

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

Adventure XLVIII -- The Valley of Fear

The Valley Of Fear--Why A Novel?

As I've discussed here, the first **Sherlock Holmes** novel, **A Study In Scarlet**, had some *serious structural problems*, breaking off after the "out of nowhere" capture of the killer for a 6-chapter digression/flashback.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's second attempt, **The Sign Of (The) Four**, proved much more adept at giving us our back story, weaving in bits and pieces of exposition throughout the story. That way, the final info dump was *much* shorter, and much less jarring.

And in the **Hound Of The Baskervilles**, Doyle has pretty much mastered the form.

Which brings us to **The Valley Of Fear**, and what seems to be a huge step *backwards*.

I suppose the first question is, *why* is Valley a novel?

The tale was serialized in **The Strand**, *after* all of the stories eventually collected in **His Last Bow**, but before the story **His Last Bow** had been published.

Last Bow was the *shortest* of all the Holmes collections, with the fewest stories. Why not write the tale of Valley Of Fear *as a short story*, and include it in the collection? Valley could work as a short story--remove the second half, incorporate all of that exposition as a confession of Douglas, get rid of the pointless **Moriarty** noodling, and the story really isn't any longer than **The Naval Treaty** or **Wisteria Lodge**.

Yet Doyle chose to write it as a novel, publish it separately, and then wait two years to write the next short story and collect the most recent ones. Why? Perhaps he had a contract that called for a novel. Perhaps he was paid more for a novel, and he was in need of money at the time.



Perhaps he was tiring of Holmes again, and wished to "stretch his legs" literarily. maybe he found the whole Molly Maguires case, upon which the "**Scowrers**" is based, fascinating, and felt the need to incorporate it into a Holmes story. Who can say?

The second, and more prominent problem, is why make it a novel *in the style of A Study In Scarlet*? Why do *the same thing* you had done with your first, unsuccessful novel--halt the story after the killer is caught, and immediately launch into a *7-chapter heap of exposition*? Did Doyle *unlearn* the lessons he had seemingly taken to heart in Sign Of Four and Hounds?

In one way, Valley's digression *is* less annoying than Study In Scarlet. In the latter, we leapt away from "present day" *immediately* after the killer had been revealed; no time was taken to explain who the murderer was, or what his motives were, or even how Holmes had caught him. So the reader had to sit through 70-80 pages of, while not necessarily tedium, digression and distraction from what they wanted to read.

Valley, on the other hand, has the good graces to allow all of our explanations of whom killed whom, and how they killed him, and how Holmes arrived at the truth, before jumping away to the world's longest flashback. In this case, Doyle had the kindness not to leave the readers in suspense whilst they waded through 7 chapters of historical prose.

Yet, in some ways that makes this case *worse* than Study In Scarlet. We already know the *whodunnit* and *howdunnit*--do we really need 50-plus pages on the *whydunnit*? In **The Dancing Men**, a not dissimilar story, Doyle managed to tell us *in just a few paragraphs* how an American gangster had come to track down his former fiancé. Couldn't the *same* have been done here? Did the story really require 7 chapters of exposition to make us understand?

As with **The Country Of Saints** in Study In Scarlet, The Scowrers was *not* a bad tale. But is it ever wise to have both Holmes and **Watson** off stage for half of your novel?

Also, the device Doyle uses here is pretty ineffective. It's fairly obvious that **John McMurdo**, the point of view character for The Scowrers, is *actually John Douglas*. After all, Douglas gave Watson the papers that this tale was based upon, so either it's a total fiction, or it's presenting Douglas' story. Yet, The Scowrers tries *very hard* to convince the reader that McMurdo is a bad guy, a thug not much better than the rest of the "**Eminent Order of Freeman**." That seems pretty inconsistent with Douglas' story--that he's being hunted by bad men--so there is really no surprise whatsoever when it's revealed that McMurdo is really **Pinkerton** man **Birdy Edwards**, working undercover to bring down the evil Lodge from within. Seriously, was there *any* reader who was startled by the revelation?

The core mystery of The Valley Of Fear is very good--"*This case is a snorter*," as **Detective White Mason** said. It's essentially a locked room mystery, a corpse that proves not to be who we thought it was, with

plenty of clues and interesting, well-developed characters. It's written crisply, with some wit and charm. But that basic story is not as esteemed as it should be, I think, because Doyle pads it out to a novel, and reverts to his early days of trying to stick another novella inside the tale. There's a reason that Valley has almost never been adapted to the screen, unlike the prior two novels, which TV and film can't seem to get enough of.

Which is a shame, because it is a corkin' good mystery. We just didn't need the extraneous history lesson.

OTHER TRIFLES AND OBSERVATIONS:

****The other big "problem"** with Valley Of Fear is Moriarty.

I complained a while back about **Grenada** series trying to make Moriarty the secret actor actually behind a lot of the crimes that Sherlock was solving. It was "*big bad*" syndrome, trying to use a behind-the-scenes master villain to enforce a narrative on stories that didn't really need one.

Well, Valley suffers from that *big time*.

It is important to note that this story would be *exactly the same* if Moriarty is never mentioned. Yes, the mysterious "**Porlock**" warns Holmes of an impending crime. Holmes and Watson spend the entire first chapter trying to decode his warning. Yet that warning was both late, and completely unnecessary, as **Inspector MacDonald** came to Holmes with the exact same case literally seconds later. The whole chapter spent decoding the cipher was *pointless!*

And even though, as far as we're told, Moriarty has no direct role in the crime--except perhaps as the man who located Douglas for the criminals--we spend the *entirety* of Chapter 2 listening to Holmes *lecture* MacDonald on the hows and whys and wherefores of the **Napoleon Of Crime**. Naming the chapter "**Sherlock Holmes Discourses**" was literally true--98% of the chapter is just Holmes on and on about his enemy--and virtually not a single word is given to the actual case at hand!!

And in the epilogue, we come *back* to Moriarty. Edwards had died on a sea voyage--lost overboard in a gale--and Holmes leaps to the conclusion that of course the professor must be behind it, despite there not being a scrap of evidence! (Holmes' admonition in this very story--"*The temptation to form premature theories upon insufficient data is the bane of our profession*"--obviously *doesn't* apply when Moriarty is involved!)

So we're left with 2 entire chapters and the epilogue focused on Moriarty, who has *nothing* to do with the mystery at hand--at least, one hopes such a crime genius would have come up with a better plan than "get an American sawed-off shot gun and hide behind a curtain!" All of this could be *excised* without any harm to the actual story. Eliminate that, and the extraneous 60-page history lesson, and you have a great length for a mystery short story...and then Valley Of Fear would be much better remembered than it is today.

Of course, bootstrapping Moriarty into this case creates all sorts of *continuity problems* that drive people nuts. In **The Final Problem, where we meet Moriarty for the first time, Watson has *never* heard of him. And since Moriarty dies and his organization is smashed at the end of the tale, Valley Of Fear must be set *before* Final Problem. Yet in this story, Watson *already knows* of the professor, and listens to Sherlock's lengthy disquisition about him.

That can be elided over easily enough--Watson wrote up Final Problem *first*, and as that's the tale that introduced Moriarty to the public, in the story he pretended not to know who he was in order to justify Holmes' unnecessary exposition to educate the reader.

As to why Watson wrote Final Problem first? Well, while Moriarty was alive, the accusations made in Valley were libelous, so Watson had to wait until the professor was convicted--or dead--to print them. And if Moriarty and Holmes were dead, well, the story in Valley Of Fear would sort of be burying the lede...

Yet *another* foreign-born feud comes to England so the participants can **Thunderdome it out and hope that the tender mercies of British law won't be too harsh on them.

Seriously, was this a *common* thing back in the day? I know London was the cosmopolitan metropolis...but was it really the crossroads for *everyone* seeking vengeance/lost lovers/stolen property?

Sir Arthur was also fascinated with foreign secret organizations/cults coming to Great Britain to do their business. **Mormons**, the **Ku Klux Klan**, **Scowrers**, **Mafia**...I think Doyle would have had a real good time with **S.P.E.C.T.R.E.**, **SMERSH**, **THRUSH**...

**So who *was* Holmes' mysterious informant, Fred Porlock? The fact that he's not mentioned at all in The Final Problem makes us suspect that Moriarty was suspicious, and probably had him eliminated.

We do have to wonder how *trustworthy* Mr. Porlock was (if indeed he existed, and wasn't just a ruse of Moriarty's!). After all, his warning to Holmes about trouble coming to **Birlstone** wasn't sent until *after* **Ted Baldwin** had shown his face there, which means that Moriarty had *already* aided the Scowrers. Hardly the most timely or useful tip, then.

Holmes' description of Porlock doesn't inspire all that confidence, either: "*Led on by some rudimentary aspirations towards right, and encouraged by the judicious stimulation of an occasional ten-pound note sent to him by devious methods...*"

Isn't sending the second message, that "I don't dare send you the key to the cipher," **just as dangerous as sending the key itself would have been? Watson nails it: "*Why did he write at all? Why did he not simply drop it?*"

Holmes reply, "*Because he feared I would make some inquiry after him in that case, and possibly bring trouble on him,*" is hardly convincing. Sherlock insisted quite loudly that Porlock knew that the detective would keep his word and not try to locate him!

And taking an envelope addressed to Holmes to the mailbox when Moriarty is already giving you the stink-eye is borderline *suicidal*...

**This cover, attempting to sell *The Valley Of Fear* as a hard-boiled crime novel, just may be my favorite thing ever:

**Holmes is very, very *snarky* to Watson in this tale, uncharacteristically so, I think. Early on, the detective takes a lot of *sarcastic potshots* at Watson's intelligence, and they don't seem like the usual good-natured ribbing:

"I am inclined to think--" said I. "I should do so," Sherlock Holmes remarked impatiently.

"Your native shrewdness, my dear Watson, that innate cunning which is the delight of your friends..."

"Perhaps there are points which have escaped your Machiavellian intellect."

Especially given the context of each occasion, it seems Sherlock is being needlessly mean.

Holmes does mellow later, especially after he learns that his theory of the case was completely wrong...

**Of course, Watson gives some of his own, famously:

"The famous scientific criminal, as famous among crooks as--"

"My blushes, Watson!" Holmes murmured in a deprecating voice.

"I was about to say, as he is unknown to the public."

"A touch! A distinct touch!" cried Holmes. "You are developing a certain unexpected vein of pawky humour, Watson, against which I must learn to guard myself.

**This story is our first--and *only*--meeting with Inspector Alec MacDonald, although Watson does refer to an unknown number of apocryphal adventures with the inspector.

Holmes keeps affectionately referring to him as "**Mr. Mac**," which is highly unusual. A sign of familiarity and respect?

Watson says that eventually, MacDonald will achieve "*national fame*," although he doesn't tell us what was responsible for such fame.

Important MacDonald note: "*his accent became more Aberdonian as he lost himself in his argument.*"

**This story is *full* of competent and respected policeman, a far cry from what Holmes feels that he usually has to deal with.

Aside from Inspector MacDonald, there is also detective White Mason, who both Watson and Holmes had respect for: "*He impressed me, this country specialist. He had a solid grip of fact and a cool, clear, common-sense brain, which should take him some way in his profession...Holmes listened to him intently, with no sign of that impatience which the official exponent too often produced.*"

Sergeant Wilson was also portrayed as smart and capable. This is by far the best array of officers in the Canon. And you can see it through the lengthy and intricate discussions of facts and theories that Holmes conducts with them throughout.

**Then again, they were slow to twig to the threat of Moriarty: "*I won't conceal from you, Mr. Holmes, that we think in the C.I.D. that you have a wee bit of a bee in your bonnet over this professor.*"

**Wise words: "*Mediocrity knows nothing higher than itself; but talent instantly recognizes genius...*"

**"*I may remind you,*" Holmes continued, "*that the professor's salary can be ascertained in several trustworthy books of reference. It is seven hundred a year.*"

Really? There is not just one book, but *several*, that list the salaries of university professors?

**Holmes: "*That's paying for brains, you see--the American business principle.*"

I suppose at the time of writing, American capitalism must have been viewed as swift and agile next to hidebound, nepotism-riddled, class-restricted British businesses. Not so much anymore...

Holmes again serves as an early version of the **NSA: "*I made it my business to hunt down some of Moriarty's checks lately--just common innocent checks that he pays his household bills with. They were drawn on six different banks.*"

Viewing peoples checks, obtaining their telegrams--Sherlock Holmes had little sense of a person's right to privacy, when he was on a scent...

***Moats!!* The house had not one, but **TWO** moats!!! Yes, one was filled in...but come on, *a freakin' moat!!!* You're not going to see that in any mystery set in America!! Moats!!

And a *drawbridge!!* A. Draw. Bridge. Heavens, I'm experience some nerd nirvana here!!

**For a Sherlock Holmes story, this was fairly graphic: "*It was clear that this had been fired at close range and that he had received the whole charge in the face, blowing his head almost to pieces.*"

Eww.

**"*But surely I have heard that the drawbridge is kept up all night.*"

"Yes, it was up until I lowered it."

"Then how could any murderer have got away? It is out of the question! Mr. Douglas must have shot himself."

It's a pretty big manor (the pantry is so far away you can't hear a shotgun blast). Wouldn't it have been possible for the killer to have *hidden* somewhere in the house until Ames lowered the drawbridge, and *then* escaped when he went for the police? Obviously, we know that's not what happened. But within the fiction our conspirators set up, it seems to be that the murderer certainly could have gotten away without some locked-room miracle...

******The tale is that Ted Baldwin snuck in the house before the drawbridge was closed--6 pm at the latest--and then hid behind a curtain in the study until he attacked at 10:45ish.

So the assassin hid behind the curtains *for almost 5 hours?!?* That's patience!

******Oh, the bucolic English life: *"That, of course, proves nothing at all," remarked Inspector MacDonald. "There has been many a hammer murder and no trace on the hammer."*

"Many a hammer murder."

Don't let them tell you that America is naturally more violent than England...

*******"That is very helpful, Mr. Holmes. No doubt you are right. Wonderful! Wonderful! Do you carry the names of all the gun makers in the world in your memory?" Holmes dismissed the subject with a wave.*

Well, *duh*. Of course he would...

******MacDonald has to reassure White Mason that Holmes isn't there to steal credit for solving the case:

"I have worked with Mr. Holmes before," said Inspector MacDonald. "He plays the game."

"My own idea of the game, at any rate," said Holmes, with a smile. "I go into a case to help the ends of justice and the work of the police. If I have ever separated myself from the official force, it is because they have first separated themselves from me. I have no wish ever to score at their expense."

******Inspector MacDonald makes the case for bicycle registration: *"It would be a grand help to the police," said the inspector, "if these things were numbered and registered."*

Apparently, there was a fair amount of *bicycle-based crime* in the late 1880s.

Just don't let the bicycle rights nuts hear you say something like that, Mr. Mac!

******Doyle gives an awful lot of behavioral bits to **Ivy** and **Cecil** that are pretty both good red herrings and, upon re-reading, nice tip-offs to the big revelation at the end. Well played, sir.

******Watson's conception of Holmes' independence: *"Mr. Holmes is an independent investigator," I said. "He is his own master, and would act as his own judgment directed. At the same time, he would naturally feel loyalty towards the officials who were working on the same case, and he would not conceal from them anything which would help them in bringing a criminal to justice."*

Well, unless he felt justice were better served by concealing the truth. Which he has done plenty of times before...

****Holmes eating like a Dalek:** *"My dear Watson, when I have exterminated that fourth egg I shall be ready to put you in touch with the whole situation."*

****Ululation? Ululation?!?** Oh. Sir Arthur...

****"And yet there should be no combination of events for which the wit of man cannot conceive an explanation."**

Another clear statement over why I have little time for Holmes pastiches involving the supernatural...

****"Well, bar the expression, that might almost be a description of Douglas himself,"** said Holmes. *"He is just over fifty, with grizzled hair and moustache, and about the same height. Did you get anything else?"*

Well, if modern readers were in doubt, that sort of gives the game away, doesn't it?

It's another case of something that might seem cliché to modern readers--the defaced corpse isn't who you think it is--so we probably solved this case in our heads a lot more quickly than Edwardian fans.

****Holmes, realizing how wrong he was:** *"I say, Watson," he whispered, "would you be afraid to sleep in the same room with a lunatic, a man with softening of the brain, an idiot whose mind has lost its grip?"*

This is probably as close as Sherlock comes to an apology.

****Holmes, claiming to be playing fair whilst being maddeningly oblique:**

On the other hand, I said that I would play the game fairly by you, and I do not think it is a fair game to allow you for one unnecessary moment to waste your energies upon a profitless task. Therefore I am here to advise you this morning, and my advice to you is summed up in three words--abandon the case.

That's hardly playing fair, though...just because they're looking at the wrong victim, doesn't mean that there isn't a crime to investigate!

And more from Sherlock:

"I consider your case to be hopeless. I do not consider that it is hopeless to arrive at the truth."

"Why in the name of goodness should we abandon the case?" "For the simple reason, my dear Mr. Mac, that you have not got the first idea what it is that you are investigating."

Dude, you could just tell them. But no, that's not you at all, is it, Holmes?

"Watson insists that I am the dramatist in real life," said he. *"Some touch of the artist wells up within me, and calls insistently for a well-staged performance. Surely our profession, Mr. Mac, would be a drab and sordid one if we did not sometimes set the scene so as to glorify our results. The blunt accusation, the brutal tap upon the shoulder--what can one make of such a denouement?"*

But the quick inference, the subtle trap, the clever forecast of coming events, the triumphant vindication of bold theories--are these not the pride and the justification of our life's work?

****Holmes, on how reading up on ancient architecture helped him solve the case: "Breadth of view, my dear Mr. Mac, is one of the essentials of our profession. The interplay of ideas and the oblique uses of knowledge are often of extraordinary interest."**

Please note the marked contrast to Holmes' *early* position, as described by Watson in Study In Scarlet: "[T]he skillful workman is very careful indeed as to what he takes into his brain-attic."

Apparently, Sherlock has mellowed on that front a bit, no longer fearing that he shall run out of brain room.

****What a great reveal: "I should strongly recommend that you ask Mr. Douglas to tell us his own story."**

****Just as Study In Scarlet proved to be somewhat *controversial* in its portrayal of the early Mormons, some have called into question the cases against the historical "Scowrers," the Molly Maguires. Doyle seems to have based his fictionalization largely on the book by **Allan Pinkerton**, founder of the detective agency. But a number of historians have suggested the cases were exaggerated, or perhaps even completely made up to justify cracking down on labor movements.**

At least in this case, Doyle did indeed fictionalize the groups and events, a lesson he no doubt learned from the reaction to his portrayal of Mormons earlier.

****Mr. Schafter** and his daughter **Ettie** were German originally, and in the American edition. But **WWI** made sympathetic German characters unacceptable in England, so editions there changed them to Swedish extraction...

****Despite my reservations about the length and appropriateness of the Scowrers tale, it is a good story, well told--a **Donnie Brasco** for the Pennsylvania mining scene.**

****I really *don't like* the epilogue. Why kill the man we just spent 60 pages getting to know? The sole reason to end the affair on such a down note, it seems, is to prove that Moriarty was a bad***. Well, we already knew that! What a terrible way to end the story!**

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June 07, 2015