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THE COMPOSITION OF THE DETECTIVE NOVELS  
OF ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

Only towards the end of the [nineteenth] century in the works of Arthur Conan Doyle did E. A. Poe's poetics of the detective short-story and the poetics of the detective novel meet and join. A. Conan Doyle was by nature a short-story writer, which may be seen not only in the overwhelming number of his short-stories about Sherlock Holmes but also in the three rather awkward attempts at enlarging a short-story to the size of a novel. His only completely artistically successful novel in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

The purpose of this paper is to justify the quoted opinion expressed by me in an article over ten years ago.<sup>1</sup> My contention has been that the detective novel is a special variety of the crime novel, but that though the detective novel and the detective short-story have, generally speaking, the same kind of plot, historically their origins were separate and independent.<sup>2</sup> The detective short-story was invented as a tale of ratiocination by E. A. Poe in the early 1840's, at a time when the English crime novel already had a long tradition, but it did not produce its offshoot – the detective novel – until 1860s.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The quoted passage belongs to my paper "Historical Sources of the Poetics of Crime Novel and Detective Short-Story" published in *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich – Les Problèmes des Genres-Littéraires* vol. 25 (2), (Wrocław-Lódź: Societas Scientiarum Lodziensis, 1982), p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> This fact was stressed in 1936 by Dorothy L. Sayers in her Introduction to *Tales of Detection* published in an Everyman's Paperback pp. VII and IX.

<sup>3</sup> *The Woman in White* by William W. Collins was published in 1860, it inspired *Lady Audley's Secret* by Mary E. Braddon, issued in 1861 and was accompanied by *East Lynne* by Mrs Henry Wood, printed in the same year. It ought to be remembered that Collins wrote *The Moonstone* in 1868, that Miss Braddon wrote 80 detective novels, that Mrs H. Wood continued writing in this genre, and that Dickens's *Black House* (1852–1853) was an overture to the novels of mystery and detection in that it introduced a professional detective officer and detection. Dickens was to close his literary career with *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* in 1870.

*A STUDY IN SCARLET*

Conan Doyle's detective fiction began in 1887 when he published his first novel *A study in Scarlet*. When we start reading the book we realize at once that the traditional novelistic narrative is used in it. We get to know the narrator, Dr Watson, and his new acquaintance, Mr Sherlock Holmes, both presented against a well-drawn background of *fin-de-siècle* London.<sup>4</sup> Also, the theme of detection is unobtrusively introduced by "the little mystery that hung around my companion" (p. 20),<sup>5</sup> by the revelation of his being "a consulting detective" and by reference to other detectives – Dupin and Lecoq.

In Chapter 3 a corpse in puzzling circumstances is discovered and Holmes is shown in action for the first time.

In Chapters 4, 5 and 6 investigation continues and a trap is set for the murderer by means of an advertisement about a ring to be called for, but the killer eludes capture.

Chapter 6 adds to the evidence what the policeman Gregson has discovered about the victim and his companion and the news from the policeman Lestrade of the companion having been killed in a hotel room.

Chapter 7 goes back to tell us how the second victim was attacked. Then the detective experiments with the pills found near the dead man and discovers that only one of them is poisonous.

He declares: "There will be no more murders!" (p. 50) and a cabman, ordered by Holmes, comes upstairs to help with luggage. He is handcuffed and bound.

Holmes introduces him as Jefferson Hope, the perpetrator of the two deaths, and is ready to answer questions.

Two further chapters end the story. In one of them Dr Watson tells us how Hope, the avenger of this fiancée and her father, afraid of his imminent death of heart-failure, insists on making a deposition at Scotland Yard, explaining how and why he had pursued two criminals and offered them a choice of two pills.

In the concluding chapter we learn that the prisoner died before his trial. The rest of the chapter contains Holmes's detailed explanation of how he solved the mystery.

<sup>4</sup> For the decadent features of Sherlock Holmes's character I refer the reader to Reginald Hill, "Holmes: 'The Hamlet of Crime Fiction'", in H. R. F. Keating (ed.) *Crime Writers. Reflections on crime fiction* (London: BBC 1978), pp. 20–41.

<sup>5</sup> All my quotations from A. C. Doyle and other references will be to *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle with a preface by Christopher Morley (New York: Doubleday and Co. Garden City, 1930), which contains all the novels and collections of short-stories about the detective, arranged in chronological order.

This is how the novel or a long short story of 44 large size pages might have looked if Conan Doyle had not spoiled its composition by inserting 24 pages of a western tale between Part I and the last two concluding chapters of the book.

For some reason he wished it to be as long as possible and therefore, having written 7 chapters, he began Part II, entitled *The Country of the Saints*, the action of which takes the reader 31 years back to the settlement of the Mormons in Utah. The story he tells in Part II is a story of adventure which reminds one of *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912) by Zane Grey.

The only reasonable purpose behind the insertion was to produce a strongly convincing motivation of Jefferson Hope's relentless pursuit of evil-doers and his acts of revenge.

By dividing the whole story into two Parts, Conan Doyle enlarged it to 68 pages and gave it a seeming balance: 53% of the text against the subsequent 47%.

But the addition of the Mormon part of the novel has made *A Study in Scarlet* a hybrid. The first part of the novel is not a story of adventure, but a story of detection. It is told by Dr Watson. After Chapter 7 it breaks off to be resumed by the same narrator in Chapters 6 and 7 of Part II. These chapters bear the titles *A Continuation of the Reminiscences of John Watson M. D.*, and *The Conclusion*.

The narrator of the western is neither defined nor in any way related to Dr Watson and his world. His intrusion remains unexplained. The careful reader will observe that he is an omniscient narrator standing outside and above the world of Jefferson Hope. He is the witness of what in the alkali desert happens to a solitary wanderer with a girl of five and he can enter the characters' thoughts and emotions and say:

The hunter's mind was of a hard, unyielding nature and the predominant idea of revenge had taken such complete possession of it that there was no room for any other emotion. (p. 15)

As to what occurred there, we cannot do better than quote the old hunter's own account, as duly recorded in Dr Watson's Journal, to which we are already under such obligations. (p. 76)

The awkwardness in the composition of the book is at odds with the author's ability to create vivid characters, their background and atmosphere.

To say that this awkwardness is a mark of a beginner is not the same as to explain why he failed exactly in this way. But the text of the novel may supply the right explanation. The ghosts of two writers seem to have hovered over Conan Doyle while he was bent over his desk. One of them was that of the American short-story writer Edgar Allan Poe, the other of the French novelist Emile Gaboriau. "You remind me of Edgar Allan Poe's

Dupin" – says Dr Watson in Chapter 2 (p. 24) and he asks: "Have you read Gaboriau's works?" (p. 25)

The two names are mentioned during a discussion of Holmes's *Science of Deduction and Analysis*. And the two men – Dupin, "the arm-chair detective" and Lecoq, blamed as "a miserable bungler", but recommended for "his energy", (p. 25) are criticized by the Baker Street genius.

Thus the text hints at two sources of inspiration: the American maker of the detective short-story and the French novelist of manners grown into an author of the crime-and-detection novel.

Gaboriau's books were composed, as R. Caillois has pointed out,<sup>6</sup> on the principle of digging up the past. Both in *L'affaire Lerouge* (1866, translated into English 1887) and in *Monsieur Lecoq* (1869) a short investigation of a crime, leads to a much longer investigation which reveals certain events that took place many years ago, and the third and the longest brings the reader to still older roots of the crime.

This is what Conan Doyle wished to imitate, but he failed in giving his book a complete unity. He was torn between the idea of making Sherlock Holmes an American "thinking machine" which solves problems without leaving his armchair and pipe and his own natural zest for a story of adventure with plenty of fresh air and exciting description of people and things.

It is to be noted that the two inspirations, to which according to J. Symons,<sup>7</sup> R. L. Stevenson's *The Dynamiter* might be added, implied the need to integrate two types of composition: the short-story and the fully developed novel. And that need the author of *A Study in Scarlet* failed to satisfy.

#### THE SIGN OF FOUR

The next book was *The Sign of Four*, first printed in February 1890 in *Lippincott's Magazine* in USA and published in England later the same year.

*The Sign of Four* is an improvement upon *A Study in Scarlet*. Dr Watson is the main narrator from its beginning to its end and if other narrators appear – like Thaddeus Sholto and Jonathan Small – they are quoted by the main narrator.

The Gaboriau model of gradually digging up the past has been retained, but the presentation of the origins of all crimes that are committed in the course of the story as consequences of an unlawful appropriation of the

<sup>6</sup> In "Le roman policier" etc., a part of his book *Puissances de roman*, Marseilles 1940.

<sup>7</sup> See J. Symons, *Bloody Murder* (Penguin Books, 1975), pp. 68–9.

great Agra treasure has been included in the last two chapters of the novel as a statement and thus does not break the unity of the book.

The presentation of the earliest events takes place where usually the detective retells the story as a logical chronological succession of events. Here, however, it is Holmes's main adversary who elucidates the past and his own motives while the detective only adds final touches to the picture. It is to be noted that, as in the first novel, the mainspring of violence is revenge.

Thus the element of the story of adventure which A. Conan Doyle was unable to integrate with the element of detection in his first novel, has been fairly well fused with the main story. But the author did not resign from using it. It forms 26% of the text in the final chapters, but it also accompanies investigation.

All stories of detection appear in two types: the simpler ones in which there is a problem to be solved and the detection proceeds until its end; and the more complex ones in which the detective has to face the criminal's counteraction which obscures traces, destroys evidence, attempts to kill the detective or inconvenient witnesses.

This second type introduces, instead of one problem to be solved, a series of related puzzles and, very often, an escape and pursuit. These two elements of composition are to be found in *The Sign of Four*. In Chapters 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 there is plenty of outdoor movement – travelling from place to place, following the dog on a cresote trail, steaming down the Thames and a steam-boat race between the criminals and Sherlock Holmes and the police. These parts of the story amount to about 22% of the text and together with the chapters about the adventures in India make up 48% of the book.

But, again, they are well fused with the investigation.

*The Sign of Four* begins like *A Study in Scarlet*. Chapter 1 has a novelistic character: it paints Sherlock Holmes as a *fin-de-siècle* character against a *fin-de-siècle* background. "Crime is commonplace, existence is commonplace" – complains the detective. (p. 93) The yellow fog swirls outside. Cocaine offers refuge. But then Miss Morstan enters ...

Chapter 2 presents the problem: the disappearance of Miss Morstan's father, a pearl sent every year by an unknown person, a strange invitation to a meeting in order to do justice to her, but without the knowledge of the police.

In Chapter 3 Holmes offers a general answer to the puzzle, some evidence comes to our knowledge and the three people set off for the appointment.

In the chapters that follow some puzzles are explained, but new ones face the detective and his companions. An explanation of Miss Morstan's father's death is given by Thaddeus Sholto, Major Sholto's theft of the

treasure is revealed, but the circumstances of his death present a new mystery. The hiding place of the treasure is still unknown.

Then the tragedy of Pondishery Lodge takes place when T. Sholto and his visitors arrive at his brother's house. The Sign of Four reappears on Bartholomew Sholto's body and a poisoned thorn behind his ear and the room locked from inside present a new puzzle. Also the disappearance of the treasure gives an additional motivation to pursue the unknown criminals.

All the time Holmes deduces what had happened and pushes the investigation on in spite of the blunders of the police. Chapter 6 characterizes the main criminal a man with a stump, called Jonathan Small, and signals pursuit which goes on in four following chapters until the man's detention.

In this way the action of the novel acquires the dynamics of movement, mystery, conflict, surprise and suspense. Those episodes which introduce some humour, a dinner, the Baker street urchin "irregulars" and Dr Watson's wooing of Miss Morstan serve to provide relief.

It is a measure of Conan Doyle's skill that he connects Dr Watson's chances of being accepted by the girl with her chances of losing the treasure. The final loss of it verifies him as a true lover. Their engagement compensates both of them.

When we add up all the components of the book we see that it belongs to the English novelistic tradition. There are seven distinct characters besides Holmes, a quest for treasure hidden in a house with a secret room, a criminal plot and even a love plot. The story of an ill-gotten Indian treasure carried away to England reminds one of *The Moonstone*.

J. Symons acknowledges the better composition of *The Sign of Four*, but criticizes its ending:

*The Sign of Four* is better organized, but the tale of treasure plays a disproportionately large part in what is after all a short novel. But he also adds: The prime defect of both books, indeed is that they could have been condensed to short stories. Doyle did not think of these books in terms of novels – as Collins, for example, conceived *The Moonstone*, but as problems, each of which could have been worked out in the form of a short story.<sup>8</sup>

My correction of this judgement would be that though Doyle *did* think of these books in terms of novels (i.e. he used novelistic technique in the narrative and he wished to make the stories long), he conceived his plots as problems whose best vehicles might be short stories.

This may be proved not only by the inner evidence of the texts, but also by external evidence. In the years shaping Conan Doyle's Holmesian fiction he was busy writing the following books:

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

- 1887 – *A Study in Scarlet* (a novel);  
 1889 – *Micah Clarke* (a novel);  
 1889 – *The Sign of Four* (a novel);  
 1891 – *The White Company* (a novel);  
 1891 (July) – *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (short stories);  
 1893 – *Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (short stories);  
 1894 (December) – *Exploits of Brigadier Gerard* (1<sup>st</sup> story);  
 1895 (April to September) – *The Exploits of Brigadier Gerard* (short stories);  
 1895 – *The Stark Munro Letters* (a novel in letters);  
 1901 (from August 1901 to April 1902) – *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (a novel);  
 1902 (August and November 1902 to May 1903) – *Adventures of Brigadier Gerard* (short stories);  
 1903 (October 1903) – *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* (short stories).

The dates (which refer to serialization in magazines, not to publication in final book form) show how much novel writing overlapped short-story writing. The balance seems even: six novels to five collections of stories. But the impact of serialization is seen in the growing predominance of the short-story form. The epistolary form of *The Stark Munro Letters* puts the novel on the verge of a series of tales.

The Brigadier Gerard and Holmes stories testify the truth of A. Conan Doyle's statement quoted by H. Pearson:

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 bring 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.<sup>9</sup>

It is, therefore, evident that the maker of Sherlock Holmes favoured the form of a cycle of tales with a single main character linking them into one whole.

This device was used in *The Adventure of Sherlock Holmes* (12 stories) and in *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (11 stories). In the last of these stories Conan Doyle, who had enough of the detective and wished to undertake, as he thought, artistically more ambitious tasks put an end to the man's life by making him fall into the Reichenbach Falls in Switzerland while grappling with Professor Moriarty, a criminal intellect equal to Holmes.

<sup>9</sup> H. Pearson, *Conan Doyle, His Life and Art* (London: Guild Books, 1946), p. 103.

*THE HOUND OF THE BASKERVILLES*

General outcry against this killing forced the writer to invent an account of an earlier exploit of the detective. And then he created his best Sherlock Holmes novel with a single plot – *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. There is ample evidence that he intended it to be a novel.

It begins, like the other two, with the same kind of overture: Holmes at home displaying his mental powers to Dr Watson. This indoor game of ratiocination is contrasted with the gloomy and superstitious legend of a spectral Hound of Dartmoor, which challenges the reason by its connexion with the sudden death of the late heir to the Baskerville estate. The challenge is taken up by the detective who formulates the problem of detection when he says:

There are two questions ... The one is whether any crime has been committed at all, the second is, what is the crime and how was it committed? (p. 684)

These are the contents of the first three chapters. A dramatic contrast has been achieved by setting off a rational mind against a Gothic story and this contrast and conflict will go on through the whole plot because of circumstantial uncertainty. This preamble to the drama forms 16% of the text.

The second phase of the action embraces Chapters 4 and 5 and makes 14% of the text. The action develops quickly. The arrival of Sir Henry, the new heir to the baronetcy, is followed by an “apparently purposeless series of small mysteries” (p. 699) and “three threads” which might have led to an explanation are broken.

The disappearance of a bearded man in a cab, who called himself Sherlock Holmes, signals an important thing – a lurking adversary equal in intellectual power to the detective.

The main body of the novel consists of Chapters 6 to 11 (44% of the text). Here Dr Watson, the narrator, is made the most important character, for he guards Sir Henry and acts as a detective and reporter to Holmes who has given him a list of suspects.

The presentation of the wild part of Devonshire with its tors, moors, bogs and prehistoric homesteads reads like bits of Hardy<sup>10</sup> and creates a moody, natural theatre for the drama about to develop. Here Sir Arthur Conan Doyle shows himself as a novelist largely indebted to the English literary tradition:

<sup>10</sup> Like Hardy, Conan Doyle in this and other novels changes place-names (e.g. he calls Bovey Tracey Coombe Tracey), but faithfully recreates their character and atmosphere.



We have left the fertile country behind and beneath us. We looked back on it now, the slanting rays of low sun turning the streams to threads of gold and glowing on the red earth new turned by the plough and the broad tangle of the woodlands. The road in front of us grew bleaker and wilder over huge russet and olive slopes, sprinkled with giant boulders. Now and then we passed a moorland cottage, walled and roofed with stone, with no creeper to break its harsh outline. Suddenly we looked down into a cuplike depression, patched with stunted oaks and firs which had been twisted and bent by the fury of years of storm. Two high, narrow towers rose over the trees. The driver pointed with his whip.

"Baskerville Hall", said he.

Its master had risen and was staring with flushed cheeks and shining eyes. A few minutes later we had reached the lodge-gates, a maze of fantastic tracery in wrought iron, with weather-beaten pillars on either side, blotched with lichens, and surmounted by the boars' heads of the Baskervilles. The lodge was a ruin of black granite and bared ribs of rafters, but facing it was a new building, half constructed, the first fruit of Sir Charles' South African gold.

Through the gateway we passed into the avenue, where the wheels were again hushed amid the leaves, and the old trees shot their branches in a sombre tunnel over our heads. Baskerville shuddered as he looked up the long, dark drive to where the house glimmered like a ghost at the farther end. (pp. 701-02)

... the house lay before us. In the fading light I could see that the centre was a heavy block of building from which a porch projected. The whole front was draped in ivy, with a patch clipped bare here and there where a window or a coat of arms broke through the dark veil. From this central block rose the twin towers, ancient, crenellated, and pierced with many loopholes. To right and left of the turrets were more modern wings of black granite. A dull light shone through heavy mullioned windows, and from the high chimneys which rose from the steep, high-angled roof there sprang a single black column of smoke. (p. 702)

It is almost superfluous to say that Baskerville Hall belongs to the long English tradition of the novel of terror and its heritage present among the English and American Romantic writers and such Victorian novelists as Sheridan Le Fanu, Dickens and the Brontes. But, unlike the Gothicists and their cheap sensational successors, Conan Doyle never overdoes the sinister atmosphere – as we can see from the following passage:

The fresh beauty of the following morning did something to efface from our minds the grim and gray impression which had been left upon both of us by our first experience of Baskerville Hall. As Sir Henry and I sat at breakfast the sunlight flooded in through the high mullioned windows, throwing watery patches of colour from the coats of arms which covered them. The dark panelling glowed like bronze in the golden rays, and it was hard to realize that this was indeed the chamber which had struck such gloom into our souls upon the evening before. (704)

Dr Watson and Sir Henry gradually become acquainted with their neighbourhood: the Barrymore couple of servants, the rather strange Stapleton siblings, the habitual litigant Frankland, and the almost respectable local beauty – Mrs Lyons. Her portrait subtly renders her not-quite-up-to-the-mark character:

A maid showed me in without ceremony, and as I entered the sitting-room a lady, who was sitting before a Remington typewriter, sprang up with a pleasant smile of welcome. Her face fell, however, when she saw I was a stranger, and she sat down again and asked me the object of my visit.

The first impression left by Mrs Lyons was one of extreme beauty. Her eyes and hair were of the same rich hazel colour and her cheeks, though considerably freckled, were flushed with exquisite bloom of the brunette, the dainty pink which lurks at the heart of the sulphur rose. Admiration was, I repeat, the first impression. But the second was criticism. There was something subtly wrong with the face, some coarseness of expression, some hardness, perhaps, of eye, some looseness of lip which marred its perfect beauty. But these, of course, are after thoughts. At the moment I was simply conscious that I was in the presence of a very handsome woman ... (p. 733)

The descriptions and daily occurrences are well fused with the developing investigation. Like in London, a series of small mysteries faces Dr Watson and Sir Henry, one after another. Their arrival coincides with the escape of a convict from Dartmoor prison. A sobbing in the night, suspicious signals with a candle, a howling dog on the moor, the strange behaviour of the Stapletons when meeting Sir Henry and the mystery of a slim man on a rock – all help to create surprises, suspicions and tension.

The artistic function of these episodic mysteries is not limited to the strengthening of the tension in an episode, but in most cases – the escaped convict affair is an exception – has been subordinated to the main purpose of investigation – the discovery of the means of crime and the criminal.<sup>11</sup>

The tension also increases owing to the absence of Sherlock Holmes. Surrounded with a growing number of strange facts and exposed to desperate weather, Sir Henry and Dr Watson feel upset as excerpts from the doctor's diary show:

October 16<sup>th</sup>. A dull and foggy day with a drizzle of rain. The house is banked in with rolling clouds, which rise now and then to show the dreary curves of the moor, with thin, silver veins upon the sides of the hills, and the distant boulders gleaming where the light strikes upon their wet faces. It is melancholy outside and in. The baronet is in black reaction after the excitements of the night. I am conscious myself of a weight at my heart and a feeling of impending danger – ever present danger, which is the more terrible because I am unable to define it. (p. 727)

The suspense is balanced by adventure. This element has been made subordinate to the element of investigation. It is owing to his brave enterprise that Dr Watson meets Sherlock Holmes on the moor at night and finds relief.

Chapters 12 and 13 (14% of the text) prepare the reader for the final solution. Some small, episodic mysteries are elucidated, the criminal is

<sup>11</sup> The function of episodic mysteries has been discussed by Jolanta Nałęcz-Wojtczak in her unpublished Polish doctoral thesis *Mystery as an Element of Composition in the English Novel of The Nineteenth Century*, (Łódź, 1975), Chap. 3.

named and his plan of a new crime is revealed. But a new difficulty arises: how to set a trap for Stapleton which would prove his guilt?

This part of the novel shows Sherlock Holmes as the master of detection. In spite of all appearances he was not passively waiting for the results of his friend's research. Unknown and unseen he was all the time on the spot and used Dr Watson's reports and his own inquiries about life of the Stapletons to discover how the late Sir Charles was killed and how Sir Henry was going to be killed.

The two chapters combine insight with events. The dramatic death of the convict resolves some moral doubts about helping him to escape and, at the same time, reveals the little mystery of the boot stolen from Sir Henry.

As neatly Holmes's pretended departure for London is combined with his visit and interrogation of Mrs Lysons at Coombe Tracey where they wait for Lestrade.

The climax of the plot is achieved in Chapter 14 which bears the title *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Two traps are set by the chief antagonists for the uninformed baronet, though one with a purpose to kill and the other with an aim to catch the murderer red-handed while saving Sir Henry Baskerville. The infernal Hound materializes for the first and the last time. Stapleton escapes from Holmes to death, his unhappy wife is released and the accessories to the crime are discovered.

In accordance with the Gothic and Romantic tradition all this happens on a moonlit night, but in Conan Doyle's presentation the landscape has the clarity of a good film scene:

The night was clear and fine above us. The stars shone cold and bright, while a half-moon bathed the whole scene in a soft, uncertain light. Before us lay the dark bulk of the house, its serrated roof and bristling chimneys hard outlined against the silver-spangled sky. Broad bars of golden light from the lower windows stretched across the orchard and the moor. One of them was suddenly shut of. (p. 756)

This serenity of the late evening is significantly disturbed not only by the impending horror, but also by the slowly creeping veil of fog:

I have said that over the great Grimpen Mire there hung a dense, white fog. It was drifting slowly in our direction and banked itself up like a wall on that side of us, low but thick and well defined. The moon shone on it, and it looked like a great shimmering ice-field, with the heads of the distant tors as rocks borne upon its surface. (p. 755)

This fog is like a symbol of some evil power which almost frustrates the master detective's efforts to bring the murderer to justice.

Holmes is conscious of his failure to ensure Sir Henry Barkeville perfect safety and the baronet must pay for his shock with a period of long gradual recovery.

This chapter which makes 7% of the text is balanced and contrasted by the final Chapter 15 (5% of the text), entitled *A Retrospection*. The very title of the chapter seems to be taken from the theory of the detective fiction. For every novel or story of detection begins with a chaotic heap of puzzling facts which in the course of investigation are arranged into a retrospective story told in chronological order, with causes and purposes satisfactorily explained. This story is usually told by the detective; this happens in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and the novelist is conscious of it when he uses Holmes as his mouthpiece:

I shall soon be in the position of being able to put into a single connected narrative one of the most singular and sensational crimes of modern times. (p. 753)

It ought to be noted that the author has happily avoided making this retrospection an apotheosis of a Master Mind. Just as Holmes was unable to avoid terrible risk, setting his trap, so now he has not got all the answers about the criminal either.

This is like life and this is like a realistic novel. The world presented in the book is close to that created in *The Moonstone* or in the Miss Marple stories, but very far from artificial whodunnits of the *Ten Little Niggers* type.

Consequently, the book ends with the following words of Sherlock Holmes

And now, my dear Watson, we have had some weeks of severe work, and for one evening, I think, we may turn our thoughts into more pleasant channels. I have a box for 'Les Huguenots'. Have you heard of the De Reszkes? Might I trouble you to be ready in half an hour and we can stop at Marcini's for a little dinner on the way? (p. 766)

The dramatic symmetry of the novel may be presented in the following table:

I	II	III	IV	V
induction	development of conflict	action leading to peripety	catastrophe	resolution
chaps 1 + 2 + 3	4 + 5	6 + 7 + 8 + 9 + 10 + 11	12 + 13	14 + 15
16%	14%	44%	14%	12%
of the text				

*The Hound of the Baskervilles* beautifully combines the closed Aristotelian structure of a dramatic story (of crime and detection) with the epic structure of the novel.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> According to Aristotle "the first essential, the life and soul, so to speak, of Tragedy is the plot". It "has beginning, middle, and end". "The story ... must represent one action, a complete whole, with its several incidents so closely connected that the transposal or withdraw-

After its publication Conan Doyle had to reconcile himself to the comeback of his detective and did this in *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* (13 stories).

### THE VALLEY OF FEAR

His fourth and last novel about Holmes, which was followed by two new collections of stories – *His Last Bow* (8 stories, 1917) and *The Case Book of Sherlock Holmes* (12 stories, 1927) – was published in 1914. Its title was *The Valley of Fear*.

Its composition is extraordinary. When one looks at the Contents of the book, its symmetry seems to be perfect. It falls into two parts – One, entitled *The Tragedy of Birlstone* and Two, entitled *The Scowrers*. Each of them consists of 7 chapters and the whole ends with a very short Epilogue. The two parts are well balanced: 47% of the text against 51% of the text. The Epilogue forms 2%.

And yet the whole reads like two completely different stories joined together by sheer force.

*The Tragedy of Birlstone* follows the ordinary pattern of a detective story. There is a warning about a crime, then the news about it having been perpetrated (Chap. 1 and 2). A visit to the scene of the crime follows (Chap. 3), followed by a discussion of how the murder might have been committed (Chap. 4). It is significant that the police are no longer presented as obtuse as in *A Study in Scarlet*. Inspector Alec Mac Donald is an intelligent partner for Holmes and even the local officers, White Mason and Seargent Wilson, are not stupid. The case presents an unusual difficulty, for the murder was committed in an ancient manor house with a moat and drawbridge and the murderer disappeared. This criminal mystery reminds one of the one in *Mystère de la chambre jaune* (1908) and *Parfum de la dame en noir* (1908) by Gaston Leroux. An examination of witnesses takes place and attempts to restore the course of events continue (Chap. 5 and 6). Then Holmes has a sudden illumination at night and is ready to explain everything (Chap. 7).

The homicide occurred in self-defence against an assassin and the death of Mr John Douglas, the owner of the Manor, was simulated by disguising the body. Douglas comes out of his secret room where King Charles once hid and his wife and a close friend own up.

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al of any of them will disjoin and dislocate the whole." I am quoting the philosopher's text from D. Daiches, *Critical Approaches to Literature* (London: Longmans, 1964), pp. 27, 30 and 31.

And then Part 2 called *The Scowrers* begins which is a paraphrase of a story written as a statement by Mr Douglas in his hiding place.

A. E. Murch calls it "another complete detective story with a different hero".<sup>13</sup> But I should say that "detective story" may be its courtesy-title only. Hesketh Pearson, though not so much a literary critic as a biographer, is more fortunate when he calls it "another long story called *The Valley of Fear*, the first and best of the gangster yarns which achieved such extraordinary vogue in the heyday of Edgar Wallace".<sup>14</sup>

*The Scowrers*, the title of which ought to be *The Valley of Fear*, is, in spite of its author's efforts, as different from *The Tragedy of Birlstone* as the second part of *A Study in Scarlet* from its first part. It also takes the reader more than ten years back and to America.

It is a tale of violence organized by a group of local leaders of the Eminent Order of Freemans, a workers' secret organization in a mining district in Pennsylvania around 1875.

To Vermissa Valley where the rule of terror and assassination has been established by the local Bodymaster, a man called Mc Murdo comes as a fugitive from the police in Chicago and through his toughness and bravery gains popularity among the miners. At the same time he becomes a favourite of the Bodymaster and local Councillor in one person, because of his readiness to kill and his ability to counterfeit dollars.

He takes part in two or three operations of terror and, together with the master of the Lodge of Freemans, sets a trap for Pinkerton's agency detective, Birdy Edwards, about to arrive in the Valley of Fear. The cream of the gangster organization take part in the trapping. But it ends with a revelation: Mc Murdo declares:

I am Birdy Edwards of Pinkerton's. I was chosen to break up your gang. (p. 863)

Birdy Edwards changes his name to John Douglas, gets married, leaves Pennsylvania for Chicago, then goes to California and faced there with the gangsters' vengeance, escapes to England. But one of the murderers released from prison, comes across the ocean to kill him and finds his own death.

It is obvious that this is a tale of terror and violence in which a detective secretly works for the forces of justice and humanity; but it is not a story of detection in the sense of solving a criminal puzzle. Its main problem is how to ingratiate oneself with gangsters without committing a crime and how to create a situation in which they might be caught red-handed and brought to justice. Birdy Edwards is rather an *agent provocateur* than a detective. And the only mystery – that of his identity – is maintained

<sup>13</sup> In *The Development of the Detective Novel* (London: Peter Owen, 1968), p. 180.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Conan Doyle*, p. 109.

throughout the story by the author who simply withholds the truth from us and keeps it secret even when he refers to the main character's hypothetical feelings and reflections.

This little dishonesty in the narrative technique may produce some disappointment in the reader, because, though the narrator never completely enters the main character's mind, he presents everything in the Valley of fear from that man's point of view.

The final result is that the reader feels uneasy when he finds that two stories of completely different genres are served to him under one title.

It is hard to believe that Conan Doyle, writing his "swan song in fiction", as he called the book,<sup>15</sup> made the same mistake in composition as in *A Study in Scarlet*.

There is considerable evidence that he wished to weld the two stories into one by all possible means. The initial chapters introduce the shadow of Professor Moriarty, the Master Mind of internationally organized crime in which Conan Doyle saw the coming danger for human society. As a learned scientist Moriarty appears in public; as the intellectual and scientific schemer of crime he hides in his comfortable apartments, growing richer and richer for his services to gangs.

Sherlock Holmes calls him a second Jonathan Wild – master criminal (p. 777). Sherlock Holmes's informer fears the man so much that he writes warnings about him in cipher. And, in the Epilogue, when John Douglas is released by the court for killing his assailant in self-defence and leaves with his wife for South Africa, he is "lost overboard in gale off St. Helena" (p. 865) by another movement of Moriarty's long hand. Holmes thinks that the American Scowlers in their pursuit of vengeance paid the professor for the new crime.

So Moriarty is present behind both stories as a new force against which Holmes has to fight with only partial success.

Besides this unifying message of the novel, the author tried to integrate the narrators within the presented world.

The first attempt to release Dr Watson as the first-person-singular narrator from the limitations of eye-witness narrative and to give him greater freedom in describing what he had not seen but learnt is to be found in Chapter 3 which begins as follows:

Now for amoment I will ask leave to remove my own insignificant personality and to describe events which occurred before we arrived upon the scene by the light of knowledge which came to us afterwards. Only in this way can I make reader appreciate the people concerned and the strange setting in which their fate was cast. (p. 779)

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. M. and M. Hardwick, *The Man Who Was Sherlock Holmes* (London: John Murray, 1964), p. 87.

This is followed by a fine novelistic description of the village of Birlstone and the Manor House with its inhabitants.

Later on in Chapter 7 when John Douglas has emerged from the secret room with a written apology for his life, it is Dr Watson who retells the story of crime, provocation and vengeance in his own new authorial way. And, before he does this, he tries to reconcile the reader to another story:

Do not think that I intrude one story before another is finished. As you read on you will find that this is not so. And when I have solved this mystery of the past, we shall meet once more in those rooms on Baker Street, where this, like so many other wonderful happenings will find its end. (p. 815)

In another place Dr Watson, after having presented a chain of the Scowrers' iniquities, addresses the reader again:

Why should these pages be stained by further crimes? Have I not said enough to show the men and their methods? (p. 853)

Such Victorian addresses, condemned by Henry James, show the author's need to apologise for what he was doing.

In my opinion the book is an artistic failure. It is impossible to say with certitude why its author reverted to his first failure and tried to improve upon it. But perhaps the message of the "swan song" may help us to guess.

In the last sentence of *The Valley of Fear*, Sherlock Holmes's "fateful eyes still strained to pierce the veil" of the uncertain future (p. 866), but no hope was given. This may express Arthur Conan Doyle's fears about historic changes in the organization of crime.

He based his story on American materials. In the years 1865-1877 (coinciding with 1875 in the novel) Molly Maguires, a secret Irish workers' organization in the Scranton districts of Pennsylvania, used violence to improve labour conditions in industry.

The attempt at Birlstone Manor (1886) coincided with the feats of Allan Pinkerton (1839-1884), the famous Scottish-born detective who exposed a band of counterfeiters in Illinois (Mc Murdo bears a Scottish name and pretends to be a counterfeiter from Chicago). Pinkerton set up a private detective agency to protect the property of railway companies and acted as the leader of espionage during the Civil War (Mc Murdo is also Pinkerton's spy). His agency, continued by his sons after his death, was notorious for its methods in the suppression of labour disputes, especially in the Homestead strike begun by The Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers near Pittsburgh, where an armed battle was fought on July 6th 1892 between the strikers and 300 Pinkerton agents led by



Carnegie's partner Henry C. Frick and supported by The National Guard. This battle resulted in ten deaths and many injuries.

To complete the scene of the American labour unrest one might add that even the Knights of Labor were involved in an incident in Chicago in which seven policeman lost their lives in 1886.<sup>16</sup>

A. Conan Doyle visited the United States for the first time in 1894, only two years after the Great Strike which resembled what happens in *The Valley of Fear*. In the anticapitalist attitudes of American Labour and in the use of terror and violence by some representatives of both sides he may have anticipated the rise of the organized gangsterism of the times after the First World War. And he expressed it in the co-operation of the Scowrers with Professor Moriarty, the symbol of the imminent future.

This hypothesis explains the predominance of the gangster story both as to the length of the text and the imposition of the title on two stories of different genres.

To convey his message to the reader successfully, Conan Doyle had to show the terrorist organization from inside. But this excluded mystery which is the essence of a story of detection. Thus the only mystery in the story of the Scowrers – the identity of Mc Murdo – has become vestigial and the story a story of crime.

#### THE SUMMING UP

It is time to sum up this analysis. Julian Symons has said: "It cannot be said that either of Doyle's first two Holmes books is a very original or well-devised novel. ... The prime defect of both books, indeed, is that they could have been condensed to short stories."<sup>17</sup>

The same might be said about *The Valley of Fear*. Only in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, when Gaboriau was forgotten and Doyle concentrated on genuinely English material did he create his really good novel.

It is significant, besides, that in all the three faulty novels revenge is the motive of criminal action. This is a limitation. Another limitation in the detection presented in all four is that Sherlock Holmes is able to prove guilt only by setting a trap for the criminal, which is a certain mark of

<sup>16</sup> For the American scene compare: C. C. Calkins (ed.), *The Story of America*, (Pleasantville N.Y.: The Reader's Digest Association, 1975), pp. 290, 342–343 and J. D. Hart, *The Oxford Companion To American Literature*, (New York: OUP, 1956). A. Pinkerton was the author of three books: *Criminal Reminiscences and Detective Sketches* (1879), *The Spy of the Rebellion* (1883) and *Thirty Years a Detective* (1864) which may have been known to Conan Doyle.

<sup>17</sup> *Bloody Murder*, pp. 68–9.

weakness in detective work. But this involves physical action – an element of adventure which enlivens the novels.

This also confirms M. A. Murch's statement that Conan Doyle "was mentally in tune with the spirit of sensational romance, for he loved action, adventure and tales of exciting quests."<sup>18</sup> He may have also been aware of rivalry in himself between the cool "scientific" detective and the lover of adventure. Some light is cast on this in the following discussion between Holmes and Dr Watson on *A Study in Scarlet* in *The Sign of Four*:

"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."

"But the romance was there", I remonstrated. "I could not tamper with the facts".

"Some facts should be suppressed, or, at least, a just sense of proportion should be observed in treating them. The only point in the case which deserved mention was the curious analytical reasoning from effects to cause, by which I succeeded in unraveling it". (p. 90)

It is amusing to discover in Sherlock Holmes, who indulged in dramatic last-moment revelations, an admirer of whodunits stripped even of sensation.

Whatever reservations, critics agree that Conan Doyle has raised the value of English detective fiction popular in his time. A. E. Murch writes:

Sherlock Holmes's exploits are not simple tales of crime, nor mere puzzles that lose their interest as soon as they are solved. They can be read over and over again with renewed, even increased appreciation for Holmes's detective acumen and the artistry with which the tale is unfolded. ... With Conan Doyle, the detective story came at last to full fruition. His sincerity, his great skill as a writer, gave it a new distinction and won for it a wider, almost universal, acceptance as a literary form.<sup>19</sup>

And J. Symons says: "Doyle was a fine story teller and one quality that keeps Holmes stories alive ... is that they are such good stories".<sup>20</sup>

I should add that in spite of the fact that Conan Doyle was by nature a short-story writer – (he has written 57 detective short stories) – he enriched them by two elements carried over from his novels: the novelistic presentation and two immortal characters: Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson. In creating the Sherlock Holmes fiction he has achieved something greater than any modern writer: he has created one of the universal myths of our civilisation, analogous to the myths of Robin Hood, Dr Faustus and Don Juan, but distinctive in his hero's fight against crime.

<sup>18</sup> *The Development*, p. 182.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 181 and 191.

<sup>20</sup> *Bloody Murder*, p. 74.

Mental brilliance, good social and cultural background, respectability and integrity, the status of a "scientist", an international reputation as a celebrity in his own field and Englishness are the detective's features enumerated by A. E. Murch, which made him popular about the end of the Victorian era.<sup>21</sup> Introduced in each of the novels in the distinctly *fin-de-siècle* London setting, Holmes impressed everybody.

His almost super-human stature demanded domination over every novel, but his maker was unable to create a plot great and long enough to counterbalance the main character. Consequently, he padded out his plots with blown-up "prehistories". If *The Hound of the Baskervilles* has become successfully balanced as a novel, one of the reasons is that though Holmes is active all the time in it, he is absent from the foreground action which fills the whole middle of the book i.e. six chapters out of fifteen, or 44% of the narrative.

When writing the four novels, A. Conan Doyle was trying to find the literary form best-suited to his talent and in the end he discovered it in a happy compromise between two artistic traditions – that of E. A. Poe's story of ratiocination and that of the English novel of crime and detection which had developed out the novel of manners.

The new form was a cycle of short stories. It allowed the main character to dominate each story and all stories in a way analogous to Hercules or Robin Hood; giving him heroic dimension without disrupting the world of the novel which requires a measure of equality for all characters.

This has been Conan Doyle's historic achievement in the development of crime fiction.

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#### KOMPOZYCJA POWIEŚCI DETEKTYWNYCH ARTHURA CONAN DOYLE'A

Nawiązując do tezy, która kończy jego rozprawę *Historical Sources of the Poetics of the Crime Novel and Detective Short-Story* opublikowaną w „Zagadnieniach Rodzajów Literackich” (t. 25 (2), Wrocław-Łódź, 1982, s. 19) i stwierdza, że dopiero A. C. Doyle przy końcu XIX w. połączył poetykę noweli detektywnej A. E. Poe'a z poetyką angielskiej powieści detektywnej, autor uzasadnia tę tezę przez szczegółową analizę czterech powieści detektywnej Doyle'a, w których występuje Sherlock Holmes.

<sup>21</sup> *The Development*, p. 177.

Postać sławnego detektywa została wprowadzona po raz pierwszy w powieści *A Study in Scarlet* z akcją usytuowaną w atmosferze *fin-de-siècle*. Natchnieniem detektywnej części tej powieści byli A. E. Poe i E. Gaboriau, od którego Conan Doyle zapożyczył technikę dokopywania się coraz głębszej przeszłości. Ale druga część, o charakterze westernu, została do niej doczepiona mechanicznie, narratorem przestaje być Dr Watson zastąpiony przez anonimowego narratora wszechwiedzącego. Dopiero ostatnie dwa rozdziały powracają do świata przedstawionego w pierwszej części.

Druga powieść *The Sign of Four* została lepiej skomponowana, wprowadzono w niej hierarchię narracji, ale autor nie umiał uniknąć stosunkowo dużej porcji „prehistorii”. Element przygodowy rywalizuje w tej powieści z elementem wykrywania, ale jest z nim logicznie połączony.

*The Hound of the Baskervilles* jest najdoskonalszą powieścią detektywną A. C. Doyle’a, dzięki pełnej syntezie angielskiej tradycji powieści gotyckiej i obyczajowej oraz akcji detektywnej Holmesa. Postać wielkiego detektywa nie narusza równowagi kompozycji, dzięki temu, że w długiej sekwencji rozdziałów działa on poza kulisami zdarzeń z pierwszego planu, na którym dochodzenie prowadzi Dr Watson. Regionalne tło, folklor i prowincjonalne życie są w tej powieści doskonale stopione z dochodzeniem.

Czwarta powieść, *The Valley of Fear*, jest artystycznym niepowodzeniem. Autor wrócił w niej do schematu pierwszej książki i chociaż tym razem poprawił błędy narracji i starał się połączyć obie części utworu jedną ideą, nie zdołał uniknąć wrażenia, że czytamy dwie historie należące do dwóch odmiennych gatunków, siłą złączone.

Autor pracy wysuwa możliwe wyjaśnienia tego błędu. Ideą pisarza było ukazanie przewidywanego przez niego działania międzynarodowej organizacji przestępczej, kierowanej przez geniusza, prof. Moriarty’ego. Dlatego przeniósł drugą połowę powieści do Ameryki i ukazał akty gwałtu i próbę penetracji zbrodniczego gangu przez detektywa z agencji Pinkertona.

Podsumowując, A. C. Doyle zamierzał pisać powieści, ale z natury swej był nowelistą. Dlatego materiał wystarczający na nowelę rozszerzał, aby uczynić z niej powieść. Stopniowo jednak, jak ukazuje świadectwo dat i tytułów, zmierzał do nowej formy – cyklu nowel połączonych jedną naczelną postacią – Sh. Holmesa, przenosząc do nich technikę powieściową. W ten sposób połączył nurt dość prymitywnej detekcji z ukazaniem charakterów i tła. Pisząc 57 nowel o Holmesie, dokonał czegoś, co nie udało się żadnemu innemu pisarzowi nowożytnemu: stworzył mit Sherlocka Holmesa analogiczny do mitów Robin Hooda, dra Fausta i Don Juana, ale wyróżniający się walką ze zbrodnią.