

The theme of narrative and narrator in detective fiction

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Extract

“In all my time working with Sherlock Holmes I have held great admiration not only for the man’s character, but for his work and our relationship. Having laboriously given my efforts to him on over fifty-four cases and narrated his tales to the best of my ability, I have never come to the point, however, where such a story... Indeed, where such a narration has proved so strange. The truth, I must confess, is that I – Dr. Watson – am dead.

How this narration is working I am sure you will be asking. Well I would ask you to bear with me on this minor point. Due to the extent of my services to the documentation of the work of Holmes, I believe that I have somehow been given this chance to follow him one final time – to follow Holmes as I have always done until he has, I hope, discovered my own murderer so that I may be given the closure of a crime that is for once more close to me than ever before... You see, I know nothing of my murder, my murderer, nor my means of murder. I thought it a normal day, a normal lunch, but something wrong, perhaps? And then a void in my mind of any events following, what I presume, was my murder. My only hope is that through this final adventure and through the abilities of my dear friend Sherlock Holmes, I might be given some satisfaction and be allowed to move on in peace and the knowledge that my killer has been discovered, captured and will do no more harm to any other person.

In any case, I ramble whilst forgetting my duties to scribing the venture at hand! As I watched over Holmes, busy at work with decanting some form of Mercurial solution onto the fabric of a hat, there was a tremendous rumble of what I can only imagine was a trading cart or perhaps taxi before a sharp knock at the door.

“Ah! My dear Mary. And officer Ottway. It’s good to- oh dear... Sit down and tell me everything quickly.” Holmes’ welcome was cut short by his sudden change and I believe he had observed the drawn face of Mary and the unusual sobriety of Ottway.

“I do believe sir, that you might need to sit down yourself since we have some rather tragic-” began Ottway before being interrupted by Holmes: “Be quiet. Watson is dead. This much any fool could tell. And I presume time is indeed of the essence and that we, officer, need to move right away.” Holmes’ face suddenly drew gaunt and I saw an emotion I had only experienced Holmes express during our adventure with the three Garridebs when he thought I may have been mortally injured. He took Mary’s hand and spoke directly to her: “I’m sorry for this. I will do everything in my power and will not stop until the person responsible is caught. And for this reason I will not indulge you with my sympathies and the time you deserve due to your loss”. With that Holmes turned to Ottway, any sense of his previous emotion evaporated: “Ottway. As I have said, I know we must leave right away. But tell me quickly – have you secured the area around the Belarge Hotel and made sure that no one interferes with the scene?”

At this stage I was as astounded as - by the look of his face - Officer Ottway. How had Holmes guessed where I was dining when murdered? Or even that I had been murdered in the first place? I had not seen Holmes for a fortnight and my plans to attend the Belarge Hotel

were completely on a whim. Before this was answered, however, Ottway questioned Holmes on this very deduction and even more that I had missed.

"Sir, but how do you know this? How do you know about Watson's death and the whereabouts? And I'm sorry for the rush but I see you somehow already know that time is indeed of the essence. I would normally like to give you more time, sir, but I'm glad that I do not need to convince you that there is indeed no time to be lost."

"Aha... indeed.... my dear Watson, how I will be at loss without your naive questioning and approval of my deductions." Holmes looked down as he muttered these words to himself, but a glint in his eye quickly returned. "Ah my dear Ottway, the signs in life that people miss!" I smiled to myself as I recognised a sentiment I had heard many times before, myself curious to know how he had deduced any of this information.

"It is simple my dear Ottway", Holmes pronounced. "You have both arrived by taxi and from the sound of the extra eight hooves drawing the carriage I assume you have paid your way for speed. The disturbing sound of the wheels along the rather attractive cobbled stones outside furthermore suggest that you forwent choosing the cheaper two person taxi. Since you are here to see me, I can easily assume that you need me to join you and in the quickest time possible."

"As for the hotel and location? Well, it takes little work to spot the characteristic matchbox of the Belarge hotel which you carry with you in that transparent case. The transparency simply confirmed the matchbox's purpose as evidence and the rest- well the rest of my deductions must wait till I have formulated further." "No, let us be off at once," Holmes said walking to the door. "The gravity of this crime is of infinite importance, the targeting of Watson no accident, and the extent to which we are all still in danger even I am yet uncertain!"

Commentary

In my extract I chose to focus on the theme of narrative and the narrator, particularly in the genre of classical detective fiction.¹ In order to do this I used the setting and characters from Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories whilst manipulating one significant feature to understand its implications on the functioning of the genre. In having Dr. Watson killed and narrating from the grave in a similar style to Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones*, I hope to demonstrate that the detective's companion is purely present for their narrative ability; in regard to their use for the physical action of detection, the detective's companion need not play a part. I will accordingly focus upon ideas of reality, suspense, narrative subjectivity, and narrative challenge in relation to the detective fiction genre, examining how my extract is compatible with traditional features of the genre.

The most significant implication of using a dead narrator in a detective story is the loss of realism. The detective fiction of Conan Doyle explicitly explains the reason for the narrative's existence, repeatedly emphasising that it is a conscious record of Holmes' adventures by a companion who has agreed to narrate: "Your [Holmes'] merits should be publicly recognised. You should publish an account of the case. If you won't, I [Watson] will for you".² SS Van Dine's 'Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories' moreover states that 'once an author soars into the realm of fantasy... he is outside the bounds of detective fiction, cavorting in the uncharted reaches of adventure'.³ Whilst my use of a dead narrator subsequently suggests the disruption of a genre which traditionally illustrates a realistic

¹ This essay will predominantly focus upon the relation between my extract and the narrative and narratorial features of classical detective fiction, as defined by John. G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1976), pp.80-106.

² Arthur Conan Doyle, 'A Study in Scarlet' in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes, Vol 1* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2003), p.96.

³ S. S. Van Dine, 'Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories' (1928), reprinted in Howard Haycraft, ed., *The Art of the Mystery Story* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1983), pp.189-93.

reason for its construction, the reader can be manipulated into suspending their disbelief. Heinze discusses narration from a dead narrator's perspective as 'Global Parelepsis', which involves 'naturalness contained within the non-natural frame'.⁴ Heinze furthermore asserts that the non-natural frame can be overlooked by the reader, but cautions that 'if the reader refuses to follow the first demand that he or she suspend disbelief, he or she might as well stop reading right there'.⁵ For this reason, my extract made explicit the fantastic nature of the narration but quickly moved on to the more natural and believable narration expected of a Holmes narrative: "In any case, I ramble whilst forgetting my duties to scribing the venture at hand!". This was supplemented with my use of what Herman terms the 'doubly deictic "you)": "How this narration is working I am sure you will be asking. Well I would ask you to bear with me on this minor point". This creates a 'projection of a fictional you onto the audience and vice versa', thus further drawing the reader into the narrative at hand as a personalised respondent to the narrator.⁶ The detective story can thus continue with little change to the general style of narration – the relationship of a narrator writing to readers about the detection of a crime is maintained.

Allowing for the impossibility of Watson narrating from the grave, the function of the Watson-figure in creating suspense can nevertheless be fulfilled without his or her presence in the action of the story. Rimmon-Kenan discusses the need for a text to use 'delays' and 'gaps' in the narrative to 'slow down the process of comprehension by the reader so as to ensure its own survival', citing this as a crucial requirement of detective fiction.⁷ In order for this to occur in classic detective fiction, the detective's point of view must remain unknown; since 'it is important that the detective solve the crime or at least get on the right track from the beginning', the reader's access to the thoughts of the detective would subvert both the mystery of the story and also the climax when the ingenuity of the detective is revealed.⁸ Unlike the omniscient narrator Susie in *The Lovely Bones* who is able to discuss the 'the shiver [her sister] had felt when I passed', I used the limited, first-person point of view of Watson in order to facilitate suspense.⁹ This was particularly encoded in the transitive choices I used when constructing verb phrases in my narrative. From Poe's *Murders in the Rue Morgue*, I gathered the presence of few mental processes in regard to the detective. For instance, when Dupin 'disentangled this little tuft from the rigidly clutched fingers of Madame L'Espanaye', the narrator's inability to describe Dupin's mental process prolongs the mystery;¹⁰ by only narrating the material process of 'disentangling', the narration is truthful whilst maintaining suspense. In light of this I chose to only associate non-mental processes with Holmes in my extract, leaving his later important reasoning behind the Mercury solution and already-made deductions about Watson's death a mystery to Watson and also the reader until later in the story. Even with having a dead narrator who exists outside of the text, the suspense and delay of the classic detective fiction story can function fully, since the dead narrator may know no more than if alive.

Due to the lack of Watson's knowledge of his murder, the formal structure of the detective fiction genre can furthermore continue to function. Huhn describes how it is 'through the development of the second story', the detection of the crime, that 'the absent first story is at last reconstructed in detail and made known'; it is this second story which

⁴ Ruediger Heinze, 'Violations of Mimetic Epistemology in First-Person Narrative Fiction', *Narrative* 16:3 (2008), p.286.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ David Herman, 'Textual "You" and double deixis in Edna O'Brien's "A Pagan Place"', *Style* 28:3 (1994), p.400.

⁷ Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Methuen, 1983), pp.125-127.

⁸ Cawelti, p.83.

⁹ Alice Sebold, *The Lovely Bones* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 2002), p.79.

¹⁰ Edgar Allan Poe, 'Murders in the Rue Morgue' in *Selected Tales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.115.

makes up the narrative of the detective fiction story.¹¹ Thus my story begins after Watson's death, but with Watson's ignorance of how this occurred: "And then a void in my mind of any events following, what I presume, was my murder". Through this, the narrative suspense is neither spoiled, nor is the second story function subverted, allowing for the 'contest between author (criminal) and reader (detective) about the possession of the meaning of the (first) story' to occur. By having a Watson narrator between the reader and detective, the reader can be more easily misled whilst also allowing for the reader's sense of superiority over Watson, the 'thick-headed friend'; by being allowed to be 'a little more ingenious than Watson', the reader's pleasure arises from being able to say "I told you so," and "I spotted that".¹² For this reason I decided to employ a great deal of epistemic modality in the viewpoint of my Watson-figure, since it 'is concerned with the speaker's confidence or lack of confidence in the truth of a proposition'.¹³ By using phrases characterised by epistemic modality such as 'I *thought* it a normal day, a normal lunch, but something wrong, *perhaps*?', I tried to enforce my Watson-figure's lack of awareness and his inability to think with certainty. This further allowed scope for the manipulation of my reader since it encoded possibility into Watson's assumptions; the reader is not mistreated when misled by Watson's ignorance if the admission of possible error was always encoded into the narrative style.

Whilst for some critics Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* 'threatened the whole basis of the genre by breaking one of its most cardinal rules: that the narration itself should be free from suspicion', I believe that manipulations of the genre can lead to a greater understanding of the genre and what features construct it.¹⁴ By having Doyle's Watson-figure narrate from the grave, I have shown the lack of necessity for the character, in regard to his or her actions in advancing the plot. Instead, the Watson-figure only appears crucial for his narrative function, the use of the Watson-figure to account the story of detection whilst maintaining suspense and the challenge between reader and author in solving the crime.

¹¹ Peter Huhn, 'The Detective as Reader: Narrativity and Reading Concepts in Detective Fiction' *MFS*, 33/3 (1987), p. 452.

¹² Sayers, p.57

¹³ Paul Simpson, *Language, Ideology and Point of View* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.44.

¹⁴ Martin Priestman, *Crime Fiction from Poe to the Present* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1997), p.20.

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