sense of anxiety that arises from a double bind of identification and difference that unites the detective and the criminal. This double bind proves fatal for Holmes, whose closeness to Moriarty appears to result in their mutual destruction. Moriarty drives the detective out of England and pursues him across Europe, finally confronting him at the Reichenbach Falls in Austria. In the course of their struggle, he and Holmes apparently fall to their deaths at the bottom of the ravine, locked together in a deadly embrace. The plot has similarities with Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, which is also concerned with the fatal process of doubling that occurs between two male characters who are at once opposed and yet curiously codependent. Both texts encode a terror of an underlying homology between the protagonist and his monstrous double. This chapter will argue that the way Holmes and Moriarty mutually destroy one another represents a regression to

an undifferentiated state - a kind of *homoousious*, as it were - that suggests their relationship is founded on an underlying consubstantiality rather than a fundamental difference. This same anxiety of nondifferentiation recurs with a vengeance when Holmes returns in the third novel, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902). Here a fear of the atavistic possibilities latent in individuals is encoded in Gothic images and motifs which appear to suggest a possible reversion to an undifferentiated state of existence: devouring monsters, the possibility of incest and an eerily animated, unstable Dartmoor landscape of mires and bogs. My reading of the novel will draw parallels between the way that Holmes meets the personal threat of Moriarty in "The Final Problem" and the psychic threat that is embodied by the landscape in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. In both texts, the detective is only able to defuse the element of danger by allowing the boundaries of his own subjectivity to be invaded by the cultural or psychic other: he cannot destroy Moriarty without imperiling himself, and he cannot penetrate the mysteries of Dartmoor without putting himself at risk of being devoured by the monsters that haunt it.

We return, then, to the paradox that appears to underlie the mysterious figure of Sherlock Holmes. While he apparently works to combat crime, the detective is also obliged to internalize it as an element of alterity in the constitution of his own subjectivity. He is, ultimately, a contaminated subject, and one who is ideologically undermined by his own close proximity to the criminal world that represents both his hunting ground and his most natural element. His genealogy is not as clean as his reputation as the preeminent crime-fighter of Victorian culture would initially lead us to believe: the following discussion will demonstrate that the inquisitors of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Spain and the Victorian archetypes of the throwback and the degenerate doctor all represent antecedents of Conan Doyle's character. This suggests a way in which the apparent conservatism of Sherlock Holmes, and perhaps even of detective fiction more broadly, can be undermined. Ultimately, the stories do not depend on the stability of the detective and the criminal subjects as fixed polar opposites, but on the magnetic dynamics of attraction that exist between them, and which become intensified by their proximity to one another. The absolute distinction between the criminal and the crime-fighter, on which the stories initially appear to depend, is progressively

undermined as imaginative identification gives way to a more complex process of psychic doubling. Once we have considered the nature of this duality and the dynamics of its representation, we may be some way to unraveling the mystery of Sherlock Holmes's enduring appeal.

## Chapter 1

### The Grand Inquisitor of Baker Street

From the first, Conan Doyle was careful to set Sherlock Holmes apart from the official police detectives at Scotland Yard. Holmes's blundering professional rivals contrast sharply with the masterful figure of the consulting detective: they follow red herrings, arrest innocent people and fail to catch guilty ones, miss vital clues and then take the credit for Holmes's successes. By representing the official force as clumsy and self-interested, Conan Doyle was playing into a climate of widespread public distrust of police detectives in nineteenth-century England. As Haia Shpayer-Makov has demonstrated in her history of the police in the Victorian era, the prospect of a centralized surveillance network had encountered widespread public resistance when the Detective Department at Scotland Yard was established in 1842.<sup>11</sup> The British mistrusted the centralized administration that Napoleon Bonaparte had introduced in France during the first half of the nineteenth century, which they popularly associated with surveillance, espionage and bureaucratic repression, and the behavior of police detectives was often viewed as similarly secretive and potentially intrusive. The most vocal opponents of the new detective force were to be found among the emerging bourgeoisie, who resented the perceived threat to the personal privacy of British citizens. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that Conan Doyle's stories found a ready audience among the middle classes. Holmes's position as a consulting detective allows him to assume the rarefied status of a gentleman in the world of crime-fighters. Acting in the personal interest of private citizens, Holmes is not accountable to anybody, nor is he bound by bureaucratic obligations or under any compulsion to expose suspects or publicize information about clients. In fact, discretion is his watchword: in "The Missing Three-Quarter" (1904) he remarks that he is "much more anxious to hush up private scandals than to give them publicity. [ . . . ] you can absolutely depend on my discretion and my cooperation in keeping the facts out of the papers" (365). The relatively autonomous and ostensibly depoliticized status which he enjoys may appear to suggest that his

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<sup>11</sup> See Haia Shpayer-Makov, *The Ascent of the Detective: Police Sleuths in Victorian and Edwardian England* (United Kingdom: Oxford Univ Press, 2011), pp.13-21.

methods represent a more liberal, ideologically transparent alternative to the underhand, cloak-and-dagger practices of which the members of the official detective force were frequently suspected. This chapter will argue, however, that Holmes's methods of obtaining information about the London populous are deeply secretive and potentially subversive, and originate in the corporeal techniques of judicial coercion associated with the penal systems of preceding centuries.

Foucault has claimed that the detective story reflects a historical shift between two different systems of punishment that occurred in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when the genre was in the early stages of its development. In his history of Western technologies of incarceration and surveillance, *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Foucault claims that the post-Enlightenment penal system saw a shift from an emphasis on physical forms of punishment, such as torture and execution, which aimed to compromise the physical integrity of the subject by objectifying and manipulating the body, to a concern with the reformation of the subject through the use of behavioral and psychological tactics.<sup>12</sup> The body of the prisoner ceased to be the primary target for penal repression, and the focus shifted instead to their internal condition. Foucault argues that detective fiction reflects the ideological shift behind this change in emphasis from corporeal to internalized systems, primarily because the detective story is invested in the intellectual processes of the investigation and in the psychology of both the criminal and the sleuth: “[ . . . ] we have moved from the exposition of the facts or the confession to the slow process of discovery; from the execution to the investigation; from the physical confrontation to the intellectual struggle between the criminal and investigator.”<sup>13</sup> According to Foucault, the historical idea of punishment as a public spectacle, quantified in terms of the amount of pain inflicted and qualified by the particular variation of possible techniques used upon the body of the convict, gave way to a new model of punishment which favored psychological methods of coercion: “[ . . . ] the pain of the body itself is no longer the

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<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans by Alan Sheridan, 1<sup>st</sup> edition (United States: Pantheon Books, 1977), pp. 8-10.

<sup>13</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 69.

constitutive element of the penalty.”<sup>14</sup> The primary objective of the modern penal culture was to engineer a set of conditions in which social norms could be internalized by the subject, rather to inscribe them upon the physical body.

The body now came to comprise an intermediary position in a political economy of suspended rights: it was still an important element in penal procedure, but the individual was coerced into acting as a partner of that procedure rather than simply comprising its passive object. Foucault claims that detective fiction reflects this shift away from the body as the primary target of the penal system: the struggle is no longer a physical encounter between the body of the transgressor and the apparatuses of sovereign law, but an intellectual one enacted between two antagonists - the detective and the criminal - who represent equally liberated, self-determinant modern subjects. The following discussion will challenge Foucault’s definition, however, by arguing that Conan Doyle’s stories rarely enact a contest between two equal subjects; in fact, there is only one criminal who could truly be said to be Holmes’s equal, Professor Moriarty. It is interesting that Holmes’s contest with Moriarty is his last, the one encounter with the criminal underworld that he does not survive (or, at least, not until Conan Doyle bowed to public demand and brought him back from the dead in 1903): it is precisely the fact that Holmes and Moriarty are equally matched that makes their contest a fatal one for the detective. More typically, the stories rely on an uneven power dynamic between the criminal and the investigator, which finds its methodological precedent in the corporeal techniques of the Inquisition in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Spain. Holmes’s methodology is strongly indebted to the penal practices of torture and interrogation: his science of deduction focuses on the physical body of the suspect as the primary site for the production of incriminating evidence, and the success of his investigation often depends on the production of a confession from the criminal, which he is not above using coercion to obtain when it is not willingly given. All of these techniques - the interrogation, the examination of the body and the use of coercion - were anticipated in the corporeal systems of punishment that Foucault locates in the period before the penal reforms of the eighteenth century. The penal

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<sup>14</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 11.

discourses that underpin Holmes's methodology should therefore be situated in an uneasy tension between intellectual and physical modes of coercion - or, historically speaking, between the reformatory practices of the post-Enlightenment penal system and the forms of corporeal coercion that were the hallmark of the Inquisition.

Active from its formal creation in 1478 into the early decades of the nineteenth century, the Inquisition represented the foundation of a new philosophy of law in Western Europe, one which reinvested the disciplinary mechanism of the confession with a new political impetus.<sup>15</sup> The key to the success of its operations was an environment of rigid secrecy: the accused seldom had access to any information about the charges brought against them, the existence and extent of incriminating evidence or the identity of their accusers. Rafael Sabatini argues that this climate of secrecy was as powerful a disciplinary tool as the physical procedure of torture of the public spectacle of the auto-da-fe: "by [ . . . ] reducing the proceedings to a secrecy such as was never known in any court, the inquisitors were able to inspire a terror which was even greater than that occasioned by the fire which they fed with human flesh at the frequent Autos."<sup>16</sup> Diego García de Trasmiera, the Bishop of Zamora from 1660-61, once went so far as to describe secrecy as "the Pole upon which the governance of the Inquisition was balanced."<sup>17</sup> In this secretive model of interrogation, the judge played the role of prosecutor. The most important technique during the interrogation of suspects was the use of rigorous questioning, followed, if necessary, by psychological coercion, such as the threat of torture, and then by torture itself. The underlying ideology depended, of course, on the idea of the secret: the thing that was not externally visible, but which was, nevertheless, subversive, and which justified the coercive force to which the individual was subjected. This same concept of the subversive secret which warrants intervention also provides the overarching ideological justification for Holmes's activities: while the Inquisition was

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<sup>15</sup> Joseph Perez provides a detailed historical study in *The Spanish Inquisition: A History* (United States: Yale Univ Press, 2005), see p. 15-30.

<sup>16</sup> Rafael Sabatini, *Torquemada and the Spanish Inquisition*, 8<sup>th</sup> edn (London: Stanley Paul & Co., 1937), p. 133.

<sup>17</sup> Reproduced in Sabatini, p. 134.

designed to expose Jews, crypto-Muslims and heretics, Holmes exposes crimes. He makes use of verbal and bodily methods of interrogation, but in his approach the order of their application becomes reversed: he begins by interrogating the physical body by means of his science of deduction, examining it for clues which may reveal the subject's guilt. Holmes extends his examination to encompass everyone who comes within the perimeters of the investigation, whether or not they are actually suspected of a crime. In "The Speckled Band" (1892), he startles a client with his ability to deduce how she travelled to London from Surrey:

"[ . . . ] I observe the second half of a return ticket in the palm of your left glove. You must have started early and yet you had a long drive in a dog-cart, along heavy roads, before you reached the station."

The lady gave a violent start, and stared in bewilderment at my companion.

"There is no mystery, my dear madam," said he, smiling. "The left arm of your jacket is spattered with mud in no less than seven places. The marks are perfectly fresh. There is no vehicle save a dog-cart which throws up mud in that way, and then only when you sit on the left-handed side of the driver" (258-259).

In a later story, "The Greek Interpreter" (1893), Conan Doyle introduces Sherlock's brother Mycroft Holmes. The elder Holmes possesses the same powers of deduction: Holmes even admits that Mycroft "has better powers of observation than I [ . . . ]" (435). Mycroft's operations are shrouded in secrecy. In "The Bruce-Partington Plans" (1912), Holmes remarks: "You would be right in thinking that he is under the British government. You would also be right in a sense if you said that occasionally he *is* the British government" (914). Mycroft's specialty is omniscience: "He has the tidiest and most orderly brain, with the greatest capacity for storing facts, of any man living. [ . . . ] In that great brain of his everything is pigeon-holed and can be handed out in an instant" (914). In other words, Mycroft, like his brother, makes his living through the exploitation of wide-ranging and often secretive kinds of knowledge. The combined effect of their



respective expertise resembles something like an inquisitorial tribunal. In “The Greek Interpreter,” Holmes and Watson visit Mycroft’s London haunt, the mysterious Diogenes Club, which is itself suggestive of the rigid secrecy and silence that marked the proceedings under the Inquisition. The Diogenes Club operates according to a strict code of discretion, and its members are forbidden to communicate directly within its confines: “No member is permitted to take the least notice of any other one. Save in the Strangers’ Room, no talking is, under any circumstances, allowed, and three offences, if brought to the notice of the committee, render the talker liable to expulsion” (436). Here, in this peculiarly cloistered environment of absolute silence, Watson is treated to a demonstration in which the Holmes brothers proceed to deduce the biographies of a couple of strangers based solely on their appearances as seen from a distance. One of these men is a “very small, dark fellow, with his hat pushed back and several packages under his arm” (437). Sherlock and Mycroft deduce that he is a recently discharged non-commissioned officer of the Royal Artillery, who has served in India and who is a widower with at least two young children:

“Come,” said I, laughing, “this is a little too much.”

“Surely,” answered Holmes, “it is not too hard to say that a man with that bearing, expression of authority, and sun-baked skin, is a soldier, is more than a private, and is not long from India.”

“That he has not left the service long is shown by his still wearing his ammunition boots, as they are called,” observed Mycroft.

“He had not the cavalry stride, yet he wore his hat on one side, as is shown by the lighter skin on that side of his brow. His weight is against his being a sapper. He is in the artillery.”

“Then, of course, his complete mourning shows that he has lost someone very dear. The fact that he is doing his own shopping looks as though it were his wife. He has been buying things for children, you perceive. There is a rattle, which shows that one of them is very young. The wife probably died in childbed. The fact that he has a picture-book

under his arm shows that there is another child to be thought of” (437).

When the object of analysis is a suspected criminal rather than a prospective client or a stranger - that is, when the science of deduction is directed toward a criminal object, rather than an intellectual one - Holmes focuses on the body of the subject as the primary site for the production of incriminating evidence, before forcing a confession and deciding whether to hand over the suspect, whose guilt is now assumed, to the authorities for sentencing. The production of the confession is so central to Holmes’s methodology that it is integral to the structure of the stories. The majority of adventures conclude with either a full confession made by the criminal in the presence of Holmes and Watson, or with the criminal’s actual or attempted suicide, which is always taken to represent a confession of guilt. Criminal confessions are often produced within the confines of Holmes and Watson’s private quarters at 221b Baker Street. In this respect, Baker Street is not only the domestic, social and emotional heart of the stories, but also an ideological locus for the production and assessment of evidence during the criminal investigation. The famous sitting rooms can be seen to represent an unofficial court of law: here testimony is taken from victims, evidence is weighed and discussed, confessions are made and judgments are delivered. Holmes, like the inquisitors, plays both judge and prosecutor, with Watson acting as witness, scribe, and, often, jury as well. In “The Abbey Grange” (1904), Holmes asks Watson to deliver the verdict on whether or not a suspect should be held morally accountable for his actions:

“See, Captain Croker, we’ll do this in due form of law. You are the prisoner. Watson, you are a British jury, and I never met a man who was more eminently fitted to represent one. I am the judge. Now, gentleman of the jury, you have heard the evidence. Do you find the prisoner guilty or not guilty.”

“Not guilty, my lord,” said I.

“*Vox populi, vox Dei*. You are acquitted, Captain Croker” (650).

Watson also documents and publicly circulates the details of the investigations in the form of his narratives. In doing so, he extends to readers an implicit invitation to serve as a kind of jury: the reader, seeking the resolution of the narrative tension which the text is structured to create, is led to desire the confession upon which such closure depends, and therefore becomes complicit in the detective's inquisition.

### Inquisitorial Genealogies

The Inquisition originated with the theological reformations undertaken at the Fourth Lateran Council led by Pope Innocent III (1119-1216). The Catholic Church initially targeted suspected heretics and Jews, as well as blasphemers, sodomites, alleged devil-worshippers, infidels, excommunicates and apostates. The production of a confession from a suspect quickly became one of the central components of the rigorous proof that was required for a conviction, leading to the formal authorization of torture as an interrogation technique in the mid-thirteenth century. The first manual for inquisitors which specifically mentions torture, *Practica Inquisitionis Heretice Pravatatis (Conduct of the Inquisition into Heretical Wickedness)*, is believed to have been written around 1320.<sup>18</sup> This was the work of an inquisitor from the Dominican Order, Bernard Gui (1261-1331), who provided guidelines for the identification, arrest, interrogation and sentencing of suspected heretics. Gui's manual inspired the Inquisitor General of Aragon, Nicholas Eymerich (1316-1399), to compile his seminal *Directorium Inquisitorium* around 1378. Eymerich's instructions detailed the manner in which trials were to be conducted, and in turn became the guidebook for Tomás de Torquemada (1402-1498), confessor to Isabella I (1451-1504) and one of the primary movers behind the establishment of the Spanish Inquisition in 1478, who would later oversee the expulsion of the Jews from Spain under the Alhambra Degree beginning in 1492. The Inquisition under Torquemada primarily targeted crypto-Jews who had come under suspicion of reverting to their old religions, or of continuing to practice in secret. With Eymerich's "Directorium" as his model, Torquemada drew up his famous code of twenty-eight articles outlining

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<sup>18</sup> See Perez, p. 232.

procedures for the use of torture and coercion. His manual did not appear in print until 1576, when it was published as *Instructions for the officers of the Holy Inquisition*. Ironically, Torquemada was himself the grandson of a Jewish converso, and in this respect he could be understood, ideologically at least, to have been in the grip of a double bind of identification with, and difference from, the group whom he was engaged in persecuting.<sup>19</sup> The ideological and subjective contradictions that are implicit in such a standpoint echo those that surround Holmes's ambivalent relationship to the criminal underbelly of London.

The most important tool in Holmes's arsenal of disciplinary techniques is, of course, his science of deduction, which individualizes subjects in order to obtain a greater degree of control over them. By observing, categorizing, and, finally, punishing the criminal population, Holmes serves as an irreplaceable functionary in the mechanisms of power. Like the torture that was administered to suspects under the Inquisition, the science of deduction constructs the body as the locus for the forcible extraction of the truth - or, more correctly, of a version of the truth that invariably accords with the theory that Holmes outlines prior to the investigation. Holmes's methods force the body to betray its secrets in the same way that the questions of the inquisitors forced the production of testimony from their penitents. . Indeed, the practice of torture under the Inquisition was euphemistically referred to as "the question."<sup>20</sup> "Putting the question to a subject" was a codified term that actually referred to the application of physical torture as opposed to questioning or verbal threats. The science of deduction, as a way of putting the question to the subject, has the effect of preestablishing the guilt of the suspected criminal as an accepted fact. From the moment that Holmes makes his deductions, the accused speaks as a party whose guilt is already assumed. Even the secrets of innocent subjects become exposed under Holmes's gaze. In "The Red-Headed League" (1891), Holmes observes of a client who has come to consult him: "Beyond the obvious facts that he has at some time done manual labor, that he takes snuff, that he is a Freemason, that he has been in China, and that he has done a considerable amount of writing lately, I can deduce nothing

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<sup>19</sup> Perez, p. 102-107.

<sup>20</sup> Sabatini, p. 122.

else” (177). He repeats the stunt in “The Norwood Builder” (1903), when he assures a new client that “beyond the obvious facts that you are a bachelor, a solicitor, a Freemason, and an asthmatic, I know nothing whatever about you” (501). Holmes’s methodology depends on the same faith in the legibility of the physical body and the power of the judicial gaze that underpinned the ideology behind the inquisitorial use of torture. In his history of the Inquisition, Ginzburg remarks on the meticulous attention that the inquisitors paid to the body of the suspect under interrogation: “[ . . . ] not only words, but gestures, sudden reactions like blushing, even silence, were recorded with punctilious accuracy by the notaries of the Holy Office.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, the Inquisition depended upon a science of deduction of its own - one which allowed the body to be read and interpreted as a site of physical testimony - as well as the verbal of the testimony that was produced under duress.

Like the inquisitors, Holmes aims to achieve a result that is, in some respects, teleologically predetermined by the structure of the inquiries which precede it. His investigations usually echo the judicial structure of the trial: a direct accusation or the arousal of suspicion is followed by an inquiry, the weighing up of evidence, a judgment, a sentence and, finally, the production and circulation of the records of the investigation, in the form of Watson’s collected narratives. This structure remains fairly uniform throughout the stories: indeed, it can be understood more broadly as a generic feature of much detective fiction. One of the most vital elements in the detective’s investigation is the production of a satisfactory confession by the suspect, which serves to confirm his or her guilt and supply all the information yet to be provided. The concluding scenes in the stories frequently incorporate a confession in which the criminal describes how they committed his crime and their reasons for doing so, and always in terms that correspond precisely with Holmes’s previously stated opinions about the case. Often this will involve the recollection of biographical detail: in “The Man with the Twisted Lip” (1891), for instance, the suspect provides Holmes and Watson with an account of his childhood, while a woman in “The Yellow Face” (1893), who is suspected of

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<sup>21</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, *The Night Battles*, trans by John and Anne Tedeschi, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 160.

bigamy, is obliged to give them details of her early married life. In *A Study in Scarlet* and the fourth novel, *The Valley of Fear* (1915), the criminals' backstories are delivered in such extensive detail that they comprise the bulk of the second half of both novels as embedded narratives. The function of the confession scene is, in fact, threefold: it provides the reader with all the remaining information about the case, reestablishes the fact of the detective's mastery by proving the accuracy of his theories and deductions, and constructs the criminal as a suitable target for either forgiveness or punishment.

During the interrogation, Holmes plays the role of grand inquisitor, posing questions, evaluating answers, interrupting, cross-examining and admonishing witnesses and suspects to tell the truth. A particularly clear example of his technique is found in "The Blue Carbuncle" (1892), a rather whimsical early story in which Watson surprises Holmes with a Christmas visit. He finds the detective pondering a peculiar clue to an even more peculiar mystery: a Christmas goose, which the police commissioner has found in Goodge Street. When they cut open the goose's crop, the three men are amazed to discover a valuable jewel: a blue carbuncle that had been stolen from a wealthy hotel guest a few days earlier. Holmes and Watson are tasked with tracking down the original thief. Their investigation eventually leads them to a James Ryder, who, it transpires, had stolen the jewel and hidden it in the goose, which he then proceeded to misplace. The success of the investigation depends on obtaining a full confession from Ryder, and Holmes deploys a number of techniques to achieve this, including various kinds of coercion and intimidation. He manages to lay hands on Ryder in an empty street after dark, and bullies him into a hansom cab, proclaiming: "My name is Sherlock Holmes. It is my business to know what other people don't know" (254). Ryder is taken to Baker Street and questioned by Holmes and Watson, who respectively act as inquisitor and scribe during the interrogation. This, incidentally, also happens to represent the minimal assembly that was required for a trial at the Holy Office of the Inquisition in Seville, which demanded the presence of at least one high inquisitor and a notary to transcribe all that transpired before an interrogation could be authorized.<sup>22</sup> The inquisitor often

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<sup>22</sup> Sabatini, p. 124.

began by warning the suspect that he already knew the whole truth of the situation, and that deception was therefore impossible. Holmes threatens Ryder in much the same way: “I have almost every link in my hands, and all the proofs which I could possibly need, so there is little which you need tell me” (255). His words are, in fact, strikingly similar to one of the formulaic admonitions that Torquemada provides for inquisitors in his *Instructions*: “Confess the while truth to me, because, as you see, I already know the whole affair.”<sup>23</sup> In Holmes’s case, the technique proves effective on Ryder, who quickly responds with a hysterical plea for mercy:

Ryder threw himself down suddenly upon the rug, and clutched at my companion’s knees. “For God’s sake, have mercy!” he shrieked. “Think of my father! Of my mother! It would break their hearts. I never went wrong before! I never will again! I’ll swear it on a Bible. Oh, don’t bring it into court! For Christ’s sake, don’t!” (255).

Like the formal declaration of guilt under the Inquisition, the confession that Holmes obtains often involves drastic introspection on the part of the penitent, and paves the way for either punishment or reconciliation. The detective frequently plays the role of judge as well as prosecutor, determining what the guilty party’s punishment will be. Only a handful of stories actually conclude with the criminal appearing before the courts. More often, Holmes decides the matter is either beyond the formal powers of justice, is of too delicate a nature to be aired publicly, or is not significant enough to warrant a criminal trial. In a handful of other cases, a kind of symbolic justice is eventually meted out to the criminal. This precludes the necessity of Holmes intervening, while at the same time confirming the accuracy of his judgment through a kind of narrative symmetry: the predatory doctor in “The Speckled Band” is fatally bitten by the poisonous snake he was planning to set upon his victim; the lecherous Baron Gruner in “The Illustrious Client” (1924) is disfigured with vitriol thrown by a vengeful lover; and the members of the Ku Klux Klan who terrorize an innocent man in “The

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<sup>23</sup> Sabatini, p. 230.

Five Orange Pips” (1891) perish when their vessel sinks at sea. In a few cases, Holmes declines to hand over the criminal to the official police on the grounds that judicial punishment would either be unnecessary or detrimental. In “The Blue Carbuncle,” he eventually allows the newly penitent Ryder to go free, commenting: “I suppose that I am commuting a felony, but it is just possible that I am saving a soul. This fellow will not go wrong again; he is too terribly frightened. Send him to jail now, and you make him a jail-bird for life” (257).

Holmes’s privatized status as a consulting detective permits him to enjoy this relative flexibility with regard to the way he treats suspects and confessed criminals; he is not obliged to report his discoveries to the authorities or to publicly expose the criminals he apprehends. “I am not in an official position,” he comments in “The Priory School” (1903), “and there is no reason, so long as the ends of justice are served, why I should disclose all that I know” (555). This autonomy sets him apart from the professional detectives at Scotland Yard, who are unable to offer the same kind of discretion, but it also situates Holmes in an ambiguous position with regard to the law. Essentially, his willingness to pronounce judgments without recourse to the authorities amounts to a kind of idealized vigilantism. The moral ambivalence of his extra-legal status is assuaged, to some extent, by the fact that he and the official police are ostensibly working toward the same goal - bringing criminals to justice - but this does not change the fact that his methods are, at the least, highly idiosyncratic. At worst, they are actually quite similar to the way that some of the more sophisticated criminal organizations operate in the stories. In “The Resident Patient” (1893), Holmes investigates a group of criminals whose mode of operation seems to mirror his own. He and Watson are consulted by a young man whose flatmate, Blessington, appears to be living in fear of some unspecified personal attack: “For a week he continued to be in a peculiar state of restlessness, peering continually out of the windows, and ceasing to take the short walk which had usually been the prelude to his dinner. From his manner it struck me that he was in mortal dread of something or somebody [ . . . ]” (427). Within a week, Blessington apparently commits suicide. Holmes’s suspicions are aroused when he examines the scene of the tragedy and discovers three different kinds of cigar ash in the victim’s bedroom. He deduces that three other men were present when



Blessington died, and figures that they entered the house with the help of a servant confederate, before subjecting their victim to a kind of criminal trial: “Having secured him, it is evident that a consultation of some sort was held. Probably it was something in the nature of a judicial proceeding. It must have lasted some time, for it was then that these cigars were smoked” (433). The “judicial proceeding” to which the murderers subject their victim is represented as an unequivocally criminal act, despite the fact that it is, in fact, situated in much the same position in relation to the law as many of Holmes’s own interrogations. Holmes, too, conducts his trials in secret, as he does when he is interrogating James Ryder, who, like Blessington, is also incarcerated in a private domicile, interrogated by a member of the public, and then judged and sentenced without any recourse to the authorities.

Ultimately, the methods employed by Holmes cannot be comfortably situated in a post-Enlightenment tradition of primarily intellectual contests between equally empowered adversaries. Nor do they always attain the degree of relative transparency and accountability which Conan Doyle’s constant comparisons between Holmes and the official detectives of Scotland Yard might have suggested to the nineteenth-century reader; rather, Holmes’s methods are invested in the production and exploitation of secretive forms of knowledge, and often, with few exceptions, rely upon the uneven power relationships between the investigator and the suspect which underpinned the inquisitorial systems of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. His science of deduction represents an invasive system of corporeal punishment that reveals its debt to the judicial procedures of torture and the confession in the way it compromises the integrity of the subject by surveying, objectifying and exploiting the physical body. Holmes is not only an investigator, but also an accuser, an informal chief prosecutor and a judge, who conducts proceedings away from the public eye and the political influence of the official force. As with his methodological, and, to some extent, ideological predecessor Torquemada, however, the moral polarities on which Holmes’s inquisitorial project appears to depend are undermined by the similarity of his methods to those of the criminals whom he pursues. In this respect, Holmes, like Torquemada, exists in a double bind of identification with, and difference from, the subjects of his investigations. As the next chapter will argue, the grand

inquisitor of Baker Street embodies some of the same elements of alterity that he is dedicated to policing in others.

## Chapter 2

### Mad Doctors and Degenerates: Sherlock Holmes and Jack the Ripper

The previous chapter argued that Sherlock Holmes's methodology can be seen to represent the recuperation of certain inquisitorial models of corporeal and psychological interrogation that originated in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but his techniques should also be situated in relation to a number of contemporaneous discourses in the Victorian era, particularly early criminology. In 1887, the same year in which Holmes appeared in *A Study in Scarlet*, the French criminologist Alphonse Bertillon (1853-1914), of the Paris Prefecture of Police, published the anthropometric system of bodily measurements that he had devised to classify and identify criminals.<sup>24</sup> His system was in widespread use until it was superseded by fingerprinting in the early twentieth century, although some of his other innovations, such as the mug shot, crime scene photography and forensic document examination techniques, remain in place to this day. Bertillon actually credited Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories with the inspiration for a number of his own innovations, and the author repaid the favor in "The Naval Treaty" (1893), in which Holmes praises Bertillon's work: "His conversation, as I remember, was about the Bertillon system of measurements, and he expressed his enthusiastic admiration of the French savant" (432). Cesare Lombroso, had, of course, published a similar schema for the analysis and classification of the body in *Criminal Man*. The set of pseudo-scientific constructs that he outlined around the theory of atavism and the way that it was thought to manifest in modern society inspired Max Nordau's later concept of the higher degenerate. Nordau's ideas coincided with a literary trend in the Gothic fiction of the *fin-de-siècle* for depicting privileged upper-class men who manifested atavistic tendencies. The idea of the upper-class criminal who was an atavistic throwback became a popular theme in literary discourses of monstrosity and abnormality, and the higher degenerate, in particular, appears in the work of Robert Louis Stevenson, Bram Stoker and Oscar Wilde. The idea of atavism also struck a powerful chord in the

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<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of Conan Doyle's influence on Bertillon, see H. R. F. Keating, *Sherlock Holmes: The Man and His World* (Great Britain: Thames and Hudson, 1979), pp. 94-98.

public imagination, and popular ideas about the throwback, and in particular the figure of the degenerate aristocrat, informed and were in turn informed by the murders committed by the criminal who came to be known as Jack the Ripper.

On the 31<sup>st</sup> of August, 1888, a prostitute named Mary Ann Nichols was murdered in the London district of Whitechapel. A second woman, Annie Chapman, was killed on the 8<sup>th</sup> of September, and the bodies of two more victims were discovered on the 30<sup>th</sup> of September, followed by a fifth on the 9<sup>th</sup> of November. The murderer was never caught or identified, although numerous theories abounded. One of the most popular held that Jack the Ripper was a deranged doctor, an idea which gained popularity after the coroner at the inquest into Chapman's death testified that she had been mutilated postmortem with what appeared to be a surgical scalpel.<sup>25</sup> The idea of a mad doctor stalking women in London's East End caught the public imagination, and the press was quick to produce the now-legendary image of Jack the Ripper as a kind of gentleman psychopath armed with his trademark scalpel and surgical bag.<sup>26</sup> Stevenson's novel *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, published two years before the murders, influenced and to some extent even suggested this idea of the murderer as a mad doctor. In Stevenson's story, the outwardly respectable Dr Henry Jekyll tries to separate the good and evil aspects of his own nature by means of a potion which liberates his worst propensities into an alter ego, Edward Hyde. The way that Hyde is described draws on discourses around the idea of atavism and suggests that he represents a degenerate form of Henry Jekyll, or, more specifically, a concentration of the degenerate elements latent in the respectable doctor.<sup>27</sup> Hyde's degeneracy is figured in terms that suggest a deformity both pathological and biological. When Richard Enfield, an acquaintance of Jekyll, encounters the doctor's alter ego in the street, he remarks of Hyde: "There is something wrong with his appearance; something displeasing, something down-

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<sup>25</sup> Paul Begg discusses the proceedings of the inquest in some detail in *Jack the Ripper: The Facts* (London: Robson, 2006), pp. 131-134.

<sup>26</sup> Elaine Showalter considers the demonization of the figure of the doctor by the Victorian press in *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin De Siècle* (United States: Penguin, 1990), see p. 127.

<sup>27</sup> See Simon Joyce's discussion of Stevenson's novel in *Capital Offences: Geographies of Class and Crime in Victorian London* (United States: Univ of Virginia Press, 2003), pp. 145-155.

right detestable. I never saw a man I so disliked, and yet I scarce know why. He must be deformed somewhere; he gives a strong feeling of deformity, although I couldn't specify the point."<sup>28</sup> Later in the novel, Jekyll himself describes his alter ego as "not only hellish but inorganic. This was the shocking thing; that the slime of the pit seemed to utter cries and voices; that the amorphous dust gesticulated and sinned; that what was dead, and had no shape, should usurp the offices of life."<sup>29</sup>

Reporters who covered the murders of 1888 often drew on the fictional dyad of Jekyll and Hyde for their imagery, fusing together the modern archetypes of the throwback and the medical man into a somewhat contradictory but enduring image of pathologised, degenerate masculinity, shaped, in part, by a public fear of the dark underside of the medical profession. This anxiety had been fuelled by decades of anti-vivisectionist lobbying in the capital, which had culminated with the establishment of the National Anti-Vivisection Society in 1875. The rhetoric of the campaigns associated medical experimentation with a brutal and strongly gendered kind of male sadism, providing journalists with a political and discursive framework within which they could portray the Whitechapel murders as sexually charged, deranged experiments.<sup>30</sup> The fear that lay behind this pathologised idea of the medical practitioner was that the primary goals of medicine - healing, disinfecting and preserving the body - were being undermined or subverted by men who subjugated their scientific knowledge to their perverse proclivities. Such criminals appeared to confirm a post-Darwinian fear that humanity's great leap forward could be reversed, and to intimate that certain boundaries in society were beginning to break down - the boundaries between East and West London, the professional and the criminal, the intellectual and the bestial, or the healer and the destroyer. Jack the Ripper represented a new breed of upper-class criminal, and he required the formulation of a new set of terms: he was intelligent, organized and educated, but also sexually predatory and sadistic. Most alarming of all, however, was the fact of his apparent anonymity: his

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<sup>28</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (United States: Signet, 2003), p. 43.

<sup>29</sup> Stevenson, p. 122.

<sup>30</sup> For a discussion of vivisection politics in nineteenth-century Britain, see Tabitha Sparks, *The Doctor in the Victorian Novel: Family Practices* (United Kingdom: Ashgate, 2009), p. 20.

ostensibly respectable persona as a doctor seemed to provide him with a perfect disguise under which to pass undetected through London and to move between the different strata of society. This new breed of criminal needed a new kind of sleuth, and it is interesting to observe that the Whitechapel crimes coincided with the rise of Holmes as Britain's most beloved crime-fighter, a super-detective capable of combating the new species of super-criminal that had been definitively embodied in the elusive figure of Jack the Ripper.

In many ways, Holmes represents a kind of doctor himself: a doctor of crime, able to diagnose and treat the contagion of criminality as easily as his medical sidekick, Watson, can treat the physical body. It is worth recalling that Conan Doyle, a physician himself, based Holmes upon his own teacher, Joseph Bell (1837-1911) of the University of Edinburgh. Bell practiced a kind of science of deduction of his own. He was renowned for his ability to make correct medical diagnoses based on the mere observation of superficial external signs. In an interview in the *Bookman* in May 1892, Conan Doyle recalled how Bell would

sit in the patients' waiting-room with a face like a Red Indian and diagnose the people as they came in, before even they had opened their mouths. He would tell them their symptoms, he would give them details of their lives, and he would hardly ever make a mistake. "Gentlemen," he would say to us students standing around, "I am not quite sure whether this man is a cork-cutter or a slater. I observe a slight *callus*, or hardening, on one side of the forefinger, and a little thickening on the outside of his thumb, and that is a sure sign that he is either one of the other." His great faculty of deduction was at times highly dramatic.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Reproduced in Daniel Stashower, *Teller of Tales: The Life of Arthur Conan Doyle* (United States: Owl Books, 1999), p. 76.

The detective is primarily a kind of rarefied social diagnostician, the perfect antidote to the social disease of crime. He seems to represent a polar opposite of Jack the Ripper, embodying justice, order, logic and sexual containment against the pathologised sexuality, violence and chaos that seemed to mark the Whitechapel murders. He and Jack the Ripper have become a classic metafictional pairing in a number of modern texts which typically historicise the fictional detective while fictionalising the historic murderer. Such stories typically imagine Holmes bringing the Whitechapel killer to justice, but some authors - notably Michael Dibdin in *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story* (1978) - provide a twist in which Holmes himself turns out to be Jack the Ripper. While this scenario is doomed to remain in the twilight zone of Sherlockian fan fiction, the implication that the detective and the criminal represent different sides of the same coin is highly suggestive. The Holmes-Jack the Ripper pairing depends on an assumption of fundamental equality, similar to that which underpins Holmes's relationship with his great nemesis, Moriarty. Like the fatal process of doubling that occurs in "The Final Problem" and apparently results in Holmes's death, this pairing with Jack the Ripper also appears to imply that the detective cannot encounter a criminal who is, in any sense, his equal or his double without the generic structuring oppositions between his disciplinary functions and his eccentric or subversive character traits breaking down. While Holmes initially appears to offer a consoling fantasy for Victorian anxieties about crime, a hero capable of explaining the most baffling of mysteries and arresting the most elusive of criminals, he is never an unequivocally positive figure: his eccentric behavior, narcotic habits and uncanny degree of familiarity with the criminal underworld of London all suggest a marginality that undermines his ostensible status as a morally uncomplicated hero. In some ways, Conan Doyle's most famous creation embodies the idea of the mad doctor himself.

#### Doctors of Crime: Scalpels, Syringes and the Seven Per-Cent Solution

From the moment when he is first introduced as Watson's highly unconventional flatmate in *A Study in Scarlet*, Holmes's lifestyle is depicted as unusual, his approach to criminology unorthodox, his sexuality ambiguous and his moral codes problematic. If Watson is the flatfooted version of the Victorian doctor -

bumbling but reliable, predictable and unambiguously heterosexual - Holmes is a genius of deductive science and criminological diagnosis, but there is a sense in which this genius is pathologised in the stories. Holmes is first encountered in a medical environment, the chemical laboratory at Bart's, a setting which is more immediately suggestive of the mad scientist than the detective. His medical knowledge is described as "desultory and eccentric" (16). He beats the cadavers in the mortuary with a walking stick "to verify how far bruises might be produced after death" (17) and enthusiastically extracts his own blood for use in chemical experiments. His body bears the brunt of his rampant experimentalism, which echoes the faintly masochistic morbidity of his cocaine habit: "He held out his hand as he spoke, and I noticed that it was all mottled over with [ . . . ] pieces of plaster, and discolored with strong acids" (17). Stamford, a mutual friend of Holmes and Watson, suggests that this penchant for morbid bodily experimentation might, given the right conditions, extend to other, less willing participants: "Holmes is a little too scientific for my tastes - it approaches to cold-bloodedness. I could imagine his giving his friend a little pinch of the latest vegetable alkaloid [ . . . ] in order to have an accurate idea of the effects" (16). More problematic still is the detective's famous cocaine habit, which is hinted at in *A Study in Scarlet* but made explicit in *The Sign of Four*. The latter novel opens with a detailed description of the detective as he shoots up a seven per-cent solution of cocaine. The language here not only suggests a compulsive medical experimentalism, but also hints at a pathologised and sublimated eroticism:

Sherlock Holmes took his bottle from the corner of the mantelpiece, 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 shirtcuff. 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 armchair with a long sigh of satisfaction (89).



Holmes makes it clear that he uses intravenous cocaine as a kind of substitute for the thrill of the chase, without which his mind “rebels at stagnation” (89). Indeed, when he is bored from a lack of crime-solving opportunities in “The Bruce-Partington Plans,” his agitation resembles the early stages of narcotic withdrawal: “He paced restlessly about our sitting-room in a fever of suppressed energy, biting his nails, tapping the furniture, and chaffing against inaction” (913). Joseph McLaughlin has suggested that Holmes’s cocaine habit is auto-erotic in nature.<sup>32</sup> The phallic mechanism of the syringe, the intensity of Holmes’s fixation on his own body and the eroticized structure of the prolonged delay and release, along with the rather decadent details of the velvet-lined arm-chair and the neat morocco case, certainly suggest a kind of erotic sublimation. Moreover, Holmes reaches for the cocaine bottle again on learning about Watson’s engagement to Mary Morstan at the end of the novel, with a remark that implies that his use of stimulants can be seen as an alternative to the libidinal sublimation of marriage:

“The division seems rather unfair,” I remarked. “You have done all the work in this business. I get a wife out of it, Jones gets the credit, pray what remains for you?”

“For me,” said Sherlock Holmes, “there still remains the cocaine-bottle” (158).

The pathology of this self-medication sits uncomfortably against the climate of anxiety that surrounded the idea of the degenerate doctor. If Holmes’s cocaine fix can be seen as the sublimation of a potentially masochistic eroticism into the compulsive self-mutilation of a drug habit, its structure echoes the Whitechapel crimes, which were popularly interpreted as the expression of pathological sexual urges through sadistic experimentalism. Furthermore, the fact that Holmes’s cocaine is a foreign element, both medically and culturally, in terms of its South American origin, evokes contemporaneous fears around the idea of the foreigner in British society that came to the surface as a result of the public hysteria around Jack the Ripper. Of the seven primary suspects who were originally implicated by

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<sup>32</sup> See Joseph McLaughlin, *Writing the Urban Jungle: Reading Empire in London from Doyle to Eliot* (United States: Univ Press of Virginia, 2000), pp. 61-66.

Scotland Yard, only two were of British extraction: Montague John Druitt and James Thomas Sandler. The other suspects were the Polish-born Seweryn Klowoski, alias George Chapman, the Russian Michael Ostrong, the Irish-born Francis Tumblety and two Polish Jews, Aaron Kosminski and John Pizer.<sup>33</sup> The image of London's most celebrated crime-solver self-injecting a foreign substance condenses a complex of anxieties about how the presence of foreign elements could predicate social and individual degeneration: if Holmes is a representation of the British body politic, his seven-per-cent solution is a poisonous foreign substance corrupting it from within. The contaminating nature of Holmes's cocaine also subtly echoes the equally contaminating presence of *The Sign of Four's* main villain, an Andaman Island cannibal, in London. Indeed, the image of the syringe actually mimics the Andaman Islander's weapon of choice - poisoned darts that deliver a payload of paralytic toxin. Holmes's self-injection has the effect of forcing his body to serve as a kind of microcosm of the murder. By subjecting himself to the process of invasion, contamination and eventual submission that is the effect of the drug, Holmes simultaneously enacts both the roles of the passive, penetrated victim and the penetrating aggressor; in this way, he anticipates the central crime of *The Sign of Four* in the signs on his fore-arm.

Holmes frequently identifies with the criminal in the story in order to anticipate their next movements, but this strategic identification, which in some stories has an almost empathic quality, also reveals how close he is himself to the world of crime. In "The Bruce-Partington Plans," Holmes remarks that it is fortunate that he is not a criminal himself, while in "The Final Problem" he declares: "There is no one who knows the higher criminal world of London as I do" (471). His ability to identify with the dark underside of the metropolis requires him to be acquainted not only with the criminals who populate it but also with the physical topography of the city. Alexandra Warwick has suggested that Conan Doyle's stories are part of a distinct urban Gothic tradition which constructs the heterogeneous

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<sup>33</sup> See Robert House, *Jack the Ripper and the Case for Scotland Yard's Prime Suspect* (New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, 2011).

environment of the city as a site of alienation, degeneration and decay.<sup>34</sup> His famously fetishized representation of London - a maelstrom of opium dens, slums, gaslight, hansom cabs and alleyways - provides a setting in which atavistic criminality finds its form, the urban jungle through which the likes of Jack the Ripper, Mr Hyde and, indeed, Sherlock Holmes, can move unobstructed. In “The Bruce-Partington Plans,” Holmes observes a dense fog that has settled on the city:

“Look out of this window, Watson. See how the figures loom up, are dimly seen, and then blend once more into the cloud-bank. The thief or the murderer could roam London on such a day as the tiger does the jungle, unseen until he pounces, and then evident only to his victim” (913).

The early predecessors of this literary construction of the city were to be found in texts like Charles Dickens’s social satire *Bleak House* (1854), which represents London as a realm of darkness and social decay. *Bleak House* was one of the first novels to fully exploit the metaphoric relationship between the urban fog of the city and the enterprise of detective fiction, which, invested as it is in concealment and disclosure, finds an apt meteorological symbol in the urban haze. The famous opening passages of Dickens’s novel play into, and to some extent even parody, contemporary discourses of atavism, Darwinism and paleontology in order to construct the industrial cityscape as a nightmare of primal non-differentiation: “As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had newly returned from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, addling like an elephantine lizard up Holburn Hill.”<sup>35</sup> This atavistic topography provides the perfect hunting-ground for Sherlock Holmes. The detective is in his element here, unlike Watson, who arrives in London only to be sucked into the “great cesspool” of the city (15). Holmes, in contrast, is intimately familiar with London, and is knowledgeable about its shadier quarters. In *The Sign of Four*, he, Watson and their client, Mary Morstan, arrange a rendezvous

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<sup>34</sup>Alexandra Warwick discusses the notion of a specifically “Victorian Gothic” in *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, ed. Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 29-38.

<sup>35</sup> Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (Great Britain: Penguin, 2003), p. 13.

with a stranger who has promised to secure Morstan's stake in a fortune. As part of the conditions of secrecy by which they are obliged to abide, the trio are taken on a mysterious ride through the city to an unknown destination. Watson and Morstan become disoriented, but Holmes is quick to pinpoint their location at any given moment:

Down the Strand the lamps were misty splotches of diffused light which threw a feeble circular glimmer upon the slimy pavement. The yellow glare from the shop-windows streamed out into the steamy, vaporous air and threw a murky, shifting radiance across the crowded thoroughfare. There was, to my mind, something eerie and ghostlike in the endless procession of faces which flitted across these narrow bars of light - sad faces and glad, haggard and merry. Like all humankind, they flitted from the gloom into the light and so back into the gloom once more. [ . . . ] At first I had some idea as to the direction in which we were driving; but I soon lost my bearings and knew nothing save that we seemed to be going a very long way. Sherlock Holmes was never at fault, however, and he muttered the names as the cab rattled through squares and in and out of torturous by-streets: "Rochester Row," said he. "Now Vincent Square. Now we come out on Vauxhall Bridge Road. We are making for the Surrey side apparently. Yes, I thought so" (99).

This fixation on the city as knowable topography has as its corollary the construction of an imaginative and uniquely Sherlockian geography of crime. Christopher Redmond observes that the modern-day pilgrimages taken by Holmes fans in London encompass not only the iconic reconstruction of the sitting rooms at 221b Baker Street, but frequently extend to the streets and locations where various events take place in the stories.<sup>36</sup> From Lauriston Gardens, where the first murder occurs in *A Study in Scarlet*, to King's Cross, where a bridegroom mysteriously disappears in "A Case of Identity" (1892), to Goodge Street, where

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<sup>36</sup> See Christopher Redmond, *Sherlock Holmes Handbook* (Canada: Dundurn, 2009), pp. 257-277.

Mr Henry Baker loses his Christmas goose in “The Blue Carbuncle,” the Holmes canon gradually overlays a topography of imaginative crime on the landscape of the physical city. Later Holmes adventures would extend this topography to include locations outside of the metropolis, such as the Dartmoor setting of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* or the Cornish town that is the scene of the action in “The Devil’s Foot” (1917). It is interesting to note that both of these stories replicate the famous London fog, which reappears in a disguised form as the mist on the slopes of Dartmoor or as the toxic smoke which poisons the victims in “The Devil’s Foot.” This tendency to imaginatively construct the city around the geographical focal points of a criminal narrative was, curiously, a feature of nineteenth-century journalism, and became a particularly popular rhetorical device in press coverage of the Whitechapel murders. Jack the Ripper’s crimes, like those in the Holmes stories, were closely associated with particular locations in Whitechapel, such as Durward Street (previously Buck’s Row) where Nichols’s body was discovered, or Spitalfields, where Chapman was murdered.<sup>37</sup> Jack the Ripper and Sherlock Holmes both appear to be inseparable from this kind of imaginative, criminalized topography, which draws on Gothic images of darkness, decay, predation and monstrosity, and on discourses like atavism for the set of theoretical constructs in which degeneration is figured as part of the urban nightmare.

Holmes’s London is haunted by many of the other cultural ghosts of its time: the shadow of Jack the Ripper, the spectre of atavism, the threat of the foreign other and the idea of the degenerate doctor. It is the detective’s job to penetrate through the obscuring fog which threatens his mastery of the modern city, but Holmes’s status as the foremost crime-fighter in London is problematised, ultimately, in relation to his own potentially pathologised genius. His eccentricity - exemplified in the enduring image of his narcotic use and in the rampant experimentalism of his science - suggests that his proximity to the criminal world destabilises the conservative social values that he professes to defend. His way of combating the criminal element in London society has a peculiarly homeopathic quality, in fact:

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<sup>37</sup> See Gary Coville and Patrick Luciano, *Jack the Ripper: His Life and Crimes in Popular Entertainment* (United States: McFarland and Company, 1999), p. 115.

he must internalise crime, and in some sense become contaminated by it, in order to combat it. This paradox is not specific to Holmes: it is true of a number of other detectives in modern literature, such as Edgar Allan Poe's sleuth C. Auguste Dupin, whose ambiguous character will be discussed in the following chapter. In this respect, Holmes can be seen to exemplify a broad-ranging and influential generic trend, even while his appeal as an eccentric sleuth has a specific relation to his particular historical moment and its discourses. The following chapter will consider the figure of the detective in relation to another of these discourses, that of homosexuality, and will discuss the ambivalent character of Holmes in relation to the male-gendered patterns of desire in the stories. As my discussion will demonstrate, one of the few possible social contexts within which Conan Doyle was able to situate the ambiguous figure of the consulting detective was that of a bohemian bachelorhood, a somewhat fluid temporal and social space in which Holmes's eccentricities and his sexual ambivalence could be satisfactorily contextualised without deflating the tension between his more subversive character traits and his ability to restore order in London society. The somewhat marginalised space of bohemia provided an ideal environment for Holmes, who, as a doctor of crime, exists on the edges of the society that he is devoted to protecting.

### Chapter 3

#### A Bohemian Mystery: The Bachelor Detective and Homosocial Desire

It is interesting that Conan Doyle, whose own exploits seemed to epitomise a certain conventional ideal of romantic masculinity, produced a marginalised and sexually ambivalent male protagonist like Sherlock Holmes. Prior to his conversion to the doctrine of spiritualism in 1916, Conan Doyle very much embodied the masculine self-image of the Victorian era: he hunted whales, clubbed seals, travelled in the colonies, had a respectable military background and was a physician and a family man. His work tends to eulogise the idea of the colonial-era bromance. Like the later stories that featured characters like Professor Challenger and Professor Maracot, the Holmes stories are chiefly concerned with the homosocial bonds that develop between groups of men who undertake heroic exploits together. These bonds frequently result in the exclusion or marginalization of women, although there are some exceptions: one of the most famous early stories, "A Scandal in Bohemia" (1891) owes much of its vitality to its unusually resourceful female protagonist, Irene Adler. She is something of an anomaly, however; women are more often relegated to passive positions in adventures dominated by the activities of men. The bonds between the male characters in the stories play out as part of a discourse of power, secrecy and knowledge that serves to confirm the detective's status as a figure of epistemological mastery. Holmes's dominance over the other men - such as Watson, the agents at Scotland Yard and, frequently, the criminal as well - is achieved through the acquisition and exploitation of certain kinds of knowledge, which becomes a sort of currency for their homosocial desire. This is not to imply, however, that the elision of that desire within the formal structures of the investigation resolves the question of Holmes's ambiguous sexuality. The following discussion will demonstrate that his status as a potentially contaminated subject and a bohemian bachelor situates him in a somewhat uneasy position in relation to the sexual norms of Victorian Britain and the normative patriarchal power economy. His bohemian bachelorhood distances him from the conventional ideal of Victorian masculinity and brings him closer to the Byronic hero of Romantic literature and to the fragmentary, ambiguous sexuality of an earlier prototype of the eccentric detective: Edgar Allan Poe's C. Auguste Dupin.

## Detecting Bohemia

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has argued that relations between men in Western culture are shaped and circumscribed by an inculcated homophobia which has a wide-ranging effect on the spectrum of possible male homosocial relations, and which presents in the individual subject as an internalised terror of his own homosexuality possibility.<sup>38</sup> According to Sedgwick, the Oscar Wilde trials of 1895 represented a crucial moment for the consolidation of male homophobic discourses in nineteenth-century society, establishing a vocabulary for the articulation of previously unspeakable acts, relationships, desires, anxieties and secrets. The trials also had the effect of publicly tainting the Aesthetic movement with the suspicion of sexual disease. Max Nordau had already attacked its major exponents in *Degeneration* three years earlier, but Wilde's conviction for sodomy opened Aestheticism up to more direct attacks on th character, and specifically the sexual character of its followers and its cultural milieu. As Martin Fido has noted, artistic sensibility and decadent Aestheticism only became construed as possible markers of an effeminate and potentially homosexual nature after Wilde's conviction.<sup>39</sup> This presented an artistic, and to some extent ideological problem for Conan Doyle, who had adopted many of the more theatrical trappings of bohemian Aestheticism to apply to Sherlock Holmes. The detective's bohemianism is partially a matter of style, emblematised in brief but iconic details such as his cocaine bottle and syringe in its neat morocco case, his opium and morphine, his violin playing, his purple dressing-gown and his fondness for quoting Flaubert. According to Watson, Holmes's bohemianism manifests chiefly in his lack of regard for normal standards of tidiness: in "The Musgrave Ritual" (1893), an exasperated Watson complains that Holmes "keeps his cigars in the coal-scuttle, his tobacco in the toe end of a Persian slipper, and his unanswered correspondence transixed by a jack-knife into the very centre of his wooden mantelpiece" (386). Holmes's interest in detection is, to some degree, an aesthetic preoccupation rather than a strictly scientific study, in that he values the

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<sup>38</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia Uni Press, 1985).

<sup>39</sup> See Martin Fido, *Oscar Wilde*, (Leicester: Hamlyn, 1988), pp. 115-117.



exceptional crime for its own sake. In *The Sign of Four* he declares his desire for intellectual stimulation in terms that recall Wilde's famous dictum of art for art's sake: "I abhor the dull routine of existence. I crave for mental exaltation" (89). Later, in "The Stockbroker's Clerk" (1893), Watson notes how Holmes listens to the details of a particularly promising case with a look on his face "like a connoisseur who had just taken his first sip of a comet vintage" (369). Although he admired Wilde's work and appears to have enjoyed his company on the few occasions which they met, Conan Doyle had never been comfortable with his homosexuality, which he interpreted in pathological terms as a symptom of mental disturbance, remarking later that he had thought "a hospital rather than a police court was the proper place for its consideration."<sup>40</sup> As a bachelor hero, Holmes's rather exotic bohemianism has much in common with Wilde's public persona, upon which it appears in some ways to have been modeled, but this aspect of Holmes's characterization should be situated in the two decades prior to the watershed moment of the 1895 trials. When Conan Doyle created the detective with the "Bohemian soul" (161) as Watson puts it, he employed the tropes of late-Victorian bohemianism with a nonchalance that would become all but impossible for authors writing after Wilde's conviction.

Nevertheless, Conan Doyle continued to embellish his fictional detective with distinctly Wildean motifs. Holmes's bohemianism fulfills the twin functions of making his domestic life at 221b Baker Street exotically avant-garde while providing a relatively respectable explanation for his wholesale rejection of the heterosexual norm. The bohemian bachelor can be seen here as a variant of the Byronic hero, who had been definitively embodied in earlier male leads such as Heathcliff in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* and Edward Rochester in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (both 1847). Sedgwick views the bourgeois Victorian bachelor as a nineteenth-century domestication of the romantic hero of Gothic literature, who reemerged as a marginalised, circumscribed character taxonomy within the social space of bohemia. According to Sedgwick, the Victorian bachelor "symbolizes the diminution and undermining of certain heroic and totalizing possibilities of generic embodiment" that were first expanded in the

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<sup>40</sup> Stashower, 107.

male protagonist of Gothic fiction.”<sup>41</sup> Holmes exhibits many of the classic traits of the Byronic hero: he is arrogant, charismatic, intelligent and somewhat cynical, rejects many social institutions and norms, such as marriage, and often tends towards introspective and self-destructive moods. The famous detective is socially dominant over both men and women, and yet he exists in a kind of self-imposed exile from society in general. One of the most striking features of this Byronic tendency is the way that Conan Doyle successfully combines it with the almost Carlylean industriousness that Holmes displays in his capacity for work. In the adventure of “The Reigate Squires” (1893), for instance, Watson is called to attend upon an exhausted Holmes who is in danger, quite literally, of working himself to death: “Even his iron constitution had broken down [ . . . ] under the strain of an investigation which had extended over two months, during which period he had never worked less than fifteen hours a day and had more than once, he assured me, kept to his task for five days at a stretch” (398). Conan Doyle appears to have taken particular care to emphasize Holmes’s work ethic as a cultural counterpoint to his bohemianism in the stories he produced after 1895. The detective’s willingness to sacrifice his body in the name of intellectual productivity is a recurring theme in stories such as “The Devil’s Foot” and “The Lion’s Mane” (1926), in which Holmes is obliged, for the sake of his health, to retire to Cornwall and Sussex respectively. This rampant industriousness, which borders on workaholism, contrasts with, and, to some degree, serves to desexualise Holmes’s rather Wildean bohemian streak (although there is an irony here, of course: Wilde himself must have been as privately committed to a work ethic as Holmes to have produced the large body of material which he published prior to his conviction). Holmes’s industriousness has the effect of deflecting any suspicion of Aesthetic decadence, while allowing the detective to retain a piquant sense of exoticism and flamboyance, in effect neutering Holmes’s bohemianism by figuring it as a natural counterbalance to a Carlylean drive for productivity.

These two cultural counterpoints of Carlylean industriousness and Wildean bohemianism manifest as a marked psychic duality in the detective subject. When Watson describes Holmes’s curiously bipolar temperament in the early chapters of

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<sup>41</sup> Sedgwick, p. 193.

*A Study in Scarlet*, he figures the manic phase, when the “working fit” is upon Holmes, in Carlylean terms, and the depressive response as the manifestation of a bohemian nature, explicitly associated with drugs and altered or dreamlike states that recall Thomas De Quincey’s *Confessions*: “[ . . . ] a reaction would come 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 [ . . . ]” (20). Edgar Allan Poe anticipated this split in the detective subjectivity in his groundbreaking story “The Murders in the Rue Morgue (1841), in which he introduced the Parisian sleuth C. Auguste Dupin. Poe uses a number of tropes which would be reproduced in Conan Doyle’s work: there is a tendency to represent the city as a site of alienation and decay; an unnamed narrator-sidekick; an often uncanny doubling between the criminal and the detective; and a particular configuration of gender relationships in which women are often situated as the passive victims of a crime, while men figure as active agents in its subsequent investigation. Like Holmes, Dupin is a bachelor, and something of a social outsider, who has devoted himself to the development of the analytical powers which he deploys to solve crimes that have baffled the official police force. Dupin, too, is characterised by a kind of psychic duality, upon which his narrator frequently remarks: “I often dwelt meditatively upon the old philosophy of the Bi-Part Soul, and amused myself with the fancy of a double Dupin - the creative and the resolvent.”<sup>42</sup> In Poe’s story, however, this duality appears to have less to do with the exoticism of bohemia than with an abnormal bipolarity in the psyche which is figured as pathological. This theme was famously explored, of course, in Stevenson’s novel, which literalised the splitting of the “Bi-Part Soul” in the image of Dr Jekyll and his alter ego Mr Hyde. In some respects, Holmes’s work ethic - his “resolvent” side - can be seen as the respectable Dr Jekyll persona that balances the Mr Hyde aspect of his increasingly suspect bohemianism, which Conan Doyle associates with his “creative” side. There is always a gendered assumption underlying the idea of the bi-part soul, which in some ways aligns

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<sup>42</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *The Murders in the Rue Morgue: The Dupin Tales*, ed. by Matthew Pearl (United States: Random House, 2006, p. 7.

with the Platonic polarities of the animus and anima; indeed, Holmes's "creative" side often appears to be feminised, characterised as it is by a certain physical and mental passivity and a slightly camp predilection for Persian slippers and purple dressing gowns. Like Poe's Dupin, Holmes exists in a marginal relationship with the outside world of polite society, occupying an exotic outpost of respectable British civilization, but unlike Dupin, Holmes is counterbalanced by a character foil, the eminently dependable Watson. In contrast, Dupin and his sidekick are not so much contrasting or oppositional characters as fragmentations or reworkings of what is essentially the same subjective position. When the unnamed narrator describes what his domestic life is like after he moves in with Dupin, the situation comes across as psychologically as well as physically cloistered. The borders of their respective identities are so blurred in relation to one another that the first person plural frequently threatens to overtake the first person singular: "Our seclusion was perfect. We admitted no visitors. [ . . . ] We existed within ourselves alone."<sup>43</sup>

Watson, in contrast, balances his marginalized companion by providing a model of an undivided male subject, offsetting Holmes's bohemianism with his stolid English propriety. In particular, he compensates for Holmes's rejection of the patriarchal establishment with his own jolly heterosexuality. In this respect, his marriage to Mary Morstan at the end of *The Sign of Four* has the effect of altering the social dynamic of the stories by changing the way the social space of bohemia functions. When Watson leaves Baker Street to become "master of his own establishment" (161-2), as he puts it in "A Scandal in Bohemia," thereby integrating fully into the patriarchal social economy, Holmes's bohemianism is relegated to the peripheries of the narrator's social structures. 221b Baker Street becomes, in a structural sense at least, an exotic outpost of Watson's world. Marrying Watson off was a conservative decision on Conan Doyle's part, because it had the effect of containing Holmes within the social structures of an isolated and, to some degree, abnormal bohemianism, from which his sidekick becomes progressively alienated. As Sedgwick has observed, bohemia represented an important social space for the young male bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century:

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<sup>43</sup> Poe, pp. 6-7.

“Bohemia served the cultural fantasy needs for the positive and negative self-definition of an anxious and conflicted bourgeoisie. The flux of bohemia is a temporal space where the young, male bourgeois literary subject is required to navigate his way through his homosocial panic, seen here as a developmental stage towards the paterfamilias.”<sup>44</sup> Bohemia also provided the ideal social space for Holmes, who rejects the normative structures of erotic desire as incompatible with his work. Within the context of an artistic bohemianism, Holmes’s rejection of the heterosexual norm can be construed as a utilitarian resolution rather than a sexual symptom. In “A Scandal in Bohemia,” Watson directly addresses the question of Holmes’s bachelor status: “[ . . . ] for the trained reasoner to admit such intrusions into his own delicate and finely tuned temperament was to introduce a distracting factor which might throw a doubt upon all his mental results. Grit in a sensitive instrument, or a crack in one of his own high-power lenses, would not be more disturbing than a strong emotion in a nature such as his” (161).

If, however, bohemia represents a developmental stage for the male bourgeoisie, as Sedgwick claims, then Holmes’s reluctance to leave that temporal space can also be seen as a rejection of the adult role of paterfamilias. Another possible intertext here is, of course, J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan; or, the Boy Who Wouldn’t Grow Up* (1904). In Barrie’s play, Peter Pan visits London and befriends Wendy Darling and her two brothers, whom he takes back to the magical island of Neverland. Wendy eventually returns to London to grow up and get married, while Peter Pan remains in a state of perpetual prepubescence. Watson, in this sense, is the sensible, socially conformist Wendy to Holmes’s rebellious Peter Pan, who rejects many of the social institutions of Victorian adulthood in order to continue living in a Neverland of crime and adventure. The bachelor hero of romantic fiction might regain an element of heroism as a consequence of his recuperation in the late-Victorian character taxonomy of the bohemian detective, but the detective still retains the constrained sexual structures of the bachelor. Holmes’s predominantly narcissistic sexuality contrasts with Watson’s

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<sup>44</sup> Sedgwick, p. 192.

unproblematic, socially sanctioned heterosexuality. Earlier in my discussion, I remarked on the series of oppositions which structure their relationship: the mainstream against the bohemian; the unimaginative against the eccentric; the solid physique of the British soldier against the contaminated physicality of the self-medicating detective; the complacently married against the inverted eroticism of a narcissistic bohemianism. These oppositions do not amount to an overarching distinction between a heterosexual Watson and a homosexual Holmes - the difference between the two men is presented, if anything, as the heterosexual against the asexual, or as the genital against the narcissistic. The contrast between Holmes and Watson is framed, nonetheless, in terms of the same oppositions that structured the distinction between heterosexual and homosexual men in Victorian culture, suggesting that the detective, as character type, and the homosexual, as social taxonomy, exist in a comparable relationship to the heterosexual male norm.

The activities of Dupin and his narrator in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” make this structural parallel between the social spaces that are respectively inhabited by the consulting detective and the male homosexual subject particularly clear. Dupin is irresistibly attracted to the nightlife of Paris, and he leads his biographer into a shadowy world where the relationships between men are unformalized and there is a peculiarly amplified preoccupation with the idea of exposure. Dupin and his sidekick attempt to discover the identity of the murderer at the centre of a crime, but their eagerness to expose the criminal contrasts starkly against their own anxiousness to protect their anonymity: Dupin’s first name, along with the details of his history and of the circumstances surrounding his withdrawal from the aristocratic society which he formally inhabited are systematically withheld from the reader, and his narrator remains both unnamed and largely devoid of distinguishing features. Like Watson, the narrator of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” is a lost soul before he encounters the detective hero. Their first meeting, which takes place in “an obscure library in the Rue Montmartre,”<sup>45</sup> is described in the hyperbolic language of romance: “We saw each other again and again. [ . . . ] I felt my soul enkindled within me by the

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<sup>45</sup> Poe, p. 6.

wild fervor, and the vivid freshness of his imagination.”<sup>46</sup> Their relationship is primarily played out by night, “amid the wild lights and shadows of the populous city,”<sup>47</sup> at a remove from the daylight world of normative patriarchy:

It was a freak of fancy in my friend (for what else shall I call it?) to be enamored of the Night for her own sake; and into this *bizarrie*; as into all his others, I quietly fell; giving myself up to his whims with a perfect *abandon*. [ . . . ] At the first dawn of the morning we closed all the massy shutters of our old building; lighting a couple of tapers which, strongly perfumed, threw out only the ghestliest and feeblest of rays.<sup>48</sup>

In Conan Doyle’s early stories, Holmes and Watson exist within a similarly cloistered homosocial environment: the detective and his sidekick move to 221b Baker Street and are soon venturing about the city by night, solving crimes together. The introduction of Mary Morstan, however, provides a counterpoint to this shadowy, male-dominated nocturnal environment, binding Watson to the daylight world of respectable domesticity and thereby stabilizing him within the normative patriarchal economy. It must be noted, however, that Conan Doyle appears to have regretted marrying off Watson to Morstan, because in subsequent stories he is obliged to invent a series of increasingly improbable strategies in order to reinstall Watson in his old quarters at Baker Street. Morstan is eventually killed off, without much ado, when Holmes returns from his hiatus in “The Empty House” (1903). Watson’s grief is immediately overshadowed by his excitement at the prospect of working with Holmes on another case: “It was indeed like old times when [ . . . ] I found myself seated beside him in a hansom, my revolver in my pocket and the thrill of adventure in my heart” (488).

### Triangles of Desire

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Poe, p. 7.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*; Poe’s italics.

The Holmes stories revolve around communities of men - professional, amateur, and criminal - who negotiate relations of desire through the exchange of bodies, evidence, clues, ideas and meanings that takes place during a criminal investigation. This process of homosocial competition and rivalry is enacted over the secret of the crime which the men in the story are attempting to solve, be it the secret of a mysterious disappearance, a gruesome murder or a stolen jewel. In this sense, the secret becomes a sort of structural place-holder, the particular content of which is not as important as the competition to solve it, and thereby to master this open epistemological space - a competition which Holmes invariably wins, and which Watson recounts to his audience in his record of the detective's conquests. This process can be compared to the more general set of relations that Sedgwick has delineated in her landmark study of male homosocial desire in Western culture, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), in which she seeks to demonstrate "the immanence of men's same-sex bonds, and their prohibitive structuration, to male-female bonds in nineteenth-century English literature."<sup>49</sup> Sedgwick explores the ways in which homosocial bonds between men are constituted and reflected in literature, and by which literature participates in and reflects the constitution of dominant homosocial relations. She has given particular attention to texts which portray the triangulated relationships of conflict and competition that often occur between two men and the woman whom they both ostensibly desire: an example would be the Arthur-Guinevere-Lancelot love triangle in Arthurian legend. According to Sedgwick, the bonding between these men is permitted only through their rivalry over the feminine object who functions as a point of displaced erotic convergence, ostensibly de-erotizing, and, by the same motion, stabilizing an economy of male-dominated exchange. The communities of male characters who dominate early detective fiction do not usually negotiate their relationships over a woman - though love triangles occur as elements of plot - but over the secret of a crime which, in fact, aligns structurally with the place of the desired female in Sedgwick's triangle of desire. We could propose, for instance, a triangle comprising Holmes, Watson and the criminal who is the target of their

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<sup>49</sup> Sedgwick, p. 15.



investigation, or, alternately, one comprising Holmes, the criminal and the men of Scotland Yard.

These triangles of desire occur more broadly as a generic element of much detective fiction. In his celebrated reading of Poe's third Dupin story, "The Purloined Letter" the French theorist and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan argues that the secret of a mystery has an importance that extends beyond the immediate implications of its superficial content: the secret's function is akin to that of the pure signifier, in that it is important because of the struggle for epistemological dominance that is permitted precisely by the absence of any specified content. The secret of the crime is invariably possessed by Holmes, who establishes his dominance over the investigative community by producing the correct solution to the mystery, which he then circulates among the others, creating a community of men who can collectively partake, at least vicariously if not directly, in the thrill of epistemological domination. In a later story, "The Six Napoleons" (1904), for instance, Holmes successfully retrieves a valuable pearl that has been stolen from a visiting prince. Watson and Lestrade respond with the rapturous applause of an adoring audience:

Lestrade and I sat silent for a moment, and then, with a spontaneous impulse, we both broke out clapping as at the well-wrought crisis of play. A flush of colour sprang to Holmes's pale cheeks, and he bowed to use like the master dramatist who receives the homage of his audience. It was at such a moments that for an instant he ceased to be a reasoning machine, and betrayed his human love for admiration and applause. The same singularly proud and reserved nature which turned away with disdain from popular notoriety was capable of being moved to its depths by spontaneous wonder and praise from a friend (594).

The relations of power and desire which are negotiated over the open space of the secret invariably confirm Holmes in a position of epistemological mastery over the others, which need not imply a formal authority: "I examine the data, as an

expert, and pronounce an expert's opinion," declares Holmes in *The Sign of Four*. "I claim no credit in such cases. My name figures in no newspaper" (90). The fact that these relationships are often constituted through the process of apprehending a criminal quarry means that the criminal frequently becomes objectified in a relationship of exchange between the different agencies of detection, as the woman in Sedgwick's triangle is objectified as the point of competition between men. The structural operations of Conan Doyle's stories objectify the criminal through a threefold process that occurs as an inevitable effect of the investigation plot: firstly, by constructing criminals as targets of a male-gendered pursuit; secondly, as a result of Conan Doyle's generic formula, which requires Holmes to solve the mystery before the criminal's identity is revealed, denying the latter the chance to figure as an active agent in the investigation; and thirdly, because the ultimate aim of the pursuit is usually to take the criminal into custody, depriving him or her of independence. The upshot of this is that the male criminal - and the vast majority of Conan Doyle's criminals are male - is feminized as a result of his structural position in the story. It is not only the victim who becomes feminized as a result of his or her passive position; in fact, this dynamic in the stories can be seen to represent a kind of structural *lex talionis* which employs the passive, female-gendered position as its most immediate means of punishment. The agency which the criminal takes from his victim is, in turn, denied to him as a result of the investigation. The triangles of epistemophilic desire that occur between men in Conan Doyle's stories also allow Holmes the opportunity to bond with the criminal whom he pursues. This is especially clear in cases when the criminal is depicted as a fitting intellectual match for the detective. There are several general categories of criminal in Conan Doyle's stories: the avenger, such as Jefferson Hope in *A Study in Scarlet*, who takes revenge for private injuries; the criminal organization, such as Moriarty's syndicate or the Ku Klux Klan in "The Five Orange Pips"; the lower-class petty criminal motivated by greed or brute violence and his upper-class counterpart, who is more disposed to large-scale fraud, blackmail or bank heists; the predatory stepfather of Freudian myth; and the corrupt aristocrat, Nordau's higher class of degenerate intellectual. In the case of criminals who belong to this latter category - into which, as the second chapter of this discussion has argued, Holmes could himself conceivably fall - the detective

and the criminal often establish a relationship of grudging mutual admiration, in which competition and conflict often take the form of courtship.

A particularly clear example of this kind of relationship is the one which develops between Holmes and the Austrian Baron Adelbert Gruner in “The Illustrious Client,” a latter story in which Conan Doyle reworks the plot of Poe’s “The Purloined Letter,” reversing the gender roles of the original text. A prominent diplomat, Sir James Damery, requests Holmes’s assistance on “a very delicate and also very important” matter, citing Holmes’s reputation for “arranging delicate matters which are to be kept out of the papers” (984). Damery is acting on behalf of his client, whose identity is not disclosed (although Watson later suspects that it is none other than Edward VII) and this client, in turn, is acting on behalf of a General de Merville. The General’s only daughter has become infatuated with Gruner, a roguish aristocrat with a bad reputation. Holmes becomes convinced that the baron murdered his former wife and, fearing for the girl, confronts him directly. He makes no secret of his admiration for Gruner: he later remarks that the baron is “an excellent antagonist, cool as ice, silky voiced and soothing as one of your fashionable consultants, and as poisonous as a cobra. He has breeding in him [ . . . ] a real aristocrat of crime [ . . . ]” (988). Their interview comes to an end when Gruner delivers a veiled threat against Holmes. He relates the story of a Frenchman who was assaulted and crippled by a gang of thugs after making similar enquires into the baron’s affairs: “Don’t do it, Mr Holmes. It’s not a lucky thing to do. Several have found that out” (989). Holmes decides to dig up Gruner’s secrets “amidst the black roots of crime” (988) and he ventures into the London underworld to enlist the aid of a prostitute, Kitty Winter, a former flame of Gruner’s who is now hell-bent on revenge. Holmes determines that his only chance of changing Violet de Merville’s mind about her impending marriage is to lay his hands on an incriminating book in which the baron has described his previous conquests. While he is stalking Grunter in order to ascertain the whereabouts of this item, Holmes is set upon and attacked by two men outside the Café Royal. The papers report that he is at death’s door, and a distraught Watson hastens to 221b Baker Street, only to discover that Holmes’s injuries are comparatively moderate. Holmes devises a plan in which Watson distracts Gruner by posing as a pottery salesman; meanwhile, Holmes burgles his house and

succeeds in stealing the journal. Gruner pursues Holmes, but is attacked by Kitty Winter, who throws vitriol in his face, disfiguring him. Violet de Melville eventually breaks off their engagement, to the satisfaction of Holmes's illustrious client. Here, as in Poe's story, the great secret is not the identity of the villain, the nature of his alleged crime or the fact of his culpability - Gruner's role is established from the outset - but the location of the one item that will allow the detective to foil his plans and save the honor of the woman in whose interests he is acting. The real action of the plot depends on the thrust-and-parry that takes place between Holmes and the baron as they contend over the honor of the passive female, Violet de Merville. The competition between the men is played out in a game of blackmail and violence in which Holmes and the baron employ prostitutes and hired thugs from the lower classes in order to threaten or incriminate each other.

Certain elements of the plot echo the conflict between Oscar Wilde and John Sholto Douglas, 9<sup>th</sup> Marquess of Queensberry (1844-1900) in the lead-up to the trials of 1895.<sup>50</sup> The Café Royal, where Holmes is assaulted by Gruner's hired thugs, was also a favorite real-life haunt of Wilde and his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas (1870-1945), the Marquess's son. The Marquess lunched at the Café Royal on 18 February 1895, and was appalled to witness what he considered to be flagrantly homosexual behavior on the part of both Wilde and his son. He later left a calling card at Wilde's club, the Albemarle, with the now legendary inscription: "To Oscar Wilde, posing as a Somdomite [sic]."<sup>51</sup> Wilde unsuccessfully sued for libel and was then himself arrested for violating the Labouchere Amendment, which in 1885 had criminalized a broad range of sexual acts under the umbrella term of gross indecency. During the preparations for the trial, the defense gathered testimony from witnesses drawn from London's underworld, including a disgruntled prostitute who had a personal grudge against Wilde. She provided the Marquess of Queensberry's legal team with the lead to a nest of blackmailers, the weight of whose collective testimony ultimately proved

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<sup>50</sup> Anne Varty gives a detailed account of the events leading up to Wilde's prosecution. See *A Preface to Oscar Wilde* (United States: Addison Wesley Longman, 1998), pp. 28-34.

<sup>51</sup> Reproduced in Fido, p. 104.

to be Wilde's undoing.<sup>52</sup> He was convicted of sodomy on May 25 of that year, and given the harshest sentence available under the Labouchere Amendment: two years' hard labor. While on bail awaiting sentencing, Wilde had been pursued in the city by a gang of thugs hired by the Marquess, in much the same way that Holmes is pursued by Gruner's men outside the Café Royal - the same location which saw the start of the Wilde scandal. If Holmes's investigation makes him vulnerable to attack in a way that echoes Oscar Wilde's position, however, his tactics also resemble those employed by the Marquess's legal team. Holmes plays the role of the Marquess's private detective, digging up his enemy's secrets with the help of a network of prostitutes and blackmailers. The baron, much like Wilde, and indeed Holmes himself, is a charismatic man "with a considerable artistic side to his nature" (987). His sexual influence destabilizes the patrilineal system by emasculating Violet de Merville's father, imperiling not only the patriarchal economy but the paterfamilias himself: "He has lost the nerve which never failed him on the battlefield and has become a weak, dottering old man, utterly incapable of contending with a rascal like this Austrian" (986). Like Wilde, the baron finds his most dangerous enemies in London's underworld. He, too, receives one of the most severe sentences possible: his disfigurement with vitriol represents a sudden and intensely physical violation in the same way that Oscar Wilde's sentence to hard labor brutalized the artistic body.

The conflict between the male antagonists is superimposed against a rather banal female dichotomy: the two principal women in the story, the aristocratic Violet de Merville and the prostitute Kitty Winter, conform to the traditional opposition of virgin and whore. "If you ever saw flame and ice face to face," remarks Holmes, "it was those two women" (992). The elemental metaphors are repeated throughout the story: the streetwalker is "fiery" (991) and "flame-like" (989), with "blazing eyes" (990), while Violet de Merville is "demure, pale, self-contained," and an "angel" with an "ethereal, otherworldly beauty" (991). The relatively static and polarized gender roles to which the females in the text conform only serve to emphasize the marked ambivalence and fluidity of the male homosocial desire that is played out in the struggle between Holmes and Gruner

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<sup>52</sup> For a detailed account of the Wilde trials, see Fido, pp. 104-107.

over Violet de Merville. The women serve as intermediaries in the competition between the two men - with de Merville representing the stakes in the battle, and Kitty Winter functioning as a kind of pawn - and the static polarity that they represent contrasts sharply with the sense of moral ambivalence that marks Holmes's role in the conflict. Here the detective is at his most ambiguous, oscillating between the roles of victim, criminal and chief prosecutor: first he is attacked in a manner that victimizes him as a Wildean object of persecution, then he takes on the role of hired thug himself when he commits burglary, before finally assuming the role of defender of public morals against a criminal who is himself rather Wildean. Holmes does not represent Gruner's polar opposite, in the way that Kitty Winter opposes Violet de Merville, but nor he is the baron's doppelganger. His activities in the case represent, rather, a profoundly equivocal morality that has more to do with his desire to compete with Gruner than with his desire to see justice done; after all, Gruner is not technically even a criminal, while Holmes puts himself on the wrong side of the law by burgling the baron's house. "The Illustrious Client" demonstrates that the triangles of male homosocial desire negotiated over the secret of a crime often represent a more powerful motivation for the detective than the immediate demands of justice, but the story also suggests that the detective is not a polarized subject so much as an ambivalent one, whose moral equivocality allows him to oscillate between the ideological counterpoints of potentially contaminated artist and extra-legal prosecutor.

These male homosocial relations of desire, conflict and competition occur as a structural element, bound up in the investigation plot itself as the detective, his sidekick-narrator, his professional rivals and his criminal target engage in what is essentially a contest for epistemological mastery, and for the dominant position within the homosocial community that such mastery implies. If an embodied homosocial thematics is to be identified in Conan Doyle's stories, it is in the structures of the investigation, which ostensibly represent male homosocial desire as an unproblematic consequence of detective work. In other words, the stories evade the question of the often complex desires that motivate a man's pursuit of another man by appealing to the law as an overarching context for that pursuit. The kinds of homosocial desire which underlie the investigation narrative often

have more to do with the tension that arises around possible similarities between the criminal and the detective than with the conflicting moral positions that they respectively represent. The final chapter of the present discussion will focus more closely on this unarticulated sense of homogeneity between the criminal and the detective, which is embodied most strikingly in the contest between Holmes and his nemesis, Professor Moriarty.

## Chapter 4

### The Final Problem: Unraveling the Double Bind

In the preceding chapter, I proposed that the criminal investigation in Conan Doyle's stories allows for the negotiation of homosocial, potentially homoerotic bonds between men, by providing an institutional structure into which the libidinal charge of such bonds can be elided and suppressed. One of the most ambivalent and suggestive of the male relationships played out through the nexus of the investigation narrative is that which develops between Sherlock Holmes and his criminal adversaries. As the previous discussion of "The Illustrious Client" has demonstrated, the moral oppositions on which Holmes's role as a detective is ostensibly founded become undermined once the detective himself is considered to represent an ambivalent or potentially contaminated agent; his relationship with the criminal is then revealed to be an ambiguous one in which a superficial appearance of difference is, to some degree, subverted by the lurking suspicion of an ulterior likeness. This hidden threat of similarity - the paradox that the detective and the criminal might be more alike than they appear - is at the heart of the double bind which, I have argued, characterizes Holmes. This final chapter will discuss this paradoxical bond of simultaneous identification and difference that marks Holmes's relationships with his criminal adversaries in "The Final Problem" and the third of the novels, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. In the former, the threat of similarity resurfaces in Gothic terms as an uncanny process of doubling between Holmes and his nemesis, Professor Moriarty. Their confrontation at the end of the story, which appears to culminate in the deaths of both men, condenses and finally discharges an anxiety which builds up around the problem of their dangerous similarity. In this sense, their mutual destruction can be viewed as the attainment of a literal kind of consubstantiality, in which the subjective borders between the criminal and the detective are finally obliterated. The story appears to encode an anxiety about the increasingly porous boundaries, particularly the moral boundaries, that differentiate the detective from the criminal element that he seeks to suppress, an anxiety that is thrown into a much wider frame of reference when Holmes returns in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. While "The Final Problem" particularizes a fear of a hidden bond of similarity between the detective and the criminal, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* amplifies the



suppressed threat of sameness through a Gothic thematics of degeneration and atavism. Ultimately, however, both adventures appear to articulate the same anxiety about the role of the detective: in order to understand crime, Holmes is compelled to internalize it, and by that same motion to open the borders of his subjectivity to the threat of contamination.

#### Moriarty and the Hidden Threat of Similarity

The role of Holmes's archenemy, Professor Moriarty, is peculiarly condensed: he is not mentioned until "The Final Problem," the story which concludes the second collection of stories, *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, in which he is suddenly exposed as the organizational mastermind behind much of the crime in London. He is mentioned again but does not appear in the last novel, *The Valley of Fear*. Despite the fact that he only makes one appearance, Moriarty is described as Holmes's greatest adversary, and his eventual destruction represents the detective's crowning achievement. Conan Doyle never revealed the inspiration behind the character, but critics generally agree that the prototype for Moriarty was most likely the American master criminal Adam Worth (1844-1902), whom Scotland Yard once described as "the Napoleon of crime."<sup>53</sup> Holmes describes Moriarty in exactly the same terms: "He is the Napoleon of crime, Watson" (471). Worth began his career in New York, where he established a ring of pickpockets in the 1860s, and eventually progressed from petty theft to large-scale robbery. His most celebrated heist was the theft of a Gainsborough painting of the Duchess of Devonshire in 1876, to which the art-loving Worth became so attached that he evidently insisted on sleeping with it for the next twenty-five years. His combination of organizational genius, artistic taste and eccentricity - which, in some respects, anticipated Nordau's atavistic archetype of the higher degenerate criminal - made him something of a romantic icon in nineteenth-century culture. This combination of traits appears to reemerge in the character of Moriarty: in *The Valley of Fear*, Holmes only realizes the extent of the master criminal's wealth and power when he estimates the value of a rare Dutch painting in his possession. This can also be seen, of course, as a reflection of Holmes's own aestheticism:

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<sup>53</sup> See Ben Macintyre, *The Napoleon of Crime: The Life and Times of Adam Worth, the Real Moriarty* (United States: Harper Collins, 1997).

indeed, the cultural influence of Worth can be traced in both Holmes and Moriarty, who represent positive and negative images of the artistic criminal prototype. Holmes, to some extent, is a Napoleon of detectives: he has in common with Moriarty - and their presumed prototype Worth - the trait of aestheticism combined with a flair for strategy and organization, only in Holmes's case this combination is ostensibly employed in the detection of crime rather than in its perpetration.

It is interesting that Conan Doyle chose to transplant the cultural prototype of the Napoleon of crime from an American context to a hibernian one by making Moriarty Irish, particularly with regard to his earlier willingness to make his villains Americans, as he does in earlier adventures like *A Study in Scarlet*, "A Scandal in Bohemia" and "The Five Orange Pips." Moriarty's Irishness is also suggestive when considered in relation to Conan Doyle's own cultural background as an Anglo-Irishman. His Dublin-born grandfather, John Doyle, had at the age of twenty emigrated to England; his father, Charles Altamont Doyle, was born in London in 1832, and moved to Edinburgh in 1849, where he met and later married the Irish-born Mary Foley. In his *Memories and Adventures*, Conan Doyle writes: "I, an Irishman, by extraction, was born in the Scottish capital."<sup>54</sup> Catherine Wynne has observed that Conan Doyle had a problematic relationship with his Irish heritage: "[ . . . ] any attempt to come to terms with his Irish Catholic identity was problematic in the Edinburgh of Conan Doyle's youth."<sup>55</sup> Conan Doyle was a confirmed Unionist since 1886 and fought unsuccessful electoral campaigns as a Liberal Unionist for Edinburgh in 1900, but later modified his position and supported Home Rule for Ireland by 1911. This represented a significant evolution for the author, whose own exploits appeared to embody the values of the quintessential Victorian Englishman so perfectly, and whose detective fiction is so steadfastly loyal to the ideals of crown and empire. The quintessentially English Holmes and Watson are juxtaposed against Moriarty,

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<sup>54</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle, *Memories and Adventures* (New York: Cambridge Univ Press, 2012), p. 8.

<sup>55</sup> Catherine Wynne, *The Colonial Conan Doyle: British Imperialism, Irish Nationalism and the Gothic* (United States: Greenwood, 2002), p. 23

whose Irish affiliations are signaled not only in the origins of his name, but, more significantly, by the way his shadowy criminal organization appears to suggest the political structures and operations of nineteenth-century Fenianism. Senia Paset has remarked on the covert and nebulous structure of Fenianism, which represented “a secret revolutionary grouping (organized in “cells” and “circles”) under whose roof sheltered a number of influences and objectives [ . . . ].”<sup>56</sup> The structures and operations of Moriarty’s covert, heterogeneous organization recalls those of Fenianism, particularly with respect to its administration and the stringency with which its codes are enforced: “[ . . . ] Moriarty rules with a rod of iron over his people. His discipline is tremendous. There is only one punishment in his code. It is death” (124). The Irish super-criminal represents a foreign other to the English detective, thus racializing the spectre of higher criminal degeneracy, but he and his organization can also be seen to reflect rejected or suppressed elements of Conan Doyle’s own racial and political background. In this sense, Holmes’s nemesis appears to embody certain anxieties around a repressed sense of identification. The problem of Moriarty’s racial identity as a criminal therefore reflects that of Holmes’s cultural identity as a detective: while Holmes is a protagonist who appears to be contaminated with the suspicion of difference, Moriarty is a villain contaminated with a dangerous suspicion of hidden similarity.

“The Final Problem” particularizes this anxiety around the idea of a suppressed similarity in the physical contest that plays out between Moriarty and Holmes. Watson is about to retire to bed one evening when Holmes walks into his consulting room. The detective confides that he is being hounded by Moriarty, of whom Watson has heard nothing until this moment:

“You have probably never heard of Professor Moriarty?” said he.

“Never.”

“Aye, there’s the genius and the wonder of the thing!” he cried.

“The man pervades London, and no one has heard of him. That’s

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<sup>56</sup> See Senia Paset, *Modern Ireland: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford Univ Press, 2003), p. 107.

what puts him on a pinnacle in the records of crime. I tell you, Watson, in all seriousness, that if I could beat that man, if I could free society of him, I should feel that my own career had reached its summit, and I should be prepared to turn to some more placid line in life. [ . . . ] But I could not rest, Watson, I could not sit quiet in my chair, if I thought that such a man as Professor Moriarty were walking the streets of London unchallenged” (470).

Holmes’s opponent is no ordinary criminal: “He is the organizer of half that is evil and of nearly all that is undetected in this great city” (471). Like Holmes himself, Moriarty appears to embody the defining traits of Nordau’s higher degenerate. He is marked by a combination of genius and atavistic proclivities toward evil:

“He is a man of good birth and excellent education, endowed by nature with a phenomenal mathematical faculty. [ . . . ] But he had hereditary tendencies of the most diabolical kind. A criminal strain ran in his blood, which, instead of being modified, was increased and rendered infinitively more dangerous by his extraordinary mental powers. [ . . . ] He is a genius, a philosopher, an abstract thinker. He has a brain of the first order” (471).

In many respects, this description could be applied to Holmes himself: the detective is also well-educated - it is implied in “The *Gloria Scott*” (1893) that Holmes attended an Oxbridge college - and he, too, manifests hereditary tendencies towards genius which are problematized by his potentially contaminated status.

Holmes tells Watson that he has devised a strategy which, if it succeeds, will expose Moriarty’s criminal affiliations and bring about his downfall. Moriarty anticipates the plot, however, and confronts Holmes at Baker Street. The master criminal appears to possess powers of deduction of his own; for instance, he immediately detects that Holmes has a concealed weapon: “It is a dangerous habit to finger loaded firearms in the pocket of one’s dressing gown” (472). More

significantly, he appears to be able to deduce what Holmes is thinking, too, in a manner that suggests a kind of psychic doubling is in process:

“All that I have to say has readily crossed your mind,” said he.

“Then possibly my answers has crossed yours,” I replied.

“You stand fast?”

“Absolutely” (472).

Moriarty warns Holmes that he has underestimated the extent of his influence: “You stand in the way not merely of an individual, but of a mighty organization, the full extent of which you, with all your cleverness, have been unable to realize. [ . . . ] If you are clever enough to bring destruction upon me, rest assured that I shall do as much to you” (472). The threat is not empty: soon after their meeting, Holmes is almost run down in the street, a brick thrown from a building almost crushes him, and he is attacked on his way to Watson’s chambers. Holmes proposes that he and Watson fly to the Continent to escape Moriarty, a proposition to which Watson readily agrees. They land in Brussels and proceed through Switzerland and Germany: “It was a lovely trip, the dainty green of the spring below, the virgin white of the winter above; but it was clear to me that never for one instant did Holmes forget the shadow which lay across him” (477). On arriving in Meiringen, they decide to take a detour to view the famous falls at Reichenbach:

It is, indeed, a fearful place. The torrent, swollen by the melting snow, plunges into a tremendous abyss, from which the spray rolls up like the smoke from a burning house. The shaft into which the river hurls itself is an immense chasm, lined by glistening coal-black rock, and narrowing into a creaming, boiling pit of incalculable depth, which brims over and shoots the stream onward over its jagged lip (478).

As they approach the abyss, Holmes and Watson receive a telegram which appears to be from the landlord at their last hotel, requesting urgent medical attention for an English lady. Watson chivalrously rushes to the rescue, leaving

Holmes alone at the Reichenbach Falls: “As I turned away I saw Holmes, with his back against a rock and his arms folded, gazing down at the rush of the waters. It was the last that I was ever destined to see of him in this world” (478). On arriving at the hotel, Watson is alarmed to discover that the letter is a hoax, and hastens back, only to find Holmes gone. He concludes that the detective met his demise after being confronted by Moriarty at the edge of the precipice:

An examination by experts leaves little doubt that a personal contest between the two men ended, as it could hardly fail to end in such a situation, in their reeling over, locked in each other's arms. Any attempt at recovering the bodies was absolutely hopeless, and there, deep down in that dreadful cauldron of swirling water and seething foam, will lie for all time the most dangerous criminal and the foremost champion of the law of their generation (480).

The story is marked by its peculiar generic incongruity: it appears to represent a sudden departure from the structures of classic detective fiction, to which Conan Doyle had faithfully adhered until “The Final Problem.” There is no real mystery for Holmes to solve here, apart from the necessity of anticipating Moriarty’s movements, and the text is, on the whole, closer in terms of its generic and discursive elements to the earlier Gothic fiction of writers like Anne Radcliffe: the emphasis placed on the intellectual processes of ratiocination and investigation is minimal, and the force of the story comes instead from the sublime effect of the European scenery, the drama of the chase, the excitement of the pursuit and the sense of anxiety and destabilization that arises around the process of doubling between Holmes and Moriarty. The lack of any real investigation plot means that there are no formal structures into which the libidinal charge of their bonds of mutual desire and competition can be satisfactorily elided, no third party or secret to structure their rivalry; as a result, their homosocial pursuit becomes literalized in a physical chase. With no mediating terms, their mutual desire can only destroy them. Their apparent deaths effectively represent a kind of consummation, which is figured not only as a point of erotic convergence but also as an atavistic regression to a state of nondifferentiation, in that the foes achieve a kind of physical consubstantiality with one another: they become mingled together in the

“creaming, boiling pit of incalculable depth,” an image which is suggestive not only of an explosive male sexuality, but also of a kind of primal ooze. This moment represents the final invasion of the borders of Holmes’s subjectivity: the detective, at last, becomes indistinguishable from the criminal whom he pursues.

#### The Subject on Unstable Ground: *The Hound of the Baskervilles*

When Holmes and Moriarty fall to their deaths at the end of “The Final Problem,” obliterating their difference in the primal abyss of the Reichenbach Falls, it marks the realization of an anxiety about the contaminated status of the detective that had been latent in the stories from Holmes’s first appearance in *A Study in Scarlet*. In the second chapter of the present discussion, I drew attention to the way that Holmes’s body is, from the first, undermined by his close proximity to the world of crime; Watson notes, for example, that Holmes’s skin is permanently stained by the chemicals with which he conducts his forensic experiments. In “The Final Problem,” this process of progressive contamination appears to be completed at last, ending in the presumed annihilation of the detective subject. When Holmes makes his return in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, the question of his potentially contaminated status remains unresolved: indeed, as the following discussion of the novel will demonstrate, the tension around Holmes’s moral ambivalence and potentially degenerate character becomes at once more acute and more generalized, amplified by the Gothic thematics of the novel and thrown into a more explicitly evolutionary frame of reference by the Darwinian and Lombrosian paradigms which structure the way that degeneracy and criminality are represented. The idea of degeneracy manifests more broadly as a lurking threat at the boundaries of the post-Darwinian subject, and particularly the male subject, for whom the spectre of atavistic non-differentiation also suggests the threat of emasculation. The following discussion of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* will argue that the moor itself becomes an ambiguous space for the negotiation and inscription of these anxieties. Conan Doyle evokes a psychology of paranoia by focusing on the helplessness of the male subject confronted by the threats of degeneracy, racial alterity and sexual predation. These post-Darwinian anxieties are central to this novel, in which Holmes is called upon to assist the aristocratic Baskerville family in one of his most sensational and challenging cases.

He and Watson are consulted by Dr James Mortimer, the close friend and physician of the late Sir Charles Baskerville. Mortimer begins by recounting the Baskerville family myth, which tells of a degenerate ancestor who makes a Faustian pact to “render his body and soul to the Powers of Evil” (674). From that time, according to Mortimer, the Baskerville family has been haunted by a mysterious and apparently supernatural hound, which appears on the moor “in those dark hours when the powers of evil are exalted” (675). The recent death of Sir Charles has rekindled fear amongst the peasants on the moor, and even Mortimer confesses that he is not immune to such suspicions: “I assure you that there is a reign of terror in the district, and that it is a hardy man who will cross the moor at night” (681). Mortimer now fears for the safety of Charles’s heir, Sir Henry, who has just arrived in England, so Watson agrees to accompany the new baronet to his ancestral property, Baskerville Hall, in Devonshire. When Watson and Henry arrive on the moor, they discover that the district is swarming with guards on the hunt for an escaped convict from the nearby prison, the mass murderer Selden. On their arrival at Baskerville Hall, they are introduced to the butler, Barrymore, and they later make the acquaintance of the other inhabitants of the moor, including the naturalist Jack Stapleton and the beautiful Beryl, who Stapleton introduces as his sister but who is later revealed to be his wife. Henry quickly falls in love with Beryl, but Stapleton sabotages the relationship. Meanwhile, Watson reports back to Holmes in a series of letters in which he describes the oppressive and melancholy 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” (721). He is especially unnerved by the sight of the Neolithic ruins which mark the landscape: “As you look at their grey stone huts against the scarred hillsides you leave your own age behind you, and if you were to see a skin-clad, hairy man crawl out from the low door fitting a flint arrow onto the string of his bow, you would feel that his presence there was more natural than your own” (721). Watson is soon distracted from his reveries by a series of unexpected events: Barrymore is caught skulking around the house at night, and Watson learns of a secret encounter between Sir Charles and a woman named Laura Lyons on the night of the baronet’s death. He is also unnerved to hear the cries of a hound at night, and glimpses a mysterious figure who appears



to be living on the moor. Gradually the mysteries are unraveled: Barrymore's nocturnal activities are revealed to be in aid of the criminal Selden, who is actually his brother-in-law, and the lonely figure that Watson glimpses on the moor turns out to be none other than Holmes himself. The detective has camped out amongst the Neolithic remains on the hillside in order to observe the action from a distance, undetected, and he now reveals that Jack Stapleton is actually Henry's illegitimate cousin, with designs on the estate. Holmes decides to use Henry as bait to catch Stapleton, and sends the baronet out alone on the moor at night. His plan succeeds: Stapleton sets the dog after him, but Holmes and Watson manage to destroy it. Stapleton flees from the scene, only to drown in the mire during his attempt to escape.

The melancholy setting of the moor reflects the internal lives of the characters who inhabit it, and, to some extent, both induces and echoes their psychic states. When Watson travels onto the moor for the first time, his journey takes him out of the light of civilization and into the darkness of a rugged and untamed landscape. The imagery suggests that this is not only a trip from the metropolitan world of modern London into more primitive country, but also, in some respects, a step back in time to an environment which is more primordial, a fitting terrain for manifestations of atavistic criminality:

We had left the fertile country behind and beneath us. We looked back on it now, the slanting rays of a low sun turning the streams to threads of gold and glowing on the red earth new turned by the plough and the broad tangle of the woodlands. The road in front of us grew bleaker and wilder over huge russet and olive slopes, sprinkled with giant boulders (701).

The bleak terrain of the moor contrasts against the hospitable, inhabitable pastoral landscape; unlike the tractable farmland, the moor resists cultivation. It represents a shifting, inscrutable and potentially subversive force, the ungovernable power of which is most clearly embodied in the image of the fog, a metamorphic agent with the ability to disguise, transform and obscure. The fog is an essential part of the

theatrical tool kit that makes the possibility of a spectral hound seem plausible in a modern detective novel. At the climatic moment when Watson and Holmes are lying in wait for the hound, Watson observes how the fog transforms the mire into a landscape that is at once sublime and primordial: “The moon shone on it, and it looked like a great shimmering ice-field, with the heads of the distant tors borne as rocks upon its surface” (755). The fog is not only a superb bit of atmospheric meteorology; it also offers an image for the idea of mystery itself. As the second chapter of this thesis argued, fog can be seen as an elemental metaphor for the broader enterprise of detective fiction, which is invested in a process of deliberate concealment and obscuration. Fog works to obscure and disorientate, as the author of the detective story aims to conceal information from the reader. The bog, of course, carries the same metaphoric possibility, embodying the sense of acute but undefined entrapment which Watson feels as he struggles to unravel the mystery: “It is melancholy outside and in. [ . . . ] I am conscious myself of a weight at my heart and a feeling of impending danger - ever-present danger, which is the more terrible because I am unable to define it” (727).

The idea of the bog also expresses a specifically postcolonial fear of an active landscape that defies control and threatens those who attempt to master it: viscous topographies resist the very concept of land ownership because of their mutable, unstable nature. Catherine Wynne argues that this shifting landscape echoes the political volatility of nineteenth-century Ireland, and in particular encodes an anxiety about the issues of land ownership and political unrest: according to Wynne, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* reflects “societal concerns in Ireland, where during this period conflict was reigning over the possession of land as the troubled transfer of ownership from landlord to tenant often produced violent agrarian strife [ . . . ].”<sup>57</sup> If Conan Doyle’s Gothic-inflected portrayal of Dartmoor expresses, as Wynne claims, a displacement of political anxieties about agrarian conflict in Ireland, the structures of this depiction echo that of Moriarty, who appears to embody an anxiety about the spectre of Fenian violence and covert political activities. The mire also embodies a post-Darwinian fear of the natural world conceived as mutable, hostile and arbitrary, a fear powerfully figured in the

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<sup>57</sup> Wynne, p. 66.

image of the mire, which represents a kind of Gothic monster that feeds upon its victims. On his first outing onto the moor, Watson is disturbed when he watches a wild pony being swallowed up by the mire: “Something brown was rolling and tossing among the green sedges. Then a long, agonized writhing neck shot upwards and a dreadful cry echoed over the moor” (708). The mire threatens to absorb the subject into a kind of primal ooze, like the “dreadful cauldron of swirling water and seething foam” (480) at the bottom at the Reichenbach Falls in “The Final Problem.” In this way, both the moor and the waterfall can be viewed as metaphors for the double bind which characterizes Holmes: by entering into these dangerous spaces, he has an opportunity to combat crime, but it comes at a risk to his own subjective borders, either because of a direct threat to his life or a less defined but no less oppressive or urgent threat of undifferentiation that is aptly embodied in the image of the devouring mire. The annihilation of the subject can also be understood in Darwinian terms to represent the threat of extinction, something that is figured explicitly in the image of the prehistoric ruins on the moor. Dartmoor still harbours the remnants of a prehistoric past: “Once you are upon its bosom,” Watson writes to Holmes, “you have left all traces of modern England behind you, but, on the other hand, you are conscious everywhere of the homes and works of prehistoric people” (712). These primitive humans are symbolically and ideologically linked with Selden, the escaped convict on the moor. Watson tells us that Selden’s crimes were remarkable for “the peculiar ferocity of the crime and the wanton brutality which had marked all the actions of the assassin” (701) and that his conduct was so atrocious that the death penalty was commuted because of doubts about his sanity. In short, it is assumed that anyone with such a capacity for violence could not be properly human. Selden exemplifies Lombroso’s archetype of the criminal degenerate, and the prehistoric ruins amongst which he hides explicitly associated him with an earlier, presumably more primitive stage of evolutionary development. He is in his element on the wild landscape of the moor, and in some ways even embodies that wildness: “Somewhere out there, on that desolate plain, was lurking this fiendish man, hiding in a burrow like a wild beast, his heart full of malignancy against the whole race which had cast him out. [ . . . ] It needed but this to complete the grim suggestiveness of the barren waste, the chilling wind and the darkling sky” (671).

There is another man hiding out on the moor, however, who is equally suited to this atavistic environment: Sherlock Holmes. Like Selden, Holmes is at home among the Neolithic ruins, but the detective is more proficient at maintaining an external appearance of civilization: “In the tweed suit and cloth cap he looked like any other tourist upon the moor, and he had contrived, with that catlike love of personal cleanliness which was one of his characteristics, that his chin should be as smooth and his linen as perfect as if he were in Baker Street” (740). While Selden embodies the classic Lombrosian idea of the degenerate as the evolutionary throwback to a savage, primordial humanity, the incongruence of Holmes’s civilized exterior and his atavistic surroundings is more suggestive of Nordau’s concept of the higher degenerate, who was thought to be able to mask his regressive tendencies under an external façade of civility. In some ways, Holmes’s suave external appearance is a veneer: despite his ability to keep his suit starched and his chin smooth, he also embodies the spirit of the moor, perhaps more so even than Selden. When Watson glimpses Holmes on the moor at night, without recognizing him, he is deeply impressed by the sense of mastery and dominance that the unknown man exudes:

The moon was out upon the right, and the jagged pinnacle of a granite tor stood up against the low curve of its silver disc. There, outlined as black as an ebony statue on that shining background, I saw the figure of a man upon the tor. [ . . . ] He stood with his legs a little separated, his arms folded, his head bowed, as if he were brooding over that enormous wilderness of peat and granite which lay before him. He might have been the very spirit of that terrible place (726).

Watson later describes the “thrill which his strange presence and commanding attitude had given me” (726). This thrill is, in some respects, epistemophilic: what really excites Watson is the impression of secret knowledge and power which the man on the tor conveys, and the sense of dominance - both epistemological and physical - which his elevated position and phallic stance imply. This sense of mastery is key to Holmes’s attraction; he is the alpha male of the crime-solving

community, supremely isolated, unfathomable and secure in his own power. There is also a sense, however, in which Holmes becomes more exposed out on the moor than he has ever been before, not only because he is physically vulnerable to both the elements and the hound, but also because his familiarity with the atavistic setting of the Dartmoor landscape signals his own ambivalence. Here Holmes is not working against the forces of alterity that are encoded upon the landscape; he is embodying and internalizing them.

The process of solving the crime in “The Final Problem” and *The Hound of the Baskervilles* necessitates that the detective endanger himself, both physically and also in psychic terms by opening up the borders of his subjectivity to dangerous and potentially subversive influences. In both of these texts, Holmes only eliminates the criminal element by endangering himself in the process. If he masters the threats of Moriarty and the atavistic landscape of Dartmoor, it is only because he also allows these threats to master him: he is willing to go to his death in the Reichenbach Falls if he does so in the arms of his enemy, or to share the hound’s territory if it will allow him, in turn, to hound down the criminal whom he is pursuing. In this sense, his role as a detective in these adventures bears less resemblance to his homeopathic function in early adventures like *A Study in Scarlet*; here, in these later stories, the detective’s function is more akin to that of the suicide bomber, who destroys the enemy by destroying himself. The desire that motivates him is, therefore, not only a narcissistic one born out of a sense of identification with the criminal, but one that is ultimately self-destructive.

## Conclusion

In his preface to the final collection of Holmes stories, *The Case Book of Sherlock Holmes*, an ageing Conan Doyle hinted at the frustration that he sometimes felt in regard to his most famous creation: “I fear that Mr Sherlock Holmes may become like one of those popular tenors who, having outlived their time, are still tempted to make repeated farewell bows to their indulgent audiences” (983). By the time that he came to pen this preface to the last adventures of Holmes and Watson, Conan Doyle had been producing stories and novels about them for close to forty years, a remarkably long period which stretched from the late-Victorian era through the short reign of Edward II and into that of George V, who acceded to the throne in 1910. The author owed his wealth, his reputation and his audience chiefly to Holmes, but he also felt constrained by the detective, whom he often saw as a distraction from his other work, such as the historical novels *Rodney Stone* (1896) and *Sir Nigel* (1905-06), both of which were eclipsed by the phenomenal popularity of Holmes. In November 1892, Conan Doyle confessed in a letter to his mother Mary that Holmes “takes my mind from better things,” and expressed his determination to do away with the character once and for all.<sup>58</sup> His attempts to liberate himself from Holmes were consistently frustrated, however; after he had the detective plunge to his death in “The Final Problem,” the combined effects of the public outcry and the princely sums offered by his publishers persuaded Conan Doyle to revive Holmes in “The Empty House” (1903). He gave the detective a respectable retirement at the end of the next collection, *His Last Bow*, after which Holmes retires to a small farm in Sussex, where he devotes the rest of his life to bee-keeping. In a preface to the collection, Watson assures us: “The friends of Mr. Sherlock Holmes will be glad to learn that he is still alive and well, though somewhat crippled by occasional attacks of rheumatism. He has, for many years, lived in a small farm upon the downs five miles from Eastbourne, where his time is divided between philosophy and agriculture” (869).

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<sup>58</sup> In Stashower, p. 126.

Holmes's retirement did not prevent Conan Doyle from penning a further twelve stories, which eventually comprised *The Case Book of Sherlock Holmes*. The author's death two years later, of a heart attack in July 1930, finally brought an end to the canonical adventures, but did nothing whatsoever to dampen the insatiable public appetite for Holmes and Watson. Four years later the first organized societies devoted exclusively to Holmes were founded in Britain and America: the Sherlock Holmes Society in London and the Baker Street Irregulars in New York, both of which remain active to this day. In 1951, during the Festival of Britain, Holmes's iconic sitting rooms were meticulously reconstructed as the centrepiece of an exhibition devoted solely to the detective, and in 1990 the Sherlock Holmes Museum, the first museum in Britain devoted exclusively to a fictional character, opened at 221b Baker Street, London, where visitors can still have their photographs taken while sitting in an armchair by the fire, surrounded by deerstalkers, violins, chemistry sets, magnifying glasses, calabash pipes and Persian slippers. Conan Doyle's achievement is not only literary and pop cultural, but also cinematic: Holmes is the most portrayed film character of all time, appearing in no less than 200 productions.<sup>59</sup> Modern adaptations continue to proliferate. One only has to think of the recent success which the BBC has enjoyed with their series *Sherlock*, starring Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman, or the American medical drama *House*, which ran from 2004-2012 and featured Hugh Laurie as a drug-addicted, misanthropic, eccentric genius, Gregory House, who employs a form of deductive reasoning in the tradition of Holmes, to realize that the public's great love affair with both the original stories and the set of wider cultural archetypes that they created is in no danger of waning, despite Conan Doyle's protestations in 1927 that Holmes "must go the way of all flesh" (983).

Conan Doyle's stories also changed the way that detectives were represented in literature, and Holmes can be seen as the ancestor of a whole generation of later sleuths, such as the Belgian detective Hercule Poirot, in the work of Agatha Christie. Along with fellow Britons Dorothy L. Sayers and Margery Allingham

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<sup>59</sup> As noted by Alan Barnes in *Sherlock Holmes on Screen: The Complete Film and TV History*, intro Steven Moffat (London: Titan Books, 2011).

(1905-1966) and New Zealand-born author Ngaio Marsh (1895-1982), Christie was one of the most prominent writers during what is generally referred to as the Golden Age of Detective Fiction in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>60</sup> Poirot, who first appeared in Christie's debut novel *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), became one of the best-known detectives after Holmes, along with Christie's other creation, the elderly spinster Miss Marple. Like Holmes, Poirot is instantly recognisable: his suit, mustache, pocket watch, spats and pince-nez are almost as distinctive as Holmes's deerstalker and Inverness cape. Christie replicates Conan Doyle's winning formula, which he in turn had adapted from Poe: Poirot, a brilliant and eccentric sleuth, is assisted by a well-meaning, dependable but clumsy sidekick, Captain Arthur Hastings, and trailed by a Scotland Yard rival, Inspector Japp. Poirot is possibly the best-known ambassador for a small army of gentleman detectives who cropped up in the 1920s, just as Conan Doyle was bringing the remarkable story of Sherlock Holmes to its final close. Their ranks also include Marsh's Roderick Alleyn and Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey. This kind of detective is often from the upper classes, always educated, reliant on his intellect to solve crimes and frequently has unusual or eccentric habits; he can be considered as a distinctly British species, opposed to the more action-focused and hard-boiled hero of male-dominated American crime fiction, who appeared in the work of authors like Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett and John Latimer. The twentieth-century idea of the British gentleman detective, who is largely the innovation of female authors, represents a domestication of some of the more ambivalent and potentially subversive elements of his late-Victorian ancestor, constricted by the more defined social structures of a conspicuously aristocratic, rather than bohemian bourgeois subjectivity: Hercule Poirot, for instance, retains a picturesque touch of the eccentric, but it is difficult to imagine him camping out amongst the Neolithic ruins on Dartmoor or shooting up a seven-per-cent-solution of cocaine out of sheer boredom.

The tradition of the gentleman detective has been continued in contemporary literature by the likes of P. D. James, whose sleuth Adam Dalgliesh first appeared in *Cover Her Face* (1962). James's detective shows the same rather incongruous

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<sup>60</sup> For a discussion of "The Golden Age of Detective Fiction," see Rzepka, pp. 151-159.



combination of artistic and pragmatic traits which characterizes Conan Doyle's Holmes: Dalgliesh is both a policeman and a poet. Conan Doyle's influence can also be traced, to some degree, in the popular *Millennium* trilogy by the late Swedish writer Stieg Larsson, of which the first installment, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, appeared in 2005. Larsson's trilogy features a female protagonist, the computer hacker Lisbeth Salander, whose character is also highly ambiguous: like Holmes, she is both subversive and ambiguous, variously employing her talents for illegal activities and to serve the cause of justice. She is likewise sexually ambiguous: Larsson makes a feature of her fluid and unformalized bisexuality. It is interesting to note that modern representations of Holmesian archetypes, such as Larsson's novel and *House*, tend to fixate on the negative character traits of the sleuth, and particularly on manifestations of the eccentric genius's pathology. While authors in the early twentieth century tended to domesticate the element of eccentricity, which manifests in a genteel way in the charming Belgian idiosyncrasies of Poirot, modern adaptations revel in the dark side of detection. Nevertheless, neither of these conceptualizations of the archetype - the morally contaminated modern crime-solver and the early twentieth-century gentleman detective - represent attempts to resolve the double bind of identification with and difference from the criminal element that both defines and problematizes Sherlock Holmes. The gentility of Poirot and his ilk has the effect of reducing or defusing what I have described as the threat of similarity between the detective and the criminal. While the gentleman detective strolls in the sunlight of bourgeois complacency, the subversive crime-fighter of the twenty-first century tends to be drawn to the shadows. There are a number of possible historical determinants for this shift in emphasis. A particularly suggestive factor is the lingering effect of World War One on the British psyche, and the shattering effects of the war on the nation's outlook and all its available sets of terms. The detectives who were produced in the aftermath of World War One tend to offer a comforting illusion of a return to normalcy, and their bourgeois complacency seems to express a nostalgia for the return of a previous world, one that was knowable and seemingly ordered by the principles of logic, reason and civilization. Poirot, for example, seems to exist in a kind of genteel, idealized Europe, despite the criminal investigations with which he becomes involved: he solves crimes while holidaying in various exotic locations, taking

picturesque train journeys or growing marrows in idyllic villages. We could view the twentieth-century gentleman detective as a response to the traumatic rending of the British worldview that was brought about by World War One, just as Sherlock Holmes appears to represent a consoling fantasy of epistemological mastery in the midst of the revolutionary and profoundly destabilizing discourse at the *fin-de-siècle*. What this suggests, ultimately, is that the various moral foibles and characteristic eccentricities of the detective archetype are likely to change, symptomatically, over time, and are therefore at once generic and historically contingent.

In the course of this discussion, I have traced the morally ambiguous nature of this archetype from its roots in Poe's Dupin to its much more consolidated and definitively stereotyped embodiment in Conan Doyle's Holmes, and I have argued that it represents a key to the mystery of Holmes's status as one of literature's most enduring and intriguing sleuths. In Holmes, this moral ambivalence manifests as two oppositional and often contradictory aspects of his character: on the one hand, he is foremost among the greatest crime-solving archetypes of modern Western culture, a man whose combination of Carlylean industriousness and deductive genius makes him uniquely qualified for the task of bringing down the most formidable criminals or unraveling the most complex mysteries; on the other, he is also profoundly ambivalent, highly eccentric and possibly degenerate. The tension and interplay between these opposing aspects of his character - the disciplinary and the degenerate, or the creative and the resolvent - and the apparent impossibility of satisfactorily reconciling them can be seen as an important part of his appeal. Holmes is never fully on the side of either darkness or light, but exists in a mysterious kind of twilight zone of subjectivity. He is closest to the darkness, however, at those moments in the stories where his desire to solve crimes, and, more generally, to be close to the criminal world, is revealed to be not only epistemophilic, in that it originates in a compulsive desire to obtain various kinds of knowledge, expose secrets and collect information, and narcissistic, in that it is founded on a sense of identification with the criminal, but also actively self-destructive. This is why Holmes feels compelled to turn to the "pathological and morbid process" (89) of narcotic use as a substitute for the stimulus of crime: his famous seven-per-cent solution is not only a means of

warding off a sense of mental stagnation, but also another manifestation of an impulse toward self-destruction which is almost instinctive. By the early twentieth century, Holmes would curb his cocaine habit after much urging by Watson. The doctor is aware, however, of the compulsive nature of Holmes's character and the lurking danger of his addiction, as he remarks in "The Missing Three-Quarter":

For years I had gradually weaned him from that drug mania which had threatened once to check his remarkable career. Now I knew that under ordinary conditions he no longer craved for this artificial stimulus, but I was well aware that the fiend was not dead, but sleeping; and I have known that the sleep was a light one and the waking near when in periods of idleness I have seen the drawn look upon Holmes's ascetic face, and the brooding of his deep-set and inscrutable eyes (622).

Watson's description recalls Lombroso's concept of the atavistic throwback, the outwardly civilized person who harbored a degenerate potential within (it also echoes Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, of course, although in Holmes's case the drug represents a symptom of the suppressed inner fiend, not a precipitate). The compulsion to use cocaine is figured as the expression of a latent instinct, rather than a simple pathological weakness. This could almost be seen to signal a masochistic nature, except that there is also an element of potential sadism in Holmes, as I observed in the first chapter of this thesis, which manifests in his rather inquisitorial methodology. Indeed, his inquisitorial complex seems to condense this self-destructive tendency, which is both potentially sadistic and, to some extent, masochistic: if Holmes himself embodies a criminal potential, his inquisitorial persecution of criminals appear to represent the persecution of an element that he also embodies himself.

In this sense, Conan Doyle appears to have anticipated the ideas of his contemporary Sigmund Freud, who in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) had argued for the existence of a death instinct, which, he believed, compelled the subject to return back into an earlier form or state. Freud was building on ideas that had come to fore in the earlier discourse of atavism, which had also hinged on

a presumed tendency in the organism to regress to an earlier stage of evolutionary development; in Lombroso's post-Darwinist theory, the throwback is driven by an innate compulsion to degeneracy, the logical extremity of which is a regression to a state of total nondifferentiation which represents the complete annihilation of the subject. In the fourth chapter of this discussion, I argued that Holmes's investment in the detective project in "The Final Problem" and *The Hound of the Baskervilles* compels him to open the borders of both his physical body and his subjective experience to possible invasion by an atavistic other, and to become, to some degree, an embodiment of an atavistic element himself. In both texts this compulsion towards self-destruction is encoded in a thematics of non-differentiation, in the Gothic doubling and primeval imagery of "The Final Problem" or in the devouring topography and post-Darwinian anxieties of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. The fact that Holmes's self-destructive tendencies anticipate Freud's theory of the death instinct is also interesting with regard to his ambiguous sexuality. According to Freud, the death drive opposes the life instinct, which manifests most obviously in the desire for sex and procreation - both of which Holmes appears to reject. This repudiation of the normative social structures of Victorian heterosexuality is permitted, as I argued in the third chapter of this thesis, by the bohemian context of his bachelorhood, which has the effect of situating his eccentricity and sexual equivocality at a remove from the patriarchal norm, isolating him within a designated space of bohemian idiosyncrasy and in effect pathologising his abnormality.

The surprising complexity of Holmes's character and the subtlety of its internal contradictions brings a particular richness to the detective story, and this marriage of ratiocinative and romantic qualities in the figure of the sleuth is part of what gives the Holmes adventures their enduring power as a male romance. What sets Conan Doyle's stories apart from myriad other reworkings of the detective story and establishes them as definitive examples of the genre is not only his productivity in producing such an extensive body of work, his masterful representation of the science of deduction, his canny exploitation of public attitudes toward the official police or his charming characterization, but also his grasp of the strength and vitality of the male homosocial bonds which underlie the activity of the criminal investigation. The third chapter of this thesis argued that

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's idea of the erotic triangle, formed between two men and a woman who serves as the conduit for the expression of their intense but displaced desire, occurs in a more institutional form in detective fiction: the secret of a crime takes the place of the woman in Sedgwick's triangular model of relations, allowing a site for the negotiation of displaced homosocial bonds of male desire. These bonds between men in detective fiction, which present as exhibitionistic desire on the part of the detective and epistemophilic desire on the part of his sidekick and rivals, ultimately prove to be stronger than the ostensible desire for justice which provides the overarching context for the investigation. The most important of these bonds is, of course, the one between Holmes and his loyal sidekick Watson, one of the greatest bromances of all time. Because their homosocial desire is usually elided into the formal structures of the criminal investigation, and because such desires are seldom articulated directly in Victorian literature at any rate, the real depth of their friendship is rarely indicated. A famous exception is found at the end of one of the very last stories, "The Three Gables" (1924), when Watson is wounded during a confrontation with a criminal. He is touched by the emotion shown by his usually reticent friend:

"You're not hurt, Watson? For God's sake, say that you are not hurt!"

It was worth a wound; it was worth many wounds; to know the depth of loyalty and love which lay behind that cold mask. The clear, hard eyes were dimmed for a moment, and the firm lips were shaking. For the one and only time I caught a glimpse of a great heart as well as of a great brain. All my years of humble but single-minded service culminated in that moment of revelation.

"It's nothing, Holmes. It's a mere scratch."

He had ripped up my trousers with his pocket-knife.

"You are right" he cried with an immense sigh of relief. "It is quite superficial." His face set like flint as he glared at our prisoner, who was sitting up with a dazed face. "By the Lord, it is as well for you. If you had killed Watson, you would not have got out of this room alive. [ . . . ]. (1053)."

This moment represents a kind of consummation, at least on Watson's part: it marks the fulfillment of his desire for recognition and emotional reciprocation in his relationship with the detective. It is also an epistemophilic revelation, because he gains a rare insight into the otherwise impenetrable and often baffling mind of the detective, marking the fulfillment of a desire which was first sparked in the early chapters of *A Study in Scarlet*, when Watson admitted: "[ . . . ] I confess how this man stimulated my curiosity [ . . . ]" (15). Holmes would continue to stimulate Watson's curiosity until their very last adventure together, "The Retired Colourman" (1927), but the fascination which he held for his readers would extend much further, from the late-Victorian era into the twenty-first century, where he continues to appear in myriad forms and disseminations. In the course of my discussion, I have attempted to unravel some of the mysteries behind his enduring appeal, which can be attributed to a constellation of literary, cultural and historical factors. What is certain, however, is that Conan Doyle's achievement, in creating one of the most enduring and intriguing characters of all time, is far from elementary.

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