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“The game is afoot”: Sherlock Holmes, hermeneutics and collaborative writing

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Abstract:

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories involve a hermeneutic game in which Holmes attempts to uncover the mystery of unsolved crime. The work of Hans-Georg Gadamer enables Holmes’s methods to be seen as both playful and creative as he seeks to understand what G. K. Chesterton refers to as the poetry of the modern world. Holmes is therefore a creative and scientific detective, one who loses himself in the game of detection in order to find himself in the search for truth in the wider world. Through the agency of Dr Watson, the reader is invited to join the game and attempt to work out the solution to the mystery as the narrative unfolds before them. Peter Hühn’s work on the detective as reader and writer is extended in relation to the work of understanding and creation carried out by authors who add new works to the genre of Holmesian fiction. This process is explored in the context of two playful writing workshops in which participants passed the opening of a piece of Holmesian fiction they had written to another participant to continue, before sharing the results with the group. Hans Robert Jauss’s ideas about genre and other perspectives on reimagining Holmes help contextualize the strategies used by participants, while Gadamer’s conception of the festive enables insights into the communal processes of creation and understanding.

“Come, Watson, come!” he cried. “The game is afoot. Not a word! Into your clothes and come!”

(Conan Doyle, 2013b, p. 641)

While this quote refers to game in the sense of a hunted animal, Holmes’s “hunt” for the criminal can also be likened to the kind of game one plays. In “The Red-Headed League”, Holmes points out to Mr Merryweather the bank director that the “game” of catching the

criminals will be more exciting, and involve higher stakes, than the director's usual Saturday night rubber (Conan Doyle, 2013d, p. 152). The study of hermeneutics provides a productive means of approaching the game of detection, both in relation to the internal dynamics of detective fiction, as well as the activity of its readers and writers. This is particularly the case with regards to Gadamer's work on areas such as the festive, horizons and play, which can also be applied to the use of collaborative writing workshops in the context of Holmesian fiction. Gadamer describes how one of the key characteristics of play is its to-and-fro movement that renews itself in constant repetition (1993, p. 103). Gadamer suggests that this is so fundamental to play that one cannot play on one's own; there always has to be someone or something there to play with (ibid., p. 105). These characteristics, which are so vital to collaborative writing, are also present within the game of detection itself. In Holmes's case, the other "players" are those who have committed the crime, with Watson noting that the criminals in "The Red-Headed League" are prepared to "play a deep game", (ibid., p. 106). One of the challenges is that the criminals deliberately choose to hide their contribution to the game. Holmes responds by employing a variety of approaches to interpret the signs that are left behind, with his powers of observation and deduction being of legendary importance in solving cases. Details such as a dog that fails to bark in the presence of a man or a fake bell pull next to a ventilator become a language that can be read or interpreted to reveal meaning. This idea is developed by Hühn, who views the criminal as the author of a story that has been deliberately concealed (1987, p. 457). Both Hühn and Tzvetan Todorov see the detective story as containing dual narratives: the first story is that of the crime, while the second story concerns the investigation of the first (1977, pp. 44-45). The way in which the detective story can be viewed both as a game and a story about understanding aligns it strongly with hermeneutics. Hühn argues that the second story is "written" by the detective via their actions and explanations (1987, p. 458). The detective is therefore a reader who attempts to understand the first story and a writer who is the author of their actions in the world, thereby bringing about the convergence of the two stories through the capture of the criminal.

A dual role is also carried out by someone who is inspired to write their own detective story after reading one by someone else. In doing so, the reader/writer draws on their understanding of the previous work in order to create something new. Participants were invited to attempt this in two collaborative writing workshops carried out at the University of Constantine the Philosopher, Nitra (Slovakia), and the University of Gloucestershire (United Kingdom). I began each workshop by supplementing participants' existing knowledge with a short lecture on features including Holmes's Victorian and Edwardian environment, his

methods of detection, and the structural significance of 221B Baker Street. I also brought an extract from one of the Holmes stories for the group to read and discuss. Peter Sotiriou suggests that one of the key characteristics of hermeneutic pedagogy is the “continued affirmation that reading and writing are profoundly interconnected activities – conversations which encourage the wilful and pleasurable participation of both members” (1992, p. 128). The workshops can be viewed as examples of hermeneutic pedagogy due to the way in which they developed understanding of existing texts through the playful activity of writing. By introducing material relating to the Holmes stories and inviting participants to begin their own story, I offered what Perrie Else describes as a play cue (2009, p. 13). This initiates a play cycle, where the other person can respond by making a play return, a dynamic which can be related to the to-and-fro nature of Gadamer’s conception of play (Else, p. 14, 103). After participants had written the first section of a Holmesian story, I initiated a new play cue by inviting each person to pass their section on to a neighbour to continue. According to Gadamer, the hermeneutic circle is, like a conversation, completed through the dialectic of question and answer (1993, p. 389). In this situation, the first text poses a question by setting up a mystery, but being unfinished, the reader’s understanding of the text, or answer, is only partial. The reader’s answer must therefore be developed through adding their own contribution to the text. The finished text can then be offered as a question for other readers to engage with.

The dynamic of question and answer found in Gadamer’s conception of aesthetic understanding relates to his emphasis on the participation of the spectator, whose involvement is viewed as part of the event of art: “The text brings the subject matter into language, but that it does so is ultimately the achievement of the interpreter. Both have a share in it” (ibid., p. 389). Viewing the interpreter, or reader, as an active participant has a particular resonance with the way in which detective fiction invites the reader to take part in the hermeneutic game of detection. In his “Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories” S. S. Van Dine views detective fiction as an intellectual game in which the reader must be given as equal an opportunity to solve the crime as the detective (1946, p. 189). Charles J. Rzepka continues this discussion by arguing that an author needs to write with a sense of “fair play”; having characters magically disappear puts the reader at an unfair disadvantage (2005, p. 15). Instead, a logical explanation that accords with the world as we know it must be found if the reader is to retain even the possibility that they might be able to solve the crime (ibid.). Holmes’s remarkable abilities might dissuade a reader from ever thinking they could compete with him in the race between reader and detective that Rzepka characterizes as the chief dynamic of the game (ibid., p. 14). Indeed, Hühn argues that it is a point of honour for the author to prevent the reader from gaining

an understanding before they are permitted to do so (1987, p. 459). What the detective story does then for many readers is to invite them to play the game of understanding by creating the illusion that they could solve the crime. It is arguable that Conan Doyle encourages the armchair detective through Holmes's status as an outsider who can step in and solve mysteries that official detectives cannot. Although Rzepka (2005, p. 14) views the author as the referee in the game between the reader and the detective, the author's bias can be seen through the withholding of information or validation of a detective's extraordinary abilities. The author is therefore playing with us, and we as readers are invited to take part, even if it is not always on equal terms.

An example of how detective fiction involves the reader can be found in one of the stories written by participants from the workshops. The story opens with Holmes getting his shoes polished and noticing the unusually thin fingers of the shoe-shine boy. He is later called back to investigate a murder in a house on the same street, where he notes the strong thin fingers of the maid who is kneading bread. Upstairs, Holmes views the indentations of finger nails on the strangled neck, which Watson attributes to a woman. George N. Dove describes how the reader's expectations of the genre mean they develop a sense for certain sequences (1997, p. 154). In detective fiction, one of the most common is what Dove terms the recurrent structure convention, where a repeated element signifies that it may form an important element in the plot (*ibid.*). For example, in the story above, the emphasis given to the shoe-shine boy's fingers alerts us that this detail will be of significance, something which is then amplified by the subsequent description of the maid's fingers and the marks on the victim's neck. This repetition draws the reader's attention, inviting them to enter the game and try and work out what the significance is, or want to read on in the hope that it will be revealed by Holmes. The first author stopped writing at this point, and the second author was required to enter the game as a reader before taking on a more active involvement by developing the recurrent structure. The second instalment continues with Holmes remembering the anomaly of the shoe-shine boy wearing a woollen hat on a baking hot day. When Holmes returns to have his shoes shined again, rain reveals a tattoo on the boy's finger which is identical to one on the maid's finger. This extends the sequence and develops it, enabling it to form part of what Dove refers to as the deep structure of the narrative (*ibid.*, p. 90). In this story, the significance of the repeated element emerges when Holmes whips off the woollen cap to reveal the russet tresses of the maid, who is in fact "Lucinda de Ferriers, granddaughter of Frank, the self-professed King of the Gypsies". She admits her guilt just as a black cart driven by Lestrade comes "thundering along the cobbles". In writing the second part of the story, the author needs to be something of

a detective; they need to understand the first part of the story, and then work out how the mystery can be solved in their own contribution.

The arrival of Lestrade after Holmes has uncovered Lucinda de Ferriers relates to the convention that Holmes often solves those cases that stump the official detectives. The way in which the mystery is revealed through Holmes's ability to observe details and read their significance is an example of another convention that features in the Holmes stories. Introducing such conventions and reworking them as part of a new story requires a certain familiarity with the genre. Gadamer sees our knowledge of previous works as vital to understanding and uses the concept of the horizon to describe the prejudices that we bring with us when we approach a work of art (1993, p. 306). These prejudices are drawn from our previous experiences and are not solely negative because they help us see the current work of art in relation to others. Neither is our horizon fixed, because it is continually evolving as we test our prejudices against new encounters (*ibid.*). Jauss develops Gadamer's concept of the horizon in relation to genres, arguing that people bring with them the horizon of expectations they have gained through exposure to other texts within that genre (1982, p. 88). Genres are not fixed, but grow, die or are replaced according to the new texts that are created (*ibid.*, p. 106). In detective fiction, this can be seen in the successive developments from the clue-puzzle and the Golden Age, to the hard-boiled style, and on to other variants such as ecological crime. Jauss's fluid and evolutionary approach means that he views genres not as scientific classes or genera, but as groups or historical families (1982, p. 80). He notes that while a genre can be traced in the continuity of all the texts in a particular genre, it can equally be made up of successive works by a single author (*ibid.*). In this sense, Holmesian fiction can be seen as a subgenre or branch of detective fiction. As with other genres, it possess its own distinctive conventions, such as Holmes's talent for detailed observation, the classic opening in which a client arrives at 221b Baker Street with their problem, or the relationship between Holmes and Watson. For those readers acquainted with the Holmes genre, conventions such as these form part of the horizon of expectation they bring with them whenever they read one of the stories. As with other genres, Holmesian fiction can be extended and developed, with an extraordinary number of other authors having done so via a plethora of adaptations, rewritings, fanfictions, films, games and television series. Sanna Nyqvist (2017) identifies two particular methods adopted by other authors: writing episodes mentioned by Watson but never recounted in full, and employing the "corrective" approach whereby new stories are written to fill in gaps in Conan Doyle's source texts. Nyqvist points out that this strategy is used by Conan Doyle himself in stories such as "The Adventure of the Speckled Band" or "The Final Problem",

which open with an explanation from Watson concerning his motivation to set the record straight or his reasons for not having previously published the story. This demonstrates that once Conan Doyle had established the Holmes genre in the first few stories, he was subsequently engaged in working within the genre he had created. Like the authors who have followed him, Conan Doyle's challenge was to continue to meet the horizons of expectation established by the genre, while at the same time attempting to bring something new.

Like the story involving Lucinda de Ferriers, other stories that were written in the workshops also reworked Holmes conventions. In one story, the relationship between Holmes and Watson is given a different twist as a disgruntled Watson feels as if Holmes is treating him like a servant and wonders if the long-suffering Mrs Hudson has finally had enough and left them to their own devices. Another story opens on a Saturday afternoon at 221B Baker Street with nothing much going on. Watson is thinking about his fiancée and looking into the flames of their fire, while Holmes, "who doesn't like bleak moments like this" is drinking coffee and rolling his eyes. As ever, a knock on the door relieves Holmes of his boredom. Jauss describes how new additions to a genre draw on its conventions in order to meet the horizon of expectations familiar to the reader from previous texts, yet at the same time conventions do not just have to be reproduced; they can be varied, extended or transformed (ibid., p. 88). An example of a transformed convention can be found in one of the texts from the workshop in which Holmes extends his penchant for disguises by dressing up as Mrs Hudson on an afternoon when no one else is in the flat. Writing a text such as this is a form of play, relying as it does on the writer's understanding of the genre's conventions which are then transformed in their own work. In her examination of Tony Broadbent's (2011) story "As to 'An Exact Knowledge of London'", Charlotte Beyer notes the playful quality of the story's blurring of fiction and reality in its juxtaposition of Holmesian features and present-day London (2015, p. 5). The story describes a character who bears a strong resemblance to Watson being driven in a taxi around a variety of locations in London associated with the Holmes stories. The cabby displays an extensive knowledge of these locations and everything else connected with the stories. The uncanny nature of the cabby's "knowledge" and "Watson's" bumbling encourages a suspicion on the part of the reader that "Watson" may be at risk. But Broadbent is "playing" with the reader here, for the story's conclusion reveals that Watson has been planting microphones in the cab. When listening in with "Holmes", it turns out the cabby is working for "Moriarty" in the attempt to hunt down the "real" Holmes, something of a challenge when there are now so many different versions. With new Holmesian fiction such as this, suspense is created not only through trying to solve a mystery, but also through working out how the author

will pull off the relationship with the previous texts in a new and interesting way. Most of the Holmes stories are narrated by Watson and follow Holmes, othering the criminals, even if Conan Doyle sometimes depicts them in an empathetic way. By contrast, Alan Bradley's story "You'd Better Go in Disguise" (2011) ends with the narrator being revealed as the criminal. Subverting the usual narrative dynamic by inhabiting the mind of the criminal narrator allows us to experience the uncanny power of Holmes's crime-solving abilities at work on us. A comparable narratological development is evident in one of the participants' stories, which is narrated by a young soldier instead of Watson. The soldier asks for Holmes's help after he wakes up next to the dead body of a young woman after a night spent drinking with his friends. Here, the narrator is unable to tell his own story, and Holmes must attempt to piece it together in order to solve the mystery.

Holmes's methods of understanding, or "reading", such mysteries are often described as being based on deduction and reasoning, yet as Hühn's conception of the detective as writer suggests, there is also a creative side to Holmes. At the height of his investigation into the "Red-Headed League", Holmes goes with Watson to spend an afternoon at a concert, where he sits, tapping his fingers, his dreamy eyes enraptured by the music. Holmes's poetic and contemplative mood is described as the other half of the detective's "dual nature", with Watson suggesting that Holmes is at his most formidable when immersed in his "improvisations and black letter editions" (Conan Doyle, 2013d, p. 185). At a point in *The Sign of Four* where Holmes's investigations have so far proved fruitless, he takes himself off to conduct a "malodorous" chemical experiment which lasts into the small hours (Conan Doyle 2013e, p. 103). Having occupied his conscious mind with the experiment, Holmes arrives at the hypothesis which will eventually solve the mystery. This incident corresponds to what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi terms the incubation stage, where the process of creativity goes underground before giving rise to a sudden insight which provides a solution to the problem (2013, p. 98). Csikszentmihalyi describes this as the most mysterious creative stage and links it to notions of genius, the Muse and mysticism (2013, p. 98). Grappling with a problem at this level requires great personal involvement, and the adverse effect of this is that Holmes is often at a loss when not engaged with a case, with some stories depicting him as listless or driven to cocaine.

'My mind,' he said, 'rebels at stagnation. Give me problems, give me work, give me the most abstruse cryptogram or the most intricate analysis, and I am in my own proper atmosphere. I can dispense then with artificial stimulants. But I abhor the dull routine of existence. I crave for mental exaltation. That is why I have

chosen my own particular profession,—or rather created it, for I am the only one in the world’. (Conan Doyle, 2013e, p. 67)

Gadamer states that play only works if the player loses their self in the act of playing (1993, p. 102). This is developed further when Gadamer describes how the hermeneutic process involves the spectator losing themselves in the work of art, only to rediscover themselves in the truths that the art reveals about the world (ibid., p. 124). A similar dynamic of alienation and connection is found in Holmes, whose solitary bachelor existence is given meaning by the hermeneutic game of detection in which he exercises his faculties to find the truth of a case in the wider world. As previously mentioned, this often involves “reading” situations or objects to render up their hidden meanings. Chesterton describes how, for the fictional detective, “there is no stone in the street and no brick in the wall that is not actually a deliberate symbol – a message from some man, as much as if it were a telegram or a post-card” (1902, p. 120). Chesterton argues that this approach to understanding means that a modern city such as London becomes a poem waiting to be read (ibid.). Something of this is evident in the passage where Holmes tries to convince Watson that life is stranger than art:

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 cross-purposes, the wonderful chains of events, working through generations, and leading to the most *Outre* results, it would make all fiction, with its conventionalities and foreseen conclusions, most stale and unprofitable. (Conan Doyle, 2013a, p. 156)

Holmes’s invitation to Watson, and by extension the reader, to join him in this flight of discovery represents an imaginative vision of the secrets that hide behind the closed doors of the city. Imagination is therefore brought to bear on “reality” in order to encourage us to see further and read what is hidden behind closed doors and unfamiliar faces, as well as in everyday objects that are found in Holmes’s London.

The way in which Holmes is situated in the world of Victorian and Edwardian Britain is another feature of the stories that subsequent authors have chosen to play with. Beyer highlights Lee Child’s “The Bone-Headed League” and Gayle Lynds and John Sheldon’s “A Triumph of Logic” as stories that attempt an “Americanization” of Holmes, both in their subject matter and in their adoption of a hard-boiled narrative style (2015, p. 6). Contemporary language and the use of humour are combined with a rejection of Watson in favour of a single detective figure after the manner of Raymond Chandler (ibid., p. 8). Transposing Holmes into a different style was also a strategy adopted by one of the workshop participants:

It was a chilly January morning. The night before the snow had covered the muddy road and dirty pavements on Baker Street. Sherlock was standing by the window looking out and enjoying the stillness. It almost looked like a painting, a black, white and grey painting.

That's when he saw her. An elegant black lady, young, around sixteen. She was moving swiftly. She kept looking behind her, over her shoulder. She seemed like she belonged in that painting; her dress was wet from being dragged in the snow and her hat was covered. She had been walking for twenty minutes, Sherlock thought, judging by the state of her clothes.

The atmospheric tone of this passage evokes a subtly different depiction of Holmes and his environment. The genre conventions of Holmes waiting in his rooms in Baker Street, and his acute observational abilities, are given a more lyrical treatment, which is augmented by the description of his contemplative mood. Describing the street scene as a painting adds another angle to the hermeneutic dimension of detection, as well as Chesterton's idea that the detective story encourages us to read the modern city as a poem.

Jauss sees a work of literature not as an isolated object, but as something like an orchestration that continues to resonate in the minds of its readers (1982, p. 21). Consequently, a work of literature is an "event" which continues to have an impact only if those who come after respond to it, either through reading or writing (*ibid.*, p. 22). This is echoed by Beyer, who suggests that Conan Doyle's continued relevance is due not only to the readers of his stories, but also to the authors who have reinterpreted the character of Holmes (2015, p. 15). The living quality of the Holmes genre can therefore be seen in relation to Gadamer's conception of the festive, through the sense in which a festival "has its being only in its coming and return" (1993, p. 123). Dove relates this to the conventions of detective fiction, the return of which are celebrated by readers as they might welcome an old friend (1997, p. 75). Through inviting participants to draw on their understanding of the Holmes genre and rework its conventions in order to create new contributions, the workshops also took on a festive dimension. The way in which conventions were transformed or used in different ways corresponds to Gadamer's assertion that although repetition is vital to the survival of a festival, it is never the same (1993, p. 123). Another vital aspect of a festival for Gadamer is participation (*ibid.*, p. 124). This is evident in the way a Holmes story invites the reader to try and solve a case alongside Holmes. It is also evident in the playful collaborative process used to generate new stories in the workshops. Both workshops culminated with participants reading out their stories to the group. Having written stories out of their understanding of the Holmes genre, participants became spectators once more through attempting to understand the artistic

works that were presented to them. Gadamer sees the spectator as being present to something in a mode of ecstatic self-forgetfulness through devoting their full attention to what is at hand (ibid., p. 126). By leaving their everyday selves behind and immersing themselves in the process of understanding and writing, the workshops offered participants the opportunity to find themselves again in the truths relating to Holmes, detection and life that were brought into being through the communal creation and sharing of the stories.

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