

tives pursued can only be designated as similar in the attempts made to assign a meaning to the events under investigation. It is not unusual to discover in the solution to the crimes a sensationalist method that surpasses the depiction of the crimes themselves.

The essays in this volume explore a variety of structuring taxonomies, the relationships between the aesthetic forms, styles and methodologies of detective and crime fiction in the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods. The influences on the artists in the genre are as varied as the interests of the period in scientific method, forensics, archaeology, aesthetics, medicine, and the paranormal. But the formalizing tendencies of investigative process remain, and it is this adherence, in artist and detective alike, to seeing crime and its resolution as a stylistic imposition of structure on disorder that is under examination. If the *Punch* cartoon and verse ultimately suggest that the genre of crime fiction had a broad appeal that could not be restricted to traditional expectations of class reading appetites, so the texts themselves cross literary, taxonomic boundaries. The formal strategies deployed by author and detective proliferate and intersect with the manifold interests of the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods, and their variety is examined in the following pages.

Paul Fox

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Horrifying Ho(l)mes: Conan Doyle's Bachelor Detective and the Aesthetics of Domestic Realism

Rudolph Glitz

University of Evansville, Harlaxton

Abstract: This essay investigates the various Sherlock Holmes stories that are concerned with domestic crimes or misdemeanors. With reference to these as well as various programmatic statements by Balzac and Zola, it highlights the striking but as yet unexplored connection between Holmes' professional outlook as a provider of narrative solutions and the aesthetics of literary realism. This connection is not only well worth noting in its own right, but can also help illuminate several meta-fictional strategies and inter-textual allusions in Conan Doyle's detective fiction.

I

On the way to a crime scene in "The Adventure of the Copper Beeches" (1892), Sherlock Holmes surprises Watson with a chilling observation: "

You look at these scattered houses, and you are impressed by their beauty. I look at them, and the only thought which comes to me is a feeling of their isolation and of the impunity with which crime may be committed there [. . .] They always fill me with a certain horror. (363)¹

"Who would associate crime with those dear old homesteads," Watson asks in response, but the houses' peaceful appearance is not the only

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all page references are to the relevant volumes of Klinger, which I choose here over the in some respects more scholarly Oxford edition of 1993 because of the more detailed background information provided and Klinger's sometimes useful inclusion of so-called Sherlockian or Sherlockological debates (i.e. usually tongue-in-cheek debates by amateur scholars about Holmes "the man" as opposed to fictional character). Original publication dates will be given upon first mention in the main text.

reason why the declaration seems unusual. As we know since Holmes' cold-blooded shooting of the hound of the Baskervilles (589), "horror" is not one of his most frequent emotions, and it might be worth asking what exactly that feeling consists of here. The houses in question are situated in the spacious Hampshire countryside – as opposed to any densely populated city where, as Holmes further explains, there is "no lane so vile that the scream of a tortured child, or the thud of a drunkard's blow, does not beget sympathy and indignation among the neighbours" (363). This dead-pan explanation is revealing. Even though, at first sight, the contrast seems to be simply between town and country, the detective's suggestive reference to children and drunkards adds to his comments a more far-reaching socio-political thrust. It invokes two stereotypes of Victorian family life gone bad, two of the more notorious by-products of that self-enclosed and patriarchally governed privacy which, while perhaps most strikingly embodied by the isolated country house, had long been generally accepted as the ideal of middle-class domesticity. According to the governmental census report of 1851, the Englishman's own free-standing domicile throws "a sharp, well-defined circle round his family and hearth," and it is simply "in the order of nature that a family should live in a separate house" (xxxv-xxxvi).²

The English are, of course, not the only nineteenth-century society for whom the self-enclosed family unit constitutes the social norm. As I hope to show in this essay, Holmes' prosaic horror of its latent cruelties can be seen as part of a literary development that spread throughout Europe and was largely centred in France. This is not to say that I am in any way challenging Conan Doyle's openly stated reasons for

the bachelor detective's personal aversion to family life. According to both Watson and Holmes, in "A Scandal in Bohemia" (1891) and *The Sign of Four* (1890), it is clearly the latter's professionalism, his fear of being emotionally incapacitated in his profession of a "reasoning and observing machine" that forms the primary motive for his marital abstinence ("Scandal" 5; see also *Sign* 378). Over and above this reason, however, (as well as several others) one can explain Holmes' in Watson's eyes rather peculiar horror on the more abstract theoretical level of literary genre. By analysing, for the most part, those stories of the Holmes canon in which the detective encounters, and occasionally shows himself unsettled by, what can broadly be classed as domestic crimes, I will highlight a literary allegiance of his that has so far been neglected by scholars.

Holmes has been compared to many social, ideological, and literary types. Reading Watson as a Boswellian biographer, for example, Richard D. Altick likens the detective to Dr Johnson. Ian Ousby points out Holmes' resemblance to Darwinian scientists of the type of Huxley (154-55) as well as, in the early novels, contemporary decadents (156-57). Rosemary Hennessy and Rajeswari Mohan see him as embodying "the interests of the middle-class, western, white male" (338). Dennis Porter compares him, together with the literary detective in general, to "a well-trained critic" (226). These and other comparisons undoubtedly vary in plausibility and overall interpretive relevance. If I mention them here, it is not to take issue with any one of them, but simply to add that at least that at least Holmes' perspective on traditional domesticity is quite manifestly rooted in the nineteenth-century aesthetics of French literary realism – an aesthetics whose direct historical influence on the Holmes *corpus* is still widely underestimated and, if at all, only marginally addressed by critics. As a first step, though, before turning to the detective stories themselves, I will briefly outline the existing academic orthodoxies on the subject and relate them to my own, more narrowly focused approach.

² Regarding the commonplace nature of marital abuse in the Victorian period, cf., for instance, Watson's remarks on the subject in "A Case of Identity" (75) and the various primary documents – including the sketch from *Punch* – that Klinger adduces in the corresponding footnote. That the maltreatment of children was similarly familiar to the Victorian public is amply illustrated by, and in fact largely due to, contemporary novelists such as Dickens and Gaskell. For a detailed overview of recent studies of Victorian domesticity, see Chase and Levinson.

II

A rather typical association of the Holmes stories with the concept of realism can be found in Catherine Belsey's influential textbook classic *Critical Practice*. In order to demonstrate the interpretive methods of Pierre Macherey and Roland Barthes, Belsey subjects some of Conan Doyle's detective fiction to a reading against the grain that, although briskly persuasive overall, is not quite conceptually consistent. For while Belsey initially regards the Holmes stories as among "other forms besides realist fiction" (100-01), this generic distinction of hers gradually breaks down in the heat of interpretation: "The project of the stories themselves," she claims, "enigma followed by disclosure, echoes precisely the structure of the classic realist text. The narrator himself draws attention to the parallels between them" (103). Belsey then quotes a passage from "The Adventure of the Crooked Man" (1893), in which the detective compares his temporary cluelessness to that of a reader engrossed in one of Watson's "little sketches" (584). The sketches he refers to are clearly the Holmes stories themselves, which are thus implicitly equated by Belsey with "the classic realist text." She continues accordingly:

The project also requires the maximum degree of "realism" – verisimilitude, plausibility. In the interest of science no hint of the fantastic or the implausible is permitted to remain once the disclosure is complete. This is why even their own existence as writing is so frequently discussed within the texts. The stories are alluded to as Watson's "little sketches," his "memoirs." They resemble fictions because of Watson's unscientific weakness for story-telling. [. . .] In other words, the fiction itself accounts even for its own fictionality, and the text thus appears wholly transparent. (103-04)

Belsey's insights into Conan Doyle's narrative strategies are relevant in their own right, and I will return to them later. At this point, how-

ever, note more generally her increasing identification of the Holmes stories with not only "the classic realist text" but also "realism" in the broader sense of "verisimilitude, plausibility." These dominant realist allegiances are subverted, according to her, by the recurrent surfacing of female sexuality as a suppressed because rationally inexplicable factor in many of Holmes' adventures (see 101-02 and 104-07). Yet despite this "implicit critique of their limited nature," Belsey still concludes her discussion by labelling the stories as "characteristic examples of classic realism" (107).

For the most part, the conceptual contradictions in Belsey's account can be ascribed to her wavering use of the term "realism" (even where she qualifies it with "classic"). On the one hand, and in fact predominantly, she uses the term to refer to an epistemologically defined mode of writing. This mode of writing is by no means ahistorical: in her first chapter Belsey links it "roughly to the last two centuries" and "the period of industrial capitalism" (7). Yet within these broad parameters, it can appear almost anywhere in fiction, drama, or even poetry, and is certainly not limited to a specific group of works.³ On the other hand, and although she never actually defines it as such, Belsey occasionally seems to relapse into an alternative use of the term as designating a more or less clearly defined literary canon. When, as mentioned above, she initially locates the Holmes *corpus* outside "classic realism," she presumably means by the latter a body of texts regarded as more serious in their mimetic pursuits than the popular crime and adventure story, a body of texts which would include the works of Honoré de Balzac, for instance, or later in England, say, George Eliot's and Thomas Hardy's.⁴ However theoretically use-

³ Immediately after the Holmes stories, Belsey discusses Matthew Arnold's ode "The Scholar-Gypsy." In fact, as shown by her references to Ruskin's theory of painting (cf. 7-9), the "expressive realism" she defines in her first chapter is not even specific to literature.

⁴ Cf. 96 and also footnote 2 on 101, where Belsey invokes the question of canonicity (though not that of the "realist" canon in particular) and refers readers to Eagleton.

ful Belsey's broader understanding of the term may be, and although, in the last analysis, the two might not be entirely separable, it is primarily this second, more narrow and historically established use of "realism" that I will adopt in my discussion.

This methodological preference conforms largely with that of another scholarly account of the Holmes stories. In his Bourdieu-informed study *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice, 1880-1914*, Peter D. McDonald maps out the early Conan Doyle's complex aesthetic allegiances within the contemporary literary field. Locating the author's professional role between the two extremes of "purist" and "profiteer," McDonald describes him as "a populist with high aspirations who became increasingly anxious about his own literary standing" (121). In this context, he refers to a historically very specific (if still many-sided) tradition of literary realism:

The characteristic precariousness of [Conan Doyle's] position can initially be seen in his attitude to the various styles of literary Realism prevalent in the 1890s. Believing that issues of literary taste were best considered in a "broad and catholic spirit," he welcomed and, at times, vigorously supported, avant-garde experimentation despite his own less radical aesthetic and generic preferences. If he considered controversial New Women novelists like Hardy and "Lucas Malet" "extreme men" [. . .] he granted them their "mission," which was to "pave the way," and hoped they would help break the "spell of Puritanism" that had, in his view, prevailed in England for too long. Similarly – albeit even more prudently – in late 1889, when the controversy surrounding Henry Vizetelly's publication of Zola was still very much in the air, he described Zola's naturalist novels as "careful and candid"

and noted their influence on George Moore's *A Mummer's Wife* (1885). (121-22)⁵

In view of, especially, "the Holmes saga with its celebrated male friendship," McDonald later links Conan Doyle with Stevensonian Romance rather than realism, classes him as a "manly Romantic" in contrast to the "manly Realists" grouped around the *New Review* and its influential editor W. E. Henley (123). Yet this overall assessment of the Holmes *corpus* does not necessarily apply to each story or aspect of the stories in detail. It is precisely the tradition of realist writing in Britain as presented in McDonald's study whose presence in the Holmes stories I will trace in the following – a tradition, that is to say, which consists to a large extent of imported French fiction and, especially in its naturalist manifestations, was regarded as both "experimental" and "avant-garde" during the late nineteenth century.

III

That Conan Doyle's detective fiction actively engages with the aesthetics of nineteenth-century realism is, first of all, reflected in a number of striking analogies between Holmes' professional outlook and that of the realist writer. The aesthetic principles of nineteenth-century realism were, one can assume, much more present to contemporary readers than they are to us – especially when they caused controversy. Yet even today, the connection seems rather an obvious one to draw. After all, scholars such as Belsey regularly describe Holmes' unshakeable epistemological confidence as an example of scientific positivism (103), of the same school of thought, in other words, that famously provided with a philosophical basis the most notoriously radical form of literary realism. I am referring to the circle around the

⁵ McDonald's quotations are from, in that order, the anonymous "A Dinner to Dr. Doyle" (1896), Blathwayt's interview with "Doyle" (1893), and the latter's own "Mr. Stevenson's Methods in Fiction" (1890).

French novelist Emile Zola, of course, some of whose programmatic pronouncements might very well constitute a direct source of the detective's aesthetic ideals.

The affinities between the naturalist variant of realism and Sherlock Holmes' criminological outlook are already visible in their publicised origins. As Conan Doyle gratefully acknowledged, much of the figure, methods, and even appearance of the detective was modelled on the Edinburgh diagnostician and dedicatee of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892): "my old teacher Joseph Bell, MD, &c."⁶ Conan Doyle wrote to Bell that Holmes was built "round the centre of deduction and inference and observation which I have heard you inculcate," and in his autobiography he says of his teacher that "if he were a detective, he would surely reduce this fascinating but unorganized business to something nearer an exact science."⁷ All this is closely analogous not just to Holmes', but also Zola's view of his profession, and for the French novelist, similarly, it was the work of an eminent physician that best exemplified the aesthetics of his movement. Basing his polemic defense of the "experimental novel" on Claude Bernard's *Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale* (1865), Zola, too, invokes the authority of science and stresses the importance of observation:

The naturalistic novelists observe and experiment, and [. . .] all their work is the offspring of the doubt which seizes them in the presence of truths little known and phenomena unexplained, until an experimental idea rudely awakens their genius some day, and urges them to make an experiment, to analyze facts, and to master them. (309)

⁶ This dedication is reproduced in Green's Oxford edition, 3.

⁷ Conan Doyle's writings are not always readily accessible – in this case his autobiographical *Memories and Adventures*. My quotations are from Klinger's introductory essay "The World of Sherlock Holmes," xvii-lxvii (xxiv), and double-checked against Stashower 28.

Zola's description of the naturalist writer (see also 306), bears obvious resemblances to Conan Doyle's methodical detective. It recalls both his famous powers of observation and his at least initially "experimental" reconstructions of the crimes he uncovers – even if, unlike the novelist, Holmes is usually "reasoning backwards," as he puts it in *A Study in Scarlet* of 1887 (198).

Conan Doyle's Bohemian detective, then, shares with Zola's naturalist novelist his claim to scientific practices and the epistemological authority provided by them. Though the radical emphasis put on this claim might be a distinctive feature of naturalism in particular, as a basic aesthetic tendency it also characterises the realist genre as a whole. Gustave Flaubert's quasi-scientific ideal of authorial impartiality famously led to the court proceedings against *Madame Bovary* (1857), and in an even earlier text by Balzac, the "Preface to *The Human Comedy*" (1842), accurate observation, systematic classification, and the search for causes had already become crucial elements of the aesthetics of the novel:

A writer could, if he adopted this method of rigorous literal reproduction, become a [. . .] painter of human types, narrator of the dramas of private life, archaeologist of social furniture, classifier of professions, and recorder of good and evil; but if I was to deserve the praises which any artist must aspire to, I must needs study the *causes or central cause* of these social facts. (144)

Holmes' extensive criminalistic filing system, his "great book" (1278) as invoked for instance in "The Adventure of the Red Circle" (1911) suggests at least some of these writerly qualities. And so does his voracious yet methodical interest in material signs. When the detective draws attention to the tell-tale outward traces of other people's professions, milieux, and states of mind, he resembles the realist novelist capturing the different "habits, clothing, words and dwellings of a prince, banker, artist, bourgeois, priest, or poor man" (Balzac 142).

One could further point to Holmes' didactic bent, which, too, has a counterpart in Balzac's preface (see 144). Or, on a more abstract level, to the rigid ideology the detective is held to promote for instance in Rosemary Jann's "Sherlock Holmes Codes the Social Body," and which also underpins Balzac's project of fixing in writing "the panorama of society" (145). A detailed exploration of these topics would exceed the limits of this essay, yet it should in any case be apparent by now that there are numerous implicit correspondences between Holmes' professional outlook and that of the realist writer, correspondences that reinforce, and add special significance to, more direct invocations of literary realism.

The most striking invocations of realism in Conan Doyle's crime fiction can usually be found in Holmes and Watson's meta-fictional dialogues. It may be true that, as Belsey points out, the detective's comments on his friend's "little sketches" add verisimilitude by accounting for the latter's fictionality (in the sense of "craftedness"). Yet this is by no means their only function. Additionally loaded, I would argue, with more specific generic and aesthetic implications, they enact within many of the Holmes texts the very clash of values that pre-occupied Conan Doyle throughout his career, namely that between serious art and popular entertainment or, which at the time practically amounted to the same, between realism and fantasy. The "realism of the late century," in the words of George Levine, "defines itself against the excesses, both stylistic and narrative, of various kinds of romantic, exotic, or sensational literatures" (5). And as one might expect after the above, the Bohemian detective regularly makes the case for realism, whereas Watson speaks in favour of fantasy and "imaginative" writing – supported, presumably, at least to some extent by the general reading public.⁸

⁸ Watson's initial claim, in *A Study in Scarlet*, about his friend's remarkable "ignorance [...] of contemporary literature" (32) is of course thoroughly invalidated in many of the subsequent additions to the saga, for which Conan Doyle deliberately modified his character.

Several of the meta-fictional encounters between Holmes and Watson occur in the novels and in the two adventures narrated by Holmes himself. In *The Sign of Four*, for example, the detective deplores Watson's "romanticism" (217), and in "The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier" he remembers criticising Watson for his "pandering to popular taste" (1485). Yet by far the highest proportion of such dialogue takes place in a particular group of stories, whose composition, I would suggest, is far from coincidental. "The Adventure of the Speckled Band" (1892), that of the "Copper Beeches" (1892), of the "Abbey Grange" (1904), of the "Creeping Man" (1923), of the "Sussex Vampire" (1924), and, most revealingly as well as earliest, "A Case of Identity" (1891) – these stories are united by the fact that, while published at vastly different stages of Conan Doyle's career, they all share a common kind of setting that is itself broadly evocative of nineteenth-century realism. I am referring to the distinctive social domain that forms the more narrowly thematic concern of my discussion, i.e. familial domesticity. Its frequent concurrence with meta-fictional dialogue that deals with questions of genre and aesthetics is the first point to be noted about this setting to whose specific realist implications I will return later.

The one aspect of Watson's writing of which Holmes consistently expresses his approval – albeit still with some reservations – is his selection of interesting cases. This "atones for much," according to Holmes, who, in "The Abbey Grange," goes on to criticise his friend for dwelling "upon sensational details which may excite, but cannot possibly instruct, the reader" and thereby ruining "what might have been an instructive and even classical series of demonstrations" (1159). When, in "The Adventure of the Copper Beeches," the detective expands a little more on the positive qualities of Watson's writing, he reveals two particularly notable elements of his aesthetics:

"To the man who loves art for its own sake," remarked Sherlock Holmes, tossing aside the advertisement sheet of *The*

Daily Telegraph, "it is frequently in its least important and lowliest manifestations that the keenest pleasure is to be derived. It is pleasant to me to observe, Watson, that you have so far grasped this truth that in these little records of our cases which you have been good enough to draw up, and, I am bound to say, occasionally to embellish, you have given prominence not so much to the many *causes célèbres* and sensational trials in which I have figured, but rather to those incidents which may have been trivial in themselves, but which have given room for those faculties of deduction and of logical synthesis which I have made my special province."

(351)

In addition to what has already been said about the differing ideals of the two friends, this passage reveals Holmes' aesthetic position as one that precariously straddles, on the one hand, disinterested artistic purity ("art for art's sake") and, on the other, an unflagging interest in the "least important and lowliest" to be found in, for instance, *The Daily Telegraph* – commonplace everyday mass culture in other words. Thus caught between two aesthetic poles, the detective lives out a contradiction notoriously prominent in the careers of many realist writers.

In Paul Barolsky's article "The Case of the Domesticated Aesthete," Holmes is compared with, among other artistic figures, Flaubert, who "once remarked that in writing *Madame Bovary* he steered a precarious course between the vulgar and the lyrical" (440). Given Flaubert's reputation as a pioneering realist, this comparison is no less apt in the context of my present argument. As is already indicated by his title, Barolsky is mainly concerned with the "lyrical" side of the detective. He reads Holmes as primarily an aesthete, an artistic "connoisseur" (447) who is constantly seeking to "escape from the 'commonplace'" (439). Yet just like in the case of the realist writer (another example would be the brothers Goncourt), this is only part of

the story. Holmes might share Watson's disapproval of "the trivial" as such – later on in "The Copper Beeches" he suspects Watson of having succumbed to it and deplores the seeming triviality of his client's introductory note (353). At the same time, however, he wholeheartedly embraces it in typical realist fashion, namely when it can serve as raw material for his art. And judging by what is arguably the most explicit statement of his realist sympathies, it does so far more often than not.

The statement I am referring to is the opening paragraph of "A Case of Identity." It reveals not only Holmes' professional interest in the commonplace as opposed to the "queer [. . .] strange [. . .] wonderful," and "outré" (74), but in fact – and wholly in the spirit of contemporary realist writers such as, for instance, Arnold Bennett – collapses the distinction altogether:⁹

"My dear fellow," said Sherlock Holmes as we sat on either side of the fire in his lodgings at Baker Street, "life is infinitely stranger than anything which the mind of man could invent. We would not dare to conceive the things which are really mere commonplaces of existence. If we could fly out of that window hand in hand, hover over this great city, gently remove the roofs, and peep in at the queer things which are going on, the strange coincidences, the plannings, the crosspurposes, the wonderful chains of events, working through generations, and leading to the most *outré* results, it would make all fiction with its conventionalities and foreseen conclusions most stale and unprofitable." (74)

Holmes' rapture in view of everyday reality is reinforced here by his Dickensian vision of himself and Watson practically removing what, in the realist theatre of their time, was becoming known as the "fourth

⁹ See, for example, Bennett's preface to *The Old Wives Tale* (1908), where he elevates the general aging process to the status of "a tragedy" of "extreme pathos" (31-32).

wall" (although, in this case, it is strictly speaking the roof, of course). In another, and rather sophisticated intertextual twist, Conan Doyle also has Holmes invert Hamlet's famous disgust for "this world" (1.2) by substituting for the latter the conventions of popular fiction. Given his narrative reliance on these very conventions in his chronicling of Holmes' exploits, Watson naturally disagrees with his friend's assessment, and in the process explicitly identifies his own aesthetic anathema: "I am not convinced of it. [. . .] 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" (74; my emphasis).

Predictably, the realist Holmes in turn rejects Watson's generic categorisation of police reports. In the following, invoking the argument of selectivity, he contrasts the "platitudes of the magistrate" (74) with the detailed observations of what Zola calls the "examining magistrates of men and their passion" (308), with realism proper, in other words. Another notable feature of Holmes' reply here is his defensive endorsement of the "realist effect," a literary term whose technical sophistication alone would remind at least some early readers of the contemporary critical debates on the subject:

"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." (74)

Evidently, terms such as "commonplace" can easily shift their meanings in the literary squabbles between Holmes and Watson, which might cause some confusion if one compares them across several dif-

ferent texts.¹⁰ Nonetheless, there should be little doubt by now about Conan Doyle's clearly marked oppositional treatment of, on the one hand, Holmes, the criminological purist committed more or less exclusively to the key aesthetic principles of contemporary avant-garde realism, and, on the other hand, Watson, the populariser of Holmes' detections who regards his work primarily as entertainment and respects at least some of the conventions of fantastic, sensational, and romantic fiction. Needless to say, the dialectic combination of their two stances reflects quite closely the author's own position within the contemporary literary field, a position that hovered, as we know from McDonald (121), between the two extremes of "purist" and "profiteer."

IV

If, among other things, Sherlock Holmes is presented as a realist, to what extent and in what forms do his aesthetics manifest themselves in the main body of the stories themselves – outside Holmes and Watson's meta-fictional dialogues, that is, which are, after all, generally regarded as structurally extraneous supplements to the cases they introduce?¹¹ In the last section, I have already highlighted the detective's characteristic obsession with material detail, his cataloguing habits, and scientific methods. Furthermore, I mentioned the domestic familial settings that characterise my selection of stories. Apart from a vast body of European and English fiction – including *Le père Goriot* (1835), *Madame Bovary* (1857), *Germinie Lacerteux* (1864), *War and Peace* (1865-1869), *A Mummer's Wife* (1885), *Effi Briest* (1894), *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908), and many others – the strong historical link between nineteenth-century realism and the social dynamics of the

¹⁰ When, for example, at the beginning of "The Adventure of the Speckled Band," Watson speaks of Holmes' exclusive interest in "the unusual, or even the fantastic" (227), this could well be explained by the doctor's more easily excitable eye for these qualities.

¹¹ At least I have not found a single critic who reads them differently.

family is also easily traceable in the two programmatic manifestos by Balzac and Zola. "I regard the Family and not the Individual as the true social unit," proclaims Balzac in the political section of his preface (146), and Zola echoes this thematic bias when, at one point in "The Experimental Novel," he equates the naturalist's task with "the study of a family" (313). That Holmes and Watson, too, see a special connection between the commonplace themes of realist writing and the family household is already indicated by one of my earlier quotations. The roofs Holmes imagines himself removing in order to reveal "the plannings, the crosspurposes, the wonderful chains of events, working through generations" ("Case" 74) clearly belong to family homes rather than, say, public buildings. In "The Adventure of the Copper Beeches," to give another example, it is a governess' query about the respectability of the household she is about to enter that prompts the detective to speak of a "zero-point" with regard to the "originality" of his cases (353).

Important as these thematic correspondences are, I would argue that there is something else to the central investigation of each story that reflects even more compellingly Holmes' realist aesthetics. This has to do with the sort of explanation Holmes regularly arrives at, and which usually constitutes the solution of the case at hand. It should be remembered that the detective's solutions to his cases basically describe sequences of events, i.e. those which lead to the states of affairs he is called on to explain. From a literary point of view, therefore, every one of Holmes' criminological hypotheses can always also be regarded simply as a narrative, or perhaps, more precisely, as a micro-narrative within the larger frame of the detective story as a whole. If one looks at the solutions to his domestic cases in this light, one quickly realises, moreover, that, as micro-narratives, they stand in direct competition with others. Watson, the police, Holmes' clients, the criminals themselves, the reader – one or more of these parties invariably produce alternative accounts of the events under investigation. These alternatives are usually far less clearly spelled out than

Holmes' theories, and, in terms of their relative truth value, regularly invalidated by the latter. As stories, however, or at least patchy and speculative hints of stories, they perform the crucial function of providing a generic foil to Holmes' accounts of events.

Before looking at the detective's own storytelling in the texts, it will be useful to identify with what exactly Conan Doyle contrasts it there, and hence arguably defines it against. As in most other texts of the Holmes *corpus*, in my selected stories, too, it is mainly Watson who organises the narrated material – up to, and around, that is, the point of Holmes' final authoritative account, which is usually rendered *verbatim* and thus relatively unaffected by the doctor's interference. Together with what we have learnt of Watson's aesthetics from the meta-fictional debate discussed earlier, his central role as authorial narrator and editor would lead one to expect that the narratives in competition with Holmes' contain strong elements of the fantastic, romantic, or at least – less specifically – the sensational. And indeed, this expectation is fully confirmed by the texts. They all resemble one another in that they regularly juxtapose Holmes' account of the domestic events under investigation with narratives that quite conspicuously draw on the conventions of sensational literature. The particular sensations invoked might vary slightly and there are one or two exceptions, but most of these micro-narratives can in fact be easily accommodated within the popular sensationalist subgenre of the horror story.

A brief glance at the titles of the "Adventures" in question already provides some evidence for this affiliation. Whereas the somewhat exceptional "A Case of Identity" might still appear neutral, and trees and old buildings such as the eponymous "Copper Beeches" and "Abbey Grange" only mildly suggestive of untold horrors, the "Speckled Band," "Creeping Man," and "Sussex Vampire" openly invoke the sort of secret criminal societies, misshapen creatures, and children of the night that formed well-known stock ingredients of the horror genre at the various times in which they were written. The expectations of horrifying scenarios awakened by these titles are further heightened in

the body of each text. Thus, in "The Adventure of the Speckled Band," the description of Helen Stoner's endangered situation abounds with suggestive details that evoke, and tenuously link together, horrors familiar from Gothic fiction. There are the "wandering gypsies" (234) whom Holmes initially regards as prime suspects (257). There is a "very old" manor house with only one inhabited wing (235). There are mysterious whistling noises (236), the unexplained bond between twins (237), "horror-stricken" stares at slowly opening doors (237), etc. "We shall have horrors enough," Holmes predicts gloomily (253), and the appearance, in the story, of "the last survivor of one of the oldest Saxon Families in England" (232) combined with Helen Stoner's theory of her sister dying "from some sudden fright" (251) are directly reminiscent of "The Fall of the House of Usher," first of Edgar Allan Poe's aptly titled *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (1840). Similarly notable intertextual allusions appear in "The Copper Beeches" – this time especially to the Gothic elements of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). If the fads and overpowering paternalism of Mr Rucastle (e.g. on 367) are only remotely reminiscent of Mr Rochester's eccentric treatment of *his* enterprising young governess, the connection is reinforced by other partially familiar motifs such as the sour-faced, tall, and strong wife of the drunkard housekeeper (367; cf. Grace Poole in Brontë's novel), the originally German Romantic *Doppelgänger* theme (367, 371), the "mad unreasoning terror" of the heroine caused by a mysterious prisoner (374), etc. There is also an early version of Conan Doyle's notorious hound of the Baskervilles: "a giant dog, as large as a calf, tawny tinted, with hanging jowl, black muzzle, and huge projecting bones" (370).

Whereas the horrifying allusions mentioned above might hint at, and induce the reader to imagine, sensationalist alternatives to Holmes' final explanations, in "The Abbey Grange," such an alternative is actually spelled out in detail. Lady Brackenstall tells the investigators about yet another supposedly murderous band, namely the sinister Randalls (1161), a father and his two sons who allegedly beat

her, smashed the skull of her husband, and callously toasted their crime with a bottle of his wine (1165). The horror of violence alone tends to be less memorable or sensational than that of the supernatural, which is perhaps why "The Adventure of the Creeping Man" emphatically suggests the latter as a possible explanation for the events it describes. The strange periodical metamorphosis of Professor Presbury, his bestial clashes with his wolf-hound, and his assistant's mention of the "phases of the moon" (1647) subtly remind the reader of the popular myth of the werewolf – although the professor is also described as "some huge bat glued against the side of his own house, a great square dark patch upon the moonlit wall" (1658). The horror alluded to in this second description is, in fact, more fully realised in the case of the "Sussex Vampire," whose implied initial hypothesis about what is happening in the Ferguson household falls into a well-known generic category. "Really we seem to have been switched on to a Grimms' fairy tale" (1556), says Holmes when first reading of Mrs Ferguson's behaviour, but, of course, popularisations of the vampire myth such as Bram Stoker's bestselling *Dracula* (1897) would have been the first association of contemporary readers. The dramatic setting of the housewife's bloodsucking (1561), her "wild, despairing look" (1562) and South-American origins (1568), the overnight affliction of the family pet (1567), the house in which a "smart maid" is "the only modern thing" (1570), Holmes' fixed gaze into, apparently, the "melancholy, dripping garden," the cherub-like beauty of the victim infant – all these Watsonian observations add vividness to Mr Ferguson's horrifying theory of what happened, until, like all the other sensational narratives or suggestions of narratives I have outlined, they are superseded by Holmes' conclusive version of events.

What about Holmes' solutions themselves, then? How do they actually differ from the narratives they replace and expose as inadequate? As should be too obvious to need detailed illustration, they are far more cogent than their competitors, cover more of the facts at hand – including seemingly trivial ones – and are based on rationally re-

traceable chains of cause and effect. The importance, accorded by them, to significant trifles and, again in Zola's words, the "absolute determinism" of things clearly conforms to the aesthetics of nineteenth-century realism. Broadly speaking, then, Holmes' micro-narratives seem to constitute quite plausible manifestations of the aesthetic outlook identified earlier in this essay, of the detective's role, that is to say, as Conan Doyle's fictional representative of nineteenth-century realism in the spirit of Balzac and Zola. However, there are certain problematic aspects of Holmes' solutions that still need to be addressed. For what about the realist emphasis on the commonplace? What about its artistic valuation of the everyday and typically human? Are these principles at all compatible with the exotic nature of Dr Roylott's crime in "The Adventure of the Speckled Band"? Or the Dr-Jekyll-and-Mr-Hyde-style experiment Holmes reveals in "The Adventure of the Creeping Man"? The teenager's scheme of infanticide in "The Sussex Vampire"? The stepfather's impersonation of a lover in "A Case of Identity"? Or even the parental incarceration of a daughter in "The Copper Beeches"? Ultimately, I would argue, the answer to these questions is yes – though how exactly Conan Doyle achieves this effect requires some further analysis.

V

One of the strategies that help Conan Doyle to present as commonplace even the more unusual crimes he has Holmes uncover is that of introducing arcane, but conventionally trustworthy, scientific background knowledge. Scientific explanations are linked to realism not only because of their inspiring emphasis on observation and causal reasoning. Their necessary reference to empirically substantiated general laws also makes them highly effective "normalisers," so to speak. As is commonly known, scientific explanation subsumes individual events and phenomena under laws that, by definition, hold also for many other events and phenomena. It thus emphasises their typicality

and detracts from their uniqueness and fear-inducing unfamiliarity. Take, for example, Holmes' identification of the deadly "speckled band." Once it is named and zoologically classified as "the deadliest snake in India," the "swamp adder" might still command the reader's respect, but despite Watson's highly emotive and mythically charged description of "the loathsome serpent" (256), Holmes' precise assessment of how long it took its owner to die from its bite (257), the training of the animal by conditioning with milk, and the general predictability of its behaviour (258) effectively deflate its earlier potential to horrify. Similarly, the behaviour of the creeping man is largely demystified by means of scientific explanation (see 1662), and Holmes' knowledge of foreign poisons and childhood psychology leave little room for the sensational at the end of "The Sussex Vampire." In the latter story, the detective even adduces a historical precedent – "a Queen in English history" (1574) – in order to downplay the unusual nature of the supposed act of Vampirism. Like in all the stories I am looking at here, however, and especially the ones in which science proper offers little help to the detective, the sense of the commonplace evoked by Holmes' solutions – as opposed to that of the "unnatural" or "supernatural" evoked by their narrative competitors – is most effectively achieved by yet another strategy of Conan Doyle's.

This strategy consists of having Holmes resort to the kind of explanation that, while not entirely unrelated to science (if one counts sociology), recalls even more directly the realist fiction produced in the nineteenth century. For familial domesticity does not only provide the characteristically realist settings of the stories I have selected. Its reputedly commonplace internal dynamics are also regularly revealed as the ultimate sources of the crimes or near-crimes committed in them, and thereby, even more strongly, recall the contemporary realist novel. Whereas the various fantastic horrors imagined or at least suggestively hinted at by Watson, Robert Ferguson, Helen Stoner, Violet Hunter, Trevor Bennett, and Lady Brackenstall all constitute intrusions from outside the closely guarded privacy of the Victorian family circle, the

narrative realities Holmes replaces them with invariably arise from within. However exotic or elaborate the technical execution of these crimes, their situational origin and the motives behind them are conspicuously commonplace since they arise from quite common social and material conditions: those of the contemporary family system.

Perhaps the most striking example in this respect can be found in "A Case of Identity." As we have already seen, this very early story of Conan Doyle's contains the most substantial meta-fictional discussion of the Holmes *corpus*, and also with regard to the detective's explanation of events it is no less than paradigmatic. Initially, Mary Sutherland's problem looks like a case involving a number of mysterious external factors, factors unknowable to her and the impatient Watson, and hence not even imaginable as the sort of vaguely outlined horror we find in the other stories.¹² But then the detective cuts the mystery down to size. He does so, first of all, by explicitly denigrating Mary Sutherland's "little problem, which, by the way, is rather a trite one" (89). It might not quite qualify as a scientific regularity, but, as Holmes assures Watson, "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." Most importantly, though, Holmes reveals the social scope of the case to be rather less grand than it looked at first by identifying it as an entirely intra-familial intrigue. At the same time, Holmes reinterprets an act for which common material greed is explicitly eliminated as a motive (i.e. Hosmer Angel's disappearance; see 87) as, precisely, an act of common material greed (i.e. Angel's impersonation by Mr Windibank; see 96).

Material greed in itself would already be considered vulgar by gentlemen professionals such as Holmes, who worked, as Watson puts it

¹² "I believe that [Mr Hosmer Angel] foresaw some danger [. . .] and what he foresaw happened" (87) is all the sensationalism we get from the baffled Miss Sutherland and Watson on this occasion, which might be one reason for the lastingly low reputation of the text. In Coren, "A Case of Identity" is even described as "perhaps the weakest of the Holmes stories" (73).

in "The Speckled Band," "rather for the love of [their] art than for the acquirement of wealth" (227). Yet as a determining factor within the family household, its presence in Holmes' account of events constitutes yet another notable allusion to the realist tradition. Near the turn of the century, the insidious material pressures within the family household, within the supposed *sanctum* of kind-hearted affection in other words, were quite aggressively exposed in certain works by Gissing and Arnold Bennett (e.g. *New Grub Street* of 1891 and *Riceyman Steps* of 1923), and as Henry James emphatically points out in "Honoré de Balzac" (1878), money was already a high thematic priority of the founding father of European realism: "'Things' for him are francs and centimes more than any others, and I give up as inscutable, unfathomable, the nature, the peculiar avidity of his interest in them" (162). Balzac's interest in money and its attractions is clearly reflected in the motivational force he ascribes to it throughout his works – including those dealing predominantly with family life – and if Holmes surprises Watson by listening "with the greatest concentration of attention" to Miss Sutherland's account of her family's finances, this is only because the doctor does not share his friend's Balzacian outlook (81).

In "The Speckled Band," too, a precisely determined monetary *cui bono* forms the basis of Holmes' investigation (243), as it would probably have in "The Copper Beeches," had the relevant information been available before the conclusion (cf. 381). Yet in "A Case of Identity," there is an even more direct sign of the French realist's influence on the Holmes stories and the extent Holmes' narrative solutions are based on realist principles. It occurs in connection with the correspondence of Hosmer Angel: "'As to the letters,' [Holmes] continued, glancing over them, 'they are very commonplace. Absolutely no clue in them to Mr. Angel, save that he quotes Balzac once [. . .]'" (91). Klinger's corresponding footnote runs: "Why Holmes found Windibank's quotation of Balzac interesting is unknown" (91 n. 44), and Green's Oxford edition simply quotes a passage in which Conan

Doyle seems to profess ignorance of the Frenchman's innumerable works (313).¹³ Yet, bearing in mind Holmes' realist solution of the case, it is actually possible to make sense of his remark. For, looking for situational and plot similarities in Balzac's work, one soon comes across *Eugénie Grandet* (1833), which Christopher Prendergast describes as "one of the first of Balzac's novels to be accorded the aura of 'classic' status" (xii). This famous realist narrative combines at least two plot elements that Holmes might have recognised. These are a) a miserly father preventing his daughter from marrying her penniless cousin since this would diminish the family income, and b) the daughter's life-shatteringly futile adherence to her promise of waiting for said cousin's return from abroad. The precise social circumstances differ, of course, but the correspondences to Mr Windibank's scheme of keeping his romantically susceptible step-daughter out of the marriage market should be obvious even from this skeletal summary. *Eugénie Grandet* clearly constitutes a very plausible source of inspiration – both to the step-father planning his deception and the detective reconstructing it.

"A Case of Identity" is paradigmatic of Holmes' domestic cases, and the way in which his Balzacian solution replaces Mary Sutherland's theory of an honest but endangered lover has close parallels in the other stories. In the sober eyes of the bachelor detective, the mystery of the "Sussex Vampire" boils down to the jealous frenzy of a damaged teenager, that of the "Speckled Band" to the materially motivated murder of a daughter by her step-father, that of the "Creeping Man" to an aging bridegroom trying to boost his virility, that of the "Abbey Grange" to the revenge killing of a violent drunkard by an

admirer of his wife, and that of the "Copper Beeches," once again, to the greed-motivated ill-treatment of a daughter by her father. However sensationally exotic or horrifying the events of these stories might appear to the uninitiated, Holmes turns them into markedly realistic tales of intra-familial egotism, addictions, material greed, and sadly predictable desires. As Catherine Belsey puts it in the context of her own argument: "no hint of the fantastic or the implausible is permitted to remain once the disclosure is complete" (103).

To conclude, it might be worth noting that while this latter prohibition certainly allays the horrors felt by Watson, other bystanders, and any reader looking for epistemological reassurance, those of Holmes are barely affected. Stephen Knight expresses the standard criticism of the Sherlock Holmes stories when he states that their "embarrassing success depended on the hero's power to assuage the anxieties of a respectable London-based, middle-class audience" (67). True as this may be, the hero does not manage to assuage his own anxieties, and thus there is at least the possibility of another kind of reading, one that resists Watson's overall narrative guidance and sympathises rather with Holmes' disillusioning realism. However satisfying the detective's solutions of his domestic cases might appear to most onlookers, there is only limited closure for the detective himself. For, as we have seen, he is not horrified by any fantastic intrusions from the dark unknown, but rather by the sadly transparent *status quo* of domestic family life. In the passage from "The Copper Beeches" I have quoted at the start of this essay, he deplores the typical family home's "isolation and [...] the impunity with which crime may be committed there" (363), and the outcomes of his domestic cases strongly confirm his suspicions. Most of them end on a doubtful note of immorality or illegality – despite his and Watson's chivalrous interventions, that is – and they invariably expose abusive fathers or husbands. In "A Case of Identity," most radically of all, the deceitful step-father remains not only entirely unpunished, but Holmes feels not even capable of freeing Mary Sutherland from her "delusion" (100). If one looks past the

¹³ While Conan Doyle's casual comments in *Through the Magic Door* (93) do indicate his avoidance of Balzac, they do not positively rule out his having read any of that author's works in the past, and certainly not his having read or heard about some of them (which would be sufficient for my explanation). In any case, Conan Doyle's reference to the realist author would make no sense at all if he did not associate him with anything.

sexist generalisation that ends the story, this unsettling result cannot help but suggest a profound criticism of contemporary social realities. As such, it and its counterparts in the other stories of my selection complicate overly simplistic views of Conan Doyle's conservatism, and, just like the particular domestic politics of the various households visited by the detective, urgently call for further exploration.

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Algernon Blackwood's Modernist Experiments in Psychical Detection

George M. Johnson
Thompson Rivers University

Abstract: Algernon Blackwood has been inaccurately labeled as a ghost story writer, but his self-declared fundamental interest was in articulating the signs and proofs of extended capacities such as telepathy and prevision that lie hidden in humankind. His project of extending the boundaries of realism to encompass these powers he shares with the modernists; he is thus more accurately viewed as one of the first moderns to realize the imaginative potential of the new psychology and psychical research. Blackwood's psychic detective stories demonstrate this since they adapt several formal properties, as well as subject matter of Society for Psychical Research psychical case studies, as gathered and classified in leading psychological theorist Frederic Myers' magnum opus *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (1903). Blackwood's 1911 novel *The Centaur* most imaginatively engages with S.P.R. case studies and elevates the psychic detection genre onto a profoundly metaphysical plane.

2008 marks the centenary of the "birth" in print of the most famous psychical detective in English fiction. Despite his longevity, many will struggle to identify who that character may be. Algernon Blackwood's Dr. John Silence arguably holds this distinction and yet he claims only a cult following today, unlike his "cousin" Sherlock Holmes.

¹ There are a number of reasons for Silence's slip into relative obscurity, perhaps most notably the difficulty critics have had in categorizing his creator Algernon Blackwood, all too frequently pigeon-holing him as a ghost story writer,² or at best a supernaturalist, albeit "the

¹ Interestingly, during his heyday Silence, like Holmes, received sometimes bizarre requests for help, and according to biographer Mike Ashley, Blackwood responded to the cases of psychic affliction that intrigued him (*Starlight* 136).

² Blackwood himself noted the restrictions placed on him by being labeled the "Ghost Man" (Kunitz 147), and, ironically, claimed never to have seen a ghost (Ashley, *Algernon* 5).