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Art of Telling Detective Stories: Archetypal Reading of Narrative Pattern in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet*

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a reading of Arthur Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* in the light of Northrop Frye's archetypal criticism. Northrop Frye, in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, suggests a structural formula for the detective fiction as 'a man-hunter locating a scapegoat.' Against the background of this view, this paper analyzes Arthur Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* to see how this structure is recurrent in the text. The character of detective corresponds to the man-hunter image and the scapegoat image can be found in the performers of crime. The man-hunter locates the scapegoat through a process of cross-examination and tracing foot print.

Arthur Conan Doyle is the most renowned Scottish writer and the father of legendary fictitious sleuth Sherlock Holmes. His Sherlock Holmes was an embodiment of superhuman intelligence and has received world-wide acceptance. Roger Lancelyn Green in his article "Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan" asserts the same: "There are a few characters of fiction who step out of their books and become known almost universally . . . and probably the best known of them all is Sherlock Holmes who has been described as 'the most famous man who never lived'" (88). Doyle's first work in the 'Holmes' series was published in 1887 under the title A *Study in Scarlet*. This book has been analyzed from the perspective of Northrop Frye's archetypal criticism to see how the structural archetype of detective fiction reappears in it.

It is while dealing with comic modes of fiction that Frye comes to refer to the literary genre of detective fiction. He holds the conviction that the beginning of the detective fiction is the result of the intensification of low mimetic comic mode which is an attempt to present the things with a high realistic tone. It is out of this conviction Frye states that detective fiction "begins as an attempt to describe life exactly as it is, and ends, by the very logic of that attempt, in pure irony" (*Anatomy* 49). In short, detective fiction belongs to the category of Ironic comedy. Frye proposes a definite narrative structure for ironic comedy. According to him, the inevitable element in the ironic comedy is the presence of a scapegoat image. He used the word *pharmakos* to indicate this figure. Frye says: "In studying ironic comedy we must start with the theme of driving out the *pharmakos* from the point of the view of society. This appeals to the kind of relief we are expected to feel when we see Jonson's Volpone condemned to the galleys, Shylock stripped of his wealth, or Tartuffe taken off to prison" (Anatomy 45).

Since ironic comedy depicts the actual life of humans in a more realistic fashion, it touches the human world of violence and brutality. In such an ironic world of comedy, there are the susceptible victims on whom the pain is being inflicted and the *pharmakos* is responsible for the victim's pain. Frye describes these features of ironic comedy as follows:

> In ironic comedy we begin to see that art has also a lower limit in actual life. This is the condition of savagery, the world in which comedy exists of inflicting pain on a helpless victim, and tragedy in enduring it. Ironic comedy brings us to the figure of the scapegoat ritual and the nightmare dream, the human symbol that concentrates our fears and hates. (Anatomy 45)

The comic end of ironic comedy is the driving out of *pharmakos* from the society and the restoration of the society into its former desirable status. In the detective fiction, this expulsion of *pharmakos* is accomplished by a man-hunter figure. Hence, Frye gives the following narrative structure for detective fiction while he speaks of the popularity of detective stories: "The fact that we are now in an ironic phase of literature largely accounts for the popularity of the detective story, the formula of how a man-hunter locates a *pharmakos* and gets rid of him" (*Anatomy* 46). So, the attempt here is to find how this structural formula has been fulfilled in the detective fiction taken for study.

Moving to A *Study in Scarlet*, the reader can easily note that it follows the same structure of ironic comedy. In the novel, Sherlock Holmes personifies the man-hunter image who tries to locate the culprits in order to bring them to law. In the novel, Holmes asserts his duty as a man-hunter, while he questions the constable. Holmes declares: "I am one of the hounds and not the wolf; Mr. Gregson or Mr. Lestrade will answer for that" (Doyle 36). Here, the plot is centered round the murders of Enoch J. Drebber from Cleveland, Ohio, U.S.A and his secretary Joseph Stangerson. Sherlock Holmes was asked by a letter from Scotland Yard official called Tobias Gregson to involve in the case so as to bring the real murderer to justice. The whole structure of the novel is foreshadowed in the very letter which goes as this:

My dear Mr. Sherlock Holmes:

> 'There has been a bad business during the night at 3, Lauriston Gardens, off the Brixton Road. Our man

> on the beat saw a light there about two in the morning, and as the house was an empty one, suspected that something was amiss. He found the door open, and in the front room, which is bare of furniture, discovered the body of a gentleman, well dressed, and having cards in his pocket bearing the name of 'Enoch J. Drebber, Cleveland, Ohio, U. S. A.' There had been no robbery, nor is there any evidence as to how the man met his death. There are marks of blood in the room, but there is no wound upon his person. We are at loss as to how he came into the empty house; indeed the whole affair is a puzzler. If you can come round to the house any time before twelve, you will find me there. I have left everything in statu quo until I hear from you. If you are unable to come, I shall give you fuller details, and would esteem it a great kindness if you would favour me with your opinions.
>
> 'Yours faithfully,
> 'TOBIAS GREGSON' (Doyle 21-22)

The content of the letter presupposes a *pharmakos*, whom has to be located by the man-hunter. Thereafter, the story is developing with the purpose of unfolding the identity of the murderer; or in other words, locating the *pharmakos*.

Holmes starts his investigation in the novel by tracing the footsteps in the premise of murder. He comments to Watson about the importance of the art of tracing footsteps. "There is no branch of detective science which is so important and so much neglected as the art of tracing footsteps" (Doyle 116). It is out of the foot impressions Holmes gives the clue of the appearance of the man behind the crime. He described the murderer as the one who "was more than six feet high, was in the prime of life, had small feet for his height, wore coarse, squire-toed boots and smoked a Trichinopoly cigar" (Doyle 30). While Watson asks him how he could predict the height of man, Holmes says, "Why, the height of a man, in nine cases out of ten, can be told from the length of his stride. . . . I had this fellow's stride both on the clay outside and on the dust within" (Doyle 32). His ability to use the footprints to estimate the stature obliged Wilton Marion Krogman to consider Holmes as a great physical anthropologist. Krogman states in his article "Sherlock Holmes as an Anthropologist": "Among the fields in which he showed considerable knowledge was anthropology. Primarily, his interests were concerned with what we today classify as physical anthropology, but he knew archeology and ethnography as well" (155).

Holmes, then, moves to the police constable John Rance, who reached first in the plot of crime. He cross-examines him to get the details of the criminal. He questions Rance as if he was there while the constable was making investigation. On questioning Rance, Holmes extracts the important information with regard to the reappearance of the murderer in the crime scene in order to take the wedding ring back. Holmes asked Rance, "Was the street empty then?" And Rance answered, "Well, it was, as far as anybody that could be of any good goes" (Doyle 36). Holmes wants a clarification of Rance's statement, "What do you mean?" For this question, he reveals the presence of a drunken man in front of the gate of the house where the murder took place. Rance says: "I've seen many a drunk chap in my time . . . but never anyone so crying drunk as that cove. He was at the gate when I came out, a-leanin' up ag'in the railings, and a-singin' at the pitch o' his lungs about Columbine's New-fangled Banner, or some such stuff. He couldn't stand, far less help." Holmes continues his question, though the constable shows some irritation, "He was an uncommon drunk sort o' man . . . He'd ha' found hisself [sic] in the station if we hadn't been so took up." On the inquest about the appearance of the drunken chap, Rance gives the following explanation to Holmes, "He was a long chap with red face, the lower part muffled round——" which goes in conformity with the explanation of Holmes about the murderer (Doyle 36).

After handcuffing the murderer, Holmes makes a cross-examination of the convict too. It is this questioning technique that unfolds the actual identity of the criminal and the reason behind the crime. Jefferson Hope reveals that the intention of the crime is revenge for the guilt of the death of a father and a daughter to whom he had engaged (Doyle 106).

Living in an age of science and reason, Holmes had acquired a deep knowledge in the science and also had enormous capacity of applying it in the field of investigation of a crime. In his article "Sherlock Holmes: Father of Scientific Crime Detection", Stanton O. Berg establishes the fact of Holmes applying scientific knowledge in the field of investigation: "A review of Sherlock Holmes stories and novels will quickly reveal the wide spectrum of scientific methods and interests utilized by Holmes in his many cases" (449). It is with the help of these abilities, he brings the criminals to the hold of justice. In his article " Sherlock Holmes: Analytical Chemist" R.P. Graham states: "A Holmesian scholar of note, S. C. Roberts, has contended that the interest of Sherlock Holmes in chemistry was purely a practical one, and that he was not devoted to scientific investigation for its own sake" (509).

Holmes's practical approach to science is illustrated in his experiment with regard to the blood stains in the novel. He describes the importance of his findings in the field of crime detection to Watson:

> Beautiful! beautiful! The old guaiacum test was very clumsy and uncertain. So is the microscopic examination for blood corpuscles. The letter is valueless if the stains are a few hours old. Now, this appears to act as well whether the blood is old or new. Had this test been invented, there are hundreds of men now walking the earth who would long ago have paid the penalty of their crimes. (Doyle 8)

His application of scientific knowledge in the field of the detection can also be found when he reveals the identity of the murderer as the one who smokes a Trichinopoly cigar. He claims to Watson that he has made a thorough study in the matter of differentiating the cigar ashes and can distinguish the cigar or tobacco examining the ash and that he has also written a monograph upon the subject (Doyle 32). According to Berg, this view of Holmes actualized later by the work of Dr. Locard. He quotes Locard, who claims that he got the subject of his

study from Holmes, from Irving Wallace's The Sunday Gentlemen. "Sherlock Holmes was the first to realize the importance of dust. I merely copied his methods" (448).

The driving out ceremony of scapegoat is accomplished by arrest, or death, or by both; and the society praises the genius of the hero. In A *Study in Scarlet*, the scapegoat is Jefferson Hope. Being the murderer of Drebber and Stangerson, he has been caught by Holmes, who brings him before the law. He is taken into prison, but dies due to an aortic aneurism before he is presented before the magistrate for the trial. . Here, the death of Drebber and Stangerson can also be viewed as an act of driving out of the *pharmakos* ritual. It was Drebber and Stangerson who killed John Ferrier and abducted his daughter, Lucy Ferrier whom Jefferson Hope wanted to marry before twenty years of the murder. She also died of a broken heart a month after her marriage with Drebber. Hope affirms, "It's enough that they were guilty of the death of two human beings—a father and a daughter—and that they had, therefore, forfeited their own lives" (Doyle 106).

The story ends with the attempt of Lestrade and Gregson to get the credit of the case. A newspaper reports it as the achievement of these two officials reducing the major role played by Holmes. Consequently, Watson attempts to write about the whole truth behind the investigation headed by Holmes with the purpose of making him a public figure. Watson says to Holmes, "I have all the facts in my journal, and the public shall know them. In the meantime you must make yourself contented by the consciousness of success . . ." (Doyle 120). The novel ends here in a comic mood giving its readers a hope of new society gathering around the heroic figure Sherlock Holmes.

To conclude, an analytical study of the narrative pattern of the concerned work will prove that it shares the structure proposed by Northrop Frye as the structure of detective fiction. This structure has its completion in the driving out ceremony of the *pharmakos*. Jefferson Hope is the major scapegoat figure in the novel. But the victims of his crime have also taken the role of scapegoat as they were the murderers of Hope's beloved and her father. All of them are driven out of the society and the structure is complete.

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