

An Observance Of Trifles

You know my method. It is founded upon the
observance of trifles.

(Arthur Conan Doyle)

snell's interminable ramblings about the canon

The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure VI -- The Boscombe Valley Mystery

The Adventure of C.S.I. England!

Ah, the nineteenth century British Empire--where a chap can go to Australia, become a highway robber, hijack a gold shipment, murder most of the guards, come back to England, and buy an entire valley! Who said there was no class mobility in those times? Aww, but he might be bedeviled by A pesky blackmailers!! Well, frankly, the blackguard deserves to die for threatening a fine gentleman--so kill 'im!! Don't you feel *sorry* for this guy?

Such is **The Boscombe Valley Mystery**.

But while that opening paragraph tells you my opinion of this story's resolution, I'd rather focus the first part of this essay on the most significant aspect of the story: **Doyle's** clearest laying out of the difference between **Holmes'** methods and the police's. And how, although fictional and perhaps at times a bit fanciful, Sherlock Holmes forecast the growing impact of forensics science on criminal investigations.

It can be easy, from our vantage point of 1,000 reruns per week of **CSI** and **Law & Order**, to forget how little of what we consider the basics of crime-solving were available at the time these stories were being published. Of course, there was no DNA. But there was also no blood-typing; in fact, there wasn't even a test that could conclusively prove that a given blood sample came from a human, as opposed to some other mammal. Fingerprints had been theorized about, but there was no systematic use of them in most places until the 1900s (**Scotland Yard** had turned down a doctor's offer to help them develop a fingerprint system in 1886...he should have gone straight to Holmes). Ballistic fingerprinting, matching a bullet to a specific gun, wasn't used in any court until 1902.



BLACK-JACK, DE BALLARAT.

Just imagine **Lenny Briscoe** trying to solve a case without any of that information! So perhaps we should be more charitable to the poor British police of the era than Holmes was.

In the real world of the time, most murders weren't too complicated--the causes were generally drunken quarrels, revenge, greed or love/lust.

And the inspectors of the day were fairly adept at finding out who had such motives, arresting them, and getting either a confession--or finding enough evidence (and hopefully an eyewitness or two) to succeed at trial. Who needed science?

Ah, but when there *wasn't* conclusive evidence? Well, the police still had a job to do. But without an eyewitness or confession, they had to try and fit the crime before them into one of their preset scenarios, and would go on to "*round up the usual suspects.*" It is noteworthy that, in the three murder cases we have dealt with so far, Scotland Yard inspectors immediately latched onto "incorrect" theories of the case, and pursued the wrong suspects, no matter what Holmes told them. As **Lestrade** himself noted, "'I find it hard enough to tackle facts, Holmes, without flying away after theories and fancies."

[Lest you think this was only a flaw of *fictional* policeman, I suggest you look into contemporary accounts of the investigation into the **Jack The Ripper** murders. Without forensic techniques or any real evidence, the prevailing theories amongst police involved trying to fit the killings into their limited psychological understandings of other crimes: "he must be a foreigner, because no Englishman could commit such heinous butchery" and "the killer must be homosexual, because the crimes evince a hatred of women." Little wonder he was never caught...]

But despite all of the polices' criticism of Holmes' "*theorizing*," our amateur detective was the one gathering **actual** evidence. You may think it cruel when Holmes says he employs methods that Lestrade "*is quite incapable of employing, or even of understanding.*" But it is true. Whereas Lestrade is willing to rely on the narrative presented by the local constabulary, Holmes actually looks at evidence. He identifies tobacco ash, and has written monographs on it. He analyzes footprints at the crime scene. Indeed, he did both of these things in **A Study In Scarlet**, which led to the successful apprehension of the murderer; yet Lestrade continues to ignore and mock these techniques in this case. Sherlock gets on his hands and knees and finds the actual murder weapon, something the police hadn't managed. Heck, in this story **Watson** gets in on the fun, analyzing the coroner's evidence to prove the blow was struck from behind, not in a face-to-face quarrel. Lestrade and Scotland Yard "*do* find it very hard to tackle the facts," as Holmes said. A paradigm shift was necessary for the development of modern police work, and Holmes was trying to provide the template.

No, in the **Canon**, and in this story in particular, Doyle has Holmes inventing forensics science right in front of our eyes. Unlike the authorities, he won't rely merely on circumstantial evidence, which "may seem to

point very straight to one thing, but if you shift your own point of view a little, you may find it pointing in an equally uncompromising manner to something entirely different."

No, Holmes got out of his armchair and found actual physical evidence which could be used to solve the crime.

All of the actual "*speculation*" and "*theorizing*" was done by the police, trying to tell a story that seemed to make sense, without taking advantage of all the facts around them.

Despite his reputation as a "*theorizer*" or an armchair detective, Sherlock Holmes was more than just the "science of deduction." He helped popularize the "science of analyzing crime scene evidence," by teaching us that it was important to get off our metaphorical *** and get beyond the circumstantial evidence.

Given the immense popularity of Holmes, it's not to think that his approach began to influence the way modern police forces would conduct investigations. It may be a reach to suggest that Arthur Conan Doyle and Sherlock Holmes invented CSI, but it's not a long reach.

The other important issue in this story is, just as in **A Case Of Identity**, an *ethical* one: Holmes does not turn over the murderer, even after confession. For the second straight time, Holmes has interposed himself between the villain and the law, acting as a *de facto* judge and jury. One could argue that this is an even more egregious instance than in ACOI, as Holmes is covering for someone who has *actually* committed a crime, a murderer.

On some levels it is somewhat more defensible a cover-up, though. It seems unlikely that **John Turner** would go on to commit more crimes, making this instance less troubling than allowing **Windibank** in ACOI to go unrevealed. Turner is dying (although Holmes seems to take his word on that far too easily). Turner has promised to come forward, and a signed confession to use, should the case against **James McCarthy** go badly. And one might be sympathetic to the concerns that releasing the truth might harm the future happiness of the children.

Except I am slightly more *skeptical*. I am not at all receptive to the suggestion that Turner will "soon have to answer for his deed at a higher court." Whether you're a believer or not, justice on Earth should not abandoned. As for shielding the children, well, Holmes' promise that the story "shall never be seen by mortal eye" is *obviously false*, as the fact that we're reading it means that Watson published the story!! "*There is every prospect that the son and daughter may come to live happily together in ignorance of the black cloud which rests upon their past?*" How, Doctor, when you *wrote up the black cloud and published it?* Especially since **Alice** will now of James' marriage to the Bristol barmaid! (I suppose we could surmise that Watson so altered the story as to make it unrecognizable; or perhaps the young lovers went back to Australia, leaving Boscombe Valley behind.)

But what I find *most* unsettling is Holmes' apparent sympathy to the senior Turner. In the future, we will learn that Holmes finds blackmailers more repulsive than murderers. Surely, though, this case takes it to an extreme. We get continuous references to **Charles McCarthy** being a blackguard, "the devil incarnate," "wicked," "cursed stock," etc. Well, that conveniently forgets that the whole sordid affair started when McCarthy was *a victim* of Turner's crimes! Turner is responsible for at least **5 murders**, four of which were in the course of a robbery of a gold shipment. A set of murders that set Turner up in a life of luxury, no matter how much he claims to have led "*a life of martyrdom*." McCarthy is hardly a saint; but Turner shows no remorse over taking 5 lives, and in fact does *everything possible* to prevent that the truth coming out and facing punishment. He was willing to let his daughter's love rot in jail (only until the last minute, he avers).

To heck with being judged in the afterlife--Turner was a *right ****** deserved arrest and trial immediately.

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

** Yet *another* quarrel born in a foreign land ends up being settled in England. That's five of the seven stories thus far. I guess that's the consequence of having a global empire--trouble washes up on your shores.

** Watson doesn't name-drop any untold cases this time...In the **Granada** adaptation Watson mentions **The Case Of The Counterfeit Spanish Dollar**.

** Alice declares that James was "*too tender-hearted to hurt a fly*." Of course, our tale starts when he grabs his gun to go hunting rabbits. I suppose that rabbits aren't as important as flies in Alice's philosophy? Or just the exaggeration of young love?

** Look, I know I've been griping about the Granada subtitling.

But this goes beyond *egregious*:

Since the whole point of subtitles is to render the dialogue *intelligible*, this must surely be the biggest **fail** in subtitling history.

Get a copy of the script, fools.

** The **1968 BBC** version had John Turner played by **John Tate**:

Unfortunately, Tate played Turner as *so* infirm and ill, there's no way we can believe he could have made it all the way to the lake and back, let alone committed the murder unseen by his running son. He also uses *a cane* in every scene, including the flashback to the murder; so when Holmes fails to find cane marks amongst the footprints, it only serves to make the detective look clueless for not solving the mystery immediately.

** Both the BBC and Granada versions changed the character of Lestrade to a different Inspector.

Why? Presumably the perils of long-running series that didn't secure the actors playing him under contract.

When a Lestrade episode rolled around, if the actor wasn't available, they faced the choice of recasting the role or changing the inspector's name for a new actor.

** Speaking of Lestrade, does Holmes ever tell him the truth? I suppose I can see the argument for keeping the facts from James and Alice; but after Lestrade's case gets dismissed in court thanks to Holmes, doesn't Sherlock at least owe him the full story? Or did Lestrade have to read about it when Watson published?

In the Granada version, **Inspector Sommerby** is *demoted* at the end, most likely due to his failure to capture the killer. Holmes' evasions and cover-ups do have real world consequences.

** This is our first road trip out of London. It is an imaginary locale, despite the efforts of many to pin it to a specific location. There will be more...

** Both BBC and Granada continue to ignore the fact of Watson's marriage. Even though this tale specifically starts with Watson and his wife at breakfast, BBC starts with Holmes and Watson already aboard the train; Granada has Watson on a fishing vacation (alone) in the area, and Holmes swings by to grab him.

** In an obvious attempt to annoy me/make me look stupid, Granada has both **The Boscombe Valley Mystery** and **Shoscombe Old Place** on the same disc, making me click on the *wrong one* innumerable times. Well played, Granada.

** The "*getting drunk and marrying a barmaid*" tale hardly ennobles James in our eye, even if it later turned out that the marriage was null and void. Heck, he had just spent the three days before the murder in Bristol with her! Oh, poor faithful Alice, do you know what you're getting yourself into?

** If I start a band, its name will be Patience Moran.

Brian Keith Snell

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