

**Doyle, Sherlock Holmes:
"A Scandal in Bohemia" Revisits the Premises of "The Purloined Letter"**

1. Doyle's stories reflect the influence of medicine (his chosen field):

- a. 8 yrs Jesuit education, medical school at Edinburgh University; 10 yrs practicing medicine before becoming full-time writer.
 - i. ACD's medical training inflected Holmes: "a scientific detective who solves cases on his own merits and not through the folly of the criminal." Scientific method.
 - ii. Medical diagnosis, a species of scientific method, requires both:
 - (1) a scientist's training in analytic reasoning
 - (2) a physician's eye for the often subtle symptoms (clues) of disease and the stories of the patient.
- b. The SH stories feature the combined scientism of Holmes the chemist and Watson the physician (possibly the mirror of Dr. Conan Doyle).
 - i. Watson provides medical services and a medical viewpoint, but most important supplies "emotional labor" of drawing out patients' stories. A "midwife" of facts.
 - ii. Holmes analyzes the physical data and the stories Watson evokes.
- c. The character SH was based partly on ACD's medical-school mentor, Dr. Joseph Bell. Famous for his ability to quickly "size up" and diagnose his patients and their symptoms.
 - i. ACD became Bell's outpatient clerk (he took medical histories of people waiting to see Bell) so that he could watch, first-hand, as Bell accounted not only for his patients' symptoms but also for their backgrounds.

2. Doyle, like SH, was interested in inventing and problem-solving:

- a. ACD was a social activist and inventor:
 - i. instigated two investigative crusades on behalf of George Edalji and Oscar Slater, both victims of British xenophobia. In separate cases, the two men were wrongly convicted and imprisoned for crimes they had not committed.
 - ii. ACD helped solve military problems:
 - iii. ACD predicted, before WWI, that a submarine blockade could pose a significant threat to England.
 - iv. ACD designed the precursor for what we call the life jacket, and lobbied to make sure that all sailors were outfitted with life preservers during WWI.
 - v. ACD invented a cipher used to communicate with British prisoners of war.

- b. **The SH stories reflect a fundamental willingness to question the *status quo*.**
 - i. Why accept the ethics of social institutions and the "letter of the law"?
 - ii. The SH stories gently question social hierarchies and institutions - the inferiority of women, the rights of parents to control their children, the superiority of the upper classes, etc.
 - iii. Many Sherlock Holmes stories (such as "A Scandal in Bohemia" and "The Man with the Twisted Lip") don't involve crimes at all. Instead they focus on violations of honor and justice. They are opposed to people, for example, who adhere to the letter of the law in order to violate the spirit of the law.
 - iv. While the stories question these realities, however, they often resolve with a victory for the traditionally dominant class or person. The stories present issues, but don't necessary resolve them by overturning social standards completely.

3. "A Scandal in Bohemia": ACD Reworking the DF Tradition to Reflect His Views/Concerns

a. Influence of Predecessors:

- i. Role of influence in literary works. Doyle uses his first brief Holmes story to re-do Poe - to go him one better.
- ii. In "A Study in Scarlet," the first of the Sherlock Holmes stories, Holmes articulates a marked contempt of Dupin. When Watson, who has just recently met Holmes, remarks, "You remind me of Edgar Allan Poe's Dupin. I had no idea that such individuals did exist outside of stories," Holmes responds: "No doubt you think that you are complimenting me in comparing me to Dupin. . . . Now, in my opinion, Dupin was a very inferior fellow. That trick of his of breaking in on his friends' thoughts with an apropos remark after a quarter of an hour's silence is really very showy and superficial. He had some analytical genius, no doubt; but he was by no means such a phenomenon as Poe appeared to imagine."
- iii. In real life, Doyle repudiated Holmes's "cavalier" dismissal of Poe's Dupin, claiming that Holmes was speaking in character for himself only and not for his author.
- iv. But in his first short Holmes story, "A Scandal in Bohemia," Doyle extensively critiques Poe by revising "The Purloined Letter," making "a thorough re-search of the premises" of Poe's story.

4. "Scandal" revisits premises of "Purloined"

- a. The D must do rigorous deduction through observation.
 - i. The D must challenge *a priori* assumptions. When Dupin proposes (pun) to do "a thorough re-search of the premises" he signals his awareness that the world cannot be taken at face value - the apartment and the police's ideas must both be "re-searched."

- ii. Webster defines the adverb *a priori* as "1: by reasoning from definitions formed or principles assumed: DEDUCTIVELY. 2: without examination or analysis: PRESUMPTIVELY. 3: independently of experience: INTUITIVELY." The adjective *a priori* is 1a: marked by reasoning or deducing consequences from definitions formed or principles assumed: DEDUCTIVE. . . . 2: without examination or analysis" (107).
- iii. Example of *a priori* assumption: the police fail to find the letter because they assume a *priori* that the letter is hidden. Dupin succeeds by turning the police's premise "inside out."

5. How does Doyle "Re-Search" Poe's Premises?

- a. While Poe's story challenges some "easy" *a priori* assumptions, such as the idea that the letter is hidden, it does not challenge thorny social issues, such as the idea that a woman's sexual transgression is a "crime."
- b. While Poe fills his story with "ciphers" - blank spaces he asks us to "read into" - but he limits the possible meanings so narrowly that we are forced to fill in the story in a very standardized way.
- c. Doyle challenges the social assumptions at the center of the story - turns them "inside out."
- d. Doyle gives us a series of signifiers - words - that, interpreted in a variety of ways, implicate the detective and his client as the "real" criminals of the story and cause the mystery to remain unsolved.

Parallels in the Stories' Forms:

- Two men, narrator and detective, hired to resolve "diplomatic" scandal that the police have been unable to handle.
- Story begins with "intro exercise," when D makes ostentatiously brilliant deduction -
 - Dupin analyzes the narrator's train of thought.
 - Holmes analyzes the narrator's life, based on his appearance.
- No crime has taken place, but an object with incriminating symbols on it - betraying an illicit relationship - threatens to be used to blackmail a royal figure.
 - The object reveals a powerful woman's sexual license has threatened the reputation of a male monarch whose identity is disguised (at least at first).
 - Attempts to buy and steal the object back haven't worked; possessor seems to know that they're looking for the object and to have taken precautions to hide it.
- Though the woman's "virtue" is questioned, she is never punished, and in both stories her illicit sexual behavior goes unquestioned by the detectives and unpunished by the culture.

Differences: Encoded in Words - Slippery Signifiers

- Doyle hides his critique in "plain sight," in a series of shifting signifiers that become sites of punning slippage through repetition and defamiliarization.

- "Groom" "sovereign," and "minister," words that correspond to the parts played by the male principles in the story, shift meaning suggestively.
 - The roles of "groom," "sovereign," and "minister" are those of men who legitimate women's sexual activity in patriarchal culture: the "groom" or man who husbands a woman, the "sovereign" or monarch who emblemizes the position of "Sire," and the "minister" or religious solemnizer of matrimonial vows.
 - Holmes, who duplicitously assumes two of these roles during his investigation, discovers that their meanings are subject to change abruptly, involving him in empathic entanglements he has failed to anticipate.

- **Groom.**

- Holmes as horse-groom, surprised to hear servants praise Adler for her sexual monogamy.
- When Adler marries Norton, Holmes, acts as the "groom"-in-disguise and proxy for that reluctant groom, the King. Once again, though, he's surprised to find that she is "virtuous" and not as the King described her. Holmes acts almost like he's marrying her himself:

I was half-dragged up to the altar, and before I knew where I was I found myself mumbling responses which were whispered in my ear. . . . It was all done in an instant, and there was the gentleman thanking me on the one side and the lady on the other, while the clergyman beamed on me in front. It was the most preposterous position in which I ever found myself in my life. . .

(169)

- **Sovereign.**

- Adler gives the "groom" Holmes a "sovereign" for his trouble.
 - A "sovereign" is a coin worth one pound sterling; its name is a metonym for the monarch's portrait stamped on its face.
 - As an adjective, the word "sovereign" also means "excellent," "unsurpassable," "independent."
 - "Sovereign" here stands not for the King, but for Adler herself. When she hands the "Sovereign" back to Holmes she declares her "sovereignty" or freedom emotional entanglement with him.
- Holmes is so impressed with Adler that he keeps the sovereign and vows "to wear it on [his] watch-chain in memory of the occasion" (169). He seems to have begun to view Adler - and himself - quite differently.

- **Minister.**

- Holmes's second disguise, as an "amiable and simple-minded Nonconformist clergyman" (170), allows him to enter Adler's home under pretense of injury. (He's also assisted the "minister" at Adler's wedding by serving as a witness.)
- But Adler recognizes Holmes is a false "minister" as she "ministers" to his wounds. "Ministers," as Dupin knows, can't be trusted - they're working for the enemy! Unlike the "Minister D-," she is smart enough to take away the photograph so that Holmes can't return for it the following day. She leaves a note:

As for the photograph, your client may rest in peace. I love and am loved by a better man than he. The King may do what he will without hindrance from one he has cruelly wronged. I keep it only to safeguard myself and to preserve a weapon which will always secure me from any steps which he might take in the future.

(175)

What Does Holmes Learn that Dupin Didn't?

- Holmes is disconcerted by his experiences as not-quite-groom, not-quite-sovereign, not-quite-minister in the Adler affair. His *a priori* assumptions about women and social class are (assumptions articulated by the King of Bohemia) are inverted, defamiliarized, and convincingly deconstructed by Adler.
- The disguises and ruses he uses are more "criminal" than Adler's keeping of the photograph - which after all belongs to her!
 - By disguising himself, he engages in the kind of public role-playing for which actresses were routinely condemned.
 - As the King's "minister," he mounts the kind of unscrupulous, vengeful pursuit of which Adler stands accused.
- Adler, in contrast, appears increasingly to be a conventionally respectable, resourceful woman who simply wants to marry without interference from her jealous former lover. Ultimately, her letter suggests, the King has given her cause to fear for her life: though married, she must keep the photograph to "safeguard herself" and "secure herself" from "any steps which [the King] might take in the future" (175).

How Does Holmes Indicate What He's Learned?

- Though he fails to obtain the photograph, Holmes makes two gestures that suggest that Adler's instruction has been reward enough.
 - First Holmes ironically upbraids the King, who arrogantly proclaims

"What a woman - oh, what a woman? Did I not tell you how quick and resolute she was? Would she not have made an admirable queen? Is it not a pity that she was not on my level?"

"From what I have seen of the lady she seems indeed to be on a very different level to your majesty," said Holmes coldly.

(175)

- Second, Holmes alters his assumptions about women. Watson notes;

[Holmes] used to make merry over the cleverness of women, but I have not heard him do it of late. And when he speaks of Irene Adler, it is always under the honourable title of "the woman."

(175)

- Holmes's growing awareness of the slipperiness of the signifiers "minister," "groom," and "sovereign" encourages him to reconsider other signifiers such as "woman" and "honor." (Likewise, the "Bohemia" of the title itself, of course, refers to the King's ancestral homeland, to Adler's demimonde, and to Holmes himself, who Watson says "loathed every form of society with his whole Bohemian soul" (161). By the end of the story, when the concept of a "scandal" in "Bohemia" is reinvoked, we must question which of the three "bohemian" worlds has been more scandalized by the whole affair.