

# **THE DATABASE OF BAKER STREET**

---

**Sherlock Holmes and the Victorian Media Condition**

*by Todd S. Gillam*

*A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of*

**MASTER OF ARTS**

*Department of English  
University of Manitoba  
Winnipeg, Manitoba*

© August 1999



**National Library  
of Canada**

**Acquisitions and  
Bibliographic Services**

395 Wellington Street  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

**Bibliothèque nationale  
du Canada**

**Acquisitions et  
services bibliographiques**

395, rue Wellington  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

*Your file Votre référence*

*Our file Notre référence*

**The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.**

**The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.**

**L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.**

**L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.**

**0-612-45047-3**

**Canada**

**THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA**  
**FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES**  
**\*\*\*\*\***  
**COPYRIGHT PERMISSION PAGE**

**THE DATABASE OF BAKER STREET**  
**Sherlock Holmes and the Victorian Media Condition**

**BY**

**TODD S. GILLAM**

**A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University  
of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree**

**of**

**MASTER OF ARTS**

**Todd S. Gillam©1999**

**Permission has been granted to the Library of The University of Manitoba to lend or sell copies of this thesis/practicum, to the National Library of Canada to microfilm this thesis and to lend or sell copies of the film, and to Dissertations Abstracts International to publish an abstract of this thesis/practicum.**

**The author reserves other publication rights, and neither this thesis/practicum nor extensive extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's written permission.**

**T H E S E P A G E S  
A R E D E D I C A T E D**

**to TAMARA, my beautiful wife**  
*the angel of my life who makes every dream possible, and every moment count*

---

**to BEV & LES, my courageous parents**  
*you both have been, and always shall be, the stars that I steer by*

---

**to SCOTT & CHARLENE, my brother and his bride**  
*for the boy I used to wrestle, the proud man he grew to be, and the amazing woman who loves him*

---

**to SEAN, DARREN, & TOMMY, my brothers-in-arms**  
*some people are blessed with one such friend, and I am blessed with three—thank you, always*

---

**to MURPHY, my basset hound,**  
*who has fallen asleep in the time it took to read this line—may you catch the rabbit*

**with very special thanks to Professor Cindy Donatelli**

## P R E F A C E

## ABBREVIATIONS IN THE TEXT

---

*The titles of the Sherlock Holmes adventures are abbreviated using the standardized key provided by The Encyclopædia Sherlockiana (Tracy xix). All direct text references to the Holmes stories are taken from Mallard Press's facsimile edition of collected works (Doyle 1990) using these codes and the specific page number.*

---

ABBE	The Abbey Grange	MUSG	The Musgrave Ritual
BERY	The Beryl Coronet	NAVA	The Naval Treaty
BLAC	Black Peter	NOBL	The Noble Bachelor
BLAN	The Blanched Soldier	NORW	The Norwood Builder
BLUE	The Blue Carbuncle	PRIO	The Priory School
BOSC	The Boscombe Valley Mystery	REDC	The Red Circle
BRUC	The Bruce-Partington Plans	REDH	The Red-Headed League
CARD	The Cardboard Box	REIG	The Reigate Puzzle
CHAS	Charles Augustus Milverton	RESI	The Resident Patient
COPP	The Copper Beeches	RETI	The Retired Colourman
CREE	The Creeping Man	SCAN	A Scandal in Bohemia
CROO	The Crooked Man	SECO	The Second Stain
DANC	The Dancing Men	SHOS	Shoscombe Old Place
DEVI	The Devil's Root	SIGN	The Sign of the Four
DYIN	The Dying Detective	SILV	Silver Blaze
EMPT	The Empty House	SIXN	The Six Napoleons
ENGR	The Engineer's Thumb	SOLI	The Solitary Cyclist
FINA	The Final Problem	SPEC	The Speckled Band
FIVE	The Five Orange Pips	STOC	The Stockbroker's Clerk
GLOR	The Gloria Scott	STUD	A Study in Scarlet
GOLD	The Gold Pince-Nez	SUSS	The Sussex Vampire
GREE	The Greek Interpreter	THOR	The Problem of Thor Bridge
HOUN	The Hound of the Baskervilles	3GAB	The Three Gables
IDEN	A Case of Identity	3GAR	The Three Garridebs
ILLU	The Illustrious Client	3STU	The Three Students
LADY	The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax	TWIS	The Man with the Twisted Lip
LAST	His Last Bow	VALL	The Valley of Fear
LION	The Lion's Mane	VEIL	The Veiled Lodger
MAZA	The Mazarin Stone	WIST	Wisteria Lodge
MISS	The Missing Three-Quarter	YELL	The Yellow Face

## A B S T R A C T F O R

**THE DATABASE OF BAKER STREET**

Literature has an almost unwavering devotion to information flow—while authors drive plot development by releasing crucial data, the *means* by which this information is communicated figures just as prominently within the stories. The methods that characters use to gather information reflect their various socio-political environments, and frequently reveal the authors' own concerns about media. More than any other genre, the detective story holds data above all else: intriguing crimes may inspire the tale, but data processing and communication issues dominate the narrative itself. In the Sherlock Holmes stories, for instance, murder weapons and ransom notes offer only the most obvious clues. To the trained eye, however, a particular kind of tobacco ash and a peculiar typeface can provide startling revelations. Each clue brings the hero one step closer to solving the mystery, and helps to distinguish the case from others in the series. Holmes is the preeminent literary detective, and his relentless struggle for information revolves around the hidden potential of common media technologies. This thesis examines the importance of data processing in the Holmes Canon from three perspectives: the explicit role of media technologies in the stories themselves; the more general attitudes towards media and their use; and the multifaceted textual experience that Conan Doyle offers. Sherlock Holmes represents the author's artistic response to an increasingly technological England at the turn of the century. By having Holmes reestablish identity at every turn, the Canon posits that individuality is inextinguishable, and that a mystery's solution is available to the shrewd mind able to 'read' the data sources at hand.

## I N T R O D U C T I O N

**WHEN OLD DETECTIVES WERE NEW**

---

**Is it a fact—or have I dreamt it—that, by means of electricity, the world of matter has become a great nerve, vibrating thousands of miles in a breathless point of time?**

*Nathaniel Hawthorne, The House of the Seven Gables (1851)*

---

Information begets knowledge, so those who control the flow of information naturally become power brokers—the people of influence. In the fictional worlds of literature, authoritative characters are often distinguished by their appreciation of the data networks available to them, and by their clever manipulation of these systems when necessary. Sherlock Holmes, the popular detective created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, reigns supreme in a fictional England that blends Old World ideals with contemporary sensitivities about media. In this world, Holmes’s phenomenal success at solving mysteries underscores the difference between his investigative methods and those used by other law enforcers. Be they constables or Scotland Yard detectives, Holmes’s peers simply cannot compete with the efficiency of the sleuth’s data gathering techniques and his personal networking skills. Sherlock Holmes primarily serves as an information conduit, closing the open circuits—or “mysteries”—presented to him by ill-equipped officials or troubled clients. In other words, Holmes works to (re)establish signature where anonymity was intended. Using his detective as a model, Conan Doyle suggests that extraordinary results may be achieved by becoming an expert in manipulating data. Holmes’s cases idealize the control of information flow, but are intentionally set in a world populated by recognizable landmarks and representative characters. Conan Doyle’s personal sensitivity to media helps him to write extremely relevant stories for an audience experiencing a period of rapid technological development. The author’s depiction of

Victorian England supports such a distinctly modernistic hero, and helps to explain why meerschaum pipes and deerstalker caps remain potent cultural icons to this day.

A critical measure of any characters' power is their ability to control the flow of information; though Holmes appreciates the wide-ranging influence of media, this quality is certainly not exclusive to the sleuth. Since people are generally products of their own personal media environments, one's proficiency with information processing becomes a defining characteristic. Even William Shakespeare recognizes the importance of data networks in his plays, and continually emphasizes how powerful those who control information can be. This aptitude is central to the Bard's best known work, where Hamlet's supernatural conversation with his dead father provides the play's dramatic foundation: the King did not simply die but was murdered, and justice must be served. Once the Prince discovers this treachery, he resolves to "catch the conscience of the King" (Evans 1158), and the play begins in earnest. From this point on, basic plot development depends upon the elaborate systems of *disinformation* that Hamlet uses to corroborate the Ghost's horrific accusations. Shakespeare's entire play resonates with Hamlet's tragic awareness of how information networks may empower the individual who cannily manipulates them. Characters who know how to use the communication and transportation systems of a given age are privileged in being able to "see" more clearly than others. More importantly, those unfamiliar with the power of media are placed at a distinct disadvantage. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern perish due to their ignorance of Hamlet's competency with media; conversely, the Prince's manipulation of the royal letters sent to England allows Hamlet to escape the sinister fate which Claudius has in store for him. Media systems<sup>1</sup> are complex tools that characters may use to extend their realm of influence, but these same technologies allow the knowledgeable to exercise a

---

<sup>1</sup> The term 'media systems' refers to the various communication and transportation networks that facilitate the transmission of information, and help extend human perception beyond its natural limitations. This definition belongs to a critical theory proposed most notably by Marshall McLuhan in Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man.



certain level of control over others. In the worlds of fiction, this considerable power typically resides in a hero or villain whose actions drive the plot forward.

As this reference to Hamlet suggests, controlling information is a thematic issue common to all literature; after all, data transmission is a basic element of social interaction. As a term, "media system" can be rather loaded and all-inclusive, describing almost any available method of communication from conversation to hieroglyphics, from smoke signals to music. Using Marshall McLuhan's generalized model, media may be defined as the technological amplification of the human senses and their abilities.<sup>2</sup> This study concentrates on how Holmes's abilities depend on both the *technological* and *non-conventional* forms of information processing that he uses throughout the Canon. Communications technologies such as telegraphy, telephony, and newspapers allow Holmes and Watson to cast their proverbial net wide and far; transportation systems like the locomotive and even the horse-drawn hansom cab help draw that same net back in. While systems of communication and transportation are crucial to Holmes in solving his cases, his ultimate success depends upon more personalized networks. Street urchins, mongrel dogs, and flatmates trained in medicine enable the detective to decipher an abundance of physical evidence previously left unread. As a literary creation, Holmes marks a distinct turning point in data gathering and processing, thereby making a shift away from earlier traditions of supernatural communication exemplified by Shakespeare's ghostly Dane and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Ancient Mariner. Instead, the detective dispels the superstitious horrors of ghostly hounds and Sussex vampires with melodramatic demonstrations of scientific knowledge and logical abduction. Conan Doyle's sensitivity to media shapes the entire Holmes mythos, from the fictional London in which the sleuth operates to the metafictional shell of Watson's own 'authorship' of

---

<sup>2</sup> Using McLuhan's concept of media, ears and voices were augmented by the communication network of the early telegraph networks, while the ability to travel farther faster was bolstered by the locomotive (or 'Iron Horse') and the later development of the automobile (or 'horseless carriage'). Often new devices were colloquially referred to in terms of old media, as demonstrated here by the adherence to horse-based phrases.

the tales. Furthermore, the preoccupation with data transmission and the flow of information reflects Conan Doyle's personal concern for his beloved England during this technological revolution.

When dramatic shifts in communication technology occur, the jarring transition between old and new media accentuates the fundamental importance of information systems in society. New media systems revolutionize the ways in which people interact, but in doing so often breed fears of the unknown. With the rapid development in communication and transportation technologies at the turn of the century, Victorian England was besieged by an unparalleled number of new devices; many evolved into the modern mass media forms of today. Johann Gutenberg's development of movable type in Germany around 1439 demonstrates how a *single* major development in media can have fantastic repercussions through the ages. Compare this realization with the plight of beleaguered Victorians, who faced an onslaught of technology similar to that of the Americans:

A century later [by 1880], in the midst of the revolution in generalized information processing and control, the modern American office added a dozen major information technologies and services: telegraph and telephone, international record carriers and other local delivery services, newsletter, loose-leaf and directory subscriptions, news and advertising services, and differentiated security systems (including district telegraphs that could summon police or the fire brigade with the turn of a crank). (Beniger 280)

James Beniger goes on to note how "by the 1890s typewriters, phonographs, and cash registers had also come into common use" (Beniger 280). This consciousness of media technologies in the late-1800s was naturally represented in contemporary literature. The detective story was an ideal artistic form for assessing the cultural importance of media systems; after all, the plots of this genre continue to focus on information and communication issues. Moreover, due to the growing number of periodicals being published during this period, the detective genre was enjoying a "Golden Age" with newfound access to a vast and insatiable reading audience.

As a character, Sherlock Holmes could not have existed at any time other than the Victorian age, due to the specific cultural conditions that made his remarkable sleuthing abilities seem possible (and, to some degree, plausible). James Tracy describes the special relationship between Conan Doyle's hero and his historical period, noting how:

Holmes's profession as a consulting detective depended on just the right combination of cultural elements—popular acceptance of scientific principles at a time when science was still in a stage which allowed a single individual a reasonable grasp of the whole; a stable society in which methods of observation, and deductive principles based on observation, could be formulated and applied faster than the data upon which they were founded changed; and the existence of a moneyed middle class from which clients could be drawn. (Tracy ix)

These 'elements' represent the particular social climate in which both the Canon<sup>3</sup> and its readership are situated. Conan Doyle finds that he must tap into this cultural mindset in order to suspend the disbelief of his readers, and establishes specific sources for Holmes's data by showcasing contemporary media usage and the sleuth's own creative networking. Since no one doubts that the Great Detective will ultimately triumph over his adversaries, the suspense of the tale rests on *how* Holmes will resolve the case using the information at hand. Once Holmes dramatically presents the riddle's answer to the reading audience—for whom Watson, the client(s), and the police act as surrogates—the tale abruptly ends, with its message completed in the solving.

Sherlock Holmes, who first appeared in the 1887 edition of Beeton's Christmas Annual, illustrates how the authority of a given character depends upon the ability to use media networks. Conan Doyle creates Sherlock Holmes out of admiration for the exemplary short fiction of Edgar Allan Poe, but the Scotsman chooses to empower his 'consulting detective' with abilities intrinsically linked to the Victorian revolution in

---

<sup>3</sup> The capitalized spelling of 'Canon' traditionally refers to the entire collection of fifty-six short stories and four novels that Conan Doyle produced featuring Sherlock Holmes. Critical writing on Holmes may be broken down generally into two categories: those articles dealing with Conan Doyle as the author, and those arguing that the detective and Watson actually existed. In the latter category, the Holmes enthusiasts posit that Conan Doyle was the publishing editor of Watson's manuscripts, and began to capitalize the term 'Canon' as a tribute to the author. Christopher Redmond provides some further history on this point, noting that the reference is an "allusion to a term used by Bible scholars" (Redmond 1993, 9). This practice has since been widely adopted whenever writing about Conan Doyle's Holmes tales.

media technologies. Holmes has special relevance to modern readers due to his connection with this information explosion and all of the mixed emotions that it provoked. Just as visions of ‘global villages’ and ‘information superhighways’<sup>4</sup> dominate the constructed myths of contemporary advertising, a similar type of integral societal change was heralded in the mid-1850s during the advent of the electric telegraph. Both telegraphs and modems, despite their vast differences in technological complexity, have comparable social contexts: by the turn of their respective centuries, each of these devices cultivated the dream of drawing the entire planet together by a vast network of wires.<sup>5</sup> Media technologies profoundly changed the perception of the Victorian world and the people that lived in it; moreover, the literature of the time began to express how various communities were suddenly connecting (and colliding) with one another. The Britons and Americans of the late-1800s were watching their globe shrink at a rate as alarming as our own. Our wonder at modern satellites and fibre optics is analogous to their amazement at the first telegraph office or the blossoming rail system. Like the Internet today, the telegraph and its mechanical contemporaries seemed to bind the populace of the planet rather uncomfortably together under the glow of those newly developed electric lights. Overwhelmed by the implications of these technological developments, Victorian audiences gravitated to a different type of mythic hero: a champion whose proficiency with media superseded physical strength. After all, in Conan Doyle’s evolving world, those who controlled data shaped their own destiny.

---

<sup>4</sup> Both of these ideas remain highly optimistic hopes for the future, and have become marketing anthems that attempt to minimize the potential impact of the modern technological revolution.

<sup>5</sup> Carolyn Marvin provides a detailed account of the technological advancements in media and their social significance for Victorians in her book, When Old Technologies Were New. Marvin traces society’s broad apprehension of media development at the turn of the century; fears ranged from worries that electricity might destroy the planet in a giant explosion to more realistic concerns about privacy in a world of wired (and wireless) communication.

## C H A P T E R O N E

**AMIDST THE HUE AND CRY**


---

The press, the machine, the railway, the telegraph are premises whose thousand-year conclusion no one has yet dared to draw.

*Friedrich Nietzsche, The Wanderer and His Shadow, aph. 278 (1880)*

---

Sherlock Holmes represents a new heroic paradigm developed during nineteenth-century England's media explosion, and any critical examination of the literature must begin by addressing this technological environment. In reacting to the Victorian media condition, Conan Doyle creates a cerebral champion who at once embraces and undermines the revolutionary devices of the late-1800s. Holmes cannot be separated from the historical context in which he 'lives', from the information gathering techniques that he employs, or from the personal ideologies that govern his thinking. In short, the telegram and the dogcart are as essential to the atmosphere of a Holmes 'adventure' as pipe tobacco or London fog. Each case emphasizes that Holmes, "the quintessential gentleman-detective" (Doyle 1995, vii), is a self-invented expert within an extremely specialized field of law enforcement who understands the true potential of media technologies. The importance of Holmes's singularity is naturally represented by the Canon's basic formula—the detective solving the apparently unsolvable mysteries—but this distinctiveness also affords Holmes the flexibility in information gathering so vital to his craft. Following the pattern of Bram Stoker's Dracula and the later writings of Franz Kafka, Conan Doyle's detective fiction acknowledges the social impact of media by weaving its very use by the characters into the narrative structure. The newspaper, the growing publishing industry, the telegraph, and the proliferative British rail system—each of these processing networks is featured in the Canon, and contributes to Holmes's success as a viable literary creation.

Any attempt to rip Holmes out of this Victorian context dismisses the particular social factors upon which the stories are based: namely, the increase of information flow due to media networks, and the misperceptions about crime that these systems helped to spread. The genesis of Holmes cannot be attributed to any single historical development, but instead must be understood as a fortuitous textual convergence of broad societal fascinations and fears. Carolyn Marvin recognizes the exciting opportunity that this period of technological growth represented for contemporary artists like Conan Doyle:

In the long transformation that begins with the first application of electricity to communication, the last quarter of the nineteenth-century has a special importance for students of modern media history. Five proto-mass media of the twentieth-century were invented during this period: the telephone, the phonograph, electric light, wireless, and cinema. (Marvin 3)

Dream-like visions of machines that would alleviate worldly hardships and concerns were becoming realities in the late-1800s, with intrigued people marveling at the power of these mechanical devices. The Victorian imagination was held in thrall by the overwhelming potential of the new media; wires already seemed to permeate every stratum of society, but the general populace was only beginning to feel the shock waves of the technological explosion. Suddenly, the confines of the corporal body had been overcome by the initial manifestations of what McLuhan referred to as “the extensions of man.” When new technologies are introduced, users frequently adhere to old media habits despite more convenient forms of communication. During the advent of electric communications, however, the more ‘primitive’ print culture became much more appealing.

The Victorians found that more traditional media forms were gaining popularity amidst all the wires; printed text remained familiar and affordable to the reading public. Though wire communication greatly aided newspaper services in their efficient relay of information, an alternate means of *mass communication* had not yet been developed to replace this ‘disposable’ medium. Mass media still consisted primarily of ink on paper, so Victorians increasingly relied upon their revitalized print sources for both information

and entertainment. With the arrival of the Industrial Revolution, cultural changes began to converge with developments in print technology, encouraging people to see reading as a viable pastime. Prices for printed material dropped dramatically when England abolished the 'newspaper tax' in 1855, and fell even further when the excise duty on paper was discarded in 1861 (Best 224). Copious amounts of reading material suddenly became more affordable. As Kelly J. Mays suggests, Victorians now had to contend with "an explosive expansion of the arena of 'knowledge' that was signified by an overwhelming abundance of printed matter and an equally dramatic increase both in the number of readers and in the amount of time such readers devoted to reading" (Jordan 165). Conan Doyle's first published Holmes story, A Study in Scarlet, appeared in print only 4 years before the inception of the term "best-seller" in 1891, and heralded a period of booming book sales in both England and America. The entire publishing industry was enjoying an incredible windfall: book distributors, magazines, and newspapers reaped the benefits of increased readership and serendipitous social change. Richard Altick marvels at how "the most popular magazines—the *Strand* [for whom Conan Doyle wrote], *Windsor*, and *Pearson's [Weekly]*, priced between 3d. and 6d.—had circulations of between 200,000 and 400,000" (Altick 1989, 224-226). More informative and affordable periodicals, with the legions of new readers that accompanied them, invited Conan Doyle to experiment with a fledgling sub-genre: the serial detective story.

Popular fiction writers like Conan Doyle had to strike while the iron was hot; reading audiences were searching for contemporary heroes to soothe their anxieties about media technologies and the growing bureaucracy in the world. To maximize supply and demand, newspapers naturally catered to the readers' increasing distress over social stability, adhering to the journalistic mandate of 'giving the public what they *bought*'. The result was a seemingly limitless number of crime reports being featured in the daily news.

Certain of the older general papers had made profitable specialties of “criminal intelligence,” and one or two other papers had printed little else, but the comprehensive reporting of recent crimes and disasters now became a staple of the cheap newspaper. . . . Not only was the supply of such material inexhaustible; so too was the common man’s appetite for it. (Altick 1957, 344)

While nineteenth-century readers were certainly aware of the criminal element in society before wire services vastly increased the data flow in newspapers, the cheaper papers’ predilection for crime stories was purposefully deceptive. To maintain their improved circulation figures, the journals of the mid-1800s fostered the belief that crime was escalating when in fact only the communal access to these types of stories had increased. With his unerring concern for justice, Sherlock Holmes formed a pithy literary response to this social concern. Julian Symons describes how the origins of the Holmesian hero may be found in the Nietzschean desire for an “*Übermensch*” to challenge this apparent onslaught of criminality.

The passion for absolutes of belief and behavior, the desire to wipe the slate clean of error and impurity through some saving supernatural grace, shows constantly in Victorian life below the surface of stolid adherence to established order. (Symons 65)

With his own ‘stolid adherence’ to a writing style filled with prosaic description and class distinctions, Conan Doyle was himself a proud example of the times. This intense patriotism was passed on to Holmes, despite Conan Doyle’s efforts to remain dissimilar to the characteristics of his hero.

And so Sherlock Holmes entered the fray, focusing all of his energy towards a single, straightforward objective: the case must be solved *so that justice is done*. For Conan Doyle, each case requires his detective to save the day by restoring the cherished Victorian sense of ‘order’. With his indefatigable work ethic and unwavering sense of morality, Holmes embodies certain nineteenth-century English ideals. However, his ‘saving supernatural’ powers of detection help audiences to overlook the cocaine addiction, violin playing, and sundry other eccentricities that distinguish Holmes from



previous literary sleuths.<sup>6</sup> Thus, by balancing a cunning scientific mind with a bohemian sensibility, Conan Doyle transforms the English gentleman into the hero. The author had a remarkable talent for delivering what audiences tacitly desired, and his timing was perfect; Holmes appealed to what many Victorians wanted desperately to believe about themselves, regardless if it was *ever* true.

Magazine after magazine, newspaper after newspaper, cried out for just the kind of deductive genius which Holmes, in fiction, embodied. The failure of the police to solve the puzzle of the Ripper murders only accentuated a psychological need for a Holmesian hero. If the public could not find him in life, they would find him in books, and find him they did. (Higham 77)

At a time when society seemed unsure of its very future, Conan Doyle mollified a troubled public with a hero so rooted in familiarity that many imagined a chance meeting with Holmes while walking the real streets of London. In his autobiography, Memories and Adventures, Conan Doyle comments on the grip that his popular characters had on the public's imagination.

When Holmes retired several elderly ladies were ready to keep house for him and one sought to ingratiate herself by assuring me that she knew all about bee-keeping [the activity which Holmes supposedly retired to] and could "segregate the queen." I had considerable offers also for Holmes if he would examine and solve various family mysteries. (Doyle 1924, 100)

This suspension of disbelief depends as much upon the vivid characterization of Holmes as it does on the fanciful plausibility of the stories themselves. For many Victorian readers, Holmes's London was *their* London, just as Holmes's fictional successes were theirs to share in and cheer on. Unlike The White Company's legions of knights on horseback or similarly fantastic images of historical champions, Sherlock Holmes embodies a different kind of fantasy: the proper English gentleman waging an exciting yet civilized war on crime.

---

<sup>6</sup> These 'other sleuths' include Edgar Allan Poe's C. Auguste Dupin and Émile Gaboriau's Monsieur Lecoq.



Holmes makes use of a variety of existing systems to receive, process, and transmit the information so critical to his craft. The audiences' identification with these more *common* means of gathering data<sup>7</sup> provides a specific context for the inclusion of nineteenth-century media forms within the Canon. To underscore the importance of *personal networks* designed for more customizable messaging (e.g., telegraphs), Conan Doyle incorporates various types of *mass media*<sup>8</sup> into his narratives. Newspapers and reference books are Holmes's primary sources of generalized data, often providing pertinent facts about both his clients and his quarry. Recognizing the potential value in this type of information warehousing, the sleuth constructs a reference book of his own with excerpts from a variety of sources. This homemade print resource facilitates Holmes's recollection of past crimes as well as his identification of criminal behavioral patterns. While travelling throughout England, Holmes and Watson also use posted letters, telegraphs, and the rail system (all communal technologies available for individual networking). The ways in which Conan Doyle's characters use these conventional communication systems help expose attitudes towards media in general: the tacit authority prescribed to the newspapers, for instance, or the implied reliability of postal services and rail travel. As Holmes himself might suggest, there is more to the detective's practice of having "unanswered correspondence transixed by a jack-knife into the very centre of his wooden mantelpiece" (MUSG 354) than simple eccentricity. Conan Doyle shrewdly uses these media forms to develop plausible scenarios, both for the mysteries themselves and for their eventual resolution.

Holmes uses a variety of media technologies throughout the Canon, but the newspaper remains his most prevalent source of general information. For the detective,

---

<sup>7</sup> Holmes's more specialized forms of information gathering will be studied more closely in the following chapter.

<sup>8</sup> Here, mass media refers to those data processing systems specifically designed to disseminate sets of homogenous data to large audiences.

the rewards of reading the daily paper stem mainly from the media form's radical evolution during the Victorian era. The catalyst for this change was England's adoption of the telegraph, which in turn burst the floodgates of newsgathering services with the sheer volume of information now being reported and distributed. In the dawn of wire services, the nineteenth-century press flaunted the sheer variety of information that it could now make available to the public: nearly five hundred newspapers were published in the London area (Tracy 219). Daniel J. Czitrom recognizes how the telegraph made information more accessible, and notes how the breadth of coverage now possible also influenced the subjectivity of the stories being printed.

Insofar as the invention and spread of the telegraph provided the crucial catalyst and means for regular, cooperative news gathering, it supplied the technological underpinning of the modern press; that is, it transformed the newspaper from a personal journal and party organ into primarily a disseminator of news. (Czitrom 18)

By Conan Doyle's day, the common newspaper had evolved from being a political propaganda machine into this somewhat more objective "disseminator" of current news-stories. Joan Lock describes how certain feature articles still sought to address contemporary public anxieties, particularly about crime:

In September 1883, the more conservative *Illustrated London News* were complimentary [of Scotland Yard] to a degree when, under the title 'The Metropolitan Preventative and Detective Police', they wrote up and illustrated the recruits examination and initiation procedure, the activities in The Telegraph Room and the Convict's Office, and the CID. They made it clear that the feature was designed to give comfort to the upper and middle classes who escaped London for the late summer and early autumn, leaving their houses empty for 'the burglary season'. (Lock 113-114)

Lock recognizes the press's role as a kind of technological counselor, here hoping to reassure Victorian readers fearful of burglaries or other property crimes that professional law enforcers were ready and on alert. Ironically, fears of the criminal element were cultivated by feature news-stories in similar publications.

Along with stories of crime and corruption, Victorian newspapers had all kinds of implicit social messages thinly veiled by their supposed objectivity. When articles focus upon the concerns of 'upper and middle class' citizens for the safety of their homes, the

implications for lower-class readers trapped in London's regimented social hierarchy become all too clear. Newspapers remained an economical source of information for the general populace, however, and the blatant class distinctions made within certain reports simply reflected the culture that produced them. Despite their pandering to certain segments of Victorian society, newspapers still bolstered an abstract feeling of 'connectedness' between readers similar to that which early telegraphy had afforded the journalists themselves. Wilbur Schramm describes "the news agency [as] a journalistic device that, more than any other, [bound] together the news systems and units of the different countries" (Schramm 182).<sup>9</sup> To generate sales, newspapers promoted the illusion that reading their printed pages would keep that person abreast of all the important issues, regardless of their class.

Conan Doyle uses this popular (mis)perception of newspapers' comprehensive coverage to give Holmes an extremely accessible source of information for his investigations. Crime reports from foreign countries—primarily Europe, Asia, and North America—could feasibly reach Holmes due to the augmented abilities of the news services. Closer to home, various newspapers enable the sleuth to lift the veil off the 'horror' of English country life, as Holmes demonstrates by "master[ing] the particulars" between the Turners and McCarthys of rural Boscombe Valley during a train ride (BOSC 159-161). In another instance, information regarding the stabbing of two Englishmen in "Buda-Pesth" leads Holmes to speculate that Sophy Kratides has delivered her vengeance upon the murderers of her brother Paul, thus concluding one of Holmes's few unsuccessful ventures (GREE 410). Watson marvels at the breadth of the sleuth's client base, attributing Holmes's staggering range of influence to the daily study of the crime

---

<sup>9</sup> Schramm goes on to note the degree to which journalists relied upon communal information networks, a practice which is reminiscent of Holmes's occasional use of the Baker Street Irregulars. "No newspaper or news agency can hope to be entirely self-sufficient in news coverage. Even the small-town weekly finds it necessary to make formal or informal arrangements with certain people to watch for items that would interest the paper's readers. As late as the nineteenth century, the more alert papers in Europe and America had reporters who studied the foreign newspapers and borrowed items of local interest" (Schramm 182).

reports in the daily newspaper. The doctor expresses to Holmes his wonder at how, “in your position of unofficial adviser and helper to everybody who is absolutely puzzled, throughout three continents, you are brought in contact with all that is strange and bizarre” (IDEN 147). Stephen Knight suggests that Conan Doyle’s understanding of information gathering is distinctly Victorian, and Holmes often finds that the value of methodical examination supersedes the results themselves.

The steady collection and analysis of data was in itself the basis of nineteenth-century science and a strong feature of other areas of thought—such as Doyle’s own beloved history. And Holmes, it is less well-known, is also a master of the data of his subject. He has collected thousands of cases, can remember them and see the patterns of similarity in new problems: this power is in itself part of the Victorian romance of knowledge. (Knight 79)

To remain ‘a master of the data of his subject’, Holmes must remain forever vigilant, continually educating himself with the knowledge gained from the study of these media sources. The detective reminds his friend of this point in The Adventure of the Red Circle: “Education never ends, Watson. It is a series of lessons with the greatest for the last” (REDC 805-806). Whether the report comes from a rural English town or from a foreign country, new articles on crime add to the detective’s encyclopedic database of cases. Thus, by forcing news agencies to become interdependent, the telegraph allows Holmes to track crime on an *international* scale.

Since a single page of newsprint can speak volumes to a shrewd investigator, newspapers appear prominently throughout the Canon. Holmes uses newsprint to identify worthy cases, to review contemporary news-stories, and to capture unsuspecting criminals. While newspapers are referred to generally throughout the Holmes stories, Peter Calamai calculates that 24 tales mention London newspapers by name (Putney 25); this total clearly demonstrates how newsprint permeates the text of the Canon, which consists of only 60 stories if the long novels are included. The peculiar cases that pique Holmes’s curiosity similarly interest the press, so both Conan Doyle and his detective find value in the daily papers’ natural propensity for crime reporting. Though Holmes

sometimes refers to the paper as “a chorus of groans, cries, and bleatings” (REDC 802), he admits that he reads “nothing except the criminal news and the agony column. The latter is always instructive” (NOBL 244). That Holmes finds these columns so useful may also be attributed to the phenomenal output of nineteenth-century newspapers, whose various editions were churned out at regular intervals around the clock. Calamai describes the incredible frequency of Victorian newspaper publication:

First came the morning papers; their early editions would be on sale by 2:30 a.m., if not earlier. Their final editions would accept news items until 4:00 a.m., and sometimes later . . . . After the final edition of the morning papers, the afternoons would take over, with their first editions on the street by 11:00 a.m. and producing as many as six editions until a Late Final appeared around 3 p.m. to catch City workers heading home . . . . (Putney 29-30)

Since many of his high-profile cases prove newsworthy, Holmes gathers background data on various clients and culprits by cross-referencing a variety of press sources. One notable exchange occurs early in The Adventure of the Noble Bachelor, when Holmes asks Watson to review the ‘public facts’ concerning Lord Robert St. Simon from the excerpts littering the Baker Street flat. In the midst of their research, Watson reads to Holmes the article ‘Singular Occurrence at a Fashionable Wedding’ (NOBL 245) in its entirety. Dispensing with Watson’s interpretation of events, Conan Doyle incorporates the article’s text into the story so that the audience essentially researches the case for themselves.

While Conan Doyle’s narratives frequently describe Holmes and Watson in the midst of their newspaper reviews, each character reads and processes this information in different ways. Watson reflects the views and practices imagined of a ‘common’ Victorian reader. Perusing the paper mostly out of a desire to ‘keep on top of things’, the good doctor subscribes to its implicit authority and remains indifferent to any deeper significance. Watson’s posture while reading the newspaper reflects the level of decorum that the activity demands from him:

With my body in one easy chair and my legs upon another, I had surrounded myself with a cloud of newspapers, until at last, saturated with the news of the day, I tossed them all

aside and lay listless, watching the huge crest and monogram upon the envelope upon the table, and wondering lazily who my friend's noble correspondent could be. (NOBL 243)

As with his indeterminate paper rifling, Watson's morning read of a periodical like the British Medical Journal (STOC 331) is perceived as a routine habit. Conan Doyle assumes that Watson would keep current within his field as any conscientious professional would; such research would be particularly important for a doctor. As his reading practices suggest, Watson unconsciously subscribes to the idea that newspapers and journals communicate a basic knowledge of 'current events'. While this misnomer implies a greater immediacy than print could possibly offer, it was probably never truer than in the Victorian era given the sheer number of daily editions made available to the public.

Though Holmes and Watson have a similar tendency to pore over newspapers, the detective has completely different objectives in mind whenever he picks up the morning edition. For a scholar of societal misdeeds like Holmes, newspapers become an unofficial journal for "the only unofficial consulting detective" (SIGN 64). Foregoing Watson's more casual reading of the news, the detective actively searches for patterns within the data by identifying specific correlatives with past events. Holmes's research traces broad trends in crime, and this information often proves helpful in resolving current investigations. Watson might never consider going to the press offices in order to search out some fact or clue, but Holmes leaves no stone unturned while working on a case:

I have just found, on consulting the back files of the *Times*, that Major Sholto, of Upper Norwood, late of the Thirty-fourth Bombay Infantry, died upon the twenty-eighth of April, 1882. (SIGN 70)

Holmes looks past the processed information printed in the newspaper and seeks out the raw factual data used to write the text, recognizing the press offices for the archival resource they represent. Though Watson admits that his 'obtuse' mind can detect no connection to the case at hand, the sleuth generates a theory that later proves to be substantially correct. This solution to the mystery is based almost entirely on supposition,

to be sure, but springs from facts that Watson might never have uncovered. Using this journalistic resource to supplement his memory of international criminal cases, Holmes identifies similarities between his current investigations and other reports he has discovered:

“You will find parallel cases, if you consult my index, in Andover in ’77, and there was something of the sort at the Hague last year. Old as is the idea, however, there were one or two details which were new to me.” (IDEN 153)

Throughout the Canon, Holmes regularly consults the newspaper to familiarize himself with the *basic* facts of a case, discovering all that he can from the most recent editions. Though Conan Doyle uses the Victorian newspaper as a traditional resource from which his detective accesses a wealth of topical information, the author emphasizes Holmes’s efforts in realizing the true potential of the medium.

In the Canon, the conventional act of reading often takes on new significance simply because of the type of material being read. The newspaper offers a symbolic representation of London that allows Holmes to scour the city’s criminal landscape *virtually*; through the ‘agony column’ or the ‘criminal news’, the detective learns of cases that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. This view of a newspaper’s optimal utility includes an oblique admission of the medium’s own limitations: Holmes must peruse not one but many papers if he is to get any objective detail. The detective explicitly states the problem he faces each time he turns to the newspaper: “The difficulty is to detach the framework of fact—of absolute, undeniable fact—from the embellishments of theorists and reporters” (SILV 291). Holmes doubts the objectivity of the press, and remains skeptical of the ‘comprehensive’ news coverage that Victorian papers would naturally promote. As a discriminating reader, the sleuth notes during one investigation how “the London press has not had very full accounts” (BOSC 159), and questions the sensationalism of newspapers with the “flaming headlines” (RETI 1105) that Watson later describes. Cognizant of the press’s shortcomings, both Holmes and Watson are



openly critical of how artistic license and extraneous concerns often shade the reporters' accounts:

[Watson begins.] "The cases which come to light in the papers are, as a rule, bald enough, and vulgar enough. We have in our police reports realism pushed to its extreme limits, and yet the result is, it must be confessed, neither fascinating nor artistic."

"A certain selection and discretion must be used in producing a realistic effect," remarked Holmes. "This is wanting in the police report, where more stress is laid perhaps upon the platitudes of the magistrate than upon the details, which to an observer contain the vital essence of the whole matter. Depend upon it there is nothing so unnatural as the commonplace." (IDEN 147)

In Holmes's considerable experience, the true basis of the crime is often found in ordinary trivialities—precisely the kind of information that reporters might choose to omit. Clearly, a single paper would never satisfy the detective's appetite for useful, objective data. Holmes would be suspicious of accepting a single reporter's perspective without first establishing the reliability of the writer's account and the information it presents as fact.

However, Holmes's cross-referential reading practices also imply a belief that a *better* understanding of events might be gained through multiple perspectives. By attempting to triangulate on the facts, Holmes assumes that objective information is in fact present but hidden; the detective must first 'decode' the print copy before it is useful. Holmes is frequently frustrated with this exercise, since it dilutes the visceral pleasures of the hunt and forces his intellect to pursue more tangential matters:

It is one of those cases where the art of the reasoner should be used rather for the sifting of details than for the acquiring of fresh evidence. The tragedy has been so uncommon, so complete, and of such personal importance to so many people that we are suffering from a plethora of surmise, conjecture, and hypothesis. (SILV 291)

Numerous stories similarly describe Holmes in the midst of a stack of "fresh editions of every paper," digging through articles to the point of necessitating a "newsagent" to feed his insatiable appetite (SILV 291).<sup>10</sup> During the initial publication of the Holmes stories,

---

<sup>10</sup> Piles of newspapers surround the sleuth most prominently in BOSC, BLUE, NOBL, DANC, COPP, and SILV (as quoted here). As described earlier, Holmes treats these papers in much the same way

Conan Doyle even received a request addressed to his fictional doctor offering to perform these services for the detective: “A press-cutting agency wrote to Watson asking whether Holmes would not wish to subscribe” (Doyle 1924, 100). Though critics and readers often focus on the detective’s cocaine addiction, Holmes’s need for information is a very similar dependence. Just as a “seven per-cent solution” (SIGN 64) might stave off the boredom of inactivity for Holmes, newspaper reading provides an analogous ‘dose’ of pertinent data, and its satiating effects are just as fleeting. Conan Doyle describes evidence in terms of its ‘freshness’, deliberately using language to reinforce the transitory value of newsprint information. Holmes does save a great number of articles for his own personal reference files, but the ephemeral relevance of newspapers to the immediate investigation is the central issue considered here. The veracity of the press remains unquestioned—Conan Doyle rarely depicts any problem with the *truthfulness* of newspaper reporting—but almost every other element of print journalism is treated with skepticism by the sleuth. Acutely aware of the medium’s shortcomings, Holmes questions any newspaper’s claims of journalistic objectivity, comprehensive coverage, or lasting pertinence.

On a superficial level, Holmes sees newspapers as a traditional, *unilateral* medium for disseminating common information; each person receives the journalist’s report simply by reading the printed text. By idealizing the medium’s effectiveness, however, Conan Doyle transforms the conventional newspaper into an effective tool for entrapping suspects and spreading disinformation. Holmes frequently uses the advertisement section—colloquially referred to as the ‘agony column’, but better known today as the ‘personals’—to send carefully constructed messages to the largest reading audience possible. Rather than expend valuable energy chasing after suspects, the detective invents a variety of textual ruses to draw in his prey. In The Adventure of the

---

as Watson—the detective frequently “rummaged amid” the articles, “tossing aside the paper” once done (BLUE 205) or “thrust[ing] the last under the seat” (SILV 291).

Blue Carbuncle, Holmes places his most straightforward ad while looking for Henry Baker: the detective simply needs to know where the man purchased his Christmas goose. Relying on the potency of mass media, Holmes explains to Watson and Commissionaire Peterson how the message will likely be received even if Baker himself does not read it:

“Well, [Baker] is sure to keep an eye on the papers, since, to a poor man, the loss is a heavy one . . . . Then, again, the introduction of his name will cause him to see it, for everyone who knows him will direct his attention to it.” (BLUE 205)

Since Baker has little reason to suspect the ad or even the person who wrote it, Holmes predicts the quick response of a man eager to retrieve his lost items. The advertisement simply offers the most efficient means of contacting Baker, and precludes any vain attempt at *physically* tracking him down.

Like Baker, however, the criminals drawn to 221b by these baited messages are ignorant of any subterfuge until the game is already lost; once the handcuffs lock on their unsuspecting wrists, though, the trap becomes obvious enough. Patrick Cairns (BLAC 641-642) responds to a fictional notice for a harpooner only to be detained for the murder of Peter Carey, and Colonel Valentine Walter declares his involvement in Cadogen West’s murder by answering Holmes’s phony request in the Daily Telegraph (BRUC 777-778). Conan Doyle’s criminals have a working knowledge of newspapers and advertisements, but Holmes’s unconventional use of media tips the balance in his favor; the detective uses his messages *strategically*, preying upon assumptions of authorship and veracity that the typical Victorian reader will presumably bring to the text. Cairns is ignorant that anyone would be looking *specifically* for him, and therefore accepts the authenticity of Captain Basil’s offer. Furthermore, Cairns never dreams that someone searching for the killer would use a seafaring alias to offer a fictitious harpooner’s position on a non-existent boat. Similarly, Colonel Walter has no way of knowing that Pierrot, the alias of the murderous Hugo Oberstein, did not write the advertisement in the Telegraph. This latter example from The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans is extremely relevant since, like Holmes, Oberstein recognizes the conventions in media

use. After discovering the newspaper notices that Oberstein wrote to his associate, the detective realizes that the Colonel's own communication system can be used to bring him into police custody. Holmes takes great pleasure in the irony of these 'private texts': while weakly 'coded' advertisements maintain some level of anonymity, they also establish an imprecise communication medium which allows an instant appropriation of identity to anyone able to break the code. Cairns is unaware that a 'Captain Basil' might actually be a detective investigating Carey's murder, while Walter is oblivious to the fact that someone other than Oberstein might write a 'Pierrot' message. Holmes's virtual disguises, based upon the clouding of authorship in textual advertisements, allow for the baiting of these traps and the capture of their intended targets. Newsprint is typically understood as a general source of topical information, but Holmes is able to use the medium for more personal transmissions. While the sleuth makes these print messages available to an indiscriminate number of readers in the public domain, often a code or special referent allows the sending to be targeted precisely.

Newspapers alone, however, are not enough to satisfy Holmes's insatiable need for data; his thoroughness in method and faith in interrelation demand that this journalistic database be supplemented with other information technologies. Along with ample newsprint resources, Conan Doyle stocks the Baker Street library with other common Victorian reference materials: Whitaker's Almanac (VALL), Bradshaw's Railway Guide (VALL, COPP), Crockford's Clerical Directory (RETI), Watson's Medical Directory of doctors (HOUN), and two gazetteers (SIGN, SCAN). Holmes builds this library to clear his mind, believing "that a man should keep his little brain attic stocked with all the furniture that he is likely to use, and the rest he can put away in the lumber room of his library, where he can get at it if he wants it" (Doyle 182). Though Holmes never believes he *has* to know this information, he uses this material as a virtual memory bank that keeps a storehouse of sociological data at his fingertips. With these resources, Watson is able to report on Dr. James Mortimer's professional

accomplishments to his roommate (HOUN 451). Similarly, Holmes uses his ‘library’ to discover the origins of the Klu Klux Klan (FIVE 183), and to establish Elman as a vicar with a M.A. who resides in Mossmoor (RETI 1098). In one particular case, Holmes’s library is so current that it actually poses a problem: the message that Holmes is trying to decode requires the older edition of a book updated annually (VALL).<sup>11</sup> Victorian reference texts consolidated high society listings and train schedules into easy volumes, which in turn save investigators precious time and energy whenever researching such trivia. Though his detective is often characterized by an encyclopedic knowledge of investigative techniques, Conan Doyle gives Holmes an even greater skill: the ability to determine what he *needs* to know.

Newspapers and journals also make important contributions to the Baker Street reference library, primarily in the form of indexed scrapbooks that Holmes organizes whenever time permits. By stockpiling press clippings and journal excerpts, the detective transforms “a rag-bag of singular happenings” (REDC 802) into a series of ‘commonplace books’ which he stores in a tin box (CREE 999). Despite the container used to store it, this ‘good old index’ is precious to Holmes, and Watson describes how all of this textual stockpiling contributes to the deplorable state of their living quarters:

[Holmes] had a horror of destroying documents, especially those which were connected with his past cases, and yet it was only once in every year or two that he would muster energy to docket and arrange them . . . . Thus month after month his papers accumulated, until every corner of the room was stacked with bundles of manuscript which were on no account to be burned, and which could not be put away save by their owner. (MUSG 354)

In a later story, Watson again marvels at the stacks of material stored in their flat, watching as “Holmes spent the evening in rummaging among the files of the old daily papers with which one of our lumber-rooms was packed” (NAPO 665). Though Holmes’s

---

<sup>11</sup> After discovering the code key to deciphering an encrypted message is Whitaker’s Almanac, Holmes is perplexed by the nonsensical translation that his decoding provides. The detective’s faith in his own reasoning never falters, and eventually Holmes finds that his annual edition of the almanac is in fact *too recent*—the code is based on the past year’s publication (VALL 842-845).

enthusiasm for hoarding paper is obvious, he does realize the transitory relevance of press clippings and journal articles to his current cases. The practice of filling ‘lumber-rooms’, however, reveals how much the detective values *stored data*. In the Canon, this saved material typically provides background facts for an investigation, but rarely produces any information critical to its resolution. However, newspaper articles often inspire Holmes to involve himself in an investigation, and therefore their importance to the plot must not be minimized. Past cases may not have any direct correlation to the mystery that Holmes is currently investigating, but these records still provide a socio-historical record that might prove useful in the future. After all, one trip to the London Times offices in The Sign of Four opens the case in Holmes’s mind, and further illustrates the value of systematized information caches in solving mysteries. The sleuth has an even more personalized and accessible database on his shelves at Baker Street, where shelves of reference books and preserved clippings help supplement Holmes’s own considerable memory.



Newspapers, reference books, and his own commonplace volumes allow Holmes to gather information from the nearest newsstand or even the armchair in his flat; however, print media impose both a temporal and geographical distance from the actual events being relayed. For Conan Doyle, effective storytelling and successful case resolution depend on Holmes’s physical involvement in the investigation. Though supported by other data gathering techniques, Holmes’s success relies upon his personal examination of clues and crime scenes, using his incredibly specialized detective skills to solve the mystery; Holmes’s presence remains at the heart of both the investigation and the plot development of the tale itself. Adding to his considerable arsenal of information technologies, Holmes uses a variety of established networking systems—the postal service, telegraphs, hansom, and trains—in order to communicate with the parties involved more directly than Victorian newspapers and reference books could ever allow him to do. By using these various networks, Holmes is able to extend his range of

influence beyond the labyrinthian streets of London to the outlying districts of rural England, and even to foreign countries when necessary. Posted letters and telegrams facilitate the quick transmission of private communiqués, while hansom and trains provide efficient modes of personal transit. The Canon compares the utility of these systems to the generalized transmission of the newspaper. Holmes openly criticizes the press for its blatant editorializing and its illusory ‘comprehensiveness’. In using the newspaper, Holmes realizes that many people will see the advertisement but only certain individuals will actually respond to its message. Though Holmes has great success in targeting his advertisements to specific recipients, the newspaper remains an indiscriminate means of transmitting information quite different from the direct messaging system offered by telegraphy. With both trains and telegraphs, however, Holmes sticks to the intended function of the systems. These transportation or communication networks help *individuals* overcome distance within shared processing systems, and facilitate the operation of more traditional media.<sup>12</sup> Though telegraphs and locomotives appear throughout the Canon as ordinary technologies rather than revolutionary advancements, Holmes’s investigations often depend on using these systems wisely.

For Conan Doyle, the postal and telegraph systems are differentiated by the social connotations of each media form. By contrasting the more intimate narrative of a posted letter to the pragmatic terseness of a wired telegram, the Canon supports McLuhan’s notion that the medium does indeed carry a message. Holmes investigates a number of cases as a result of posted letters that contain threats, since recipients of such mail often

---

<sup>12</sup> Media developments in telegraphy and telephony were linked with the evolution of railways and other transportation networks. Beniger notes a similar trend in 1852, describing the United States and how “the two infrastructures [telegraph wires and railroads] continued to coevolve in a web of distribution and control that progressively bound the entire continent” (Beniger 17). Likewise, the developing postal system and its processing of information relied heavily upon the rail network’s efficient and cost-effective method of transportation. Considering its effects on communication media (such as letter couriers or wire routes) and the more Holmesian notion that people themselves are data carriers, transportation networks have particular relevance as a form of media all their own.

arrive at Baker Street to plead for the detective's help. Violet Hunter is simply concerned about the bizarre job requirements prescribed by Jephro Rucastle in his letter, which she shares with Holmes to validate her suspicions (COPP 273-276). But Mary Morstan (SIGN 68-69), Elias and John Openshaw (FIVE 177-178), James Armitage (GLOR 349), and Sir Henry Baskerville (HOUN 466) all receive coded messages that strike terror in their hearts. Other messages mailed in the Canon include pasted clippings of newstype, word games, and many pages of handwritten script. Unlike newspaper advertisements or telegrams, posted letters are ideally suited for coded messages: five orange pips may easily be used to send a very complete message to the addressee. Ironically, these unique letters often give Holmes his most valuable clues, and help the sleuth to solve their respective mysteries.

To those who doubt that there was *ever* a time when postal delivery was so dependable, Christopher Redmond offers this description of the enviable Victorian mail system and its traits:

At these [reasonable] prices a vast number of items passed through the post office: some 1.8 billion letters, and 50 million parcels, each year. Modern North Americans accustomed to thinking of the mail as a leisurely means of communication must remember that it was both reliable and rapid in Victorian England . . . . For letters outside London, overnight delivery was the standard. (Redmond 1993, 122)

With this description of the functional and affordable postal service of the late-1800s, Redmond provides another reason for the prevalence of mailed messages in the Canon. For swift and individualized communication unencumbered by telegraphy's per-word pricing, the Post Office was clearly a viable (if not the *preferred*) option. Ironically, the Canon continually stresses the fragility of coded messages, and how the loss of privacy invariably shatters the mysteries they hold. Holmes transforms the physicality of the textual warning into evidence, since decoding the message neutralizes the threat and condemns the sender.

As an alternative to the posted letter, telegraphy appeals more directly to Holmes's utilitarian tastes in communication media. Watson notes that the detective "has



never been known to write where a telegram would serve" (DEVI 783). E.B. Hobsbawm suggests that telegraphy has a nationalistic quality, and its importance to a colonial society like England has special relevance when examining how the detective views the medium.

[Telegraph cables] were indeed of very direct importance to government, not only for military and police purpose, but for administration—as witness the unusually large numbers of telegrams sent in countries such as Russia, Austria and Turkey, whose commercial and private traffic would hardly have accounted for them . . . . The larger the territory, the more useful was it for the authorities to have a rapid means of communicating with its remoter outposts. (Hobsbawm 77)

Since his next case may just as easily come from rural England as from a foreign country, Holmes uses the telegraph to reach these 'remoter outposts' in his search for mysteries to solve. Curiously, the telegraph is widely used throughout the Canon, yet paper telegrams remain the only evidence of this practice; Conan Doyle rarely describes characters actually going to a telegraph office to send a message. Given that Holmes and Watson live in relative luxury with few financial concerns, one imagines that their page-boy would almost always be at hand to complete such a menial errand 'off-stage' (e.g., NAVA 412). Moreover, since the tales rarely include any narration that does not directly advance the plot, Conan Doyle probably thought that a detailed passage about sending a wire might be exceedingly tedious. As a result, characters in the Canon stop at a telegraph office along the way or simply use a subordinate whenever one is available. While the use of this media is critically important to the detective, Conan Doyle focuses on its results rather than drawing undue attention to the technology itself.

Conan Doyle stresses the obvious reasons why Holmes prefers telegraphy: namely, the convenience of transmission speed and distance, and its relative self-containment. The detective often finds himself in need of swift communication, particularly when he must contact Watson or the official police. The telegraph also allows clients to contact Holmes at almost any hour should they need his assistance; a tense Violet Hunter relaxes somewhat when Holmes reassures her that, "at any time, day or

night, a telegram would bring me down to your help” (COPP 276). At times, Holmes appears to be *too* accessible. While the detective fills a lumber-room with newspaper clippings, a continent’s gratitude produces a blanket of telegrams that covers the floor:

The triumphant issue of his labours could not save him from reaction after so terrible an exertion, and at a time when Europe was ringing with his name, and when his room was literally ankle-deep with congratulatory telegrams, I found him a prey to the blackest depression. (REIG 365)

While this example is particularly dramatic, telegrams appear throughout the Holmes stories in a variety of contexts. A wire message can initiate an investigation (Colonel Ross in SILV 291, Cyril Overton in MISS 697), confirm a suspicion (CREE 1007, LADY 819), or hail a policeman like some Victorian bat-signal (CARD 309, FINA 442, DANC 594, SIXN 659, 3GAB 1065).

Various stories promote the practical advantages of expedient communications. The Adventure of the Dancing Men is replete with telegrams coordinating exchanges of data and personal meetings between Holmes and Hilton Cubitt, while the coded hieroglyphic messages are left to the postal service (given the non-standard character set, the dancing men are ill-suited for telegraphy). Later, Holmes is able to use the cable networks to confirm his suspicions about Abe Slaney’s past:

“I therefore cabled to my friend, Wilson Hargreave, of the New York Police Bureau, who has more than once made use of my knowledge of London Crime. I asked him whether the name of Abe Slaney was known to him. Here is his reply: ‘The most dangerous crook in Chicago.’ On the very evening upon which I had his answer Hilton Cubitt sent me the last message from Slaney. (DANC 596)

This case is particularly important in that the (relatively) phenomenal speed of media still proves insufficient to prevent the tragedy of Cubitt’s death and the injuries suffered by his wife.

Though telegraphy is obviously faster than letter writing, wire services also seem better suited to Holmes’s peculiar disposition and personal tastes. Letters create a self-perpetuating system of textual dialogue: to *receive* mail normally carries the obligation to *reply*. Holmes’s frustration with these social protocols is obvious, given the unanswered

correspondence affixed to his mantelpiece with a jack-knife. Watson categorizes this behavior as yet another eccentricity, but this habit also reveals how Holmes values his time and effort. After all, Holmes typically evaluates each mystery to see if it *warrants* his involvement, given his desire to work only those cases that will adequately test his skill. Similarly, telegrams give Holmes a more efficient medium for his own personal narratives. In sending his messages by wire rather than by post, Holmes consciously frees himself from the social constraints and expectations of letter writing. Terseness in a telegram is actually desirable, since the price of the sending is based on the number of words (BRUC 771); likewise, more verbose telegrams subtly communicate an indifference to cost that surely the recipient would notice (STUD 23). Though letters often provide Holmes valuable clues during in an investigation, they represent a less efficient means of communication for the detective to use personally. After all, the telegraph allows Holmes to summarize an entire day of investigating to his brother Mycroft with the message “See some light in the darkness, but it may possibly flicker out,” (BRUC 771). Holmes’s passion for speed and concision during an active investigation would surely demand nothing less.

Holmes does not subject transportation networks to the level of scrutiny or criticism that the newspapers suffer throughout the Canon. Travelling by hansom or train rarely necessitates the type of decoding that a crime report or an articles in the ‘agony column’ require. Instead, these transit systems allow Holmes to follow the advice he offers to Robert Ferguson: that “it is simpler to deal direct” (SUSS 1018). While telegraphs and newspapers are useful in transferring information over a wider geographical area, transportation networks help Holmes surmount the impediments that distance imposes upon his ability to investigate the crime scene personally. For inner-city travel in Victorian England, the most practical form was the hansom cab. Akin to modern taxis, hansoms free Holmes from the responsibilities of owning a carriage: finding room

to store the horse and cab would have required a move from Baker Street. Jo McMurtry provides an overview of the qualities that distinguished these Victorian vehicles:

Hansom cabs were two-wheeled, one-horse vehicles that, in comparison to hackneys, conferred little status. They were, however, well designed for balance (the driver sat on an elevated seat behind the passenger compartment, the reins passing over the roof), comparatively cheap, and quite fast. (McMurtry 235)

Holmes's personal idiosyncrasies allow him to move freely across class boundaries as needed, and the unpredictable demands of his investigations similarly govern his utilitarian choices in transportation. While hansoms are far from the only horse-drawn transport<sup>13</sup> that Holmes employs, these types of vehicles seem appropriate for the detective given his concerns about immediate access and functionality. Given the detective's bohemian and somewhat mercurial lifestyle, retaining a carriage on a more permanent basis seems an unnecessary expense (regardless of Holmes's comfortable financial standing). Similarly, trains and their regimented scheduling appeal to Holmes's regard for structure and reliability; after all, a cross-country trip requires no further obligation from the detective apart from the purchase of his ticket.

As with communications, Conan Doyle focuses upon the utility of the technology and the capabilities it provides rather than the novelty of its actual use.<sup>14</sup> When travelling by train, Watson is more concerned about the seriousness of Holmes's ailment than with the social ramifications of England's expanding rail network.

On referring to my notes, I see that it was upon the 14th of April that I received a telegram from Lyons, which informed me that Holmes was lying ill in the Hotel Dulong. Within twenty-four hours I was in his sick room, and was relieved to find that there was nothing formidable in his symptoms. (REGI 365)

---

<sup>13</sup> Thomas W. Ross's Good Old Index provides one of the few lists of contemporary Victorian vehicles used throughout the Canon. Even here, however, Ross admits that the various types are too numerous to exhaustively catalogue: "barouches, broughams, buses, cabs, carts, dog-carts, drags, four-in-hands, four-wheelers, gigs, growlers, hansoms, landaus, traps, waggons, wagonettes, vans . . . rattle throughout the canon" (Ross 159-160).

<sup>14</sup> Geoffrey Best traces the rapid growth of Victorian railways in terms of passenger loads: "Tracks themselves thickened, as swelling traffic demands turned some single tracks into double, some doubles into quadruple, and all along them more elaborate provisions of yards and sides. The railway had no rival. . . . In 1850 British railways carried 67.4 million passengers; in 1875, 490.1 million" (Best 72).

As Watson's trip suggests, Victorian transportation networks offered their passengers a means of quick, affordable travel at a moment's notice; Conan Doyle's fiction mirrors this utility. Watson often agrees to join Holmes on a case only to find that the train they need to catch is scheduled to leave within a matter of minutes. Though quick communication is a concern throughout the Canon, the urgency with which Holmes and Watson travel is unparalleled. While some trips are hastily planned (BOSC 159, SILV 291, STOC 331-332), Holmes's train travel is usually necessitated by sudden case developments (NAVA, FINA, HOUN, DANC). Only a handful of tales focus upon transportation as a central issue of the plot: the bicycling stalker in SOLI; the titular ship bound for the Australian penal colonies in GLOR; and the discovery of Cadogen West's body on the Underground in BRUC. A few cases even go so far as to interrelate communications and transportation technologies. Watson describes bicycle tire tracks as "an impression like a fine bundle of telegraph wires ran down the centre of it" (PRIO 621), while Holmes estimates a train's speed by observing that "the telegraph posts upon this line are sixty yards apart, and the calculation is a simple one" (SILV 291).

The prominent use of media technologies in the Canon intimately links the two protagonists to the historical period being characterized. Furthermore, Holmes's distinctively Victorian tastes dictate his use of particular communication and transportation systems. While telephony followed quickly upon telegraphy's heels (relatively speaking),<sup>15</sup> the telephone only appears in Conan Doyle's last collection of stories, The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes (3GAR, ILLU, RETT). Though telephony was certainly more common than these few references would suggest, Redmond offers the following explanation:

---

<sup>15</sup> While Samuel F.B. Morse publicly demonstrated the telegraph for the first time in 1837, Bell's functional telephone made its first transmission only 39 years later on March 10, 1876. Though telephone systems existed for Holmes, the technology was still in its infancy: "In 1908, 2,280 independent telephone companies were not connected to the Bell System, and many homes had to have several instruments to call through different exchanges" (Beniger 326).

Telegrams serve also as a device to emphasize the period quality of the tales, for Holmes is seen to use the telegraph even when telephones (introduced in London in the early 1880s) would have served better. He does have a telephone by the turn of the century, but it seems an anomaly. (Redmond 1993, 121)

Like automobiles, of which only two appear in the Canon (both in *His Last Bow*), telephones are sacrificed to Conan Doyle's evocation of the preeminent detective in an *idealized* Victorian England. Ronald Pearsall attributes the lasting appeal of the tales to its vivid characterization of this particular period:

The nation looked back at the nineties, when everything was stable. . . . Sherlock Holmes was part of the reassuring past—upright, chivalrous, incorruptible, above the law when the law was unfair, and omniscient . . . . It was, indeed, like old times. The reader could forget the rattle of the tramcar outside the front door, and listen instead to the clatter of hooves through late-Victorian fog. (Pearsall 107)

Holmes's use of contemporary media technologies irrevocably situates the character in 'late-Victorian fog', but Conan Doyle's stories also incorporate more modern media concerns about signature and control. In this chapter, the traditional communication and transportation technologies of the Canon have been related to specific media perceptions of the time. Since information processing is so central to Conan Doyle's work (and to detective fiction in general), the focus of this critical evaluation will now shift from the overt use of media technologies in the Canon to the implications of Holmes's symbolic struggle against media. Pearsall's commentary on the detective's 'upright, chivalrous, incorruptible' nature speaks directly to this modernized image of Holmes as a nineteenth-century knight: a hero riding in on an iron horse to save humanity from the dragon of technology, using science as both a shield and a sword.

## C H A P T E R T W O

**THE CONSUMMATE PROFESSIONAL**

---

At one time my only wish was to be a police official. It seemed to me to be an occupation for my sleepless intriguing mind. I had the idea that there, among criminals, were people to fight: clever, vigorous, crafty fellows. Later I realized that it was good that I did not become one, for most police cases involve misery and wretchedness—not crimes and scandals.

*Søren Kierkegaard, Journals and Papers, Vol. 5, Entry No. 6016 (1978)*

---

In creating Sherlock Holmes, Conan Doyle questions the effects of media technologies on personal individuality. The conveniences offered by nineteenth-century media, and the vast amount of information that was now transmitted by these devices, carried with them a price: the cherished Victorian sense of identity. With the technological developments of the late-1800s, the traditional role of the individual was being eclipsed. People were herding onto trains set to schedules out of their control, and slowly turning into figures themselves: addresses, reference book statistics, and newly-assigned phone numbers. Newspapers had displaced local coverage and personal interests with more objective world news. Writing itself was enduring the pains of evolution: telegraphs and telephones made the act of composing a letter seem painstakingly tedious in comparison, and typewriters were appropriating the skill of handwriting with its standardized scripts. The personal mark of the individual behind the message was slowly, methodically being removed by media technologies. In his tacit campaign against erasure, Holmes use those same technologies which threaten individual signature in order to reestablish its presence. Since classic detective themes often focus on solving the mystery by means of establishing the criminal's identity (colloquially referred to as the "whodunit"), the relationship between signature and media is critically important to Conan Doyle's fiction. The way in which Holmes incorporates various dualities allows him to become a type of medium unto himself. If a crime is understood as a private coded

transmission intended by the sender to exclude outsiders, then Holmes acts as a sentient processing center who deciphers data in order to complete the communication circuit. From this perspective, the sleuth 'reads' the crime and its signature to solve the case. With Holmes's incredible success at finding and decoding information, Conan Doyle depicts a world where signature resists complete erasure.

The act of discovering and deciphering signs is central to the Canon, and Holmes's 'deductive' skills are a function of his semiological understanding of the world. The detective's investigations justify and reinforce an unwavering faith in information gathering, charting a series of mysteries that invariably break under the scrutiny of informed sign-tracing. Curiously, Conan Doyle's preoccupation with the information imparted by signs—represented by the clues Holmes uses in formulating his 'deductions'—loosely corresponds to linguistic theories proffered by Ferdinand de Saussure and (decades later) by Jacques Derrida. Holmes depends on the structured, predictable relationship of the "signified" to the "signifier" to establish some single meaning, but the reciprocal importance of the clues themselves to the investigation must not be overlooked. Holmes's deductions rely on 'Clue A' (in SILV, the dog guarding the stable does not bark during the night) leading to 'Fact B' (the dog knew the culprit well). Furthermore, Holmes trusts that all the 'Facts' discovered by way of the 'Clues' shall invariably converge on 'Solution C' (John Straker, the horse trainer, was killed while attempting surgery on a racing horse as part of a fraudulent gambling scheme). For Conan Doyle's narrative, the gradual discovery of this established set of clues guides basic plot development towards its expected conclusion. Each piece of information links together for Holmes, who then triumphantly completes the puzzle. While the resolution coincides with discovering the single true 'reading' provided by these signifiers,<sup>16</sup> the narrative

---

<sup>16</sup> The idea that *any* true reading exists, much less a single governing one, is a notion with which Derrida's deconstructive precepts would most certainly take issue. A 'true reading' would necessarily involve the story having a structural center, but Derrida argues that "the center could not be thought in the form of a being-present, that the center had no natural locus, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions come into play" (Richter 961).



importance of each clue actually works against the strict hierarchical understanding of structured sign relationships proposed by Saussure. Instead, the mysteries are predicated on the discovery of *particular* sign systems. These conundrums do not easily conform to conventional reading practices because of their non-sensical elements (vampires in SUSS, spectral hounds in HOUN) and their inherent resistance to unintended readers (namely, the authorities).

For Conan Doyle, Holmes's effectiveness is rooted in his cognizance of these sign systems. The detective continually challenges his audience to recognize the vast wealth of information (or clues) communicated by everyday life; physical characteristics, clothes, mannerisms, and crime scenes all have some form of signature which holds data for the trained observer. To this end, Holmes's catalogue of knowledge even includes Alphonse Bertillon's theories on the physical characteristics of criminals—a kind of natural signature of 'criminality'.<sup>17</sup> During an investigation, the sleuth reconstructs the chain of events through an intensive study of 'trivialities'; Holmes admits openly that "it has long been an axiom of mine that the little things are infinitely the most important" (IDEN 150). Heta Pyrhönen relates this maxim to the proliferating scientific disciplines of the period:

Detective stories and the emerging practices of psychology as well as the social sciences, criminology included, all concentrated on minor details as keys to a deeper reality that was inaccessible by other methods . . . . Like track-reading, these practices order facts so as to produce an explanation in the form of a narrative. (Pyrhönen 67)

Holmes's cultivated abilities as a 'track-reader' allow him to determine the hidden meanings in signs; through these observations, he is able to draw accurate inferences and even establish characteristics of identity. The detective always astounds his guests with these dramatic demonstrations of his intellectual prowess, and usually withholds any

---

<sup>17</sup> Watson relates his own knowledge of Bertillon's theories, describing how "with feverish haste [Holmes and I] turned the body over, and that dripping beard was pointing up to the cold, clear moon. There could be no doubt about the beetling forehead, the sunken animal eyes. It was, indeed, the same face which had glared upon me in the light of the candle from over the rock—the face of Selden, the criminal" (HOUN 527).

explanation of his methods until the subject demands to know how the feat was done. Holmes performs one such demonstration for Watson as their friendship begins, pronouncing the doctor's recent return to the practice of medicine by his use of 'deductive' reasoning in A Scandal in Bohemia. With a characteristic lack of modesty, Holmes explains how:

"It is simplicity itself . . . . As to your practice, if a gentleman walks into my rooms smelling of iodoform, with a black mark of nitrate of silver upon his right fore-finger, and a bulge on the side of his top-hat to show where he has secreted his stethoscope, I must be dull indeed, if I do not pronounce him to be an active member of the medical profession." (SCAN 118)

In this way, Conan Doyle's detective is directly involved with an alternative form of media: like any other system of communication, the Victorian age allowed a so-called 'student of society' to gain a considerable amount of worldly knowledge due to the limitations of what was known at the time. England's narrowly defined class hierarchies, traditional sense of discipline, and fervent adherence to social protocol made such astute inferences feasible. Holmes's confident induction that the owner of a particular hat has a wife who has ceased to love him—simply because the hat has not recently been dusted—represents the believably exaggerated traditions from which Conan Doyle spins his art.

"This hat has not been brushed for weeks. When I see you, my dear Watson, with a week's accumulation of dust upon your hat, and when your wife allows you to go out in such a state, I shall fear that you also have been unfortunate enough to lose your wife's affection." (BLUE 204)

Watson often recognizes the familiar patterns of logic in Holmes's explanations, admitting that "the thing always appears to me to be so ridiculously simple that I could easily do it myself" (SCAN 118). In Conan Doyle's narrative, Watson's admiration for the logician's art serves a dual purpose: to illustrate how few people train themselves to notice these details, and to emphasize the supposition that any person could learn to perform similar feats of 'deductive' reasoning. Using Watson in this way, Conan Doyle actively promotes the idea that Holmes—while exceptional in his chosen field—does not

have extraordinary powers beyond the capabilities of others; he simply ‘reads’ a revealing media for the type of information essential to his trade.

In demonstrating his powers of observation, Holmes reveals the same information processing methods he uses during investigations, but also hints at the closed system(s) present in Victorian society. Occupations in the late-1800s were beginning to reflect the specialization best characterized by the assembly line, whose advantages were touted in the type of social propaganda that James Beniger describes below:

In a public demonstration in 1908, workers disassembled three Cadillacs, mixed the parts, then reassembled the vehicles and drove them away—a level of standardization in mass production that made moving assembly possible. (Beniger 298)

People imagined themselves to be approaching this ‘ideal’: interchangeable parts incorporated into an increasingly mechanized society. With the dawning of industrial specialization in Europe, members of the nineteenth-century working class usually had only one career with an increasingly narrow scope, enabling a ‘student of society’ to distinguish certain defining characteristics for each occupation—be it sailor, salesman, sergeant, or student. The proverbial “clothes” did far more than “make the man”; a person’s occupation, manners, and peculiarities could literally speak volumes to the learned specialist. Holmes writes about the accessibility of such information in his “Book of Life” magazine article:

By a man’s finger-nails, by his coat-sleeve, by his boots, by his trouser-knees, by the callosities of his forefinger and thumb, by his expression, by his shirtcuffs—by each of these things a man’s calling is plainly revealed. That all united should fail to enlighten the competent inquirer in any case is almost inconceivable. (STUD 17)

The stricter codes of the upper class and nobility are even easier for a Sherlock to learn, due to the antiquated traditions and attitudes handed down from generation to generation. But Holmes found important clues in the more general, classless details of a person: the yellowed forefinger of a smoker who rolls his own cigarettes (HOUN 452); the economic standing of a man from the blend of tobacco ash in his pipe (YELL 321); and the specific type of mud stain caused by a dog cart (SPEC 215).

Like the information he gleans from conventional media resources, Holmes's logical inferences further augment his investigative abilities to achieve the idealized range of data gathering commonly associated with a character. "What makes Sherlock Holmes so successful at detection is not that he never guesses but that he guesses so well" (Eco 22). At times, Conan Doyle's fiction ventures far beyond the limits of verisimilitude, with Holmes's comical mind-reading being perhaps the most obvious indulgence:

"So when I saw you throw down your paper and enter upon a train of thought, I was very happy to have the opportunity of reading it off, and eventually of breaking into it, as a proof that I had been in rapport with you . . . . The features are given to man as the means by which he shall express his emotions, and yours are faithful servants." (CARD 308)

As his occasional episodes of telepathy suggest, Holmes depends upon accurate transmissions and reliable assumptions; the fiction idealizes the communicative nature of yellowed forefingers, mud stains, and Watson's facial features. Holmes's familiarity with Watson and the closed system of their Baker Street flat are the only things keeping this fanciful bit of mind-reading from being completely ludicrous. In fact, Holmes's 'deductions' rely upon his Victorian understanding of the universe: an infinite set of logically traceable series that may be discerned through careful observation and intelligent surmise. Holmes regularly taps into this presumed power of logic, and proposes in one of his monographs that "from a drop of water . . . a logician could infer the possibility of an Atlantic or a Niagara without having seen or heard of one or the other" (STUD 17). By the same token, the detective severely reprimands himself during another investigation for not extrapolating everything from a particular observation made by Watson. Holmes later shares his feelings of failure with his friend: "When in your report you said that you had seen the cyclist . . . arrange his necktie in the shrubbery, that alone should have told me all" (SOLI 611). Stephen Knight recognizes how causation governs Holmes's world, and describes the impact of its linearity on the Canon:

In terms of epistemology we have a materialistic model, which can read off from physical data what has happened and what will happen. The succession of incidents in

explained and necessary relationship to each other expresses the ideas of material causation and linear history so important to the world-view. (Knight 74)

For Holmes, candles may accurately determine time (RESI 389) and parsley melting in butter may prove to be the crucial clue (SIXN 659); these types of logical extrapolation become infinitely more practical within Conan Doyle's fiction. Generally speaking, our suspension of disbelief hinges upon Holmes's expert knowledge of his environment (in fashion, custom, and exact physical characteristics) and the plausibility of this specialized knowledge store (given the regimented class structure of late-Victorian England). This presupposition of a 'stable society' does not comment on the abilities of Conan Doyle's detective as much as it qualifies the amplified predictability of the fictional environment.

By 'reading' the physical characteristics of people and crime scenes, Holmes transforms the Victorian world into a nearly limitless source of coded information. Each object carries a form of signature that simply requires competent decoding in order to unlock its meaning. Put another way, Holmes's technique of processing information suggests that a simplified form of poststructural semiotics is at work; Derrida coins the term 'de-sedimentation' to describe a similar exercise. The intensely hierarchical relationship between *signifier* (e.g., the clues of a case) and *signified* (e.g., the person[s] responsible) becomes marginalized; after all, Holmes's investigative work naturally ascribes an importance to both components. The clues left behind at a crime scene may be used in targeting the criminal, who is invariably the focal point of the investigation. However, the importance of the clues discovered during this search (and the apparent inevitability of leaving other clues behind) privileges the status of the 'signifiers' as well. Derrida's terminology is particularly useful in defining the type of intellectual exercise that engages Holmes during an investigation—that is, exploring *différance*<sup>18</sup>—and how

---

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Derrida creates this term in specific reference to linguistics—"a word he coined that puns on two French words meaning 'to differ' and 'to defer': words are the deferred presences of the things they 'mean', and their meaning is grounded in difference" (Biedler 181). The term, however, is equally relevant to the conceptual relationship given to signs in Conan Doyle's detective fiction.

the sleuth's efforts often focus on studying the poststructural subsets of signifiers *within* signs.

This concept of signature, synonymous with identity in Conan Doyle's fiction, focuses on various differentiators within a given signifier—be it a purloined letter, a muddy pant-leg, or a murder weapon.<sup>19</sup> Rarely is the detective satisfied with any given clue (or 'signifier') at face value, despite whatever role that clue plays in the larger mystery. For instance, Holmes looks beyond the explicit message in a letter to the style of handwriting or the choice of paper, and uses this information to identify characteristics of the sender. While examining a personal effect left behind by a guest during one such demonstration, the detective remarks to Watson that "nothing has more individuality [than smoking pipes] save, perhaps, watches and bootlaces" (YELL 321). Most stories in the Canon open with the familiar scenario of Holmes flexing his intellectual faculties at Baker Street, ostensibly for Watson's benefit. These demonstrations usually focus on the more superficial signifiers that Holmes discovers through observation alone, and rarely dig deeper beyond that which the detective can discern immediately; without closer examination of the person or object being considered, Holmes's abilities do have limits. When outlining the 'elementary' string of abductions<sup>20</sup> used to arrive at his detailed conclusion, however, Holmes still asks incredulously whether any explanation should be required. In addition, the detective often claims some apprehension at revealing his methods for fear of destroying their intrigue.

---

<sup>19</sup> David Richter observes that signifiers "are not known through what it is but through its differences relative to other possibilities—the other possibilities that are not present but absent, existing only through the transient traces they leave" (Richter 945). This definition is particularly relevant in studying Holmes's motives. However, the regimented hierarchies of signs that will lead Holmes's to his prey belong more to Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic school of thought than to the poststructuralists.

<sup>20</sup> Various essays from prominent semioticians collected in *The Sign of Three*, including those of Umberto Eco and Thomas A. Sebeok, attempt to correct Conan Doyle's inappropriate labelling of Holmes's method of logical inference as 'deduction'. Marcello Truzzi explains that "Although Holmes often speaks of his *deductions*, these are actually quite rarely displayed in the Canon. Nor are Holmes's most common inferences technically *inductions*. More exactly, Holmes consistently display what C.S. Pierce has called *abductions*. . . . Abductions, like inductions, are not logically self-contained, as is the deduction, and they need to be externally validated" (Eco 69).

“It is simplicity itself,” [Holmes] remarked, chuckling at my surprise—“so absurdly simple that an explanation is superfluous; and yet it may serve to define the limits of observation and deduction.” (SIGN 66)

“I am afraid that I rather give myself away when I explain,” said [Holmes]. “Results without causes are much more impressive.” (STOC 332)

Ironically, this memorable narrative device distinguishes the tale in which it appears, and is often as identifiable a feature as the central mystery to which the title refers.

The focus of Holmes’s ‘readings’ in the Canon may be broken down (depending on the data source being examined) into two generalized categories: *voluntary* and *involuntary* signature. Some texts are conscious clues that are deliberately given, having been adopted into social custom and therefore designed to be accessible to all. The Victorian visiting cards which people either send ahead to announce their arrival or leave behind as physical evidence of their presence there exemplify this type of voluntary signing. In the ten stories in which calling cards appear in the Canon,<sup>21</sup> the cards’ authenticity is never called into question. Curiously, unlike Holmes’s newspaper advertisements, no counterfeit cards are ever used to appropriate the signature of another (perhaps since the card is often a precursor to a face-to-face meeting). Of course, public texts and obvious signatures hold precious little mystery; Holmes is drawn to peripheral texts that others do not immediately see, or if seen cannot decipher.

Since only readers with the key may interpret the message, codes naturally discriminate against outside audiences. The Canon presents various codes to Holmes, challenging his skills as a translator while highlighting the inherent subjectivity of the reading act. Though the police may not fathom what hieroglyphs of gyrating stick figures could possibly mean in The Adventure of the Dancing Men, Holmes’s knowledge of mathematics and cryptographic techniques reveals the code to be a simple correlation between two alphabetical symbol sets. Since Holmes theorizes that the message still

---

<sup>21</sup> As noted by Thomas W. Ross, the Canonical stories where calling cards are used are as follows—STUD, CARD, SOLI, BRUC, RETI, ENGR, CHAS, SECO, LADY, and SIGN. Holmes’s vehement reaction both to Milverton’s card and the man himself (CHAS 645-648) is perhaps the most memorable.

conforms to common writing, statistical knowledge of letter use becomes the coding key that opens the message to translation. In addition, the detective's comprehensive expertise allows him to formulate the possible motivation behind such a code for Watson and Inspector Martin:

"I am fairly familiar with all forms of secret writings, and am myself the author of a trifling monograph upon the subject, in which I analyze one hundred and sixty separate ciphers, but I confess that this is entirely new to me. The object of those who invented the system has apparently been to conceal that these characters convey a message, and to give the idea that they are the mere random sketches of children.

"Having once recognised, however, that the symbols stood for letters, and having applied the rules which guide us in all forms of secret writings, the solution was easy enough." (DANC 595)

Holmes's ability to reason abstractly allows him to break the code and translate the message for the police. To do this, the detective further deconstructs the image text he is initially given, looking past the *prima facie* message of glyphs in order to break down the message's textual *components*. As Holmes suggests, the code is itself a transmission device with a dual purpose, specifically designed to confound the reader by appearing as a different type of writing altogether—the "random sketches of children"—rather than any sort of communicative text message. Even if the pattern of a message is discovered within the drawings, there is the code itself to contend with before the message actually becomes readable. Since the medium of textual transmission offers inadequate control over regulating readership, coding the text creates an added level of privacy for sensitive messages. However, the privacy afforded by these secret writing systems is extremely fragile—once the key is 'found', codes are "broken" or "cracked."

Throughout the Canon, Holmes cracks a variety of codes: historic rituals (MUSG 359-360), pictograms (DANC 595), simple word puzzles (GLOR 347), foreign languages (STUD 34), incomplete text strings (RETI 1105), and numerical notations (VALL 842). When examining these coded texts, the detective finds two distinct types of signature: the *voluntary* signature of the transcribed message, and the *involuntary* signature of the code itself. These identifying characteristics provide clues about the sender and the recipient of



the letter, and about the relationship that binds these two people together. By appropriating the code of the dancing men, Holmes exposes Abe Slaney and other key elements of the case: Slaney's use of hieroglyphs in "the joint," his years-old pledge of love to Elsie Patrick, and his feelings of rage towards Hilton Cubitt (DANC 597). In making these exclusionary texts accessible to others, Holmes once again emphasizes how the medium itself may contain a message. Aside from dancing glyphs, the Canon provides other scenarios where McLuhan's maxim holds true. The Musgrave Ritual actually bequeaths a hidden family treasure to anyone with basic trigonometry skills and some knowledge of the estate. In The Valley of Fear, Porlock's list of numerals gives specific text references to an almanac that form a message once strung together. Since these coded messages often attempt to hide criminal activities, any intrusive action taken by Holmes during his investigations tends to be legitimized by his unofficial standing as a law enforcement agent. In short, the sleuth opens certain modes of private communication in order to restore social equilibrium.

The focus thus far has been on messages which are to some degree *meant* to be read, either by a general audience or by a specifically targeted recipient; the concept of involuntary signature, however, speaks to information sent unconsciously that can only be read by the trained eye. Conan Doyle deliberately blurs the distinction between these general types of marking, showing that even the involuntary signature of a fingerprint is susceptible to forgery (NORW 578-580).<sup>22</sup> But Holmes's intimate study of the investigative sciences transforms civilization itself into a type of communicative media; physical traits, personal tastes, and social customs all become viable sets of information which can be interpreted by the logician. Holmes's most revealing observations often

---

<sup>22</sup> Holmes describes to Lestrade how one form of media signature—John Hector McFarlane's thumbprint on wax to seal some documents—was used by Jonas Oldacre to counterfeit another in blood on the wall. "It was the simplest thing in the world for [Oldacre] to take a wax impression from the seal, to moisten it with as much blood as he could get from a pin-prick, and to put the mark upon the wall during the night, either with his own hand or with that of his housekeeper" (NORW 582). Ironically, the act of forging a fingerprint serves as an equally valuable clue in Holmes's identification of the true criminal.

focus on the data communicated by *reciprocal markings*—those signs specifically transmitted to a person through their participation in a given activity. Certain media technologies leave traces of their own, like the significant markings that Holmes observes on Mary Sutherland’s glove:

“You observed that her right glove was torn at the forefinger, but you did not apparently see that both glove and finger were stained with violet ink. She had written in a hurry, and dipped her pen too deep. It must have been this morning, or the mark would not remain clear upon the finger.” (IDEN 153)

While the detective notes that Sutherland has recently engaged in some correspondence, he is also able to determine the particular conditions under which this writing took place. Holmes’s specialized investigative skills are equally useful in examining the physical world. The sleuth compares samples of clay found at in the headmaster’s office to rectify the academic mystery at St. Luke’s College, and uses the evidence he gathers from a pencil to eliminate certain suspects (3STU 680, 674). In another case, the police mock Holmes as he scours the large expanse of grass where Charles McCarthy’s body was found; the detective is able to ‘bear out the story’ of the murder simply by examining footprints left behind, despite the additional trampling of Lestrade and his men. Holmes’s subsequent analysis is able to offer an incredibly detailed description of the killer:

[He] is a tall man, left-handed, limps with the right leg, wears thick-soled shooting boots and a grey cloak, smokes Indian cigars, uses a cigar-holder, and carries a blunt penknife in his pocket. There are several other indications, but these may be enough to aid us in our search.” (BOSC 169)

For Holmes, the physical realm is bursting with data. While the Lestrades of the world rake the ground to search for murder weapons with all the sense of “a herd of buffalo,” Conan Doyle’s detective calmly notes the small details that would otherwise go unnoticed. As Holmes tells Watson: “You know my method. It is founded on the observance of trifles” (BOSC 171). Though the sleuth’s brilliant mind remains his best tool, the speed and accuracy of Holmes’s specialized reading is equally important to his investigations. In the case cited above, this aptitude allows him to quickly identify the

rock as the murder weapon for which Lestrade and the other officers are desperately searching (BOSC 169).

Throughout the Canon, Holmes challenges the assumption that there is little information to be gained from a “black mark of nitrate of silver” or “the bulge of a top-hat.” While cataloguing the important signatures available in ‘standardized’ forms of media, the sleuth trains himself to recognize the peculiarities in newspaper print and typewriter script. Holmes uses this knowledge in his examination of Sir Henry Baskerville’s note and to identify the following distinguishing features:

There is as much difference to my eyes between the leaded bourgeois type of a Times article and the slovenly print of an evening halfpenny paper as there could be between your negro and your Esquimaux. The detection of types is one of the most elementary branches of knowledge to the special expert in crime, though I confess that once when I was very young I confused the *Leeds Mercury* with the *Western Morning News*. But a *Times* leader is entirely distinctive, and these words could have been taken from nothing else. (HOUN 467)

Though “the utmost pains have been taken to remove all clues,” Holmes’s analysis of the typeface reveals the source of the pilfered text and even some general characteristics of the sender, since “the *Times* is a paper which is seldom found in any hands but those of the highly educated” (HOUN 467). The detective knows that every message has certain characteristics which help identify the medium that was used. At times, Conan Doyle over-emphasizes the amount of data that Holmes can gather from this evidence:

If you examine it carefully you will see that both the pen and the ink have given the writer trouble. The pen has sputtered twice in a single word, and has run dry three times in a short address, showing that there was very little ink in the bottle. Now, a private pen or ink-bottle is seldom allowed to be in such a state, and the combination of the two must be quite rare. But you know the hotel ink and the hotel pen, where it is rare to get anything else. (HOUN 468)

Recognizing the individuality of every text object, Holmes carefully examines the specific physical attributes of the message to reveal even more information. After all, in the detective’s world, the answer to the mystery is often found within the mark of a troublesome pen or the typeface of a particular newspaper.

In A Case of Identity, Holmes establishes the individuality found in another technology—the typewriter—by identifying the various peculiarities of James Windibank’s machine. The detective explains how a typewriter is almost incapable of producing a completely ‘standardized’ typeface, regardless of its intended design:

“It is a curious thing,” remarked Holmes, “that a typewriter has really quite as much individuality as a man’s handwriting. Unless they are quite new, no two of them write exactly alike. Some letters get more worn than others, and some wear only on one side. Now, you remark in this note of yours, Mr. Windibank, that in every case there is some little slurring over the ‘e,’ and a slight defect in the tail of the ‘r.’ There are fourteen other characteristics, but those are the more obvious.” (IDEN 155)

In both cases, the detective proves that technology can neither avoid nor totally deny individuality. The Canon shows that each medium leaves its own form of physical signature, like the double lines on Mary Sutherland’s plush sleeves caused by resting her arms on the table’s edge while typing (IDEN 153). As Windibank later discovers, even standardized typefaces are not sufficient to conceal the author of a message. Watson mistakenly infers that Hosmer Angel (Windibank’s pseudonym) is simply trying to avoid any legal difficulty by *typing* the signature. Overlooking the peculiar way in which the letter has been signed, Watson focuses on what the signature itself *means* to the document. In reality, Windibank chooses to use his typewriter simply to distance himself from the personal act of writing. Rather than clouding his identity as he had hoped, Windibank’s ploy gives Holmes the clue he needs to solve the case: “My suspicions were all confirmed by his peculiar action in typewriting his signature, which of course inferred that his handwriting was so familiar to her that she would recognize even the smallest sample of it” (IDEN 158). The detective finds the significance of Windibank’s letter in the message implicitly communicated by the two signatures: the one actually typed on the letter, and the handwritten script that is absent.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Holmes solves another mystery by being similarly sensitive to what is *not* present—in this case, the barking of a dog. Since the hound near the King’s Pyland stables did not bark at all on the night in question, Holmes suspects that the dog is familiar with the person responsible for Silver Blaze’s ‘disappearance’ (SILV 303).

According to Holmes, handwritten script has the most obvious and revealing characteristics of any communication medium. Certain grammatical choices or stylistic qualities of the writing may be used to identify the author, but Holmes finds that the most useful information comes from examining the script itself. Using the torn letter fragment found in the murdered William Kirwan's hand, Holmes demonstrates the effectiveness of this investigative technique:

“You many not be aware that the deduction of a man's age from his writing is one which has been brought to considerable accuracy by experts. In normal cases one can place a man in his true decade with tolerable confidence. I say normal cases, because ill-health and physical weakness reproduce the signs of old age, even when the invalid is a youth.”  
(REIG 374)

To emphasize further the amount of information that handwriting analysis can yield, the sleuth alludes to “twenty-three other deductions which would be of more interest to experts than to you” (REIG 374). After collating all of the evidence he gathers from this particular note, Holmes concludes that the two scripts are produced by blood relatives; Alex Cunningham and his father eventually confess to the crime and prove the sleuth right.

Throughout the Canon, Conan Doyle shows his readers that the distinctive characteristics of media are nearly impossible to destroy. The Cunninghams' oddly scribbled note does nothing to conceal their identities, and Jack Stapleton's butchery of the Times similarly fails to disguise its origins (HOUN 467). In yet another example, Holmes explains to Mrs. Laura Lyons that “sometimes a letter may be legible even when burned” (HOUN 515). Signatures have a frightening permanence in the Canon, and machines come to symbolize individuality rather than erase it. Indeed, Holmes himself may be said to represent a singular form of technology, especially with Watson describing him as “the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has ever seen” (SCAN 117). The detective is an information processor of phenomenal skill, yet Holmes's mental prowess is just as distinctive as his quirky idiosyncrasies or his keen sense of the theatrical. After all, it is hard to imagine Poe's M. Dupin or even Chandler's

Philip Marlowe ever taking a revolver to engrave ‘a patriotic VR’ (or equivalent) in the wall with bullets. Like the media he so frequently studies, Holmes strikes a balance between specialization and singularity: the sleuth is an incredible, yet extremely individualized ‘machine’.



Holmes’s intellect constantly gives him the upper hand over the official police force, but the advantages gained from his amateur or “unofficial” status must not be overlooked. By opening alternate avenues of data collection, Holmes is able to take liberties that are simply unavailable to the constabulary. Severely hampered by its structured hierarchies and public interests, the fictional Scotland Yard is essentially a victim of its status as a professional agency. Yard detectives investigate every illegality, trying to apply their standardized procedures to unconventional crimes. Conan Doyle’s depiction of this agency coincides with Beniger’s description of bureaucracy’s primary function:

Foremost among all the technological solutions to the crisis of control—in that it served to control most other technologies—was the rapid growth of formal bureaucracy. . . . Bureaucratic organization serves as the generalized means to control any large social system; it tends to appear wherever a collective activity needs to be coordinated by several people toward explicit and impersonal goals, that is, to be *controlled*. (Beniger 279)

Beniger describes how the Victorian social landscape was being transformed by “the growing ‘systemness’ of society” (Beniger 278). Private companies were introducing managerial hierarchies to handle the vastly increased flow of data, and larger government institutions like the Post Office adopted the latest information processing trends. Perhaps the most pertinent example of “control” and “systemness” was Scotland Yard itself. Though the Yarders and other police forces were charged with maintaining social order, criminality remained a common part of Victorian life. After all, ‘controlling’ this social element largely meant *reacting* to the incidence of crime as it occurred.

Holmes is much more *proactive* than his official counterparts in the Canon, especially while investigating a case; the detective passionately searches for data, and at times scours the very ground on all fours while Lestrade watches from a distance (BOSC 169). The sleuth is free to devote himself completely to the investigation, quite unencumbered by the kind of managerial duties foisted upon Yarders by their own bureaucracy. Embodying a Victorian ideal of specialization, Holmes is a self-defined professional who answers only to himself. Holmes never needs to seek approval for his actions, nor is he forced to waste energy in coordinating multiple agents. While Lestrade concerns himself with answering to his superiors, Holmes's only concern is reconciling the case with his personal sense of justice. The detective is free to consider criminal intentions, possible illegalities, and extenuating circumstances on their individual merits, and not their pertinence to a legal proceeding that *might* follow. By involving himself personally and keeping his networks completely centralized, Holmes naturally avoids any degradation of information. On the rare occasions when Holmes uses agents to act in his stead,<sup>24</sup> he gives specific instructions to these operatives and then leaves them to their own resources. Put another way, the responsibilities of almost any official organization preclude the kind of self-sufficiency that Holmes demands from his own networks. Conversely, the hierarchies of the Scotland Yard model all but ensure the degradation of information, passing reports from one constable to another sergeant until the Scotland Yard detective arrives. Conan Doyle deliberately includes Scotland Yard and its overwhelming bureaucracy to emphasize the inherent advantages of Holmes's *modus operandi*. While interviewing people, the detective's specialized knowledge helps him to determine which questions should be asked and which facts should be ignored. Holmes's analysis of the physical scene is equally thorough, and often results in the discovery of more useful information than any of the efforts of his official colleagues. In short, Holmes

---

<sup>24</sup> Holmes's need to personally involve himself sometimes results in the absolute exclusion of others, including Watson. The detective's preference is always to investigate cases on his own, and uses an extensive range of disguises whenever his true identity would prove a hindrance.

demonstrates how the *absence* of any large-scale organization (or superfluous secondary agents) simply leads to more effective information processing.

Just as the permanence of identity is a recurring theme throughout the Canon, Holmes's standing as a *lone crusader* is continually contrasted against representations of law enforcement organizations to underscore the power of individuality. Holmes embodies the ideal professional intellect, whose expertise and skill highlight the unavoidable shortcomings of the larger police structure. Conan Doyle positions the constabulary as the journeymen of law enforcement, while the Yarders are presumed to be a cut above. The various police institutions form an interrelated *system* that is well-meaning but perpetually ill-equipped to cope with the peculiar problems arising in the tales; concerns about official procedure and legal culpability cripple the effectiveness of these officers during unusual cases. Given these qualities, the Scotland Yard detectives of the Canon are foils to Sherlock's imaginative problem-solving. While both Holmes and Watson remain true to self-prescribed moral codes, Yard Inspectors like G. Lestrade and Tobias Gregson suffer external pressures from multiple organizations (e.g., the police force and the court system):

"Theories are all very well, but we have to deal with a hard-headed British jury . . . . I am a practical man," he said, "and I really cannot undertake to go about the country looking for a left-handed gentleman with a game leg. I should become the laughing-stock of Scotland Yard." (BOSC 170).

On reaching Scotland Yard, however, it was more than an hour before we could get Inspector Gregson and comply with the legal formalities which would enable us to enter the house. (GREE 408)

Holmes wants to see justice served and mysteries resolved, but plays the 'game' of investigation for its own sake. Conversely, the Yarders are preoccupied with procedures, juries, and reputations<sup>25</sup>—all factors that affect Scotland Yard's ability to effectively process information in order to resolve their investigations.

---

<sup>25</sup> Though Holmes praises Gregson as "the smartest of the Scotland Yarders," the sleuth also comments on the rivalry between Gregson and Lestrade over reputation. "They have their knives into one



Hence, numerous police officials make erroneous conclusions due to their professional status. Concerns about organization hierarchy, job performance, and ambitious rank-rising become key elements in both the officers' characterizations and their subsequent failings. Some, like Lestrade, simply fall prey to the pride of office. Bolstered by the measure of power bequeathed to him in the form of a badge, Lestrade's judgmental mind is prone to myopia and being "full of the one idea" (STUD 19). Heedless of Holmes's warnings that "it is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data" (SCAN 119), Lestrade remains predisposed to half-baked conclusions despite the crack investigative company he keeps (BOSC 169, NORW 574). Only those inspectors who have the presence of mind to recognize their own inadequacies, like Stanley Hopkins (BLAC 633) and Gregson (STUD 19), earn unsolicited praise from Holmes; after all, in deferring to the sleuth's abilities, these inspectors demonstrate a wisdom absent from Lestrade's prideful investigations. Though other Yard detectives are capable of employing Holmes's more rudimentary techniques, the conventionality of their reasoning makes Holmes rage at their "incredible imbecility" (FIVE 183). The subtleties of close crime scene analysis and even the newspaper ruses that Holmes orchestrates are not beyond the abilities of the official police, but simply past the limits of their *imagination*.

With Holmes's perceptual clarity and flexibility, Conan Doyle illustrates how a wealth of information flows freely and efficiently through the detective to the proper channels, official or otherwise. Furthermore, the author positions this free-flowing data as yet another advantage that the Great Detective enjoys by operating *outside* of hierarchical organizations. Holmes's distinctive personality and curious habits rescue him from the dangers of traditional thinking and systematized bureaucracy. Conversely, Conan Doyle's Scotland Yard and official constabulary symbolize the deficiencies of regimented hierarchical systems, as if to justify the detective's choice to remain a self-defined

---

another, too. There are as jealous as a pair of professional beauties. There will be some fun over this case if they are both put upon the scent" (STUD 19).

authority. The ineffectiveness of these systems is reinforced by representatives in each stratum of the organization; Scotland Yard inspectors are shown to be closer to Holmes's intellectual level yet they remain devoted to antiquated methods, while the general constabulary is usually depicted as honest laborers suited to more menial tasks. As Ronald Pearsall suggests, "Whatever their faults, the policemen in [Conan Doyle's] fiction are a fine body of men, as committed to the finding and punishment of wrongdoers as Holmes" (Pearsall 117).

Holmes's treatment of police officers, however, is inconsistent throughout the Canon; the sleuth approaches lawmen with varying degrees of civility, depending upon their personal character and their presumed intelligence. With similar disdain for the police bureaucracy, Watson criticizes the constable who charges Jefferson Hope with murder: "The official was a white-faced, unemotional man, who went through his duties in a dull, mechanical way" (STUD 56). In the earlier sets of short stories (The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes and others), Holmes rarely has anything better to say about policing agencies, and frequently condescends to the lesser officers that he must sometimes interview. Holmes's distaste is well justified once the mercenary tendencies of an officer like Constable John Rance reveal themselves. Rance irritably suggests that Holmes should read his report if the detective wishes more information; that is, until Holmes begins to play with a golden half-sovereign in his hand (STUD 25-26). The detective is somewhat more forgiving of Yard inspectors like Lestrade and Gregson, largely because these men often grant Holmes access to official investigations in progress. However, later stories in the Canon present a more tempered view of uniformed peacekeepers. Most members of the constabulary are shown to be simple representatives following the protocols that their positions demand, like the officers at Henry Peters' home in The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax. Since Holmes and Watson lack a proper warrant, the officers ask them to leave; the sergeant follows the two after escorting them outside in

order to say, "Sorry, Mr. Holmes, but that's the law" (LADY 824). For Conan Doyle, the official law enforcers only hinder the 'heroes' and often let the 'villains' run free.

In the real world, Victorian newspapers and magazines held a similar view of law enforcement agencies, and remained quite critical of the great bureaucracy's inability to deal with the important criminal matters of the day. Public opinion concerning the police during the late-1800s did not paint a vastly different picture from Conan Doyle's patchwork of competence and "imbecility." As David Taylor describes, however, the public's view was predicated on the new societal role that the constabulary was being forced to fill:

Whether they approved or not, the police were increasingly expected to enforce laws directed against clearly defined outcast groups whose behavior had been deemed to be in some way threatening to the health, security and morals of society. The police commissioners made it known that they had reservations about the police as enforcers of morals rather than fighters of crime, but in the public eye the police had a central role to play in the re-moralising of late-Victorian society and this had a corrosive effect on the public's belief in police impartiality . . . . (Taylor 102)

Moreover, the myth of the career criminal had taken hold of the collective imagination; Taylor goes on to note how this dreaded menace "was, in very large measure, an artificial construct . . . . However, a bogeyman was created: the habitual criminal, waging war on society" (Taylor 103). Just as popular newspapers and tabloids were inundating the public consciousness with tales of rampant crime in the streets, Jack the Ripper burst out of London's East End like some horrific nightmare. The depraved killer was a cunning man who murdered with impudence, and the police seemed incapable to stop him. Societal fears concerning the Ripper were deliberately exacerbated by the tabloid industry, whose affinity for sensational stories directly corresponded with a tendency to find fault with almost any faceless bureaucracy; the police, for example, proved to be an easy target.

The Ripper murders captured the public's interest and galvanized concerns about police effectiveness less than a year after the publication of Conan Doyle's first Holmes

novel;<sup>26</sup> in fact, this coincidence might help explain the phenomenal popularity of an ultra-successful sleuth who helped a group of befuddled Yarders desperate for assistance in unusual cases. While discussing the real Criminal Investigations Department, Joan Lock outlines the key characteristics desirable in a 'competent' investigator:

Good thief-catchers did not need to be educated or even particularly intelligent. Energy, enthusiasm, gut reaction, knowing their patch and their people, were often sufficient compensation. And while tact, mental agility and flexibility, combined with the ability to act quickly on conclusions drawn, might be necessary to solve the more complex cases, academics or great thinkers were certainly not required. They would a) find much of the groundwork boring and b) still be pondering on the finer esoteric points when the whole thing was over. (Lock 81)

While Lock's description characterizes the policemen that populate Conan Doyle's tales and their limited information gathering abilities, it all but excludes Sherlock Holmes by name. After all, the sleuth seems to exemplify the exact type of 'academic thinker' that would apparently 'find much of the groundwork boring'. However, this excerpt illustrates yet another basic difference between reality and the idealized world depicted by Conan Doyle's fiction. While Holmes embodies some of the traits that Lock outlines, the real Scotland Yarders were clearly a breed apart.<sup>27</sup> Always choosing effective agents, Holmes keeps his organization limited in order to keep himself close to the action, and properly manages these resources in order to solve the case. If Scotland Yard and the ranks of the constabulary were actually filled with the uneducated men that Lock describes, one wonders at how such a disadvantaged bureaucracy would manage to stay *functional*, much less responsive. Conan Doyle's constables may fit Lock's profile of officer traits, but this only emphasizes how Sherlock Holmes embodies the ideal characteristics of a detective.

---

<sup>26</sup> The first Ripper murder, that of Mary Ann (Polly) Nichols, occurred in August 1888 under a gas lamp in London's Whitechapel district. *A Study in Scarlet* was completed by Conan Doyle in April 1886 (Nordon 33), and published in *Beeton's Christmas Annual* in 1887 (Redmond 1993, 54).

<sup>27</sup> Curiously, a canine metaphor recurs throughout the Canon—while Watson's colorful dissertations on an investigation sometimes slip into comparisons of Holmes as a bloodhound on the trail (BOSC 168), he frequently comments on Lestrade's features as those of the more lethargic "bulldog" (SECO 735). Truly, a breed apart.

The 'esoteric' nature of Holmes's skills becomes a crucial strength: the flexibility of his reasoning and the creativity of his methods are sorely lacking in the policemen that inhabit Conan Doyle's London. To establish Holmes as the celebrated expert, the official police forces have to be weakened in a way that does not completely detract from their functionality. Neither Conan Doyle's patriotism nor Holmes's narrative situation would allow for the complete discreditation of the police. Thus, systematized organization becomes the critically important Achilles' heel of law enforcement in the Canon. Christopher Clausen elaborates on the conventionality of Conan Doyle's police forces, and their inherent weaknesses:

The police are conventional not merely in the literary but also in the social sense of the word; they think and operate by conventions. As a result, they are often the victims of their own orthodoxy, of their social roles as respectable, practical, untheoretical men, whenever they encounter an especially bright or unorthodox criminal. They become blinded by their own unimaginative assumptions about how people act, which are those of the classes they are sworn to protect. (Orel 74)

The full import of Holmes's marginality now comes into focus: he moves freely among all classes<sup>28</sup> looking for intellectual challenges, having no superiors to please and no set protocols to follow. The police are shown to deal adequately with the *majority* of crimes that arise, and Holmes simply complements this function. After all, if traditional law enforcers were completely incompetent, Conan Doyle's fictional London would be an untenable social wasteland filled with crime. A single hero would be no match for the chaos of such a world. Little good comes from establishing Holmes as the best detective in a universe of hopeless policemen; being the *premier specialist* working amidst journeymen of the trade, however, gives that distinction some measure of value. At one point, Holmes commends Lestrade specifically (and Scotland Yard in general) since, "there may be an occasional want of imaginative intuition down there, but they lead the

---

<sup>28</sup> Stephen Knight notes how Holmes "is in touch with all levels of society" (Knight 83), a quality especially evident in *The Adventure of the Noble Bachelor*. The tale begins with Watson as he makes special mention of Holmes's mail from that morning—letters from Lord St. Simon (the second son of the Duke of Balmoral), a fishmonger, and a tide waiter. As the detective jokes, "my correspondence has certainly the charm of variety" (NOBL 243).

world for thoroughness and method” (3GAR 1035). Given the serialization of Conan Doyle’s tales in the Strand, this ‘thoroughness’ has special relevance to Pyrhönen’s critical difficulty with the detective story series and its basic premise:

The power of the detective’s solution to reestablish order and harmony appears particularly limited when evil, book after book, is continually presenting itself anew. Would it not seem that, in the world of the whodunit, it is the disruption that is the permanent feature rather than harmony? (Pyrhönen 59)

This observation is pertinent to certain detective fiction subgenera like the cynical, hard-boiled detectives of Dashiell Hammett or Raymond Chandler, where corruption and crime are integral components of the fictional worlds that the authors create. However, Conan Doyle presents a character tackling cases that are beyond the police’s ability to solve, or that fall beyond officialdom’s range of influence. Crime is ever-present, but seen as flashes of lawlessness rather than some unstoppable pervasive disease. Moreover, unlike the hard-boiled detective story, the majority of Holmes’s cases conclude with the detective scoring another victory over the criminal element. Of course, some battles are won more decisively than others.

Despite their rather similar professions, Holmes and the police take very different views of media. Lestrade and his professional brethren<sup>29</sup> perceive newspapers through the lens of their official status, seeing newsprint simply as a public forum in which the constabulary’s efforts are applauded or denounced. Conversely, Holmes’s view of the papers as a practical source for preliminary information underscores his ‘amateur’ status. Since he has no official authority to demand information, Holmes must gather all the data available to him, including those facts found in the columns of “bald” and “vulgar” newsprint sources (IDEN 147). Claiming indifference at seeing his name in the paper (SIGN 64), the detective relishes the dramatic irony of the ‘amateur’ outstripping officialdom:

---

<sup>29</sup> In another subtle delineation of the Victorian social climate, Conan Doyle ensures there are no female officers within the Canon. In fact, Irene Adler is one of precious few female characters who cannot be categorized as a “damsel in distress.”

To his sombre and cynical spirit all popular applause was always abhorrent, and nothing amused him more at the end of a successful case than to hand over the actual exposure to some orthodox official, and to listen with a mocking smile to the general chorus of misplaced congratulation. (DEVI 783)

For Holmes, conventional thinking and antiquated protocols will always relegate traditional law enforcement agencies to second place. The detective shares this sentiment with Watson during one of their investigations:

“Besides, we may chance to hit upon some other obvious facts which may have been by no means obvious to Mr. Lestrade. You know me too well to think that I am boasting when I say that I shall either confirm or destroy his theory by means which he is quite incapable of employing, or even of understanding.” (BOSC 161)

These ‘means’ have been developed specifically by Holmes to resolve those cases that baffle the police or sit beyond their realm of influence. The specialization so valued in the late-1800s is already an essential part of Holmes’s *modus operandi*: the detective actively resists standardization in his own pursuits, constantly challenging his intellect with cases that will prove his own worth.

Watson understands the difference between the detective’s objectives and those of officialdom: “For, working as he did rather for the love of his art than for the acquirement of wealth, [Holmes] refused to associate himself with any investigation which did tend towards the unusual, and even the fantastic” (SPEC 214). The investigative ‘game’ that Holmes plays relies upon the expert gathering of information as much as its proper reading (or decoding), and Scotland Yard’s stolid patterns of reasoning handicap them whenever problems do not conform to predefined criteria. Even the caseload of these law enforcers is dictated by procedure, since the police are locked into investigating *illegalities*; cases are simply punishable crimes with no client per se, apart from the public interest. Due to the official standing and conventional objectives of law enforcement agencies like the police, an officer’s primary focus remains the censure of illegal activities; the abstract dilemmas that so captivate Holmes fall well outside this rubric.

To emphasize the serious limitations of the police, Conan Doyle deliberately creates scenarios in which people suffer cruel injustices that cannot officially be classified as criminal. Resolving these cases depends as much on Holmes's professional discretion and his amateur status as it does on his intellectual prowess. The sleuth clearly understands the social dynamics at work in London:

“Only one of those whimsical little incidents which will happen when you have four million human beings all jostling each other within the space of a few square miles Amid the action and reaction of so dense a swarm of humanity, every possible combination of events may be expected to take place, and many a little problem will be presented which may be striking and bizarre without being criminal” (BLUE 201).

Watson agrees, and corroborates Holmes's observation by noting that “of the last six cases which I have added to my notes, three have been entirely free of any legal crime” (BLUE 202). In fact, Holmes's lack of official status within the police ranks attracts more than a few clients. The King of Bohemia (SCAN), James Windibank (IDEN 155), and Percy Phelps of the Foreign Office (NAVA 413)—all three choose the sleuth *because* of his independence from Scotland Yard. Holmes himself is quick to note that “what I know is unofficial; what [Hopkins] knows is official. I have the right to private judgment, but [Scotland Yard] has none. He must disclose all, or he is a traitor to the service” (ABBE 723). Ian Ousby describes how insecurities about police effectiveness and press involvement give Holmes an added advantage:

The distinction is an important one, and Holmes uses his status as private individual rather than public official for more than hushing up delicate scandals and correcting official wrongs. He is in a real sense a law unto himself: the representative of a private code of justice which transcends the technicalities or the inflexibilities of official law. (Ousby 168)

When resolving cases that fall outside the boundaries of ‘official law’, Holmes often decides on his own how justice might best be served. By frequently stressing Holmes's staunchly moral world-view, Conan Doyle sidesteps the avocation of vigilantism that the subjective application of justice by a self-appointed judge might otherwise suggest.

Regardless of his moral character, the sleuth has no objections to bending the laws his official counterparts find so ‘inflexible’ in the interests of justice. Early in the Canon,



Holmes's indifference to the legality of his pursuits is established by his unethical plot to discover the secret hiding place where Irene Adler keeps an incriminating photograph (SCAN 126-128).<sup>30</sup> In other cases, Holmes trespasses on private property to steal sensitive papers from the reprehensible extortionist Charles Augustus Milverton (CHAS 650); trespasses again to see what "correspondence" has been left at the Caulfield Gardens flat (BRUC 776); and threatens Henry Peters at gunpoint to discover what the man has done with Lady Frances Carfax (LADY 823). At times, even the hamstrung police benefit from the sleuth's cavalier attitude and flair for theatrics. For instance, when Holmes gains entry into a Myrtles house by forcing open a window latch in front of Gregson, the Yarder recognizes his own impotence and expresses his gratitude for Holmes's indiscretion (GREE 408). These cases bring perhaps the greatest Holmesian conundrum to the fore: though obsessed with dealing honorably and in the strictest of confidence with his clients, the detective's very career centers upon destroying a multitude of privacies, from those imposed by media to those protected by the law.

While on the trail of a suspect, Holmes's status as an 'unofficial' detective allows him the freedom to explore some unconventional options for gathering information: such as Toby the mongrel, the Baker Street Irregulars, and the skillful use of personal disguises. Members of Scotland Yard and the Metropolitan London Police might even be included here as another non-traditional data source, since the detective frequently finds cases of interest thanks to his official peers.<sup>31</sup> The sheer number of officers walking the beat at the turn of the century made them a hard resource to ignore; Conan Doyle

---

<sup>30</sup> Disguised as a "Nonconformist clergyman," Holmes arranges for a scuffle to break out where he appears to be injured, just at the time when Adler is arriving home. Holmes's accomplices entreat the lady to allow them inside so that the 'clergyman' may recover, while Watson plays his part in the scam by throwing "an ordinary plumber's smoke rocket" into Adler's sitting room window. As Holmes predicts, Adler runs to her hidden safe to retrieve an important photograph, believing her home to be on fire—thereby giving the detective the information he needs in order to regain the photo.

<sup>31</sup> The official law enforcement forces are included here as an 'unconventional' source of information for Holmes simple because of his status as an outsider. Most other Victorian citizens did not enjoy the professional liberties that the police, and particularly Scotland Yard, understandably afforded to the Baker Street sleuth (given the benefits gained through his involvement).

establishes with a patriotic flourish that, “it’s a fine, law-abiding country is England, and there’s always a policeman within hail” (BOSC 173). Jo McMurtry provides some further context for modern readers:

In the business district and many residential parts of London, policemen were so numerous that citizens felt a real increase of safety. The implication in Victorian novels that there is always a policeman around the corner (“Officer, would you step in here for a moment?”), which may seem to us so suspiciously convenient to the plot as to represent an exaggeration of fact, was an everyday part of life to many original readers. (McMurtry 181)

As a true utilitarian, Holmes is not governed by class or economic concerns: the detective will employ any and all effective resources at his disposal to solve a case, be it police officers or even dogs. Though Toby is “an ugly, long-haired, lop-eared creature,” Holmes swears that he “would rather have Toby’s help than that of the whole detective force of London” due to the dog’s incredible sense of smell and tracking ability (SIGN 84, 83). Just as Holmes is the specialist of choice despite his ‘amateur’ status and idiosyncratic habits, Toby’s effectiveness is the key trait that endears the “half spaniel, half lurcher” to the detective; his mongrel pedigree and scruffy appearance is inconsequential.

Similarly, Holmes sings the praises of the Baker Street Irregulars, a group of London street urchins that the sleuth occasionally recruits for a small price (STUD, SIGN, CROO), since:

“[t]here’s more work to be got out of those little beggars than out of a dozen of the force. The mere sight of an official-looking person seals men’s lips. These youngsters, however, go everywhere and hear everything. There are as sharp as needles, too; all they want is organization.” (STUD 30)

Holmes finds that these resources complement his own considerable detective work; in short, each network functions in a role that Holmes either *cannot* or *will not* perform. The amateur detective refuses to become an official member of the British police force, since it would jeopardize the freedoms which his ‘consulting specialist’ position allows. Though his senses do at times seem superhuman, Holmes cannot track the creosote scent that Toby follows in The Sign of Four. And though Holmes is a master of disguise, the Irregulars form a network of information gatherers able to cover most of London

efficiently while remaining perfectly camouflaged within the urban landscape. Disguises offer Holmes a wider range of face-to-face interaction, and allow the detective to infiltrate a variety of social strata without detection. With each of the sixteen different characters that he creates (Ross 54-55), Holmes demonstrates his complete command of personal media; the detective's understanding of information transmission allows Holmes to mask his own identity while authentically adopting another. By studying the tactics and techniques of the criminal underworld, Holmes has mastered the subtleties of the games they play. While the detective can instantly spot the efforts of a forger, Holmes demonstrates his proficiency in identity transmission through forgeries of his physical being, either through electrically backlit silhouettes (EMPT 561) or wax replicas (MAZA 970-971). None of these resources, however, match the incalculable value of the sleuth's deductive abilities; this skill transforms the entire world into a medium for Holmes's keen eye and disciplined, scientific mind to read.

Conan Doyle's famous sleuth resonates with the attitudes of a particular media environment, and the prevailing scientific theories of the time shape the way in which this fictional character is represented. Similar to our current period of technological development, the Victorians were experiencing a revolution of scientific knowledge that included the study of media and its profound influence on society. Using the development of natural sciences as his focus, E.B. Hobsbawm notes how the Victorian period began to consider scientific theory in terms of its *comprehensibility* (or accessibility) to the reading public:

Even the Darwinian theory of evolution was impressive, not because the *concept* of evolution was new—it had been familiar for decades—but because it provided for the first time a satisfactory explanatory model for the origin of species, and did so in terms which were entirely familiar even to non-scientists since they echoed the most familiar concept of the liberal economy, competition. Indeed, an unusual number of great scientists wrote in terms that allowed them to be readily popularised—sometimes excessively so . . . . (Hobsbawm 297)

This observation directly relates to the way that science is represented in Conan Doyle's fiction, especially since Holmes's specialized training amalgamates scientific knowledge

from a number of different fields. While the investigations demonstrate the relevance of science to everyday life,<sup>32</sup> Holmes also popularizes the kinds of scientific methodologies he uses during his investigations. Taking full advantage of the ideally closed system in which he operates, the sleuth continually touts the utility of rational, objective data collection. Holmes's familiar maxims evoke the sense of the "mechanistic simplicity" (Tracy ix) that governs Conan Doyle's fictional universe; in the Canon, the detective frequently reminds Watson that "we must look for consistency. Where there is a want of it we must suspect deception" (THOR 990). Holmes bases his entire professional existence on the ability of signs (or clues) to penetrate any mystery, since a careful reading of the crime scene often illuminates the entire chain of events. Conan Doyle distills the Victorian confidence in science and reason that pervades the Canon into Holmes's most quoted maxim: that "when you have excluded the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth" (BERY 270).<sup>33</sup> Holmes rarely questions his own abilities, and never doubts that the most fantastic mystery will finally be reduced to a rational explanation of events. In truth, Conan Doyle does not allow it; every problem has its solution, every 'adventure' its end, every message its medium (and vice versa).

By translating codes and trivialities into useful data, Holmes restores an equilibrium upset by incomplete or exclusionary communication circuits. The sleuth has no peer in solving mysteries so puzzling in their singularity that they resist the conventional methodologies and social systems meant to deal with such matters. Though Scotland Yard is an effective bureaucratic system that serves a generalized purpose, each of Holmes's cases vividly illustrates the shortcomings of organized law enforcement.

---

<sup>32</sup> The Canon makes explicit use of mathematics, genetics, biology, botany, and chemistry (to name but a few). Apart from a short list that Watson gives in A Study in Scarlet, Conan Doyle never fully defines the extent of Holmes's scientific expertise.

<sup>33</sup> Mr. Spock of the Star Trek series quotes this tenet verbatim in the film Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country. That Spock lays claim to familial links to the famous detective moments later demonstrates how Holmes has been adopted into the popular consciousness, transcending genre boundaries as a cultural touchstone.

Explaining the nature of his profession in *A Study in Scarlet*, [Holmes] portrays himself as the man to whom officialdom turns when it is baffled, but in practice he is often the man to whom the private citizen turns when suffering from the wrongs and mistakes of officialdom. (Ousby 167)

The Yarders' sense of duty is predicated on the legality and propriety of their actions, which in turn forces the inspectors to suppress their personal judgment. Holmes's justice is infinitely more subjective, and remains the single most effective means of resolving unique cases in the Canon. So, whenever the police's orthodoxy cripples their ability to deal with an unusual mystery, Conan Doyle's detective demonstrates once again how he is ideally suited for the job. The fact that he has no badge only enhances his effectiveness. Holmes's role as the righteous champion does not depend on his mental acuity or his moral principles, but rather on his supreme ability to control and manipulate the media of his world: the detective's intimate understanding of observation and inference grants him almost superhuman powers. Holmes is exceptional not for what he *sees*, but for where he gets his information: from newspapers, slum children, police briefings, and mud-stains on your pants.

## C H A P T E R   T H R E E

**MONOGRAPHS, PAMPHLETS, AND  
ADVENTURES**

---

Literature is not exhaustible, for the sufficient and simple reason that a single book is not. A book is not an isolated entity: it is a narration, an axis of innumerable narrations. One literature differs from another, either before or after it, not so much because of the text as for the manner in which it is read.

*Jorge Luis Borges, For Bernard Shaw (1952)*

---

While tales of Sherlock Holmes address issues of communication technology and information processing, the entire Canon also offers a multifaceted media experience to the reader. Since the stories only allow brief glimpses into the sleuth's peculiarities or the doctor's moral convictions, Holmes and Watson remain *hypertextual* characters greater than the sum of their total literary parts. Conan Doyle carefully constructs the Holmes and Watson characters through successive tales; readers learn about the two gradually, bit by bit. As the exhaustive cross-referencing required by a concordance's entry for 'Holmes, Sherlock' indicates, any sense of the *complete* character is a product of reading various adventures and slowly piecing traits together. Furthermore, since Holmes is a media figure generated in two Strands (Conan Doyle's and Watson's), the narrative situation that Conan Doyle develops intentionally blurs the distinction between reality and fiction. From this perspective, the Canon maintains a complex duality of its own. As a series of self-contained fictions whose characterizations and narratives bleed into one another, the Canon simultaneously seeks closure while constantly leaving links to other (often untold) stories.

Though the historical context does influence the general tone and rhythm of the stories, Conan Doyle's sensitivity to media inspires the self-referentiality of the overall narrative. Dr. John H. Watson's fictive authorship of the Holmes stories for a fictional

Strand further implicates the reader by having the narrative structure rationalize *how* audiences come to receive the text in their hands. With his obvious devotion to the stories he ‘tells’, Watson’s role as chronicler gives even greater complexity to Sherlock Holmes as a creation of print culture. Through the veneer of Watson’s authorship, Conan Doyle uses conventional media forms as narrative touchstones within the Canon; telegrams, telephones, typewriters, newsprint, reference books, and handwriting are familiar technologies that contribute to Watson’s texts. This chapter will focus upon media issues addressed by the Canon’s rich narrative metafiction: the critical perspectives introduced by having characters generate texts; the dynamics of Watson’s role as chronicler and mediating filter; and finally, the influence of the Canon’s serialized publication upon Holmes as a literary character. In the end, the information about Sherlock Holmes that Watson presumably supplies is second-hand, episodic, and incomplete. By saturating the narrative with media forms, Conan Doyle allows the detective to remain a mystery in himself.

Conan Doyle refuses to allow the conventional boundaries of periodical fiction to restrict the characterization of his famous duo. With his short fiction, the author develops a new form of serialized storytelling beyond that of the fragmented novels offered by other contemporary writers (e.g., Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope).<sup>34</sup> Believing that Holmes belonged to a “lower stratum of literary achievement,” Conan Doyle acknowledges the relationship between a medium’s content and its relative social context. The author wished that his literary achievements would be remembered because of historical novels like The White Company, given his high regard for the intensive research that such writing demanded. Clearly underestimating how popular his two Baker

---

<sup>34</sup> Conan Doyle’s writing employs many of the same narrative devices as other Victorian serial novelists, but remains free of the constraints and restrictions involved with a continuing storyline. After the initial stories, Conan Doyle begins to take advantage of this fact by presenting tales in non-chronological order, frequently revisiting times where Watson was living with Holmes (for his marriage to Mary Morstan). As Robert Patten notes, other authors (including Thackeray and Collins) employed somewhat different strategies: “Developing an appetite for the past, in a sense battenning on mouldy graves like the ivy green, was one secret of the success of serial fiction” (Jordan 138).

Street flatmates would become, Conan Doyle dismissed the narrative richness of the Canon as simple, ‘potboiler’ fiction. In fact, the Holmes stories stand shoulder-to-shoulder with those works of other Victorian writers intrigued by complex narrative frames and concerns about media. Bram Stoker’s vampire hunters in Dracula are extremely self-conscious of their own media creations (diary entries, wax cylinder phonograph recordings, etc.), but the fictional collation of their stories supposedly happens much later. Using the content provided by these characters’ accounts, Stoker develops a metafiction to explain how the textual object of the novel is created for the audience. Taking this concept even further, Conan Doyle has Watson’s awareness of the reading audience govern his style of narration, and opts to have his characters fully cognizant of the publication as a textual object within the fictional world itself: a Strand within the Strand. Conan Doyle’s narrative structure blurs the distinction between reality and fiction; the Canon offers a metafictional explanation of how the stories arrive in print, and allows the characters themselves to be aware of their own media representations. While this narrative device allows for the ingenious self-promotion of the magazine, the characters’ commentary on their own texts creates another level within an already elaborate narrative structure.

Conan Doyle’s distinctive characters are further defined by the specific commentary and criticism of media offered by each personality: Holmes is ever the pragmatist, while Watson remains loyal to his proud British nationalistic perspective.<sup>35</sup> Holmes comments on Watson’s abilities as an author, criticizing the questionable artistic choices that his roommate makes while chronicling their adventures:

“Hopkins has called me in seven times, and on each occasion his summons has been entirely justified,” said Holmes. “I fancy that every one of [Hopkins] cares has found its way into your collection, and I must admit, Watson, that you have some power of

---

<sup>35</sup> Holmes jokingly refers to another textual document which Watson prepares during the first novel—a paper outlining Holmes’s limitations. “Philosophy, astronomy, and politics were marked at zero, I remember. Botany variable, geology profound as regards the mudstains from any region within fifty miles of town, chemistry eccentric, anatomy unsystematic, sensational literature and crime records unique, violin player, boxer, swordsman, lawyer, and self-poisoner by cocaine and tobacco” (FIVE 182).



selection which atones for much which I deplore in your narratives. Your fatal habit of looking at everything from the point of view of a story instead of as a scientific exercise has ruined what might have been an instructive and even classical series of demonstrations. You slur over work of the utmost finesse and delicacy, in order to dwell upon sensational details which may excite, but cannot possibly instruct, the reader.” (ABBE 712-713)

This complaint is perfectly characteristic of Holmes, and consistent with his general views on literature and the inherent value of scientific objectivity. This philosophical difference is introduced early in the Canon when the detective apparently objects to *Watson's* “small brochure” entitled *A Study in Scarlet*. Holmes’s critical review of the work appears in the very next Conan Doyle novel:

[Holmes] shook his head sadly.

“I glanced over it,” said he. “Honestly, I cannot congratulate you upon it. Detection is, or ought to be, an exact science, and should be treated in the same cold and unemotional manner. You have attempted to tinge it with romanticism, which produces much the same effect as if you worked a love-story or an elopement into the fifth proposition of Euclid.” (SIGN 65)

Here again, the detective expresses his deep concern over the narrative choices that any third-person account involves. Holmes always looks for raw data; subjective accounts only frustrate the investigator by hindering the ‘exact science’ of ‘detection’. When he finds that *Watson's* texts are introducing certain facts while foregoing others, Holmes naturally touts the value of objectivity.

By having Holmes criticize *Watson's* authorship, Conan Doyle is able to address the relation between media and authorial intention: the medium for which a person is writing naturally affects the text that is produced. Just as the terseness of a telegram might be unacceptable in a letter, Holmes suggests that the dramatic plots of a magazine story are hardly relevant in a scientific monograph. Ironically, the detective finds fault with *Watson's* writing because it is quite unlike his own. Conan Doyle actively promotes Holmes’s scientific monographs and journal papers as a way of legitimizing the detective’s pursuit of specialized knowledge. After all, by Holmes’s estimation, any specialist worth his/her salt should have “contributed to the literature of the subject”

(REDH 133). Appropriately, the Canon alludes to some 17 articles<sup>36</sup> from the detective's impressive bibliography: topics include the identification of 140 types of tobacco ash (STUD 24, SIGN 65, BOSC 171), 160 different kinds of secret writings (DANC 595), and even tattoos (REDH 133). Apparently Holmes has even authored a monograph on the methodology of dating documents (HOUN 452). The detective proudly cites his own work, thereby promoting himself as an authority on those subjects:

“Oh, didn't you know?” [Holmes] cried, laughing. “Yes, I have been guilty of several monographs. They are all upon technical subjects. Here, for example, is one ‘Upon the Distinction between the Ashes of the Various Tobaccos.’ In it I enumerate a hundred and forty forms of cigar, cigarette, and pipe tobacco, with coloured plates illustrating the difference in the ash. It is a point which is continually turning up in criminal trials, and which is sometimes of supreme importance as a clue. . . . Here is my monograph upon the tracing of footsteps, with some remarks upon the uses of plaster of Paris as a preserver of impresses. Here, too, is a curious little work upon the influence of a trade upon the form of the hand, with lithotypes of the hands of slaters, sailors, corkcutters, compositors, weavers, and diamond-polishers. That is a matter of great practical interest to the scientific detective—especially in cases of unclaimed bodies, or in discovering the antecedents of criminals. But I weary you with my hobby.” (SIGN 65)

Holmes's understandable preoccupation with facts and ‘minutiae’ leads him to conceive of only one text, much as his investigations inevitably lead to one solution despite the myriad of possibilities at the outset. Given his affinity for objective accounts, Holmes doubts that the doctor's sentimental perspective could ever produce a text of equal value.

In fact, the sleuth's regard for reserved, unemotional, pseudo-scientific writing would seem to negate the possibility of the Canon stories *ever* reaching a reading audience. In reading Watson's accounts, the audience realizes that Holmes's collection of adventures would probably have appeared as sober monographs in some obscure scientific periodical. Only when Holmes responds to Watson's earnest request to write a case himself does the detective begin to understand the particular authorial challenges that the doctor faces.<sup>37</sup> These stylistic distinctions emphasize the prejudices held by

---

<sup>36</sup> Thomas W. Ross, Orlando Park, and James Tracy each provide concordance entries outlining the Great Detective's publications. Ross's Good Old Index provides the enumerated outline from which the above figure is cited (Ross 86).

<sup>37</sup> Holmes himself appropriates Watson's role as narrator in two stories (BLAN and LION). At the outset of The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier, the detective is “compelled to admit that, having taken my

Holmes and others (including Conan Doyle) concerning the hierarchy of media outlets. Though Holmes initially criticizes Watson for his artistic choices, the detective later realizes how writing for a magazine differs from producing articles for a scientific journal.<sup>38</sup> After visiting Reichenbach Falls, Conan Doyle comes to a similar understanding.<sup>39</sup> Journals assume a pre-existing interest in the subject material for its scientific value, but popular magazines must generate this interest with the entertainment value of its stories. Conan Doyle creates a delicious irony when Holmes, a character designed specifically for the narrative-driven medium of the popular magazine, disparages Watson's art for the very qualities which led to his creation in the real Strand.



Conan Doyle's intricate narrative shell reflects the gamesmanship that pervades the mysteries themselves, and offers an appropriately rich backdrop for the Canon's intellectual puzzles. This metafiction is designed to appear natural and plausible while mirroring the playful complexity of the mysteries themselves. After all, each of Holmes's cases has to end differently in order for the series to remain dramatically satisfying for the reader. Given the hypertextual nature of the main characters, Holmes himself seems freshly conceived with each new idiosyncrasy or peculiar habit that is revealed. However, Watson has precious little mystery surrounding him, despite his importance to the narrative shell. The doctor is a natural foil to Holmes's aestheticism, and faithfully represents the attitudes of an average (though staunchly moral) professional person. While intelligent enough to follow the story, Watson is never brilliant enough to solve the mystery independently. In Conan Doyle's tales, the good doctor is just that: consistently

---

pen in my and, I do begin to realize that the matter must be presented in such a way as may interest the reader" (BLAN 1071).

<sup>38</sup> Watson explains to the reader why some of Holmes's failures have not been included within his published works. "Some [curious problems], and not the least interesting, were complete failures, and as such will hardly bear narrating, since no final explanation is forthcoming. A problem without a solution may interest the student, but can hardly fail to annoy the casual reader" (THOR 981).

<sup>39</sup> When Conan Doyle is overcome by fan mail lamenting Holmes's apparent death, the magazine readers' emotional attachment to popular characters becomes all too clear.

*good* but rarely *great*; idiosyncratic but hardly eccentric; heroic but never truly the hero. Watson's mediocrity allows his narrative to blend more naturally into the Canon's metafictional shell, encouraging the audience to focus on those events being 'recounted' through his texts. Watson's self-effacement and admitted lack of genius help elevate Holmes's qualities to mythic proportions. Pearsall comments further on Watson's surrogacy, and offers some reasons for the character's interesting resonance with audiences:

There was a good deal of Dr. Watson not only in Doyle but in the readers of the *Strand*. They were largely middle class or improved working class anxious for acceptance, and they were inclined to share Watson's attitude to Holmes, compounded of respect, awe and friendship, yet without a hint of servile kowtowing. (Pearsall 57)

Conan Doyle intentionally develops a narrating persona that would facilitate and augment the telling of the tales. To this end, Watson is a stalwartly honest man of conscience and discretion, whose convictions lend a simple credibility to his authorship.

Fueled by admiration for the detective, Watson writes his stories with a desire to share the wonder and excitement of their mutual experiences, and to see that Holmes gets the public credit he is due. These sentiments are frequently cited by Watson as the reason he puts pen to paper:

I had no keener pleasure than in following Holmes in his professional investigations, and in admiring the rapid deductions, as swift as intuitions, and yet always founded on a logical basis, with which he unravelled the problems which were submitted to him. (SPEC 214)

Using print as his medium, Watson attempts to approximate his experience of Holmes's investigations by withholding the sleuth's solutions until the end of the story. Holmes may have some hand in this, too, since "he was exceedingly loathe to communicate his full plans to any other person until the instant of their fulfillment" (HOUN 537). Though he apparently writes each tale after the fact and knows the outcome of each mystery, Watson rarely gives hints as to its outcome beyond the clues that Holmes finds during the course of the investigation. Instead, Conan Doyle chooses to develop a narrator who demonstrates (and openly professes) his interest in 'reliable' storytelling. The doctor does

not reinvent himself by augmenting his contributions to the adventures—instead, Watson relocates himself in the powerful position of *chronicler*, describing his modest participation as Holmes’s associate within the texts he creates.

Watson’s narrative is also unguardedly critical of Holmes, and even of himself; this candor reinforces the plausibility of the metafiction that Conan Doyle creates. The doctor is similarly cognizant of his artistic shortcomings and candidly reviews the editing choices he is forced to make:

Somewhere in the vaults of the bank of Cox and Co., at Charing Cross, there is a travel-worn and battered tin despatch-box . . . crammed with papers, nearly all of which are records of cases to illustrate the curious problems which Mr. Sherlock Holmes had at various times to examine. Some, and not the least interesting, were complete failures, and as such will hardly bear narrating, since no final explanation is forthcoming. A problem without a solution may interest the student, but can hardly fail to annoy the casual reader. (THOR 981)

Throughout the Canon, Watson is bound both by client confidentiality and by the restrictions of the print medium. The doctor must weed through his stockpile of notes, choosing the most *interesting* stories for the Strand from those cases that can be made public. Though constantly influenced by his obvious admiration for his roommate, the doctor never hesitates to write frankly about the shortcomings of “the last man with whom one would care to take anything approaching a liberty” (SIGN 64):

I confess, too, that I was irritated by the egotism which seemed to demand that every line of my pamphlet should be devoted to his own special doings. More than once during the years that I had lived with him in Baker Street I had observed that a small vanity underlay my companion’s quiet and didactic manner. (SIGN 65)

This reticence upon his part had increased the somewhat inhuman effect which he produced upon me, until sometimes I found myself regarding him as an isolated phenomenon, a brain without a heart, as deficient in human sympathy as he was pre-eminent in intelligence. (GREE 399)

It was one of the peculiarities of [Holmes’s] proud, self-contained nature that though he docketed any fresh information very quietly and accurately in his brain, he seldom made any acknowledgment to the giver. (SUSS 1016)

Conan Doyle deliberately has Watson confess his feelings of astonishment at the detective’s fantastic deductions, inviting the reader to trust a self-effacing narrative

persona who operates on a similarly intelligent level. The doctor's wonder at Holmes's exploits frequently mirrors our own. Watson accepts the detective unconditionally, flaws and all, fully realizing that Holmes's less attractive characteristics will always be situated within the larger context of his investigative successes. The doctor's self-reliance and deeply moral character transform Holmes's brazen arrogance into colorful eccentricity. So, while Watson's imagined authorship seems more honest because of its candid depiction of Holmes, Conan Doyle's own fiction enjoys new freedom in characterization through the narrative distancing of the idiosyncratic protagonist.

Conan Doyle's attention to detail also provides a vivid idealization of the real world. By presenting Holmes's heroic media use through the eyes of the conservative 'Victorian Everyman' that Watson represents, Conan Doyle's fiction is able to entertain its audience in a reassuring way. The Holmes stories sympathize with public concern over the increased bureaucracy and mechanization, reasserting the power of human individuality by presenting characters that embody larger social systems. The Canon is populated by idealized models of the specialized professional, and Conan Doyle's preoccupation with identity results in a symbolic distillation of three major components of London's society—government, crime, and law enforcement. As a response to Victorian anxieties about media, the idea that one extraordinary person can (and possibly should) be in control inspires Mycroft Holmes, Professor James Moriarty, Dr. Watson, and particularly Holmes himself. Mycroft is the one person whom Sherlock openly acknowledges as his mental superior, though he qualifies that Mycroft "will not even go out of his way to verify his own conclusions" (GREE 400). More significantly, Sherlock tells Watson on another occasion how his older brother "remains the most indispensable man in the country," and how "You would also be right in a sense if you said that occasionally he *is* the British Government" (BRUC 766). Conan Doyle reduces the entire democratic system of England to a single man, but one whose worth is immeasurable and

whose faculties are unquestionable.<sup>40</sup> The reason for improving upon Sherlock's considerable skill becomes obvious, though familial similarities to the resident sleuth of Baker Street remain:

"Well, [Mycroft's] position is unique. He has made it for himself. There has never been anything like it before, nor will be again. He has the tidiest and most orderly brain, with the greatest capacity for storing facts, of any man living. The same great powers which I have turned to the detection of crime he has used for this particular business. The conclusions of every department are passed to him, and he is the central exchange, the clearing-house, which makes out the balance. All other men are specialists, but his specialism is omniscience." (BRUC 766)

Behind all the forms and laws, all the committees and courts, Conan Doyle sees Mycroft Holmes: the individual in charge, hidden by vast layers of government much as personal signature is concealed by media forms like the typewriter. Although Mycroft does not display the same sort of passion that Sherlock does for his detective work, his lack of 'ambition' and 'energy' are strangely appropriate for a character who *is* the British government (or any bureaucracy, for that matter). Regardless, Mycroft exemplifies Conan Doyle's notion of certain essential people presiding over Victorian England's growing bureaucracies, reasserting the power of the individual within a burgeoning urban populace.

Sherlock Holmes and Professor James Moriarty fulfill the literary roles of righteous champion and arch-villain respectively; Holmes personifies the social fantasy of a self-policing instrument of justice, while Moriarty is simply depicted as crime incarnate. Like Mycroft, Sherlock officially defines his 'unofficial' position; the detective is free to investigate those cases which interest him and to dictate his level of involvement. Sherlock offers this description of himself to Watson in A Study in Scarlet, proudly declaring that he is:

"The only unofficial consulting detective," he answered. "I am the last and highest court of appeal in detection. When Gregson, or Lestrade, or Athelney Jones are out of the depths—which, by the way, is their normal state—the matter is laid before me. I examine

---

<sup>40</sup> Mycroft Holmes appears in only two Conan Doyle short stories, which are the sources of these two citations.

the data, as an expert, and pronounce a specialist's opinion. I claim no credit in such cases. My name figures in no newspaper. The work itself, the pleasure of finding a field for my peculiar powers, is my highest reward." (SIGN 64)

Despite his 'unofficial' status, Holmes prides himself on being an 'expert/specialist' to whom the police may refer when mysteries confound their efforts. As the detective continually reminds the reader, this confoundedness is 'their normal state'. Like Mycroft, Sherlock performs a necessary and vital function without concern for public recognition, or for failure. As one would expect, Professor Moriarty is strikingly similar to both Holmes brothers, but especially to Sherlock: he is the one foe that Holmes cites as being his equal, noting his mental prowess, his mathematical skill, and his numerous publications.<sup>41</sup> While describing Moriarty in The Adventure of the Final Problem, Holmes reflects some of the strong nationalistic tendencies of his creator:

"He is the Napoleon of crime, Watson. He is the organizer of half that is evil and of nearly all that is undetected in this great city. He is a genius, a philosopher, an abstract thinker. He has a brain of the first order. He sits motionless, like a spider in the centre of its web, but that web has a thousand radiations, and he knows well every quiver of each of them. He does little himself. He only plans. But his agents are numerous and splendidly organized." (FINA 437)

Each one of these characters epitomizes a functional element of society, yet remains a specialized individual within an information network. Put another way, all three characters are media forms in themselves. Mycroft, Moriarty, and Sherlock collate data, using their ultra-specialized knowledge to achieve certain objectives in their chosen fields. The Canon shows government ministers, assassins, and police detectives seeking out their respective 'experts' in order to get answers and to see results.

Once these characters are recognized as information conduits and processing centres, the imagery of hierarchical network associated with each persona takes on new

---

<sup>41</sup> Curiously, audiences must take Holmes at his word concerning the evil nature of Moriarty due to his veritable non-existence in the Canon. While Ross notes that the supreme criminal mastermind appears in a mere six tales (EMPT, FINA, ILLU, LAST, NORW, and VALL), the character has a substantial role in only two—FINA and VALL. As such, Conan Doyle adds yet another layer to the narrative shell: Holmes relates the depths of Moriarty's sinister nature to Watson, who in turn (as chronicler within the metafiction) relays that information to the reader. Moriarty becomes a further fiction within a growing number of fictions constructed by the Canon.



relevance. Mycroft Holmes is a “clearing-house” or “central exchange”; Moriarty is a “spider in the center of its web”; Sherlock Holmes remains the “last and highest court of appeal.” Curiously, an allusion to spiders is also used to describe the *detective’s* sensitivity to crime, which suggests how Holmes’s networking system resembles that of his nemesis: “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 rumour or suspicion of unsolved crime” (CARD 307). For the most part, the characters become translators and collators of information: human beings transformed into rudimentary forms of media by their intelligence and proficiency with data. Mycroft is able to provide an answer concerning a number of socio-political variables. Moriarty is capable of twisting the base tendencies of his underlings into coherent patterns of crimes that serve his own ends. Sherlock Holmes, both with the police and with private clients, almost invariably translates the available ‘data’ from an unsolved mystery into a *just* resolution.<sup>42</sup> Finally, there is Watson’s fundamental role in the Canon to consider. Since the doctor functions as the metafictional medium through which Holmes’s adventures are translated into text for the audience, this ‘chronicler’ is the prototypical mold from which all other characters—and their abilities as information conduits—are cast.



Like the mysteries themselves, the Canon’s narrative metafiction plays with the audience’s assumptions about the text being read. The inclusion of a fictional Strand blurs the details surrounding the tales’ publication, and the layering of the metafictional shell also extends the Canon’s conventional boundaries to include *unwritten* texts. Conan Doyle has Watson allude to nonexistent cases and other illusory files from which future stories may be drawn, teasing the audience with the promise of stories not yet told. Openings naturally had to be left for new installments, though the narrative framework

---

<sup>42</sup> Justice for Holmes ranges from prosecution in a court of law to private sanctions, and even includes doing nothing at all (since some form of punishment has already been meted out); in every case, however, Conan Doyle leaves the choice to the detective’s unchallenged moral judgment.

had to maintain some level of self-containment. With Sherlock Holmes, Conan Doyle wanted to develop a series of self-contained short stories that avoided the fragmentation of serialized novels but still appeared to be part of a larger body of work. This approach radically changed the conventions of magazine fiction, both in its writing and its readership. In his autobiography, the author shares his early conceptual vision:

Considering these various journals with their disconnected stories it had struck me that a single character running through a series, if it only engaged the attention of the reader, would bind that reader to that particular magazine. On the other hand, it had long seemed to me that the ordinary serial might be an impediment rather than a help to a magazine, since, sooner or later, one missed one number and afterwards it had lost all interest. Clearly the ideal compromise was a character which carried through, and yet instalments which were each complete in themselves, so that the purchaser was always sure that he could relish the whole contents of the magazine. (Doyle 1924, 95-96)

Conan Doyle believed that to create a more coherent series of stories, and to encourage more faithful periodical reading, the character of Sherlock Holmes had to be built up gradually through successive installments. Historically speaking, the author's experiment succeeded admirably. The Strand was the most successful of the modern illustrated magazines, with its impressive library of authors (which included H.G. Wells and E.W. Hornung) and its revolutionary form of serialized fiction.

The strong feeling at the *Strand* was that a new form of literary art should be encouraged. Instead of the serial novel which was then popular, the magazine would present a series of short stories with a recurring central character or characters. (Higham 88)

Every story provides a window into Holmes's on-going 'life', continually tempting audiences with hints of 'ghost' narratives that rarely became part of the actual collection of published texts.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, each serialized installment presents two narrative opportunities—one in the form of the eponymous mystery (and its resolution), and the other in that mystery's contribution to the mythology of the Canon.

To develop interesting narrative contexts, Conan Doyle often has Watson explain the circumstances surrounding the text's writing or qualify its publication with some sort

---

<sup>43</sup> Conan Doyle believed he perhaps had too much success in blurring fiction and reality with Holmes and Watson. "That Sherlock Holmes was anything but mythical to many is shown by the fact that I have had many letters addressed to him with requests that I forward them" (Doyle 1924, 100).

of mysterious disclaimer. Conan Doyle uses these types of narrative devices to manufacture the illusion of a privileged text for the reader, often by emphasizing the secrecy of the information being shared:

It is years since the incidents of which I speak took place, and yet it is with diffidence that I allude to them. For a long time, even with the utmost discretion and reticence, it would have been impossible to make the facts public; but now the principal person concerned is beyond the reach of human law, and with due suppression the story may be told in such fashion as to injure no one. . . . The reader will excuse me if I conceal the date or any other fact by which he might trace the actual occurrence. (CHAS 645)

The doctor even describes his narrative difficulties with his flatmate, as well as some of the external issues affecting his subject matter and his editorial choices:

In recording from time to time some of the curious experiences and interesting recollections which I associate with my long and intimate friendship with Mr. Sherlock Holmes, I have continually been faced by difficulties caused by his own aversion to publicity. . . . It was indeed this attitude upon the part of my friend and certainly not any lack of interesting material which has caused me of late years to lay very few of my records before the public. My participation in some of his adventures was always a privilege which entailed discretion and reticence upon me. (DEVI 783)

This passage has significant implications for the Canon's narrative shell: Holmes is obviously reviewing the texts that Watson produces, primarily since the texts themselves reveal confidential stories that might have remained untold. Conan Doyle's narrative structure does more than simply implicate the reader as the motivation for writing the stories; suddenly, the characters themselves are actively generating their own narratives, and put in control of the literary creations that audiences receive as Strand Magazine text.

Studies of the Holmes Canon typically concentrate on the stories that are actually told; each tale contributes to the larger Holmes mythos, however, and blurs the distinctions between the stories themselves. In doing so, Conan Doyle intentionally makes the strict Canon boundaries much more flexible. Throughout the series, Watson makes claims that he has voluminous files waiting to be transformed into new narratives. The doctor's stockpile steadily increases as Holmes's career flourishes, swelling from "seventy odd" (SPEC 214) to "notes of many hundreds of cases" (SECO 727). Watson's authorship frequently hints at various other accounts of Holmes's adventures: those cases

*already* written and published, those *planned* but not yet written, and those ‘curious incidents’ that *never* develop into actual Holmes stories. One tale actually includes all three types:

The July which immediately succeeded my marriage was made memorable by three cases of interest, in which I had the privilege of being associated with Sherlock Holmes and of studying his methods. I find them recorded in my notes under the headings of “The Adventure of the Second Stain,” “The Adventure of the Naval Treaty,” and “The Adventure of the Tired Captain.” The first of these, however, deals with interests of such importance and implicates so many of the first families in the kingdom that for many years it will be impossible to make it public. No case, however, in which Holmes was engaged has ever illustrated the value of his analytical methods so clearly or has impressed those who were associated with him so deeply. (NAVA 411)

The Adventure of the Naval Treaty is the tale from which this excerpt is taken, and the first title was eventually included as an installment within The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes series, but “The Adventure of the Tired Captain” remains ‘unreleased’. By establishing Watson as a metafictional author with an imaginary storehouse of texts, Conan Doyle is able to play with the authority of the signifier and its conventional referencing relationship. Unlike more self-contained narratives, the serialized fiction of the Canon relies upon the missing ‘signifieds’ to which these titles refer in order to resist complete closure; the series become self-perpetuating, always affording room for one more tale.

Unfortunately, the self-perpetuating quality of the Canon is a double-edged sword: while the metafiction of Watson’s authorship readily allows new installments and resists closure, Conan Doyle did not foresee the problems of actually shutting such a narrative system down. By encouraging audiences to develop a strong connection to Holmes, and by having Watson tease the audience with the countless stories waiting to be told, Conan Doyle unwittingly set the stage for the emotional backlash he received from the Strand readers once he decided to stop writing Holmes stories. With insatiable readers avidly purchasing the latest installments and driving the Strand’s demand for new stories from Conan Doyle, the various circumstances surrounding the Canon’s serial publication had a profound impact on the detective’s evolution. Two particular developments had the most

dramatic effect on Sherlock Holmes as a literary creation: the subtle changes in appearance instigated by Sidney Paget's illustrations early in the series, and the infamous resurrection that results from Conan Doyle's success at making Holmes seem *real* to audiences.

Since the detective's adventures appear in an *illustrated* magazine, Conan Doyle must eventually contend with an artist's conception of his protagonist. Holmes's physical appearance is well documented in the early stories: a lean man about six-feet high, with "a thin razor-like face, with a great hawk's-bill of a nose, and two small eyes, set close together on either side of it" (Doyle 1924, 106). Curiously, while the magnifying lens and the pipe are both infamous Holmes icons that have *textual* origins, the commonly displayed deerstalker hat does not. Knight illustrates how the conventions of the illustrated serial subtly alter Conan Doyle's mental picture of his own character, and how the medium itself actually affects his writing:

[Sidney Paget] provided the legendary deerstalker hat that naturalized Holmes's hunter-protector element, and by the time 'The Boscombe Valley Mystery' Doyle had altered his earlier description of Holmes's features to fit Paget's authoritative version. (Knight 84)

Conan Doyle laments that Sidney Paget's model for Holmes, the illustrator's brother, "took the place for the more powerful but uglier Sherlock" (Doyle 1924, 106). But the popularity of the Paget illustrations could not be denied, forcing Conan Doyle to modify his detective so that his descriptions of Holmes matched the images presented in the Strand and the expectations now held by the readers. As further evidence of print culture's influence upon the Holmes character, Charles Higham cites a theory that suggests how the press might have inspired Conan Doyle's choice to change Holmes's first name:

At first, [Conan Doyle] called the detective "Sherringford Hope," after his beloved whaling ship, the *Hope*. Then he switched to "Holmes," a name he drew from Oliver Wendell Holmes, whom he admired. . . . Oliver Wendell Holmes was about to embark on a grand tour of Europe, a fact which the newspapers were widely announcing at the time, and which would have made the name "Holmes" ring especially loud in Conan Doyle's head. (Higham 68)

Regardless of how ‘Sherlock Holmes’ came to be the iconic name synonymous with ‘detective’, the character’s appearance in George Newnes’s affordable, high profile illustrated magazine put Conan Doyle in good financial stead from the outset. With the Strand, Newnes offered the reading public an attractive form of contemporary literature, “boasting modern-looking typography and (a policy from the beginning) an illustration on every double page” (Redmond 1993, 55). Pearsall comments on the bankable popularity of the character, noting that “once Holmes had begun to grip, . . . [he] was the only personage capable of boosting the circulation of the *Strand* by more than hundred thousand by his presence in its pages” (Pearsall 60). Despite the financial rewards and immense popularity of his detective stories, Conan Doyle still thought that Holmes and Watson belonged to a lesser form of literature which seemed increasingly less attractive. As a result, the author decides to do what many readers thought unthinkable:

At last, after I had done two series of [Sherlock Holmes stories] I saw that I was in danger of having my hand forced, and of being entirely identified with what I regarded as a lower stratum of literary achievement. Therefore as a sign of my resolution I determined to end the life of my hero. (Doyle 1924, 99)

But it was a death that audiences would simply not accept. Overwhelmed by mail from despondent readers and offers from frantic publishers bidding for new material, Conan Doyle finally surrendered to the considerable public pressure demanding the sleuth’s resurrection.

Doyle’s postcard to his agent, which said simply, ‘Very well. A.C.D.’, mean that he had succumbed to the lure of an offer of \$5,000 from America and a fee of £100 a thousand words from the Strand. . . . From this point onwards he made no attempt to abandon Holmes, but he still resented the importance with which the detective’s exploits were regarded. (Symons 73)

Clearly, Conan Doyle gets caught in a trap of his own making: the author had consciously decided to blur the distinction between reality and fiction in order to encourage devoted readership. Magazine publishers were desperate for new tales to satisfy a demanding readership unwilling to let their hero die, while the Strand was offering Conan Doyle vast sums of money just to secure *temporary* rights to new stories. The author had deliberately

chosen self-contained story structures, constructing the detective gradually through an open-ended series of episodic tales. By his own admission, Conan Doyle did not write his fiction with hopes of creating a 'Canon'. The short stories resist any strict chronological ordering as part of a self-perpetuating series, and the series itself similarly avoids any denouement: the author always left his options open. Conan Doyle continually hints at untold stories and disregards the Canon's internal chronology to facilitate his own storytelling; however, this tactic encourages his audiences to take a similar stance and disregard any thought of the Canon's eventual conclusion.<sup>44</sup> Paget's illustrations and the deerstalker hat, the Sherringford name change, and the sleuth's resurrection from Reichenbach Falls—these three examples demonstrate print culture's considerable influence on both the Canon and the character of Sherlock Holmes.

Media forms greatly contribute to the textual composition and incongruities of the Canon, especially given Watson's frequent appropriation of information from various sources. By Watson's own admission, he keeps 'notes' regarding the cases themselves; this textual hoarding recalls a certain detective's lumber-room of newspaper clippings, and also provides a reasonable explanation for the doctor's occasional specificity in case details. However, like the infamous 'magic Jezail bullet' that wounded Watson *somewhere*,<sup>45</sup> these dates are difficult to reconcile internally and are at times contradicted by the commentary. In responding to this criticism in his autobiography, Conan Doyle admits his indifference to minor points of contention within the Canon, and cites basic artistic license as his only defense:

I have never been nervous about details, and one must be masterful sometimes. When an alarmed Editor wrote to me once: "There is no second line of rails at that point," I

---

<sup>44</sup> While Conan Doyle might have remained adamant that Sherlock Holmes had, in fact, perished at Reichenbach Falls, publishers and audiences could still have argued for Conan Doyle to provide more retroactive stories of cases left untold—again demonstrating the danger in blurring the conventional boundaries of fiction.

<sup>45</sup> The bullet puts Warren Commission theories to shame. Watson consistently claims he was wounded in Afghanistan by a "Jezail bullet" that inconsistently moves around his body depending on the text being read. The pain that Watson nurses travels from his shoulder (STUD 11) to his leg one novel later (SIGN 65), finally remains indefinitely placed but still bothersome "in one of my limbs" (NOBL 243).

answered, "I make one." On the other hand, there are cases where accuracy is essential. (Doyle 1924, 108)

While this confession shows how Conan Doyle perceived his own writing, its revelations about accuracy do not negate earlier assessments of Watson's reliability as a chronicler. The doctor is offered by Conan Doyle as a truthful narrator preoccupied with honestly recounting events; one extreme theory argues that Watson's narrative inconsistencies are intentional and make the character seem even more human. Dates might not correspond with some master calendar for the Canon, but Conan Doyle admits that they only function as window-dressing for the mysteries and their stories. While absolute accuracy may be essential to enthusiasts reconciling the entire Canon, Watson's authorship remains convincing and achieves its fundamental purpose: the fictional semblance of realism.

Along similar lines, Conan Doyle uses several types of media to generate Watson's 'texts' and to emphasize further the coherence of its narrative shell. While Watson's penmanship is foregrounded, other supplemental materials and their origins are purposefully included. The text in any given 'adventure' is composited from a variety of media sources: the reproduced or transcribed text of newspaper articles (NOBL), personal correspondence (SCAN, COPP), telegrams (GREE, BRUC), coded messages (DANC, HOUN), diaries (GLOR, HOUN), diagrams (NAVA), and even handwriting (REIG). Watson incorporates these 'completed' texts in his account under the pretense of laying the facts out just as Holmes had received them; as always, the doctor invites the audience to play the game provided by the story.<sup>46</sup> One of the best examples of this narrative approach is the novel The Hound of the Baskervilles, whose amalgamation of reports, letters and diary entries recalls the textual patchwork of Bram Stoker's Dracula. Similar to the campaign launched against the supernatural vampire, Watson's investigation in Devonshire is conducted through constant and expedient communication with Holmes

---

<sup>46</sup> The inconceivable prowess at transcription necessary for this level of story-telling is an understandable narrative complication that is justified by its objective, much like the Jezail bullet. While the doctor could never recall and/or transcribe the text in this manner, the story largely remains unaffected as a 'game' to be played through the audience's reading.



back in London; both agents work in tandem to home in on the guilty parties through extensive media use and cross-referencing. Like Stoker's appropriation of Seward's recordings or Nina's diary, Conan Doyle also situates entire chapters as text taken directly from Watson's own transmissions to Holmes. These narratives are not addressed to the reader, but rather to other characters within the story. The sense of the texts being written shortly after the events take place adds an immediacy to the story's telling, and dispels the narrative distance normally associated with Watson's recounting of past events. David Seed's description of the media factors at play in Dracula has direct relevance to the networking systems and final objectives present in the Holmes stories:

This collaboration makes explicit the social dimension to recording characters' experiences. Stoker's surprisingly modern emphasis on the means and transmission of information brings society's self-defense into the very narrative process of the novel. Since understanding Dracula is a necessary precondition to defeating him, the exchange and accumulation of information literally is resistance to him. (Carter 203)

Like Dracula, the Hound is destroyed once Holmes returns with the knowledge of the criminal elements at work; only with this understanding can the detective resolve the problem completely. In order to create a greater sense of intimacy for the reading audience, Conan Doyle shows characters composing their own texts in very distinctive styles. As an original participant sharing his experience textually, Watson professes to cut through layers of discourse in order to chronicle the tale, yet he continues to add narrative complexity through his creative act.

As shown through these many levels of narrative structure, Conan Doyle's Canon is an intricate series of stories that deliberately interrelate for a variety of effects, and with different objectives in mind. By blurring the distinctions between fiction and reality, the author achieves a characterization that deeply resonates with his target audience: middle-aged, middle-class citizens taking the train home from the city, wishing for a story to occupy their restless minds during the trip. Conan Doyle develops a new approach to episodic fiction that would bind readers to a given magazine while appeasing their desires for richly detailed and well-dramatized stories. As such, Watson invites the readers on a

narrative journey into an intriguing textual puzzle: the detective story mystery. Throughout the Canon, however, Conan Doyle presents a world where media technologies are incapable of erasing singularity and where heroes use their wits to triumph. Images of systems distilled into single, powerful human beings did not stir fears of conspiracy with audiences, but instead reaffirmed the value of the *individual* living amongst the growing bureaucracies. People still enjoy eavesdropping on Holmes and Watson while the two investigate their unusual mysteries; this readership is a testimonial to the artistry of Conan Doyle's fiction and its enduring appeal.

## C O N C L U S I O N

**A GAME WORTH THE CANDLE**

---

**As the unity of the modern world becomes increasingly a technological rather than a social affair, the techniques of the arts provide the most valuable means of insight into the real direction of our own collective purposes.**

***Marshall McLuhan, "Magic that Changes Mood", The Mechanical Bride (1951)***

---

Sherlock Holmes is a hero who is just as relevant to modern readers and our acute media sensibilities as he was to audiences of the late-1800s; in both historical contexts, an explosion of information technology altered social and geographic boundaries forever. E.B. Hobsbawm describes how the stage was set in Victorian England for this particular type of cultural revolution:

It was, as we have seen, a period of art for the masses by means of the technology of reproduction which made the unlimited multiplication of still images possible, the marriage between technology and communication which produced the mass newspaper and periodical—especially the illustrated magazine—and the mass education which made all these accessible to a new public. (Hobsbawm 351)

The considerable ramifications of this unprecedented technological development formed the catalyst for one of literature's most enduring figures: the "unofficial consulting detective" of Baker Street, who is more likely to scour a newspaper than brandish a pistol in his search for justice. Though incredibly eccentric, Sherlock Holmes is a singular scientific mind that excels in the sober contemplation of the facts that he discovers during his tireless search for evidence. Bestowed with a chivalrous attitude and a moralistic sense of duty to see justice done, Holmes embodies the spirit of the medieval epigraph that appears on his creator's gravestone: "Steel true, blade straight." Holmes's success at solving mysteries continually reinforces an implicit faith in scientific methodologies, in their creative application, and (to some degree) in information itself.

By placing his societal fables within the context of the detective story—a genre where plot development and resolution depend directly upon the skillful gathering and *reading* of data—Conan Doyle explores the pervasive influence of media systems in his idealized depiction of Victorian life. Throughout the Canon, Holmes is shown to be intimately familiar with a plethora of information technologies ranging from newspapers and reference books to telegraphs and trains, and each investigation shows how the sleuth relies on efficient data processing. The shortcomings of these media forms, however, demand that Holmes exercise his skill at developing alternative data gathering networks. Recognizing the limitations of conventional law enforcement, the sleuth takes full advantage of the official Scotland Yard offices, the unorthodox ranks of the Baker Street Irregulars, and his notorious ability to ‘read’ the minutiae of society. Finally, the Canon itself presents a complex narrative experience where the ‘message’ is profoundly shaped by the particular ‘medium’ in which it appears. Within a metafictional shell, Conan Doyle develops Watson as a fictional surrogate who actively chronicles the tales, all the while using media to effectively blur conventional literary boundaries for a variety of effects. By clouding traditional distinctions—author versus narrating character, self-contained short fiction versus ‘Canon-like’ collections—Conan Doyle encourages a heightened level of audience involvement. The author’s desire for a loyal following results in passionate demands for Holmes’s resurrection despite Conan Doyle’s decision to end the series. Quite simply, in his manner and method, Sherlock Holmes captures the essence of an age for a readership clamouring for this particular heroic representation. Conan Doyle’s champion appears as some Victorian incarnation of a mythic knight, riding his ‘iron horse’ through the countryside and expertly wielding media technology. The detective remains a creation of print culture, however, and the indignant refusal of the public to accept Holmes’s demise exemplifies how media systems focus on two essential functions: the *exchange* and *control* of information.

Holmes's uncanny ability to process information allows him to work outside the restrictions of any bureaucratic agency, which in turn becomes critically important to the plot development of the stories. By having Holmes solve mysteries as a "consulting detective," Conan Doyle also develops the self-perpetuating narrative scenario in which the larger series of cases is situated. Holmes's remarkable career is supported by two generalized categories of media: *virtual* methods of information gathering whose content consists largely of third-party accounts, and *personal* modes of communication and transportation that facilitate first-hand data collection. Newspapers, journals, reference texts, and Holmes's commonplace books characterize the former category. Generally speaking, these media technologies allow the detective to gather basic information while never physically leaving the familiar comforts of his Baker Street flat. The sleuth makes full use of these resources, but Holmes and Watson rarely accept these accounts at face value; both question the ability of these sources to represent facts objectively. To collect this type of information so essential to an investigation, the detective utilizes the technologies of the latter media category; telegraphs, trains, and even the emblematic hansom cabs serve Holmes's desire to investigate the scene personally. While newspapers and clippings might increase the scope of his awareness and alert the detective to a case that he might not otherwise have known about, the Canon invariably posits this exchange as the *starting point* of the adventure. There remains no adequate substitute for Holmes's investigative expertise, which necessitates his study of the crime scene in person.

While the detective uses existing systems of information exchange like newspapers and telegraphy to their fullest potential, their deficiencies prevent a complete communication of the facts, and this shortcoming forces Holmes to develop his own networks for personal data collection. The various mysteries of the Canon might best be understood as incomplete communication circuits, where message intelligibility and narrative access have either been lost or denied because of the illegalities involved. Crimes involve people that wish their identities to remain unknown for fear of societal

sanctions and forced restitution; confidence schemes are deceptions specifically designed to conceal true intentions; and coded messages like the hieroglyphs in The Adventure of the Dancing Men are meant for only a select few to read. As the preeminent codebreaker, Holmes completes the circuits and restores message comprehensibility. The detective usually deciphers the *voluntary* signatures of coded messages and other exclusionary media systems (for those desiring access), or reveals the data discovered through the careful examination of *involuntary* signatures (for those oblivious to their presence). Holmes uses his personal database of specialized knowledge to *read* these various signatures from everyday life. Working within Conan Doyle's structured universe, the sleuth finds that joining enough of these pieces together will eventually illuminate the entire chain of logic and thereby solve the puzzle. Furthermore, Holmes's ability to function on the periphery of officialdom through his role as "consulting detective" only adds to his effectiveness. The detective avoids bureaucracy in order to open new avenues of operation and communication for himself; this strategy allows for networks like the Baker Street Irregulars not only to be *conceived* but actively engaged. Though the fiction admittedly presents a more closed system of regimented social hierarchies, Holmes's expertise transforms the Victorian world into a vast collection of coded information available to the educated mind. Society itself becomes a text to be read through logical reasoning and careful observation, where key evidence may be found in anything from the height of a snuffed candle to the velvet sleeve of a typist.

The Canon's metafictional story also deals with the exchange and control of information, but does so by focusing on narrative issues and characterization rather than on actual plot development. While detective stories are considered intellectual games in their own right, Conan Doyle's constructed shell adds another dimension to each of the main characters. Much of Watson's development as a character may be found within the passages he provides as chronicler, which have precious little to do with the story apart from welcoming the reader back to Baker Street. Apart from these narrative

contributions, Conan Doyle subtly uses Watson's established normality to amplify the detective's special attributes: Holmes's deductive abilities and dramatic flair seem that much more incredible when painted against the backdrop provided by Watson's conservative common sense. Moreover, Holmes's penchant for reclusive, introspective thought would be unbearable without the sympathetic depiction given in Watson's account. The doctor functions as the narrative buffer, allowing the reader access to the detective while anchoring Holmes to the fictional London outside of the Baker Street windows.

Watson's text incorporates a variety of media forms: transcribed conversations, letters, newspaper articles, and journal excerpts—even facsimiles of actual writing and hand-drawn maps appear, illustrated by Conan Doyle himself. As such, the Canon becomes a narrative nexus which grants a certain creative freedom to the author. Conan Doyle adopts a number of different writing styles within the same story, and somewhat clouds the idea of a single author within the fictions themselves. Though similar emphasis on complex narrative sourcing may be found in other contemporary works like Dracula, Conan Doyle extends the metafictional boundaries even further by making the characters aware of their own media representation in a fictional Strand. Through this type of innovation, Conan Doyle achieves a suspension of disbelief that clearly becomes a double-edged sword: while the author enjoys the financial windfall made possible by an enthusiastic readership, that same audience vetoes Conan Doyle's decision to kill Holmes and end the series. Obsessive readers unwilling to let go of their hero and persistent magazine publishers mesmerized by projected circulation figures essentially become surrogate authors for the Canon, adding a chapter crucial to the Great Detective's history.

That Sherlock Holmes holds the record as the most portrayed character in film—75 actors, 211 movies (Brunner and others 21)—speaks volumes about our own inability to let the deerstalker hang on the peg. For today's audiences, media anxieties felt in this

modern period of technological advancement<sup>47</sup> find a strange historical correlate within the Canon; while idealized visions of Victorian society evoke thoughts of simpler times, their world was similarly being inundated with wires. Perhaps the most compelling aspect of the Holmes series continues to be the artistry of the puzzles devised by Conan Doyle, a quality which demands consideration of the print traditions from which the tales are born.

A detective novel is the most readable of texts, first, because we recognize the terms of its intelligibility even before we begin to read and, second, because it prefigures at the outset the form of its denouement by virtue of the highly visible question mark hung over its opening. (Porter 86)

These 'question marks' form a sort of textual gauntlet dropped in front of the reading audience, an entreatment to play "a game worth the candle" by matching wits with Holmes. And we do, reveling in attempts to mimic the hero's competency with media. Using his infamous powers of observation, the detective 'reads' the world for pertinent data, presumably as anyone with his intellectual database might do. And here, if anywhere, lies the moral of the Canon. With his clinical understanding of civilization, Holmes is never mystified by the newfound technological wonders in his world; telegraphs, trains, and typography are simply tools to be used in the pursuit of knowledge, of information. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, his narrator Watson, and the great Sherlock Holmes challenge us to see the same potential.

---

<sup>47</sup> A recent article concerning the corporate juggernaut Microsoft notes a similar connection between today's information technology and that of the Victorian period, "Not since the heyday of the railroads in the 1800s has prosperity been tied so closely to one sector of the economy" (Cortese and others 126).



# WORKING BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

- Adam, Hargrave Lee. C.I.D.: Behind the Scenes at Scotland Yard. London: Sampson Low, 1931.
- Altick, Richard D. The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public 1800-1900. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Writers, Readers, and Occasions: Selected Essays on Victorian Literature and Life. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989.
- Baring-Gould, William, ed. The Annotated Sherlock Holmes, Vol. I and II. New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1967.
- Basalla, George. The Evolution of Technology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Begg, Paul and Keith Skinner. The Scotland Yard Files: 150 Years of the C.I.D. London: Headline Book Publishing, 1992.
- Beniger, James R. The Control Revolution: Technological and Economic Origins of the Information Society. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986.
- Best, Geoffrey. Mid-Victorian Britain 1851-1875. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971.
- Biedler, Peter G., ed. Henry James: The Turn of the Screw. Boston: Bedford Books, 1992.
- Binyon, T.J. 'Murder Will Out': The Detective in Fiction. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Bishop, James. The Illustrated London News: Social History of Edwardian Britain. London: Angus & Robertson, 1977.
- Briggs, Asa. A Social History of Britain. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1983.
- Brunner, Rob, Suna Chang, Steve Daly, Andrew Essex, and others. "EW's Guide to the Greatest Achievements and Most Important Records in Show Business History (And Who Can Break Them)." Entertainment Weekly #429, 1 May 1998, 21.
- Bunker, John. From Rattle to Radio. Warwickshire: K.A.F. Brewin Books, 1988.
- Bunson, Matthew E. The Sherlock Holmes Encyclopedia. London: Pavilion Books Limited, 1994.
- Burke, James. "Communication in the Middle Ages." In Communication in History: Technology, Culture, Society, ed. David Crowley and Paul Heyer, 67-77. New York: Longman Publishing Group, 1991.
- Burke, James. Connections. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1978.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Day the Universe Changed. London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1985.

- Carter, Margaret L., ed. Dracula: The Vampire and the Critics. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988.
- Charney, Hanna. The Detective Novel of Manners: Hedonism, Morality, and the Life of Reason. Rutherford: Associated University Presses, 1981.
- Cortese, Amy, Mike France, Susan Garland, Steve Hamm, and Michael J. Mandel. "What to Do About Microsoft." Business Week, 20 April 1998, 112.
- Costello, Peter. The Real World of Sherlock Holmes: The True Crimes Investigated by Arthur Conan Doyle. London: Robinson Publishing, 1991.
- Cox, Don Richard. Arthur Conan Doyle. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1985.
- Crawley, Chetwode. From Telegraphy to Television: The Story of Electrical Communications. London: Frederick Warne & Company Limited, 1931.
- Czitrom, Daniel J. Media and the American Mind: From Morse to McLuhan. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982.
- Dilnot, George. Scotland Yard: The Methods and Organization of the Metropolitan Police. London: Percival Marshall and Co., 1915.
- Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan. A Treasury of Sherlock Holmes. New York: Nelson Doubleday, 1955.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Memories and Adventures. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1924.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Illustrated Sherlock Holmes Treasury: Revised and Expanded (Unabridged). New York: Avenal Books, 1984.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Original Illustrated 'Strand' Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Facsimile Edition. London: The Mallard Press, 1990.
- Eco, Umberto & Thomas A. Sebeok, eds. The Sign of Three: Dupin, Holmes, Peirce. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983.
- Eisenstein, Elizabeth. "The Rise of the Reading Public." In Communication in History: Technology, Culture, Society, ed. David Crowley and Paul Heyer, 94-102. New York: Longman Publishing Group, 1991.
- Emsley, Clive. Policing and its Context, 1750-1870. London: Macmillan Press, 1983.
- Evans, G. Blakemore, ed. The Riverside Shakespeare. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977.
- Fabre, Lucien and Henri-Jean Martin. The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing, 1450-1800. Translated by David Gerard. London: Verso Books, 1976.
- Fabre, Maurice. A History of Communications. Translated by Peter Chaitlin. New York: Hawthorn Books Inc., 1963.

- Gatrell, V.A.C. "Crime, Authority, and the Policeman-State." In The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950: Volume 3—Social Agencies and Institutions, ed. F.M.L.Thompson, 243-310. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Gibson, William. Neuromancer. New York: Ace Books, 1984.
- Hall, Trevor H. Sherlock Holmes: Ten Literary Studies. London: Gerald Duckworth and Co. Ltd., 1969.
- Hardwick, Michael & Mollie Hardwick. The Sherlock Holmes Companion. London: William Clowes and Sons, 1962.
- Harrison, Michael. A Study in Surmise: The Making of Sherlock Holmes. Bloomington: Gaslight Publications, 1984.
- Harrison, Michael. In the Footsteps of Sherlock Holmes. Newton Abbot: David and Charles Publishers Limited, 1972.
- Harrison, Michael. The London of Sherlock Holmes. Newton Abbot: David and Charles Publishers Limited, 1971.
- Hay, Douglas and Francis Snyder, eds. Policing and Prosecution in Britain 1750-1850. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989.
- Higham, Charles. The Adventures of Conan Doyle: The Life of the Creator of Sherlock Holmes. New York: Norton, 1976.
- Hilfer, Tony. The Crime Novel: A Deviant Genre. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990.
- Hobsbawm, E.J. The Age of Capital: 1848-1875. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson Ltd., 1975.
- Hodgson, John A. Arthur Conan Doyle: Sherlock Holmes—The Major Stories with Contemporary Critical Essays. Boston: Bedford Books, 1994.
- Holzmann, Gerard J. and Björn Pehrson. The Early History of Data Networks. Los Alamitos: IEEE Computer Society Press, 1995.
- Howe, Sir Ronald. The Story of Scotland Yard: A History of the C.I.D. from the earliest times to the Present Day. London: Arthur Barker Limited, 1965.
- Innis, Harold A. Empire and Communications. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972.
- Jaffe, Jacqueline A. Arthur Conan Doyle. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987.
- Jordan, John O. and Robert L. Patten, eds. Literature in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-Century British Publishing and Reading Practices. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Kittler, Friedrich A. Discourse Networks 1800/1900. Translated by Michael Metteer with Chris Cullens. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990.
- Knight, Stephen. Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction. London: Macmillan Press, 1980.

- Lentricchia, Frank and Thomas McLaughlin, eds. Critical Terms for Literary Study. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- Lock, Joan. Scotland Yard Casebook: The Making of the C.I.D. 1865-1935. London: Robert Hale, 1993.
- Marvin, Carolyn. When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth-Century. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- McDonald, Peter D. "Light Reading and the dignity of letters: George Newnes, Ltd. and the making of Arthur Conan Doyle." British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice: 1880-1914. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- McGann, Jerome J. The Textual Condition. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.
- McLuhan, Marshall. The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man. New York: Penguin Group, 1964.
- McMurtry, Jo. Victorian Life and Victorian Fiction: A Companion for the American Reader. Hamden: Archon Books, 1979.
- Mitch, David F. The Rise of Popular Literacy in Victorian England: The Influence of Private Choice and Public Policy. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992.
- Murch, A.E. The Development of the Detective Novel. London: Peter Owen Limited, 1958.
- Nordon, Pierre. Conan Doyle. London: John Murray, 1966.
- Orel, Harold, ed. Critical Essays on Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. New York: G.K. Hall & Company, 1992.
- Ousby, Ian. Bloodhounds of Heaven: The Detective in English Fiction from Godwin to Doyle. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976.
- Panek, Leroy Lad. An Introduction to the Detective Story. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987.
- Park, Orlando. The Sherlock Holmes Encyclopedia. Secaucus: Citadel Press, 1981.
- Pearsall, Ronald. Conan Doyle: A Biographical Solution. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977.
- Piper, Leonard. Murder by Gaslight. New York: Gallery Books, 1991.
- Porter, Dennis. The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Crime Fiction. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981.
- Postman, Neil. Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.

- Pound, Reginald. Mirror of the Century: The Strand Magazine 1891-1950. Crasbury: A.S. Barnes and Co. Inc., 1966.
- Priestman, Martin. Detective Fiction and Literature: A Figure on the Carpet. Bridgend: WBC Print Ltd., 1990.
- Putney, Charles R., Joseph A. Cutshall King and Sally Sugarman, eds. Sherlock Holmes: Victorian Sleuth to Modern Hero. London: The Scarecrow Press, 1996.
- Pryhönen, Heta. Murder from an Academic Angle: An Introduction to the Study of the Detective Narrative. Columbia: Camden House, 1994.
- Redmond, Christopher. A Sherlock Holmes Handbook. Toronto: Simon and Pierre, 1993.
- \_\_\_\_\_. In Bed with Sherlock Holmes: Sexual Elements in Arthur Conan Doyle's Stories of the Great Detective. Toronto: Simon and Pierre, 1984.
- Redmond, Donald A. Sherlock Holmes Among the Pirates: Copyright and Conan Doyle in America 1890-1930. New York: Greenwood Press, 1990.
- Ross, Thomas W. Good Old Index: The Sherlock Holmes Handbook. Columbia: Camden House, 1997.
- Roth, Marty. Foul and Fair Play: Reading Genre in Classic Detective Fiction. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995.
- Rumblelow, Donald. The Complete Jack the Ripper. London: W.H. Allen, 1975.
- Schramm, Wilbur. The Story of Human Communication: Cave Painting to Microchip. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1988.
- Shreffler, Philip A., ed. Sherlock Holmes by Gas-Lamp: Highlights from the First Four Decades of the Baker Street Journal. New York: Fordham University Press, 1989.
- Shreffler, Philip A., ed. The Baker Street Reader: Cornerstone Writings about Sherlock Holmes. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1984.
- Stavert, Geoffrey. A Study in Southsea: The Unrevealed Life of Doctor Arthur Conan Doyle. Horndean: Milestone Publications, 1987.
- Stoker, Bram. Dracula. New York: Barnes and Noble Inc., 1993.
- Symons, Julian. Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel—A History. London: Faber and Faber, 1972.
- Taylor, David. The New Police in Nineteenth-century England: Crime, Conflict, and Control. Glasgow: Manchester University Press, 1997.
- Thompson, Jon. Fiction, Crime, and Empire: Clues to Modernity and Postmodernism. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993.

Tracy, Jack. The Encyclopædia Sherlockiana: A Universal Dictionary of the State of Knowledge of Sherlock Holmes and his Biographer John H. Watson, M.D. New York: Doubleday & Company, 1977.

Weller, Phillip with Christopher Roden. The Life and Times of Sherlock Holmes. London: Studio Editions, 1992.

Williams, Guy R. The Hidden World of Scotland Yard. London: Hutchinson and Co., 1972.

Winks, Robin W., ed. Detective Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays. Woodstock: Foul Play Press, 1988.