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The Sidekick: Split Characters Final Draft

A father and a young daughter are murdered in an inaccessible room. The father is stabbed to death, but the daughter has no visible fatal injury. In the next few hours, the police arrive and analyze the corpse. A mysterious crime scene such as this is one of the elements that makes a good detective story. The detective genre is unique, according to literacy scholar George Dove, who writes in his book-length study of the genre that it leaves the reader with a feeling of the “differentness,” which refers to the inclusiveness that the genre gives to the readers. (Dove 2). In Dove’s “*The Reader and the Detective Genre*”, Doves claims that there are four qualities that set the detective fiction genre apart from other literacy genres: “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. Some of the essential conventions of the detective genre include: a brilliant but eccentric detective hero, the sidekick companion, the criminal mastermind, or maybe just like the crime scene above- a locked-room murder. Although the detective genre originated with Edgar Allen Poe’s Detective Dupin, the genre became popular during its classic stage with the writing of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in the late Victorian Era. Conan Doyle’s version of the detective genre flourished because of the advancement of technology, the widespread acceptance of science, and the cultural beliefs during the late Victorian Era. His second novel, *The Sign of Four*, contains many conventions created by Conan Doyle which have withstood the test of time and are still expected by audiences. Just like the idea of evolution, the detective genre does not belong to a specific group, audience, or time period; instead, the genre evolves over time to keep up with the audience and the culture.

In Conan Doyle’s works, the existence of the sidekick, John Watson, is indispensable. Watson acts as the mirror to Sherlock Holmes who reveals the hidden personality of Holmes, publicizes the brain-work in Holmes, and assists Holmes unintentionally when Holmes hits the stone as Holmes is puzzling the evidence. The relationship between Holmes and Watson is not only that they are flat mates -- they also need each other to be considered complete. In Kirby Farrell’s article, “Heroism, Culture and Dread in The Sign of Four,” he claims that Watson and Holmes are like one person, but each emphasizes one personality trait more outstandingly than other.

Conan Doyle’s classic conventions of the detective genre are still extremely popular in the 21st century. The genre has evolved, but the essential conventions are still visible – maybe in different ways. In BBC One’s 2010 TV series, *Sherlock* which is directed and written by Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss, the classical detective conventions are adapted to the film medium and a contemporary audience. Conan Doyle’s sidekick convention is both retained and updated in the role of John Watson, played by Martin Freeman.

In the TV series, *Sherlock*, the role of Watson, in which he acts as the counterpoint for Holmes is to show the skills that Holmes is lack of, is updated with many cinematic techniques. 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 like opposites that attract 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,*” he describes the relationship between Holmes and Watson as “facets of a single persona,” a “split-man,” because they “epitomize humanity dissected into ratiocinative violence and sentimental virtue, the latter avid of absorption into the former.” (34) Watson represents an uneasy accommodation to the commonplace work. Similarly, in the contemporary *Sherlock*, the directors, Moffat and Gatiss, further develop this “split-man” relationship in Holmes and Watson. The crucial role of the sidekick is revealed thoroughly in “The Great Game” episode. In the episode, Holmes is in progress of saving the kid’s life and figuring out the falseness of the famous painting. When the kid starts to count down through the phone, Holmes is 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. 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. Moreover, the use of racking focus, which refers to the shift of the camera focus from one subject to another subject, is highly dominant throughout this part of the episode. The camera focus is shifting back and forth quickly between Holmes and Watson with the aim of drawing audiences’ attention to each character, as well as linking the two characters. In Robert Bianco’s movie review from *USA Today*, 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, 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 process of investigation. 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 *Sherlock.* In the same scene, Holmes is the one who does the internal thinking process, and Watson reveals Holmes’s thoughts to the public. After Holmes figures out the falseness of the painting, he leaves. Instead of leaving right away, Watson stays to 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. When the camera focuses on Holmes, who is mumbling with his deductions, Watson is silent. 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 sound and focus replacements shows the difference in personality, as well as the indispensability of Holmes and Watson. The use of eye-level camera angle and framing emphasizes the “need each other” relationship of Holmes and Watson. Unlike other scenes in the series, Watson and Holmes are portrait with similar framing size, same proximity to the camera, and under the same lighting. Both Holmes and Watson appear in the camera with medium close-up shot. These cinematic techniques bring equality between Watson and Holmes. In addition, all these techniques grab the audience’s attention to focus on a single character. In Lloyd’s movie review published in *LA Times*, he 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 *Sherlock* still follow. In “The Study in Pink”, the first episode of the TV series, Watson does not 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, Watson rejects. In this scene, under the effect of sound and camera focus, the audience, surprisingly, observes Watson under the shadow of Holmes. There are many over-the-shoulder shots in this scene. The camera continuously shifts its lens from Mycroft’s shoulder to Watson’s shoulder or vice versa. Filming the conversation with over-the-shoulder shots focuses the audience’s attention to each character at a time. When Watson is talking with Mycroft, the framing size of both characters is equal; none of the characters is taking control of the conversation. However, as the conversation continues on, the camera moves closer to both men, but there are some close-up shots on Watson’s facial expression. The use of close-up shot in this scene is designed to focus the audience’s attention on Watson’s expression, as well as to direct the audience to see the loyalty that Watson has for Holmes. Low-key lighting also plays a crucial role. The conversation takes place in a dark, vacant warehouse. After Watson arrive, the use of low-key lighting creates a serious, and secret environment by throwing the background into shade, while giving some lights on Mycroft and Watson. However, under this intense atmosphere, Watson’s status is growing stronger over Mycroft as he shows his loyalty for Holmes on. 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.

Media scholars describe genres through time as having four basic stages of development: primitive, classical, parodic, and revisionist. In the classical stage of the detective genre, Conan Doyle invented the conventions that are now considered standard. However, the conventions also change as the social norms change. 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. Conan Doyle’s conventions of the detective genre is publicly known to the 21st century audience. In Bianco’s movie review, he confirms the popularity of the genre where he writes “It may seem odd that the most unabashedly entertaining new show of the season is built around an almost overly familiar, formerly Victorian detective, but the evidence is indisputable. Ingeniously reconceived by Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss, the revivalist team, this modern-day British twist on Sherlock Holmes takes Sir Arthur Conan Doyle 's beloved creation and moves him lock, stock and deductive reasoning into a present-day procedural.”

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