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The Key Versatility of Stories: Storytelling and 'Sherlock Holmes'

Writing Process

When given the freedom to write my final essay on anything related to my course theme, Sherlock Holmes, I felt equally challenged and excited. I had found many of the topics interesting, but the one I found most interesting the Sherlock Holmes and forensic science unit. As I began my research, I realized that what was most engaging to me about the forensic science information as a communication major, was not the scientific evidence and analysis, but the stories that accompanied the real-life and fictional mysteries. This altered my course of research and forced me to ask how the role of stories plays a part in so many different disciplines and aspects of everyday life. Through insight gained in my research, I really believe that in addition to vital role of science and evidence, stories alter the way we gather, interpret, and use that information to make the world better.

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Anna Rose Redgate

For as long as they have been able to communicate, human beings have told stories. The existence of history, religious beliefs, cultural traditions, modern media and several other entities would not exist without the human desire to tell and listen to stories. Stories and narratives shape the way the world is perceived, yet are interpreted and analyzed on an individual basis. The versatility of stories allows two different audiences to come to different conclusions and perhaps two different points of view of the story at hand. Whether this open-endedness is a positive or negative quality, it really becomes vital in many different disciplines and careers. How crimes are investigated, medical diagnoses are reached, legal cases are argued and more are all affected by the storytelling nature of human beings.

This concept can be illustrated in several of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* stories and a variety of adaptations. Sherlock Holmes stories have stories being told within stories. These stories guide Holmes's investigations and alter the ways in which he reaches a conclusion. I propose that, in addition to Holmes's natural intellect and use of deductive reasoning, the use of storytelling and narrative in investigating cases is equally important in Holmes's stories and in everyday life. By exploring the human nature to intently listen, analyzing and interpreting stories uniquely, analyzing the use of storytelling in Holmes's stories and adaptations, and applying the use of stories to a variety of modern day disciplines, I argue the stories have been an essential aspect of modern day life and continue to be so.

To understand how storytelling impacts criminal proceedings used in Holmes's stories and the modern-day world, it's important to understand the roots of a narrative paradigm. The narrative paradigm theory, developed by Walter

Fisher, is built upon the idea that all meaningful communication is through the form of storytelling. Storytelling, also referred to as narrative, is present in all aspects of life: religion, history, media, philosophy, science, and more. According to Fisher, if people want to know whether or not we should believe the truth that different storytelling situations proclaim to have, we should analyze all events as stories and narratives (Griffin et al. 304). The theory states that narratives are evaluated on two criteria: coherence and fidelity. Coherence refers to a story's consistency and fidelity refers to the degree of truth of the story. When audiences hears a story, they are inclined to evaluate the degree of truth to which they believe it was told in accordance with what actually happened. Viewing and interpreting events as stories allows audiences to hear an identical story and evaluate it based on what they individually believe to be truthful and consistent (310). The way stories can be interpreted differently becomes extremely important in the criminal investigations found in Holmes's stories. Stories can alter the way we feel and think about certain things both literally and figuratively.

According to research, oxytocin is a chemical released in the brain when positive social bonds are formed. Recent research has indicated that storytelling and narratives often evoke the same chemical release. Scientists regard oxytocin "as the biological instrument that puts people in thrall to a story" (Zak). This means that our brains are chemically wired to build attachments through stories. Oxytocin is also responsible for the empathy humans often feel when they are being told a story, making people more invested in what is being said (Zak). Stories grab our attention and motivate people to delve into what is happening and therefore neurologically encourage people to feel a sense of involvement in the narrative. Often, this biological personal investment is exemplified by Holmes and Dr. Watson. Holmes and Watson are not forced to be involved in their cases. They make the choice to pursue certain crimes and mysteries because they gain a sense of personal satisfaction by being invested in the case. The narrative guides the inspiration for all their investigations.

The importance storytelling plays in the role of Holmes's investigations is exemplified in several different stories. In Conan Doyle's "The Adventures of the Speckled Band," Watson recollects a particular case where Holmes was called upon to help solve the death of a Ms. Helen Stoner, a local who had heard about his work. In her description of her fear, Stoner explains to Holmes and Watson that her sister was killed right before she was to be married. Her dying words were "the speckled band." Stoner tells Holmes about the violent and strange

nature of her stepfather, who allows wild animals and gypsies on their property. This forced Stoner to move into the room where her sister died. After visiting the property, Holmes makes the timely discovery that the speckled band is an exotic snake that Stoner's stepfather has slipped into the room. In his explanation of his discovery, Holmes stated:

The idea of a snake instantly occurred to me, and when I coupled it with my knowledge that the doctor was furnished with a supply of creatures from India, I felt that I was probably on the right track. The idea of using a form of poison which could not possibly be discovered by any chemical test was just such a one as would occur to a clever and ruthless man who had had an Eastern training. (Doyle 11)

Had Helen not given a detailed narrative of her case, Holmes's course of action may have been entirely altered. Because Holmes allowed Helen to give an extremely vivid description and detailed background of her story, Holmes was able to draw on different, seemingly irrelevant details, such as the wild animals wandering the property, to deduct his conclusions. Had Helen left out details in her narrative, or altered some of the storylines, Holmes's altered course of action could have been fatal. The way stories are told and interpreted is extremely essential, especially in high stress situations.

In today's criminal investigations and trials, investigations involving eyewitness testimony, like Stoner's in the Holmes's case, are evaluated using the "ideological framework" of a witness. This means that eyewitness narrators have free bridle to "assign his praise or blame [and] give free recall of the criminal event which provides them with the opportunity to give their personal evaluation about the criminal event" (Zhang and Meng 3). Stoner was able to tell her story to Holmes using her own personal testimony, essentially giving her the initial upper-hand of the situation. Those who are able to give testimony get the opportunity to frame cases in whatever light they see fit whether or not they are true. Stoner's eyewitness account and the accompanying narrative may have been truthful, but she was able to frame her situation the way she chose. In today's non-fictional criminal investigations, this honesty factor may not always be the case. Sometimes the way narrators frame their stories are not completely accurate or do not share the whole story. Because of the potential deficiencies in a narrator's

story, it becomes essential to discuss all possible sides of cases to ensure that important facts or details are not overlooked.

The eleventh episode in the *House* series, “Detox” is an example. This television show is based on a Sherlock Holmes-esque character named Dr. House who, along with a team of doctors, attempts to diagnose (or solves the mystery) of a teenage patient whose health is declining at a rapid and deadly pace. The team explores a large variety of possible diagnoses, but none seem to accurately uncover a proper diagnosis that can help cure the teenager. In a fit of illness-induced hysteria, the boy cries out the name Jules. Dr. House asks the boy’s father and girlfriend about who Jules is and they tell the story of the boy’s childhood cat who passed away in what was believed to be a case of old age. After hearing the story, Dr. House exhumes the cat to find out that the boy and the cat share the same toxins in their bloodstreams due to termites, causing such violent and deadly symptoms. With the information gathered from listening to the family’s story about the family cat, Dr. House was able to make a proper diagnosis and save the teen’s life.

All medical diagnoses start with a story, oftentimes, a story of symptoms or actions that have led an individual to seek medical attention. Liz Neely, founder of *The Story Collider*, an organization devoted to connecting science and communication disciplines asserts the following,

Storytelling is about constructing meaning from raw information. The stakes are never higher than when that information is about physical or mental health. From patients and doctors to public health campaigns and policymakers, storytelling encourages people to give voice to their experiences, confront illness and mortality, and connect knowledge to action. Stories are sense-making tools. (2)

When paired with medical knowledge, stories allow doctors to properly treat patients, whether they are physically or emotional illnesses. With the employment of science, or in Holmes’s case, the evidence is essential to solving the case. Without the background information stories, conclusions or solutions could not be drawn. Stories create a sense of empathy that allow others to gain new perspectives and view the situation from someone else’s perspective. This new information provides helpful insights, like House’s investigation of the cat, that

otherwise would not have been explored. This is not to say that concrete evidence or clues are not vital to a case. I am merely stating that without the foundation laid by stories, it would be significantly more difficult to solve the mysteries presented to experts.

The way crimes are investigated, prosecuted, and decided today are greatly influenced by use of stories in criminal proceedings. While Holmes primarily used stories to provide alternate perspectives on his cases and gain new information, in today's real and modern cases, the different stories told by suspects, witnesses, lawyers can determine the outcome of a case. Evidence is undoubtedly a key determining factor in criminal cases, but if there is an inconsistency in the story, the evidence it is less credible in the criminal process (Bex 151). Determining which facts to accept in a case is based on the credibility of the stories in evidential arguments. This approach to facts "involves constructing coherent accounts of the facts about 'what happened' in the case that explain the evidence" meaning that stories are primarily used to analyze evidence (146). How the evidence came to light, what happened in the case that led to the evidence, and why it is significant to the case are all questions that come from the stories told about the evidence, making it imperative to cases that the questions are answered honestly and consistently to determine the future use of the evidence. Evidence, "is not valuable in itself, nor is there any way of appraising its validity or usability outside the framework of the legal story" (Kruse 301-302).

In BBC's first episode of *Sherlock*, Holmes enters a crime scene to find the victim face down, dead by apparent suicide. The deceased scratched the word "Rache" (later determined to be Rachel) into the ground with her fingernails. Holmes immediately tries to investigate the story behind this significant name. He is told that Rachel was the name of the victim's stillborn daughter who had passed away fourteen years prior to the case. Sherlock tries to gain a new perspective on the clue and asks why the woman would think to write the name very painfully on the ground before dying. With this new sentimental insight, Holmes is able to determine that 'Rachel' was the victim's phone password, meaning that investigators would be able to use a GPS system to locate her phone, and, therefore, locate the killer. By investigating the essential story behind the evidence, a bigger and more cohesive picture is clear, and allows Holmes to be make progress.

While Holmes's stories focus on the investigation of crimes, it is still important to examine the role of narrative in the processes after the crime has

been solved. In almost all developed countries in the world, once the person or group responsible for the crime has been taken into legal custody, there is some sort of trial to determine the roles of the suspect and whether she or he is to be considered guilty or not guilty of the crime. The role of storytelling in coming to these important conclusions is critical. In the case of the prosecution, their primary goal is to tell the story of the crime in a way that frames their client as either the protagonist or the victim and to tell the story of their journey or struggle, and describe the obstacles, often as a defense (Chestek 104). As long as the prosecution is telling the truth, they can alter the way the story is told to create a different meaning and paint the picture of the story in an entirely new way. Stories cannot alter evidence, but they can alter the way the evidence is perceived. The stories can have an impact on the criminal justice proceedings.

The way human beings tell and interpret stories to elicit new meanings is an extremely important quality to advance a different perspective and gain a variety of insights. Through Holmes's stories and their adaptation and application to real life situations, stories can completely alter the meaning of an event and shape an entirely new perspective. With technological advancements and the access of information continuing to grow every day, it may be vital for investigators to step back and understand the impact stories and their multiple interpretations have on a society.

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