
UNIT 4 DEVICE OF MULTIPLE CLUES

Structure

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4.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This Unit will enable you to see

- how the interpretation of available clues is the core of the detective's art, and that the clues include all kinds of evidence;
- how Sherlock Holmes established a model of interpretation of **clues**— putting one's power of deduction to work;
- that there is another mode which centres on the **interpretation** of the interaction between the detectives, people, places, events and circumstances;
- how an author like Raymond Chandler, for example, is more interested in what really happened, how people behaved, why did it have to happen, than who the criminal is;
- how even false clues **play** their part, or have a role in the detective story;
- how in some cases the **criminal might** himself 'plant' false clues to 'thicken' the mystery or mislead the detective.

At the end of this Unit, you would be able to list the types of clues and models of interpretation. The Activities inserted at various points in the Unit will enable you to structure and pinpoint clues in your own stories.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In the preceding three Units we have discussed some of the essential ingredients of the detective story—suspense and atmosphere, characters and dialogue. But you can see that the solving of the mystery and the identifying of the criminal depends **largely** on how the detective makes use of the clues available to him. **This** is done by him through his power of deduction, his ability to discover motivation for the crime or to trace it to the criminal. In doing so, he often comes across false clues, some of which might have been deliberately planted to throw the detective off the scent. The detective thus uses his insight into human nature to make out the criminal's motivation and understand his behaviour. He **then** obtains clues to help him along.

4.2 WHY WE ENJOY READING DETECTIVE STORIES

We are drawn to **detective fiction** because it entertains us and **challenges** our 'detective' **skills**. **We** are given a problem **and** challenged to offer a solution;

from a number of incidents and characters we are invited to discover motives for a crime and identify the criminal; In other words, we are provided clues and asked to solve mysteries.

There are, of course some readers who don't like 'mechanical puzzles' or detection based on 'physical clues' which they find teasing rather than exciting. They dismiss them as 'riddle stories' with no literary merit. They are not wrong in their judgement, if we consider how many detective stories are just bad. Homer, problem solving, by itself, is an intelligent activity. Great skill goes into the construction of a plot containing a mystery or a problem. To solve it, not only is a very clever detective engaged, but the intelligent reader is also encouraged to make guesses, often to find that the detective is more clever, after all. A plot, which defeats even the very intelligent reader, cannot be dismissed lightly.

4.3 EARLY DETECTIVE STORIES: SIMPLE CLUES

You might have read stories, written somewhat earlier, in which a single object like a ring, a lock of hair, a foot-print, or a locket was enough to discover identity and start the process of solving the mystery. Such clues are too patent and obvious to satisfy our taste for sophisticated mystification. We do examine objects for what they signify but we do so as scientists do, i.e., study them as though with a microscope and examine what lies behind and beyond them. Indeed, we proceed to reconstruct a crime as we reconstruct an extinct animal (you might have seen pictures of Dinosaurs and such prehistoric creatures which at one time strode our world—they were all constructed in this way).

4.3.1 Interpretation of clues at the heart of the detective's art

You might attempt to reconstruct a thing or an event of the past with the help of whatever evidence—material or circumstantial—you might have discovered. In that process you have to interpret by regarding the available data (sensory and otherwise) for signs of hidden facts about events in the past and hidden truths about the character's personalities. Indeed, you use your data as clues to what is to be discovered.

4.3.2 The model of interpretation of clues: Sherlock Holmes

It is interesting to note that the way Conan Doyle's detective Sherlock Holmes sets about his 'business' has set up a model of interpretation (a formula) which has served and still continues to serve as a model for much popular detective fiction.

The following is a typical example of Sherlock Holme's method:

'Were is my lens. You know my methods. What can you gather yourself as to the individuality of the man who has worn this article?'...

'I can see nothing,' said I, handing it back to my friend.

'On the contrary, Watson, you can see everything. You fail, however, to reason from what you see. You are too timid in drawing your inferences.' (*italics mine*)

Clues, I ought to say, cannot be easily discovered. You, the reader, have got to look for them and reason from what you see' and draw your inferences. Moreover, although the writer of the detective story does plant clues, as it were, his purpose is to make the reader exclaim at the end: 'Oh, how stupid of me not to have noticed them'.

Consider, for example, the story, 'A Case of Identity', from *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. An agitated young woman, Miss Mary Sutherland, comes to Holmes and tells him that her lover, Mr. Hosmer Angel, has disappeared on their way to the church to get married. From her 'rambling and inconsequential narrative', Sherlock Holmes is able to collect significant facts which he pieces together to solve the mystery.

Miss Sutherland, having an independent income, lives with her mother and her stepfather, Mt. James Windibank, only slightly older than her. Obviously, Mr. Hosmer Angel would benefit from the marriage while Miss Sutherland's mother and stepfather would stand to lose. This means that Hosmer Angel could not have voluntarily disappeared and that her people would be anxious to prevent her from getting married as long as possible. Holmes notices what turn out to be 'clues' to the mysterious disappearance of Hosmer Angel. Hosmer Angel appears to be a shy man ('would rather walk with me in the evening than in daylight, for he said he hated to be conspicuous'); wears tinted glasses suggestive of weak eyes, and has whiskers; types out his letters including his signature but objects to her doing likewise; wants his letters to be addressed to the Leadenhall Street Post Office; is seen only when her stepfather is away on business (i.e., the two of them have never been seen together).

Holmes interprets each of these facts to find out whether they point to anything that will help solve the mystery. He is able to infer that Mr. Hosmer Angel and Mr. James Windibank are one and the same. He tells Dr. Watson how he is able to draw such an inference:

'Well, of course it was obvious from the first that this Mr. Hosmer Angel must have some strong object for his curious conduct, and it was equally clear that the only man who really profited by the incident, as far as we could see, was the stepfather. Then the fact that the two men were never together, but that the one always appeared when the other was away, was suggestive. So were the tinted spectacles and the curious voice, which both hinted at disguise, as did the bushy whiskers. My suspicions were all confirmed by his peculiar action in typewriting his signature, from which of course, I inferred that his handwriting was so familiar to her that she would recognize even the smallest sample of it. You see all these isolated facts, together with many minor ones, all pointed in the same direction.'

'And how did you verify them?'

'Having once spotted my man, it was easy to get corroboration. I knew the firm for which this man worked. Having taken the printed description, I eliminated everything from it which could be the result of a disguise—the whiskers, the glasses, the voice, and I sent it to the firm, with a request that they would inform me whether it answered the description of any of their travellers. I had already noticed the peculiarities of the typewriter, and I wrote to the man himself at his business address, asking him if he would come here. As I expected, his reply was typewritten, and revealed the same trivial but characteristic defects. The same post brought me a letter from Westhouse & Marbank, of Fenchurch Street, to say that the description tallied in every respect with that of their employee, James Windibank. Voilà tout!'

4.4 THE OTHER MODE: INTERPRETATION OF INTERACTION BETWEEN DETECTIVE, PEOPLE, PLACES, EVENTS AND CIRCUMSTANCES

Nowadays you will find popular writers like Raymond Chandler who have rejected the model of interpretation in the Sherlock Holmes stories. You will

find them **using** 'reciprocal interaction between the detective and the people, places, events and circumstances under investigation' as the basis for interpretation.

Activity 1

Read the following passages and list the clues on which **Holmes** relies for identifying the criminal (100 words):

'You see, Watson', he explained in the early hours of the morning, as we sat **over** a glass of whisky-and-soda in Baker Street, 'it was **perfectly obvious** from the first that the only possible object of this rather fantastic **business** of the advertisement of the League, and the copying **of** the Encyclopaedia, must be to get this not overbright pawnbroker out of the way for a number of hours everyday. **It** was a curious **way** of managing it, but really it would be difficult to suggest a better. **The** method was no doubt suggested to Clay's ingenious mind by the colour of his accomplice's hair. The four pounds a week was a lure **which** must draw him and what was it to them, who were playing **for** thousands? They put in the advertisement, one rogue has the temporary office, the other rogue incites the man to apply for it, and together they manage to secure his absence every morning in the week. **From** the time that **I** heard of the assistant having come for **half-wages**, it was obvious to **me** that he had some strong motive for securing **the** situation.'

'But how could you guess what the motive was?'

'Had there been women in the house, **I** should have suspected a mere vulgar intrigue. That, **however**, was out of the question. The man's business was a small one, and there was nothing in his house which could account for such elaborate preparations and such an expenditure as they were at. It must then be something out of the house, **What** could it be? **I** thought of the assistant's fondness for photography, and his trick of vanishing into the cellar. The cellar. There was the end of this tangled clue. Then I made inquiries as to this mysterious assistant and found that I had to deal with one of the coolest, and most daring criminals in London. He was doing something **in** the cellar—something which took many hours a day for months on **end**. What could it be, once more? I could think of nothing **save** that he was running a tunnel to some other building'.

'So far I had got when we were sent to visit **the scene** of action. I surprised you **by** beating upon the pavement with my stick. I was ascertaining whether **the** cellar stretched out in front or behind. It was not in front. **Then** I rang the bell, and, as I hoped, the assistant answered it. We have had some skirmishes, but we had never set eyes on each other before. I hardly looked at his face, His knees were what I wished to see. You must yourself have remarked how worn, wrinkled and stained they were. They spoke of those hours of burrowing. The only **remaining** point was what they were burrowing for, I walked round the **corner**, saw **the** City and Suburban Bank abutted on our friend's premises, and felt that I had solved my problem. When you drove **home** after the concert I called upon Scotland Yard, and upon the **chairman** of the bank directors, with the result that you have seen'.

'And how could **you** tell that they would make their attempt tonight' I asked.

'Well, **when** they closed their League offices that was a sign **that** they **cared no longer** about Mr. **Jabez** Wilson's presence; in other words, **that they had completed their tunnel**. But it **was essential** that they **should use it soon**, as it might be discovered, or the **bullion** might be **removed**. **Saturday** would suit them—two days for their **escape**. For all these **reasons** I expected them to come tonight.'

'You **reasoned** it out beautifully,' I exclaimed in unfeigned **admiration**. 'It is so long a **chain**, and yet every link rings true.'

48 ADDITIONAL READINGS FOR BLOCK.3

This list contains two books on how to write detective stories. Mainly the list **includes** works by famous writers of detective fiction. Use them as models for ~~your~~ own writing.

Boland, Johd, Short Story Techniques (Enl. rev. ed.) The Red House, **Mardens** Hill. 1960

Cawetti, John G., Adventure, Mystery and Romance, Chicago and London, The **Univ.** of Chicago Press; 1976

Chesterton, G.K., Dagger and Wings and Other Father Brown Stories, **Oxford** University Press, 1984

Christie, Agatha, Murder On the Orient Express, Collins, 1974

Christie, Agatha, The Murder *of Roger Ackroyd*, Collins, 1967

Doyle, Sir Arthur **Conan**, The Adventures of *Sherlock Holmes*, J. Murray and Cape, 1974

Hitchcock, Alfred, Book of Horror Stories, Hodder, 1984

Le' **Carre**, A Perfect Spy, Hodder, 1986

Queen, Ellery, Best of *Ellery* Queen, Hale, 1984-85

Sayers, Dorothy, (ed.) Great Tales of Detection, Dent, 1984.