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Detective Fiction and Its Convention: Eccentricity

The success of detective fiction is often determine by how thorough it fulfill the convention of its genre, which is the unwritten rules of how the story should be presented. In the late Victorian Era, there are many detective fiction writers put in effort to identify the essential conventions of detective fiction. Ronald Knox, a writer during the 1920s, published a list of 10 “commandments” that he argued are indispensable to the success of detective fiction. However, these 10 commandments have evolved, and nearly all of them have been broken. By examining Conan Doyle’s famous work *The Sign of Four,* many scholars today believe that the eccentric characteristic of the main character plays an important role in the detective fiction genre. In Doyle’s *The Sign of Four,* Doyle gives Sherlock Holmes, the consulting detective, a genius mind but accompany with a strange addiction of cocaine. The twist in Holmes’s personality not only makes a contribution to the popularity of the genre, but also changes the image of the detective in people’s mind during the Victorian Era. The success of Conan Doyle makes Sherlock Holmes become the most popular representative detective all the time. Many scholars provide different analysis about the eccentric characteristic of Sherlock Holmes, and how it contributes to the success of the genre.

In *The Sign of Four,* Conan Doyle portraits Sherlock Holmes as a genius. During his conversation with Watson, Holmes explains that “he possesses two out of the three qualities necessary for the ideal detective.” (Doyle 221) He claims that he has the power of deduction and observation, and knowledge is something that will come in time. In “Doyle” chapter, Panek analyzes the conventions of detective genre as well as the process of building Holmes. Doyle first follows Poe’s footstep of creating an incredible genius detective. However, he later decides to give Holmes a commonplace, which is his addiction with cocaine. Panek claims that by building Holmes as a paradox character makes the genre more interesting. Similar to Panek’s view, Konnikova Maria praised Holmes for his remarkable scientific mind in *How to Think Like Sherlock Holmes,* where she describes Holmes has “a natural skepticism and inquisitiveness toward the world.” (Maria 17) Holmes’s undeniable power of deduction and observation gives him the image of a heroic detective to the people during the Victorian Era. As Panek describes in “Beginning” chapter, as people notice the incompetence of the police detective, the need for a genius hero become stronger. Under Doyle’s writing, Holmes never failed to solve a crime, which ensures his image of a genius crime-solver. However, many scholars agree to the fact that it is not the heroic figure popularize the genre, but the “split personality” in Holmes makes the character down to earth and popular.

Eccentricity is the feature that separate detective fiction from other genres. In the excerpt of “Theory and Practice of Classic Detective Fiction”, Delamater mentions that through Watson, Holmes is characterizes as “emotionless, unable to love, possesses a cold and detached mind, a mind that Watson equates with a scientific instrument.” (Delamater 22) However, Delamater believes that even Holmes’s collection of knowledge is an example of his eccentricity, when Panek, instead, takes it as demonstrating genius but to the most naive part of our imagination. Similar to Delamater who claims that Holmes has odd personal habits, in “Doyle” chapter, Panek supports Delamater’s argument by arguing that Holmes is a rational drug addict, and he possesses all the fantasies that people want without effort. In addition, Panek further strengthen his argument by demonstrating that Holmes’s eccentricity does not only limited to drugs like cocaine, but work also can be his addiction. The first scene in *The Sign of Four,* surprisingly, is not focusing on Holmes’s intelligence, instead, it is about Holmes’s addiction to drugs. Holmes says “I suppose that its influence is physically a bad one. I find it, however, so transcendently stimulating and clarifying to the mind that its secondary action is a matter of small moment.’ ” (Kindle Version, 182) Holmes is addicted to work; he cannot bear boredom, which is the main reason for his drug addiction. Similarly, this view is supported by Christopher Keep and Don Randall in their article “Addiction, Empire, and Narrative in Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Sign of Four,”* which is published in *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*. On page 210-211 of their article, Keep and Randall gives a detailed analysis of how work is also an addiction for Holmes. Although Keep and Randall’s article is mainly focusing on the analysis of *The Sign of Four* and its symbolism during the Victorian Era, Keep and Randall accidentally agree with Doyle that Sherlock Holmes’s addiction is not cocaine- it is only the stimulus, but it is work, his eccentric habit of getting his mind busy.

Since the detective fiction genre exists, it has been evolved over time. The unwritten rules of detective fiction changes as the class of readers changes. In many scholarly texts, most scholars analyze the evolution of the genre as well as the conventions of detective fiction genre. Detective fiction genre begins with Poe’s work, which is considered as the primitive stage of genre development. However, due to the inefficient of police power and the need of a hero, detective fiction genre has moved into a newer stage, where Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes become popular to a wide range of readers, especially during the Victorian Era. As scholars examine the conventions of a successful detective fiction, it is clear that the development of the main character, the detective, is most essential.

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