

Examine the presentation of crime and transgression in any two modernist texts

I often think of those lines of old Goethe:

Schade dass die Natur nur *einen* Mensch aus dir schuf,
Denn zum würdigen Mann war und zum Schelmen der Stoff.¹

*Nature, alas, made only one being out of you,
Although there was material for a good man and a rogue.*²

Sherlock Holmes applies these words to himself at the end of *The Sign of the Four*. In this essay, I first demonstrate how Holmes represents transgression, and I examine how being presented with a transgressive hero alters our attitudes towards transgression. I look at the differing ways in which characters in *The Sign of the Four* and *A Scandal in Bohemia*³ present crime and I attempt to put this in the context of how crime can be presented.

Watson charitably remarks of Holmes that he "had observed that a small vanity underlay [his] companion's quiet and didactic manner"⁴. It is closer to arrogance. "I abhor the dull routine of existence,"⁵ Holmes decries, evidently believing that his personal abilities elevate him above having to endure the mundanities of life. Holmes is misogynistic: "Women are never to be entirely trusted - not the best of them"⁶. He is self-centred: he responds to news of his friend's

1 ¹ Arthur Conan Doyle; *The Sign of the Four*; first edition; Christopher Roden; (Oxford; Oxford University Press; 1993); page 119.

2 ² *Ibid.*; p.137.

3 ³ Quotations from *A Scandal in Bohemia* taken from: Arthur Conan Doyle; *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*; (London; George Newnes Ltd.; 1895).

4 ⁴ *id.*; p.5.

5 ⁵ *id.*; p.4.

6 ⁶ *id.*; p.70.

engagement with "a most dismal groan"⁷, adding "I really cannot congratulate you"⁸. Holmes may well be joking, but he goes on to explain that he values his own judgement and its "true cold reason"⁹ above all things and thus would not be prepared to sacrifice this to marriage.

Holmes' impatience is another transgression of socially-designated virtues: whilst waiting for information regarding the whereabouts of the steam launch *Aurora*, he paces his room continuously until the landlady below begins to fear for his health - "I ventured to say something to him about cooling medicine, but he turned on me, sir, with such a look that I don't know how ever I got out of the room"¹⁰.

Holmes transgresses by choosing to live in a world stripped of all its emotional colour. His quarrel with *A Study in Scarlet* is apparently that Watson has "tinged"¹¹ the story with romanticism. He deliberately blinds himself to emotional considerations and has thus - as Watson remarks - developed himself into "an automaton - a calculating machine"¹². One of Holmes' deepest transgressions is his inhumanity. Watson protests that "there is something positively inhuman in you at times"¹³ when Holmes has failed to register Miss Morstan's beauty, because to him, "a client is a mere unit, a factor in a problem"¹⁴. By defiantly choosing the single life: "I should never marry, lest I bias my judgement"¹⁵, and by devoting himself to what his chosen profession demands that he become, Holmes effectively castrates himself and transgresses social values by standing aloof from society.

7 ⁷
id.; p.118.

8 ⁸
id.

9 ⁹
id.; p.119.

10 ¹⁰
id.; p.71.

11 ¹¹
id.; p.5.

12 ¹²
id.; p.15.

13 ¹³
id.

14 ¹⁴
id.

15 ¹⁵
id.; p.119.

As dawn breaks in *The Sign of the Four*, Holmes and Watson are described still following the scent of two suspects through London. The sun, Holmes remarks, "shines on a good many folk, but none, I dare bet, who are on a stranger errand than you and I"¹⁶. Part of Holmes' passion, and part of his transgression, lies in this - his liminal status in society. "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"¹⁷. Holmes seems to delight in Watson's disparaging attitude towards his use of cocaine - "he smiled at my vehemence"¹⁸ - and in *A Scandal in Bohemia*, Watson finds an apposite word for his companion's solitary lifestyle: "Holmes, who loathed every form of society with his whole Bohemian soul"¹⁹. Holmes' position allows him to keep anti-social hours whereof periods of "what in another man I should call laziness alternate with your fits of splendid energy and vigour"²⁰; and allows him to be directly accountable to no one.

This transgressive autonomy appears to extend to Holmes' fiercely independent thought and thus his attitude to the law. When, in *A Scandal in Bohemia*, the King of Bohemia explains the necessity of recovering a photograph, Holmes suggests stealing it²¹. The method he eventually settles on is equally illegal and he requires the complicity of Watson: "You don't mind breaking the law?"²², he asks. At Pondicherry Lodge in *The Sign of the Four*, Holmes does not inform the police detective Athelney Jones of the history of the case, neither does he draw Jones' attention to many of the clues he has noticed upon his examination of the virgin crime scene. Holmes does not go through the right channels and his role ensures that he is in

16 ¹⁶id.; p.58.

17 ¹⁷id.; p.4.

18 ¹⁸id.

19 ¹⁹Arthur Conan Doyle; *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*; (London; George Newnes Ltd.; 1895); p.2.

20 ²⁰Arthur Conan Doyle; *The Sign of the Four*; first edition; Christopher Roden; (Oxford; Oxford University Press; 1993); p.119

21 ²¹Arthur Conan Doyle; *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*; (London; George Newnes Ltd.; 1895); p.11.

competition with the state, transgressing the role of its CID apparatus: "No, I shall probably call Athelney Jones in at the last moment ... But I have a fancy for working it out myself, now that we have got so far"²³; and even organising his own spy network in the "Baker Street irregulars"²⁴.

Holmes' other means of transgressing secrecy and thus privacy, is to disguise himself. In *A Scandal in Bohemia*, he infiltrates Irene Adler's home under the false pretences of being "an amiable and simple-minded Non-conformist clergyman"²⁵. His disguise satirically subverts the codes of faith as much as his "preposterous"²⁶ false witness to her marriage earlier in the story. The most significant transgression which arises out of Holmes' disguised performances is that they violate and seriously compromise his sincerity. Thus, when he is endearingly human during a meal with Watson and Jones - "Holmes could talk exceedingly well when he chose, and that night he did choose"²⁷ - we are left wondering how much of his apparent charm is a performance. After talking to Mrs. Smith, Holmes confides, ""The main thing with people of that sort ... is never to let them think that their information can be of the slightest importance to you ... If you listen to them under protest, as it were, you are very likely to get what you want"²⁸. It seems that even when Holmes is not in disguise, he is still masking his identity - and his insincerity.

Transgression requires boundaries, and in Holmes' world there are few boundaries left.

Everything that can be observed is penetrated: Holmes arguably does not need a wife because

22 ²²id.; p.18.

23 ²³Arthur Conan Doyle; *The Sign of the Four*; first edition; Christopher Roden; (Oxford; Oxford University Press; 1993); pp.63-64.

24 ²⁴id.; p.66.

25 ²⁵Arthur Conan Doyle; *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*; (London; George Newnes Ltd.; 1895); p.21

26 ²⁶id.; p.17.

27 ²⁷Arthur Conan Doyle; *The Sign of the Four*; first edition; Christopher Roden; (Oxford; Oxford University Press; 1993); p.79.

28 ²⁸id.; p.63.

he ravishes with his gaze. Of a client in the story *A Case of Identity* for instance, Watson describes how "he looked her over in the minute, and yet abstracted fashion which was peculiar to him"²⁹. The same story illuminatingly provides an instance of Holmes' scrutiny embarking upon a voyeuristic flight of fantasy: "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 ..." ³⁰ he conjectures to Watson. It is Holmes' powerful and intrusive powers of observation which hurt and offend Watson in *The Sign of the Four*, as he deduces the alcoholism and death of Watson's eldest brother from examining a watch: "You have made inquiries into the history of my unhappy brother, and now you pretend to deduce this knowledge in some fanciful way"³¹. Holmes apologises on this occasion for having "forgotten how personal and painful a thing it might be"³², but it seems that neither privacy nor empathy can stand sacrosanct as boundaries to possession by the gaze of this obsessive detective.

Sherlock Holmes, then, appears to transgress much that is valued by society as decent behaviour, good character and even basic humanity. He stands at a reclusive distance from society and breaks the law, deceives people into giving him what he wants, and shows little respect for privacy. He should, it would seem, be an objectionable character. Yet apparently he is not. The popularity of Sherlock Holmes testifies to the success of Arthur Conan Doyle in presenting a liminal transgressive character in a favourable light. Holmes is likeable perhaps because of his success, his brilliance, his power and because he gets things done. Most importantly, he fights crime. He may well be a transgressive rebel, but Holmes makes

29 ²⁹ Arthur Conan Doyle; *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*; (London; George Newnes Ltd.; 1895); p.63.

30 ³⁰ id.; p.60.

31 ³¹ Arthur Conan Doyle; *The Sign of the Four*; first edition; Christopher Roden; (Oxford; Oxford University Press; 1993); p.9.

32 ³² id.

society better by initiating the exclusion of transgressors. It seems that we are prepared to give such an individual a *carte blanche* to fight transgression in a transgressive manner; and as he is the hero of the text, transgression is here presented as a good thing - a heroic quality - in Sherlock Holmes.

Holmes represents in his lifestyle and detective work, the triumph of the individual. This is a socially transgressive doctrine, but one that is in keeping with free-market capitalism. He is an entrepreneur who earns a comfortable living: "the King took a heavy chamois leather bag from under his cloak, and laid it on the table"³³; yet in his work the society he purges becomes defined as better in opposition to the excluded. Thus Holmes demonstrates a way in which society can still be bound together and even cohered by individuals acting along selfish motivating principles; and he shows how a kind of transgressive individualism is actually promoted by capitalist ethics.

"A singular case," remarked Holmes, opening his note-book"³⁴. Holmes privileges the individual, the unique, in a world he has occasion to regard as "hopelessly prosaic and material"³⁵, in which "existence is commonplace"³⁶ and is "dull routine"³⁷. It seems that the remark "A singular case"³⁸ is one of the highest compliments that Holmes can pay to any "brainwork"³⁹ that his prodigious abilities are presented with; and he seems to take pride in his position as "the only unofficial consulting detective"⁴⁰ moreover "the only one in the

33 ³³ Arthur Conan Doyle; *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*; (London; George Newnes Ltd.; 1895); p.13.

34 ³⁴ Arthur Conan Doyle; *The Sign of the Four*; first edition; Christopher Roden; (Oxford; Oxford University Press; 1993); p.13.

35 ³⁵ id.; p.11.

36 ³⁶ id.

37 ³⁷ id.; p.4.

38 ³⁸ id.; p.13.

39 ³⁹ id.; p.11.

40 ⁴⁰ id.; p.4.

world"⁴¹. Individuality is necessarily transgressive because it blurs the bounds of the normal and the ordinary. Thus Holmes elevates the unique, the individual, not only in his own mind, but also in ours - because he is the brilliant transgressor, the fiercely individual hero of the texts.

In the book *What Everyone In Britain Should Know About Crime and Punishment*, Wilson and Ashton write: "Crime does not exist as a fixed entity. It is not a "thing" out there, somewhere in Britain, waiting to be discovered, for politicians to condemn and police to put a stop to"⁴². The word "crime" can be regarded in a number of ways. It can be seen as a legal enshrinement of a transcendent moral code, it can be seen conversely as an arbitrary socially-constructed definition of certain actions. Turk contends that the definitions "crime" and "criminality" are powerful tools used by the authorities against "groups and individuals who in any way, inadvertently or deliberately, are resistant to the will of the authorities"⁴³. In writing on eighteenth century woodland society in Hampshire and Wiltshire, Rule relates how there persisted "assured and determined resistance in some areas to legal sanctions against the right to gather wood for fuel, which was so deeply fixed in the popular mind"⁴⁴. Crime can thus be seen alternatively as an ideological categorisation manipulated to protect the interests of the empowered class.

It is significant that Sherlock Holmes is in a position of being able to choose what not to investigate. Should he refuse to accept a case because he does not consider that what has motivated his client to approach him constitutes a morally worthwhile cause, then he has

41 ⁴¹id.

42 ⁴²David Wilson and John Ashton; *What Everyone In Britain Should Know About Crime and Punishment*; (UK; Blackstone Press Ltd.; 1998); p.1.

43 ⁴³A. Turk; Class, 'Conflict and Criminalization'; *Sociological Focus*; 10; pp.209-220 / 11; but quoted here from: Richard V. Ericson; *Making Crime: A Study of Detective Work*; second edition; (Canada; University of Toronto Press Incorporated; 1993); p.7.

44 ⁴⁴*Outside the Law: Studies in Crime and Order*; John Rule; (UK; University of Exeter; 1982); p.81.

effectively taken a part in the process of defining crime. Packer contends that "Crime is a sociopolitical artifact, not a natural phenomenon"⁴⁵ and thus Ditton argues that "the reaction is *constitutive* of the criminal (or deviant) act"⁴⁶. Holmes' autonomy of action and choice, problematises definitions of crime. Is Holmes pursuing crime as illegality, is he pursuing crimes against decency, or is he the executor of his clients?⁴⁷

Watson approaches a view, in *A Scandal in Bohemia*, that crime is about preventing others from being hurt, and guiltily acquiesces to a relativist position. "I never felt more heartily ashamed of myself in my life than when I saw the beautiful creature against whom I was conspiring ... After all, I thought, we are not injuring her. We are but preventing her from injuring another"⁴⁸. In the same story, the King of Bohemia presents the likely moral judgements of his fiancée's family towards his indiscreet social transgression, as a relativist position rather than as the immutable orthodoxy. "'You may know the strict principles of her family. She herself is the very soul of delicacy'"⁴⁹.

The presentation of crime by the police detective Mr. Athelney Jones and the media (the *Standard*) are somewhat undermined by the ideological saturation of a newspaper report⁵⁰ in *The Sign of the Four*. Not only is Jones presented as an incompetent who makes clumsy and hasty prognoses "But what is all this? Bad business! Bad business!"⁵¹, but Holmes observes

45 ⁴⁵H. Packer; *The Limits of the Criminal Sanction*; (London; Oxford University Press; 1968); p.364; but quoted here from: Richard V. Ericson; *Making Crime: A Study of Detective Work*; second edition; (Canada; University of Toronto Press Incorporated; 1993); p.7.

46 ⁴⁶J. Ditton; *Controlology: Beyond the New Criminology*; (London; Macmillan; 1979); p.20; but quoted here from: Richard V. Ericson; *Making Crime: A Study of Detective Work*; second edition; (Canada; University of Toronto Press Incorporated; 1993); p.8.

47 ⁴⁷Although perhaps not directly pertinent to the area of investigation: the "presentation" of crime, nonetheless, these issues are addressed in Appendix I, for the sake of personal inquiry.

48 ⁴⁸Arthur Conan Doyle; *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*; (London; George Newnes Ltd.; 1895); p.24.

49 ⁴⁹id.; p.12.

50 ⁵⁰Arthur Conan Doyle; *The Sign of the Four*; first edition; Christopher Roden; (Oxford; Oxford University Press; 1993); pp.65-66.

51 ⁵¹id.; p.44.

of the article that, "Jones and the ubiquitous reporter have fixed it up between them"⁵². The media is thus shown to be susceptible to interpellation by police definitions of crime, however clumsy: "By a singular piece of good fortune, Mr Athelney Jones ... was on the ground ... His trained and experienced faculties were at once directed towards the detection of the criminals, with the gratifying result that ... "⁵³. In contrast, the most extreme presentation of crime in *The Sign of the Four* comes from Jonathan Small, whose confession contextualises his murder: ""In Worcestershire the life of a man seems a great and a sacred thing; but it is very different when there is fire and blood all around you, and you have been used to meeting death at every turn""⁵⁴. He later tempts us into further complicity: ""It was all very bad, no doubt, ""⁵⁵ - he proceeds with "a touch of defiance"⁵⁶ - ""I should like to know how many fellows in my shoes would have refused a share of this loot when they knew that they would have their throat cut for their pains""⁵⁷.

Jonathan Small exhibits another form of transgression - foreignness as transgression. Small could never imagine murder in Worcestershire, yet in India, he has been infected by the foreign. In *A Scandal in Bohemia*, the King lives up to any suspicions concerning the transgressive bohemianism of his past, with the New Jersey-born⁵⁸ Irene Adler, when they were both in Warsaw⁵⁹. Thaddeus Sholto is sinister partly because his exoticism is presented as transgressive and as an extension of his self-indulgent nature. "Two great tiger-skins

52 ⁵²id.; p.65.

53 ⁵³id.

54 ⁵⁴id.; p.103.

55 ⁵⁵id.; p.107.

56 ⁵⁶id.

57 ⁵⁷id.

58 ⁵⁸Arthur Conan Doyle; *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*; (London; George Newnes Ltd.; 1895); p.11.

59 ⁵⁹id.; p.10

thrown athwart it increased the suggestion of Eastern luxury"⁶⁰; and regarding his hookah, "Mr Thaddeus Sholto looked from one to the other of us with obvious pride at the effect which his story had produced, and then continued between the puff of his overgrown pipe"⁶¹. In *Out of the Woodpile*, Bailey notes that "Doyle also challenged his hero and entertained his readers with exotic elements, such as poisonous snakes, secret societies, and foreign-born characters"⁶². Tonga, the Andaman Islander, is represented by Holmes' gazetteer as part of a transgressive foreign race: "They are a fierce, morose, intractable people ... They are naturally hideous, having large, misshapen heads, small fierce eyes, and distorted features"⁶³. Here, as with Sholto, ugliness is also part of the transgressive quality of these characters. Jonathan Small's appearance too has been corrupted by the influence of the exotic: "He was a sunburned, reckless-eyed fellow, with a network of lines and wrinkles all over his mahogany features"⁶⁴. In *Thrillers*, Palmer remarks that Holmes in *The Man With The Twisted Lip*, as so often in his adventures, "refuses to reveal the solution of the case at the moment when he has actually deduced it, when it would have been perfectly possible to do so without prejudicing the outcome"⁶⁵. Holmes is a showman, he prefers the "dramatic flourish ... He wants to surprise Watson and the police, just as Doyle wants to surprise the reader"⁶⁶ and despite his laughing protestation in *A Scandal in Bohemia* that "I do not wish to make a mystery"⁶⁷, it is clear in *The Sign of the Four*, that he will not give away the dénouement: ""We shall give you two

60 ⁶⁰ Arthur Conan Doyle; *The Sign of the Four*; first edition; Christopher Roden; (Oxford; Oxford University Press; 1993); p.22

61 ⁶¹ id.; p.29.

62 ⁶² Frankie Y. Bailey; *Out of the Woodpile: Black Characters in Crime and Detective Fiction*; first edition; Contributions to the Study of Popular Culture; No. 27; (USA; Greenwood Press; 1991); p.17.

63 ⁶³ Arthur Conan Doyle; *The Sign of the Four*; first edition; Christopher Roden; (Oxford; Oxford University Press; 1993); p.68.

64 ⁶⁴ id.; p.88.

65 ⁶⁵ Jerry Palmer; *Thrillers: Genesis and Structure of a Popular Genre*; first edition; (London; Edward Arnold Ltd.; 1978); p.105.

66 ⁶⁶ id.

others in the place of them""⁶⁸ he tells Jones, ""But you must put yourself under my orders""⁶⁹.

As well as amplifying the relative brilliance of Holmes' talents, Watson delivers a vital service to Sherlock Holmes. He provides an appreciative audience. Holmes' methods, and his transgressive qualities, can thus be justified in our eyes not merely by his solving of crimes, but by the virtuoso displays by which he succeeds. The ends may not justify the means, but in the case of Holmes, the endings perhaps do. Holmes prompts Watson, ""But you yourself have had some experience of my work in the Jefferson Hope case""⁷⁰; to which Watson "cordially" responds, ""Yes, indeed ... I was never so struck by anything in my life""⁷¹.

Sherlock Holmes performs, and by presenting this performance, the astounded Watson legitimises and heroicises Holmes' transgressions. What becomes important is that Holmes is fighting crime - as Ericson observes, "the need to *feel* secure (rather than to *be* secure) among members of the citizenry is played out and relieved in television "cop shows" that are at the same time episodic and endless" (5) Holmes presents crime that can be swiftly brought to a dramatic conclusion, and repeatedly; and Watson allows us to have faith in this dream.

To conclude, since Sherlock Holmes is a transgressive hero, and his transgressions are presented in a favourable light by Doyle - through Watson - we may as readers be influenced towards adopting a pragmatic attitude to transgression. Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* texts foster a more relativist approach to defining transgression and crime, and as they elevate the individual, they contribute towards an erosion of clear-cut moral positions. Both *A Sign of the Four* and *A Scandal in Bohemia* show how crime is constituted along socio-political lines

67 ⁶⁷ Arthur Conan Doyle; *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*; (London; George Newnes Ltd.; 1895); p.25.

68 ⁶⁸ Arthur Conan Doyle; *The Sign of the Four*; first edition; Christopher Roden; (Oxford; Oxford University Press; 1993); p.78.

69 ⁶⁹ id.

70 ⁷⁰ id.; p.5.

such as police definitions, the foreign within dominant codes, and the social perceptions of its effects. We are ultimately encouraged to endorse Holmes' transgressions, despite there indeed being enough material in Sherlock Holmes for both "a good man and a rogue"⁷².

71 ⁷¹id.
72 ⁷²id.; p.137.

Appendix I

This appendix is not submitted for marking. It is here to elaborate my position on some incidental questions raised by the above inquiry and delineates my opinions regarding Holmes' arguably ambiguous attitude to crime.

It is questionable how far it is possible to structure morality from a standpoint of emotional neutrality; yet I would argue that Holmes' focus, his avowed motivation, is upon the solving of crimes as puzzles rather than the solving of crimes as injustices. "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 ... That is why I have chosen my own particular profession"⁷³. I would refute that Holmes' actions are motivated primarily by transgressions against his clients, or by a quest for justice, a moral crusade. "Crime is commonplace"⁷⁴ he tells Watson as he reduces many diverse mysteries to the same everyday base motives such as avarice, greed and lust.

Holmes does talk in terms of justice on occasion. In *A Case of Identity*, the following exchange is made: ""The law cannot, as you say, touch you," said Holmes, unlocking and throwing open the door, "yet there was never a man who deserved punishment more""⁷⁵. When Holmes threatens to "treat"⁷⁶ himself to whipping Mr Windibank - and the transgressor escapes "at the top of his speed" - Holmes' reaction is curious: ""There's a cold-blooded scoundrel!" said Holmes laughing"⁷⁷. Holmes is certain that "That fellow will rise from crime to crime until he does something very bad, and ends on a gallows"⁷⁸. However, the case is closed, and Miss Sutherland will not be told of her step-father's deception because there is ""danger also for whoso snatches a delusion from a woman""⁷⁹. Crime is evidently commonplace, and Holmes has other puzzles to solve.

73 ⁷³ Arthur Conan Doyle; *The Sign of the Four*; first edition; Christopher Roden; (Oxford; Oxford University Press; 1993); p.4.

74 ⁷⁴ id.; p.11.

75 ⁷⁵ Arthur Conan Doyle; *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*; (London; George Newnes Ltd.; 1895); p.83.

76 ⁷⁶ id.

77 ⁷⁷ id.

78 ⁷⁸ id.

79 ⁷⁹ id.; p84.

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