

Two Blind Mice:
Sight, Insight, and Narrative Authority in Sir Arthur Conan
Doyle's *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*

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In *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892), Arthur Conan Doyle focalizes different modes of seeing through a multiplicity of narrative perspectives, exploring the relationship between teller and tale to inspect the nature of narrative authority. While Watson functions as the main narrator and the reader's only point of access to the story, he has no direct control over the unfolding of the plot, with the revelation of the story instead occurring before and around him through a series of narrative moments in which different characters tell their stories. Watson's own narrative therefore becomes only one of three main narrative perspectives that occur in every story, each embodying a different mode of seeing, a varying degree of insight, and a different level of narrative authority. In this essay, I will analyze two of Doyle's stories, "A Scandal in Bohemia," and "A Case of Identity," to argue that Doyle enacts the plots of his *Sherlock* stories through a series of personal utterances—statements that are not objective or neutral but rather directly linked to the narrator's perspective and therefore perform that character's distinct way of seeing. I will then argue that Doyle uses these narrative events to explore how different modes of seeing influence narrative formation, and that ultimately, for Doyle, a speaker's ability to tell a tale depends on his or her ability to see, with narrative authority becoming contingent on seeing and knowing. In *Sherlock Holmes*, therefore, Doyle explores the relationship between knowledge and narrative power, concluding that the ability to enact narrative depends on the teller's omniscience.

Although Watson, as the primary narrator, conveys the events of the story to the reader, his role as narrator is limited; he does not create, control, or propel the narrative, but rather watch-

es silently as it unfolds around and before him. In “Watson Falls Asleep: Narrative Frustration and Sherlock Holmes,” James Krasner describes Watson as a “frustrated” narrator who “desire[s] to behold and comprehend” the story but cannot, and must therefore wait, “bid[ing] his time” until Holmes arrives to explain the events to him (425). In both “A Scandal in Bohemia” and “A Case of Identity,” in his initial encounters with his old friend Holmes, Watson silently waits for him to speak first. He either watches as Holmes “st[ands] before the fire” with “hardly a word spoken,” or endures a long, introspective, extradiegetic silence until Holmes finally shares what he has been thinking about, abstractly remarking on how “infinitely strang[e]” life is (6, 30). Watson not only passively awaits the arrival of narrative, as described by Krasner, but he does so in a profound, unassailable silence—an inert void barren of narrative. In both stories, Holmes propels Watson out of his attendant inertia through his voice, claiming control of a passive, unstructured narrative space through a speech act. Watson’s powerlessness to enact narrative thus embodies itself in his voicelessness, just as Holmes enacts his power to take control of that narrative space through speaking. For Doyle, moments of communication therefore create and control narrative, with the speech act becoming the very locus of narrative construction.

Indeed, speech acts form the backbone of each story’s narrative trajectory, propelling not only Watson but also Holmes from a place of attendant, directionless inertia into narrative action. Between cases, Holmes habitually wallows in inert “drug-created dreams,” losing himself in a place that is distinctly devoid of narrative direction (6). Only when a client arrives to seek his help—describing his or her problem to him by letter, as in “A Scandal in Bohemia,” or in person, as in “A Case of Identity”—does Holmes become possessed by “the scent of some new problem” and begin

to “pac[e] the room swiftly [and] eagerly” (6). These moments of communication propel Holmes from lethargic ennui into action, with the specific form of the speech act—the motivating mystery or “problem” behind it—launching him into a narrative frenzy (6). It is therefore not only the occurrence of a client’s speech act, but also its form and the ways in which its language may be read that construct the mystery and propel the plot of the story. For Doyle, speech acts are therefore never neutral, but are rather distinctly readable, as they perform or communicate meaning beyond their literal content.

Narrative utterances become complicated in Doyle’s stories by the relationship between the teller’s tale and Holmes’s fascination with the formal implications of language constituting the speech act as a complex construction that is intimately connected to its maker and mediated by that maker’s perspective. Throughout *Sherlock Holmes*, Holmes pays close attention to what others tell him, listening to Miss Mary Sutherland’s “rambling and inconsequential narrative” in “A Case of Identity” “with the greatest concentration of attention” (34), carefully scrutinizing her words before concluding that she “made [her] statement very clearly” (39). In “A Scandal in Bohemia,” as well, Holmes closely analyzes the king’s letter, “not[ing] the peculiar construction of the sentence” to conclude that “the man who wrote [it] is a German” national (9). While these passages showcase Holmes’s formidable analytic talent, they also show how Doyle constructs language as a contestable act that indirectly enacts or communicates a meaning beyond its literal message. By analyzing his clients’ language, Holmes is able to discern information about their nature and character, with language existing as an interested, motivated utterance spoken by a distinct personage and reflecting the attitudes of that person. Within Doyle’s stories, language is thus always linked to and motivated by the character who uses it, with the distinct form of its performativity,¹ or how it

enacts and determines narrative, becoming implicated in the characters' ability to exert authority and control the narrative. For Doyle, how one sees and how one tells are intimately linked, with such personal utterances becoming a lens for evaluating a speaker's mode of seeing, level of knowledge, and narrative authority.

In both "A Scandal in Bohemia" and "A Case of Identity," Doyle approaches the narrative through three distinct focalizing perspectives. Each narrative perspective, including the clients' initial description of their problems, Watson's own misguided interpretations, and Holmes's final solution of the mystery, imparts a different kind of seeing, a varying degree of insight, and a different level of authority over the 'real' narrative.² For Doyle, not only are seeing and telling intimately connected, but sight is linked to knowledge, and knowledge to narrative authority, with how one sees constituting one's authority to enact and determine narrative.

In their initial accounts of their problems, Holmes's clients give testimony to their experiences, recounting their quandaries in great detail while failing to discern the meaning behind the stories they tell, with the core enigma of their mysterious problems remaining inscrutable to themselves. According to Shoshana Felman in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, testimony is a narrative act where "the speaking subject constantly bears witness to a truth that nonetheless continues to escape him," with individuals engaging in an unstable "discursive practice" in which they narrate "a truth that is, essentially, not available to" themselves (5, 15). During moments of testimony, as

¹ See Austin's "Performative Utterances" for a further exploration of the notion of the performativity of language.

² While the concept of a core, stable, essential 'real' meaning is clearly problematic, I use the term throughout the rest of this essay to refer to the mystery narrative as it becomes clearer at the end of the story (in contrast with the beginning): solved, bereft of enigma, and thus substantially more stable.

a speaking subject ‘tells’ a truth that she or he cannot ‘see,’ she or he cannot perceive what his or her language signifies,³ and therefore cannot control his or her own narrative. In Doyle’s stories, Holmes’s clients’ inability to understand the enigma at the center of their own narratives plagues them, with “anxiety” consuming the king, and Miss Mary Sutherland being “drive[n] ... half mad” and not being able to “sleep a wink at night” (14, 38). Thus, even while they are able to calmly testify to their experiences, they must transfer the “weight of the matter”—the weight of determining the ‘real’ nature of the narrative—onto Holmes, relying on his discerning ears to ascertain the signifying nature of their own narratives by “leav[ing] that question in [his] hands” (38–39). As Holmes’s clients cannot ‘see’ the nature of the narratives they ‘tell,’ they have no control over determining the nature of their own narratives, and therefore have no narrative authority.

In contrast to the ‘not-seeing’ of Holmes’s clients, Watson habitually ‘mis-sees’ or misinterprets the world around him, constructing an erroneous narrative divorced from reality while he fails to engage with the ‘real’ narrative. Throughout *Sherlock Holmes*, Holmes constantly berates Watson for “miss[ing] everything of importance” as he “see[s]” but does “not observe” the world around him (8, 40). Not only does Watson misread Holmes’s cases, coming to fallacious, misguided conclusions, but, as Krasner writes, Watson also constantly misinterprets Holmes’s “disembodied,” intellectual “labour” in terms of its physical materiality, believing that he is unoccupied or “has fallen asleep” while he is in reality extraordinarily absorbed in his thoughts (430–31). In Watson’s hands, Holmes’s intense intellectual labour becomes an act of rest; his extreme consciousness of the world around him becomes a moment of uncon-

³ See Saussure’s “Course in General Linguistics” for the relationship between the signifier and the signified.

sciousness. As Watson utilizes only a flawed ability to see, he fails to gain access to the narrative world around him, losing the authority to tell the story while resigning himself to simply wait for Holmes to recount the ‘real’ narrative to him.

In contrast to both of these flawed modes of seeing, Holmes alone sees and understands the world in its entirety, allowing him to pierce through the enigmatic nature of the client’s narrative and claim control of its meaning, with his formidable ability to see giving him the narrative authority to tell the true story. Each of Doyle’s stories ends with Holmes’s ultimate revelation, when he reconstructs the events of the initial mystery and the “steps of [his] reasoning” to finally realize the narrative that has been evaded and misinterpreted throughout the story (47). Holmes’s ability to see allows him to discern what has been “invisible” for both the client and Watson, and thus to gain knowledge beyond their comprehension to exert a “masterly grasp” over the narrative (15, 40). Therefore, not only does Holmes see beyond what the client and Watson are able to see, but he uses this knowledge of the “invisible” to forge a narrative out of it and enact, in his final revelation, the true narrative (40). Among such a myriad of modes of seeing, Holmes is the only character who gains the power, through his ability to see, to assume narrative authority and enact the ‘real’ narrative.

For Doyle, narrative power therefore comes from the speaker’s ability to see and discern meaning, with a greater amount of insight leading to a greater knowledge base and greater control over narrative. Michel Foucault’s complex analysis of the relationship between power and knowledge in *The History of Sexuality* provides a useful lens for reading the relationship between seeing and telling in Doyle’s work. For Foucault, power depends on knowledge, with the desire to know an entity’s “aspects,” “correlations,” and “effects ... down to their slenderest ramifications” leading to the ability to

incorporate it into an “order of knowledge” and exert control over it by determining how and where it exists within discourse and society (19, 54). It is Holmes’s ability to allow the mystery no “obscurity” or “respite” through his unique ability to see, and thus trace the enigma to its very core, that gives him a greater level of power and narrative authority than his two fellow narrators (20). For Doyle’s text, narrative formation is therefore founded upon the Foucauldian relationship between knowledge and power, with a narrative being inextricably linked to its teller and legitimized by this teller’s omniscience.

In *Sherlock Holmes*, Arthur Conan Doyle links processes of seeing with modes of telling to explore the relationship between sight, knowledge, and narrative authority. Within the Sherlock stories, the speech act motivates the plot by propelling it from a place of silent inertia to narrative frenzy, becoming the locus of narrative construction in both its occurrence and formal nuances. The speech act thus becomes a significant, contestable utterance that is bound to and formed by its maker, providing a lens for reading how that character sees. Forming his plots through three distinct narrative perspectives—‘non-seeing,’ ‘mis-seeing,’ and ‘all-seeing’—Doyle examines how each way of seeing exercises narrative authority differently, with the ability to see leading to the aggregation of knowledge and the eventual ability to control and enact plot. Sherlock’s ability to see omnisciently gives him the ability to see through what is enigmatic in a story and then enact the real narrative by revealing the truth. By examining the complex relationship between the teller and his or her tale, Doyle explores how a speaker’s reality mediates and is apparent in language, and how this language can be used to exercise authority over a narrative. Language therefore becomes the locus of the exercise of authority—a domain that must be challenged and contested whenever it is used in order to discern the truth among the enigmatic.

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