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The Sidekick: Split Characters

A father and a young daughter are murdered in an inaccessible room. The father is stabbed to death, when the daughter has no visible fatal injure. In the next few hours, the police arrived and analyzed the corpse. Having a mysterious crime scene is what makes a good detective story. Having many common features with other genres, the detective genre is unique with the feeling of the “differentness”, which literally is referring to the inclusiveness that the genre gives to the readers. (Dove, 2). In Dove’s writing “The Reader and the Detective Genre”, Doves claims that there are four qualities that sets the detective fiction genre apart from other genre: “the detective story is transitory; it is fundamentally an intellectual undertaking; it is recreational; and it is a disciplined, delimited literacy form”. (Dove, 2) There are many unique conventions that specialize the detective genre and are expected by the audience in the detective genre. These conventions can be relevant to the main character, other characters, as well as the plot. Some of the essential conventions of the detective genre include: a genius, but eccentric detective hero, the sidekick companion of the detective, a criminal mastermind, or maybe just like the crime scene above- a locked-room murder. Although the detective genre is originated with the Detective Dupin under Edgar Allen Poe’s writing, the genre, instead, became popular during the late Victorian Era. The detective genre comes to its climax along with the advancement of technology, the widespread acceptance of science, and the cultural beliefs during the late Victorian Era. During this period, the detective genre is well-known under the hand of Arthur Conan Doyle. His detective story *The Sign of Four* outstandingly exemplifies many conventions of the detective genre. Just like the idea of evolution, the detective genre does not belong to a specific group of audience, or a time period. Instead, the genre evolves over time to keep up with the audience and the culture. From Conan Doyle’s works, the existence of the sidekick, John Watson, is indispensable. In his detective story, Watson, as the sidekick character, acts as the mirror of the detective, Sherlock Holmes- by revealing the hidden personality of Holmes, publicizing the brain work in Holmes, and assisting Holmes unintentionally when Holmes hits the stone. The relationship between Holmes and Watson is not only being flat mate, but they also need each other to be consider completed. In Farrell’s “Heroism, Culture and Dread in The Sign of Four”, Farrell claims that Watson and Holmes are like one person, but each of them is emphasize one personality more outstandingly than other. The detective genre is still well popular when it comes to the 21st century. With the evolution of the detective genre, the essential conventions are still visible – maybe in different ways. In the 2010 TV series, *BBC Sherlock* which is directed by Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss, the classical detective genre is remake to adapt the audience in the contemporary society. The convention of the sidekick in the classical genre development phase is shown and updated in the role of John Watson in *BBC Sherlock*.

The conventions of the detective genre is updated in the *BBC Sherlock* for the audience in the 21st century. The convention of the sidekick is further revised in the TV series. John Watson, as the sidekick, acts as the counterpoint for Holmes to show the skills that Holmes is lack of. In Conan Doyle’s classical detective story *The Sign of Four,* it is easy for the reader to recognize the relationship between Holmes and Watson- they are opposite attracted to each other. They need each other; Holmes is logical, and Watson is emotional. In Farrell’s “Heroism, Culture, and Dread in *The Sign of Four*”, Farrell describes the relationship between Holmes and Watson as the “split-man”, where she writes “Watson of course complements Holmes. To Professor Kenner the two characters are facets of a single persona, the “split-man,” since they “epitomize humanity dissected into ratiocinative violence and sentimental virtue, the latter avid of absorption into the former.” Watson represents an uneasy accommodation to the commonplace work. Dissociation allows him- and the reader- to identify with a godlike projection of human powers and participate in a fantasy of “mental exaltation.” (Farrell, 34) Similarly, in the contemporary *BBC Sherlock*, the director further develops this “split-man” relationship in Holmes and Watson. The crucial role of the sidekick is revealed thoroughly in “The Great Game” episode. In the movie, Holmes is in progress of saving the kid’s life and figuring out the fakeness of the famous painting. When the kid starts to count down through the phone, Holmes really calm, and sharp. However, Watson, standing behind Holmes, is nervous, and scared. Unlike other scenes, the camera perspective shows both men with equal framing size and eye-level angle especially in this scene. The effect of framing and camera angle play an important role – emphasizing the “split-man” relationship. At this moment, Holmes is revealing his logical deduction, and Watson is showing the emotional side of humanity. Holmes is superior with his knowledge; Watson is superior with his social skills, and emotions. Both men seem to have the same status, but based on different stages. In Bianco’s movie review on USATODAY newspaper, he writes “[Holmes] aided by an equally terrific performance by Martin Freeman (the original *Office*) as a Dr. John Watson who is no match for Sherlock's intellect but is much his superior in social sense. They're a great team, given a fine assist by [Rupert Graves](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/Rupert+Graves), who plays Inspector Lestrade in two of the three films, and by Una Stubbs as a humorously dithering Mrs. Hudson, who keeps annoying Watson by implying that he and Sherlock are more than friends.”

Holmes and Watson are not just the “split-man” in term of their personalities, but also their role in the case investigation process. The sidekick, in this situation, gives the main character an opportunity to express his thoughts, and make him look smarter at the same time by asking the questions that the audience have in mind. In Conan Doyle’s classical short story *The Red-Headed League,* Watson once says “Here I had heard what he had heard, I had seen what he had seen, and yet from his words it was evident that he saw clearly not only what happened, but what was about to happen, while to me the whole business was still confused and grotesque" (Doyle, 35). As Holmes is solving the case, both Watson and the reader are confused. This teacher-student role is seen in *BBC Sherlock.* In the same scene, Holmes is the one who does the internal thinking process, and Watson reveals Holmes’s thought to the public. After Holmes figures out the fakeness of the painting, he leaves. Instead of leaving right away, Watson stays at give the concluding sentence that explains Holmes’s answer. In this scene, the camera is set in front of Watson and Holmes. However, when Holmes is doing his deduction, the camera focuses is on Holmes. As soon as Holmes comes to the conclusion, Watson comes up and becomes the focus of the scene where he starts explaining the problem. The use of camera angle and framing emphasizes the “need each other” relationship of Holmes and Watson. In Lloyd’s movie review published on LA Times, Lloyd describes the relationship between Holmes and Watson as “Holmes and Watson call each other John and Sherlock here, and the game is "on" now, rather than "afoot." They have been fitted with smart phones and laptops; Holmes has a website, Watson blogs. The pipe (and the cocaine) has been replaced by an abundance of nicotine patches. But the soup in which they swim would be familiar to their Victorian models — terrorism, globalism, new technologies, the incorporation of crime.” By showing this relationship, Watson plays an important role in the success of Holmes’s detective life as a sidekick.

Another characteristic of the sidekick, John Watson, is his loyalty to his companion. In the classical stage, Conan Doyle characterizes Watson with his identity as a military doctor, Holmes’s friend, the emotional side of Holmes, as well as with his loyalty to Holmes. In *The Sign of Four,* there are many times where Watson shows his loyalty by following Holmes’s request even if he doesn't know what the meaning behind it is. Watson’s loyalty to Holmes is an important characteristic of the sidekick that the modern-day *BBC Sherlock* still follow. In The Study in Pink, the first episode of the TV series, Watson didn't have much knowledge about Holmes. However, when Holmes’s brother, Mycroft, comes to Watson offering benefits for updating him with Holmes’s day to day information. In this scene, under the effect of sound and camera focus, the audience, surprisingly, observes Watson under the shadow of Holmes. When Watson is talking with Mycroft, the camera distance is normal; none of the character is taking control of the conversation. However, as the conversation continues on, the camera moving closer to focus on Watson’s facial expression. With the low-key lighting and mysterious background sound, it creates a serious, and secret environment. However, under this intense atmosphere, Watson’s status is growing stronger over Mycroft as he shows his trust to Holmes and his determination for his decision. His answer to Mycroft’s questions are short, but firm just like the way Holmes talks. In the classical stage, Watson’s loyalty is shown through his actions. However, in the 21st century, the way people characterize loyalty is not purely based on actions.

There are four stages of genre development: primitive, classical, parodic, and revisionist. In the classical stage of genre development, Conan Doyle did an outstanding job on using the convention of the detective genre. However, detective genre changes as the social norms change. Readers’ ideology, hobbies change when they interact with new things, new culture. Similarly, the convention that make detective genre unique changes as well to fit the interest of the new population of readers. In the 21st century, which is the revisionist stage, it is clear that some conventions of the detective genre still exist. However, it is the updated version with many adaptions that are targeted to fit the 21st century readers.

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