

[Work in Progress]

Detective Actions in *The Moonstone* and *Sherlock Holmes*

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In 19th-century Britain, Wilkie Collins and Arthur Conan Doyle established the detective novel genre. Each writer used unique methods to captivate readers. Collins published *The Woman in White* (1860) and *The Moonstone* (1868) and built the foundation of detective fiction by using the social background of the time and complex plots. His works are also called “sensation novels.” They strongly reflect British society in the late 19th century. Beyond simple entertainment, his stories cleverly include social problems, the instability of the family system, and British class consciousness. On the other hand, Doyle wrote the *Sherlock Holmes* series. He described the life of the brilliant detective Holmes and his assistant and narrator, Dr. John H. Watson. Before this, detective novels usually focused on the police. Yet, Doyle introduced the new setup of a detective and an assistant. This changed the typical form of the detective novel and brought new appeal to the genre. However, while both writers belong to the same genre, there is a major difference. Collins’ works highlight social and psychological conflicts, while Doyle’s works emphasize scientific reasoning and logic. There is an essential difference in their approach to “deduction.”

This paper examines Doyle’s *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) and Collins’ *The Moonstone* to show the differences in reasoning within the same genre. The term, “detective activity” refers to actions taken to find the truth of an incident. This is not limited to the activities of official detectives. By comparing the characters who act as detectives and the position of the reader in both works, I aim to reveal the diversity of detective fiction in greater detail.

1. The Official Detection

The agents of detection in these novels can be identified from two perspectives: “official detection” and “collective detection.” In the early stages of detective fiction, investigative activities such as examining the crime scene and gathering evidence are carried out primarily by the police. First, I will analyze the “detective activity” in *The Moonstone*. The Moonstone is a sacred gem located in a temple in Seringapatam (now Srirangapatna), southern India. It is protected by three Brahmins for generations. However, the British army suddenly attack and destroy the temple, and Colonel John Herncastle took the stone. Forty-nine years after the attack, based on the Colonel’s will, the diamond is sent to his niece, Rachel Verinder, for her birthday. But the next day, the Moonstone vanished. Consequently, everyone in the Verinder house fell under suspicion.

The story develops from this incident. In this novel, the agents of detective work can be divided into two viewpoints: “official reasoning” and “collective reasoning.” In the early part of the story, the police mainly handle the investigation, such as examining the crime scene and gathering information. Here, I will focus on Sergeant Cuff from Scotland Yard. He is the second officer to investigate the Verinder estate after the crime. He proceeds with his deduction based on an objective perspective. The following passage shows Cuff, who is struggling to solve the case, proposing a new method to the butler, Betteredge.

After carefully thinking it over, I determined to conduct the inquiry in, what we should call at our office, a highly irregular manner. For this reason: I had a family scandal to deal with, which it was my business to keep within the family limits. The less noise made, and the fewer strangers employed to help me, the better. (*The Moonstone* 175)

As shown above, he attempts to advance the investigation by using his experience as a police officer. This scene also suggests that, based on his past experience, he understands the need for caution when dealing with family scandals. At this point, readers can predict the future development and the potential culprit, not just from a layperson’s view, but by

considering the opinion of a third party—the police.

Yet, in this work, we cannot easily accept the views of the authorities. In fact, Superintendent Seegrave, who started the investigation right after the theft, struggled with this difficult case and produced highly subjective deductions. The following section is where Betteredge describes in his narrative how Seegrave suspected the butler's daughter, Penelope, of being the criminal.

“My daughter's little outbreak of temper in the ‘boudoir’, and her readiness to think herself suspected, appeared to have produced an unfavorable impression on Superintendent Seegrave.... the police-officer had almost as good as told her she was the thief!” (*The Moonstone* 99)

Perhaps he is annoyed that she took a strong attitude toward him earlier. Treating her as the perpetrator without any evidence can be seen as a major flaw. We can interpret him as a character whose qualifications as a police officer are questionable, as he treats an innocent person like a criminal. Because of such instances, readers can receive opinions from the police standpoint, but whether those opinions are directly related to solving the case is a different matter. In this novel, the police exist to present one possible direction for the story's future development to the reader.

In *A Study in Scarlet*, Inspector Gregson and Inspector Lestrade represent the police method of deduction. They both work for Scotland Yard, but their rivalry prevents them from working effectively together. The following passages show the different personalities of these two officers. First, here is a scene where Gregson confidently presents his theory at Holmes's house:

“What amuses me is to think of Lestrade, who had started off upon the wrong scent. I am afraid he won't make much of Why, by Jove, here's the very man himself!” (*A Study in Scarlet* 41)

Gregson shows too much confidence in his own ideas. He views other investigation paths as meaningless and feels superior to others. This behavior likely comes from his sense

of competition and jealousy toward his colleague, Lestrade. He clearly wants to appear superior to him.

In addition, the following passage shows Lestrade talking to Holmes at the crime scene after finding a mysterious message:

“You will find that a woman named Rachel has something to do with it. It’s all very well for you to laugh, Mr. Sherlock Holmes. You may be very smart and clever, but the old hound is the best, when all is said and done.” (*A Study in Scarlet* 23)

From this, we can infer that while Gregson looks down on his partner and overestimates his own skills, Lestrade also has a strong desire to highlight his own merits. Although he is usually a calm inspector, he wants to outshine his competitor. Their main goal should be solving the case, but they seem mostly motivated by a thirst for personal glory. Lestrade even calls himself an “old hound.” Hounds are known for their excellent sight and smell for hunting prey, as well as their strong will and aggression. For this reason, these dogs are often used as police dogs in other countries. By comparing himself to a “hound,” Lestrade implies that he is a professional and suggests he is superior to Holmes.

Furthermore, Haruaki Sone describes the position of Scotland Yard in the stories as follows:

Though an essential element of the Holmes stories, Scotland Yard often comes across as quite a pitiful existence, primarily because the cases they consult Holmes on are those they have been unable to solve, giving the impression that its officers are either inept or constantly making mistakes. (Sone 124)

Based on these points, we can understand the reason for the appearance of a character like Holmes. He is always calm, composed, and not controlled by emotion. In contrast, the police organization, represented by these two rival inspectors, is dysfunctional. The high crime rate and the failure of the authorities created a social environment where a new type of detective was necessary.

2. The Collective Detection

Alongside the police investigation, the residents of the Verinder household also carry out their own detective work. This is particularly true for the steward, Betteredge, and the family cousin, Franklin. The passage below shows a conversation between these two characters regarding the Moonstone, which was given to Rachel. Here, they exchange their views and ideas about the gem:

“Why did my uncle leave the Diamond to Rachel? Why didn’t he leave it to my aunt?”

“That’s not beyond guessing, sir, at any rate, I said. ‘Colonel Herncastle knew my lady well enough to know that she would have refused to accept any legacy that came to her from him.’...”

“Is there any young lady in existence, sir, who could resist the temptation of accepting such a birthday present as the Moonstone?”

“That’s the subjective view,” says Mr. Franklin. (*The Moonstone* 54–55)

As seen above, these two characters try to find the true meaning of events through conversation. This is a point in common with the *Sherlock Holmes* series, which I will discuss later.

In *The Moonstone*, dialogues, testimonies, and notes from various characters serve as vital clues for finding the truth. Dorothy L. Sayers, the mystery novelist, comments on this storytelling style where the plot progresses based on these different viewpoints:

In *The Moonstone* Collins used the convention of telling the story in a series of narratives from pens of the various actors concerned. Modern realism—often too closely wedded to externals—is prejudiced against this device. It is true that, for example, Betteredge’s narrative is not at all the kind of thing that a butler would be likely to write; nevertheless, it has an ideal truth—it is the kind of thing that Betteredge might think and feel, even if he could not write it. And granted this convention of the various narratives, how admirably the

characters are drawn! (Sayers 25)

By presenting the truth through each character's testimony and notes, readers can naturally guess the future development of the story. They do not have to rely solely on the theories or facts provided by the police or detectives. Also, since this method is rarely used in modern times, Collins's uniqueness stands out clearly. A key feature of this work is the shift in the "detective" role. At the beginning of the story, the police lead the investigation, but gradually, the residents who were present at the scene take over.

In contrast, in the *Sherlock Holmes* series, as the title suggests, the brilliant Holmes takes the lead in investigating and finding clues to solve the case. Watson, who is the narrator and assistant, sometimes uses his medical knowledge from his previous job. However, he basically views the case from the same perspective as an ordinary person, just like the reader. Of course, the police organization appears in the story, but they are uncoordinated and cannot reach the core of the mystery. Therefore, Holmes and Watson become the ones who perform the reasoning.

The story often moves forward through dialogue. Holmes acts as the speaker and takes the lead, while Watson acts as the listener and tries to understand Holmes' thoughts along with the reader. The following passage shows the two of them deducing the culprit of a murder that happened in vacant house:

"I am rather in the dark still... But why should he come back to the house after leaving it? That is not the way of criminals."

"The ring, man, the ring: that was what he came back for. If we have no other way of catching him, we can always bait our line with the ring... There's the scarlet thread of murder running through the colourless skein of life, and our duty is to unravel it, and isolate it, and expose every inch of it." (*A Study in Scarlet* 29)

As shown above, Watson cannot fully understand Holmes' superhuman logic. However, by getting hints from him, he gradually gets closer to the truth. By choosing a private detective and an assistant as the main characters instead of the police, the story unfolds

from the viewpoint of ordinary people. Most readers are regular people, so it is hard for them to relate to the police perspective. Readers feel more interest and empathy when the story is told by a private detective who lives a life similar to theirs, rather than by an organization like the police. Therefore, Doyle may have intentionally created a story that feels close to the reader.

3. Narration and the Position of the Reader

In the two novels discussed in this paper, the role of the reader in reading the story forward is significantly different. I will analyze how readers interact with the works by dividing their roles into “active participants” and “passive participants.”

First, the reader’s position in *The Moonstone* is that of an “active participant.” As mentioned in the previous chapter, this story moves toward a solution through a series of testimonies. Since no single character summarizes everyone’s opinions within the story, only the reader grasps all the testimonies in the work. Therefore, the real pleasure of this novel is that readers can predict future developments and understand the story based on these various opinions. In fact, the steward, Betteredge, gives the following message to the reader:

Here follows the substance of what I said, written out entirely for your benefit. Pay attention to it, or you will be abroad, when we get deeper into the story.... I hope you won’t take this freedom on my part amiss; it’s only a way I have of appealing to the gentle reader. (*The Moonstone* 42)

This can be taken not just as a request from Betteredge, but also as a request from the author, Collins, to the reader. One characteristic of Collins’s work is that readers objectively consider each character’s opinion and use their own reasoning power to engage with the story. Regarding detective fiction written with the premise of involving the reader, narratology researcher Peter Hühn states:

The reader of the novel is thereby placed in a position to obtain a clearer

picture of the actual progress of detection as well as to develop doubts about the actual efficacy of the crime scheme. Thus, for once, the real reader finds himself in a better position than the protagonist to read the true state of affairs with respect to the crime story as well as to the detection story.

(Hühn 463)

Hence, the reader becomes involved in the work as a bridge between the fictional world of the characters and the real world to which the reader belongs. Moreover, regarding the reader performing the reasoning themselves, Sayers states:

Thus today we accept as a “classical standard” of detective fiction the thing we call the “fair-play rule”. We take it for granted that “no vital clue should be concealed” that reader and detective should start from scratch and run neck and neck to the finish. (Sayers 5)

The Moonstone gives the reader an excessive amount of information to solve the case. It presents character testimonies, notes, and even the personalities and backgrounds of the servants. At first glance, some of this seems unrelated to the mystery. However, having so much information offers readers various possibilities and adds excitement to the future unfolding of the story. Collins’ greatest feature is that he wrote detective fiction based on the premise of treating the characters inside the work (fiction) and the readers outside (reality) equally.

Regarding the presentation of information and Collins treating the reader “fairly,” the biographer Catherine Peters argues:

Yet *The Moonstone* is also a literary jigsaw puzzle, which first challenges our intelligence, before it engages our emotions, requiring us to retain and interpret apparently disconnected pieces of information, building them up into a coherent pattern. Collins plays fair with his reader. All the pieces are there; though they often look like something they are not. The reader like the characters in the story, must learn to “read” and interpret in ways that are not

immediately obvious. (Peters 9)

By placing the characters and the reader in the same position, the story proceeds without either side reaching the truth first. Only the author, Collins, knows the truth, while everyone else—characters and readers alike—clarifies the mystery together.

On the contrary, in the *Sherlock Holmes* series, the reader assumes the role of a “passive participant.” Holmes’ superhuman deduction is often hard even for his assistant, Dr. Watson, to understand immediately. The same applies to the reader. Unlike *The Moonstone*, the information given to the reader is limited, so they cannot easily reason on their own. However, Doyle does this on purpose. Holmes intentionally hides parts of his logic to prevent others from fully figuring out his methods. The following passage shows a conversation where Watson struggles to understand Holmes’s conclusion, while Holmes speaks to him directly:

“I confess that I cannot see any possible way of reconciling all these facts.”

“I’m not going to tell you much more of the case, Doctor.... and if I show you too much of my method of working, you will come to the conclusion that I am a very ordinary individual after all.” (*A Study in Scarlet* 25–26)

To prevent the reader from easily guessing the solution, only minimal information is provided. The main character, Holmes, is the one who performs the reasoning. Watson and the other characters mainly receive and interpret his ideas. Through Watson, who acts as the narrator, the reader comes to understand the truth of the case. However, the reader is intentionally kept from doing independent deduction. This storytelling strategy ensures that the act of reasoning stays focused on Holmes, which shapes the reader’s experience of the story.

4. Conclusion

This paper has examined the differences in the methods of detection in the

same genre by focusing on Arthur Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* and Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone*. In this study, "detective activity" refers to intellectual efforts aimed at uncovering the truth of events within a work of fiction and is not limited to the activities of official detectives. By comparing the roles of the characters who undertake detective work and the positioning of the readers in both works, it has become clear that there are multiple ways in which detective fiction can be structured.

Section 1 revealed the official detective in the two works. In *The Moonstone*, the police initially conduct the investigation, but their reasoning is not entirely reliable. As the story progresses, the central detective role gradually shifts to the household members, such as the butler and relatives. Here, multiple testimonies and perspectives intersect, and readers are actively involved in connecting them to approach the truth. In contrast, in *A Study in Scarlet*, the detective activities are concentrated in those by Holmes and Watson. The police are depicted as ineffective, and Holmes maintains control over the investigation. Watson serves as a proxy for the reader, providing the perspective of an ordinary person and helping the reader understand Holmes' reasoning through dialogue. Thus, while *The Moonstone* presents a polyphonic and distributed detective structure, *A Study in Scarlet* features a concentrated structure centered on a duo, and these differences greatly affect the reader's involvement in the narrative.

Section 2 examined the collective detection. *The Moonstone* relies on multiple sources, including letters, diaries, and testimonies, with each character's perspective and emotions influencing their account of the truth. Conversely, *A Study in Scarlet* resolves the mystery through Holmes' powers of observation and deduction, complemented by Watson's medical knowledge, forming a scientific approach to investigation. This contrast indicates that detective fiction did not converge into a single form in its early stage but developed with multiple approaches, combining narrative and scientific methods.

Section 3 compared the positioning of readers. In *The Moonstone*, the absence of a character who synthesizes the testimonies makes the reader the sole agent capable of understanding all the information. Readers thus assume the role of an "active participant," organizing testimonies and anticipating the narrative. In *A Study in Scarlet*, by contrast, readers are "passive participants," receiving limited information through Watson and following Holmes' conclusions rather than making their own deductions. The

comparison highlights how expectations of reader engagement and ways of enjoying the narrative differ significantly even within the same genre.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that *The Moonstone* and *A Study in Scarlet* are highly contrasting in terms of detective agents, methods of detection, and reader involvement, each offering a unique narrative experience. *The Moonstone* encourages readers to actively integrate fragmented testimonies into the story, while *A Study in Scarlet* allows readers to marvel at the detective's intellectual brilliance from a more passive standpoint. Future research could explore how these narrative structures and reader positions have transformed in film adaptations or other retellings, and how the blending of sensation fiction and detective fiction contributes to the evolution of the genre. Such studies may provide a deeper understanding of the diversity and historical development of detective fiction.

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