

Berwick-upon Tweed Educational Association

'Sherlock Holmes: a Study Morning'

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Friday 3rd November 2017 10am – 1.00pm

Content of Study Morning

It is always interesting to analyse the relationship between a writer and his creation and to see how often the former tries to shake off the latter. Agatha Christie grew increasingly weary of Poirot, Hergé hated and dreamed of strangling Tintin, and Arthur Conan Doyle famously tried to kill off Sherlock Holmes at the Reichenbach Falls. In this study morning we shall examine the edgy relationship between Holmes and his creator and also place both in the wider context of crime fiction and crime fact.

Conon Doyle is frequently presented as a pillar of the Establishment and a man of great social conformity. Up to a point this is true but he had his own demons. He was born on 22nd May, 1859, and his father, a draughtsman, was an alcoholic. They were devout Roman Catholics and Arthur himself attended Stonyhurst, the Jesuit public school in Lancashire. His literary interests included a fervent admiration of Edgar Allan Poe, from whom he drew hints for his own famous detective. He also much admired the Gothic Historical Romances of Sir Walter Scott and wild, rather Gothic landscape features in many of his own works.

After Stonyhurst, Conan Doyle spent a year at a Jesuit school in Austria before deciding to become a doctor. To pay his way, he worked as a clerk for Dr. Joseph Bell, an Edinburgh surgeon and one alleged model for Sherlock Holmes. Bell delighted in impressing his students with deductions from clothes, mannerisms and behaviour. He once deduced that a man was a cobbler from a patch on his corduroy trousers – the patch came from the friction in hammering shoes.

While Arthur was still a student, his father was admitted into a nursing home. An epileptic as well as an alcoholic, he became increasingly immersed in his own fantasy world. He ended up being cared for in a series of homes, and his condition gave his son an interest in the underdog, the outcast and the misunderstood.

As a young medic, Arthur took a job as a ship's surgeon on the "Hope", a 400 ton whaler bound for the Arctic. He harpooned a whale and nearly drowned in icy waters. Next year, he went on the *S.S. Mayumba*, a cargo and passenger ship bound for West Africa. Gales in the Bay of Biscay nearly sank the ship. He nearly died from typhoid. On the way home, the ship caught fire. This hardly suggests a stay-at-home stuff-shirt Scottish gentleman.

The rest of Conan Doyle's life and career will be covered in the Study Day but it is worth noting that he was writing in an already existing tradition. Crime fiction had begun from crime fact. It was stimulated by police memoirs, popular ballads, and the sensational reporting of interesting crimes. Even before the 19th century, there was a strong tradition of making brutal events into art. *The Tragedy of Mr. Arden of Faversham*, a play published in 1592 and sometimes attributed to Shakespeare, follows the persistent and eventually successful attempts of Mistress Arden and her paramour Mosby to murder her husband. This involves the hiring of two murderers, with the jolly names of Black Will and Shakebag. The whole thing is directly based on an account by Raphael Holinshed of an actual murder committed in February, 1551.

If we skip to the 18th and 19th centuries, we note again a popular interest in crime. The notorious 18th century housebreaker Jack Sheppard appeared in many plays, pantomimes and novels, while many real-life murders were dramatised for stage presentation. The most famous is *The Murder in the Red Barn*, a lurid theatrical version of incidents at Polstead (Suffolk) where one of the most famous murders in history had been enacted, causing sensational public interest.

It was not only on the stage that real-life murder was able to freeze the blood. Melodramatic stage dramas were reinforced and fed by pamphlets and broadsheets featuring recent "horrible murders". One example is

the account of the murder of a poor Liverpool family by John Gleeson Wilson. The account of his execution “at Kirkdale Gaol on Saturday, September 15th” for the murder of Mrs. Hinrichson, her two children and female servant is heralded by an illustration of a hanging man. Then follows a fairly straight-forward prose account, in which nonetheless the heart-strings are deliberately pulled

The other big influence was Dickens. In *Barnaby Rudge* (published 1841) Rudge, the murderer, is very melodramatically conceived. Mrs. Rudge’s grief and horror at his nature and deeds accounts for the birth of an idiot son, this being a kind of poetic justice and a transferred judgement. Later, the Victorian sensation novel is closely linked with the novel of crime and detection. Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White* (1860) is a good example of an intricately plotted story of mystery, suspense, psychological perversities and crime. The *Moonstone* (1868, and also by Collins) features perhaps the first significant detective in a full-length work of literature – he being Sergeant Cuff, “grizzled, elderly and lean” and with a passion for growing roses.

It is not Collins, however, but Anthony Trollope who, in *He Knew He Was Right* (1869), introduces the first private detective to feature prominently in a full-length novel. The story is one of marital pain, inflexible judgement and sexual jealousy. The detective is called Bozzle – the name being meant to suggest the buzzing of an inquisitive bluebottle fly.

All the above helps to clarify Conan Doyle’s literary antecedents. In addition, it partly explains his interest in real-life cases, to one of which – the Marion Gilchrist murder – we shall refer in the Study Morning. As for the novels, it will not be necessary to have prior knowledge but reference will specially be made to *The Sign of Four*, *The Speckled Band* and *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

Finally, if all this crime worries you, take note of the following: “Crime in England this century has increased 400 per cent, in Ireland 800 per cent and in Scotland above 3,500 per cent”. It has increased because “the restraint of character, relationship and vicinity are lost in the urban crowd”; because high wages and strikes have induced “a confusion of moral principle and habits of idleness and insubordination”, and because “the employment of women has destroyed the familial bond, emancipating the young from parental control”. Sounds familiar? These words were written in *Blackwood’s Magazine* in 1845. So perhaps we are better off now, after all.

The study morning will be accessible to all, and you do not have to have read any works by Conan Doyle. If you do have a copy of his collected works do bring it along.

The cost of the study morning is £9.00 including refreshments.

The study morning will be held at the Berwick Voluntary Centre, Tweed St, Berwick-upon-Tweed, 3rd November, 10 -1.00pm.

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