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Narrative Similarities in Detective Fiction

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Abstract: *In the literary genre discussed in this article various ways are employed to tell a story. There is an integration of narration, dialogue, and description at work. In this article the emphasis is on description similarities between four authors. Two are British, one is of the United States, and one is an author writing in Japanese. Except for the U.S. author, the others write mainly detective fiction. It seems that at times authors of the detective genre refer in homage to each other. Although there is no direct reference to other works the observant reader knows immediately that ill-will plagiarism is not intended. Some references show a disagreement with other authors, for example, how Sherlock Holmes valued Dupin's detective qualities.*

Introduction

An interesting point in literature is the phenomenon that some of the authors selected in this article refer to each other's work intentionally or more hidden in honour of fellow authors. It is the duty of the accomplished reader audience to discover these treasures. In this article I will refer to two British authors, namely: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930), and Wilkie Collins (1824-1889). Washington Irving (1783-1859) is an U.S. author. Ikari Uchida (1960-) writes detective fiction in Japanese. In an earlier article in the OTB journal (Bode, 2014) I wrote on the authorship controversy regarding the Sherlock Holmes canon. As an example I referred to another work of Conan Doyle, *Strange studies from life and other narratives: The complete true crime writings of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle* (The Bravoes of Market-Drayton, p. 49), to show that the text part within the canon shows similarities with that. This time it is necessary to broaden our scope and look at other literary works as well. From Andrew Lycett's biography (2007), and from O'Brien's exposition (2013) as well it becomes clear that Conan Doyle was an avid reader of world literature (pp. 39, 47). His own writings might sometimes quite naturally contain similar descriptions and narratives of other author might have been caused by other factors: conscious or unconscious.

Bode, J. (2017). Narrative similarities in detective fiction. *OTB Forum*, 8(1), 19-24.

Literary Evidence: Body of the Crime—The Detective

In the detective genre the detective can differ immensely from a "mild-mannered" detective like Sherlock Holmes (UK) to a more "hard-boiled" disposition such as Philip Marlow (US). A wide range between these bipolar extremes are richly available in this literary genre. Hercule Poirot and Sugishita Ukyo are not strictly private detectives as the former two are. Hercule Poirot was a police officer in Belgium and became a private detective after he arrived in the UK. Sugishita Ukyo belongs to the Metropolitan Police of Tokyo and is quite at odds with the other three fictional characters. Interesting also to note is the sharp divide between Holmes and Poirot in matters of religion. Holmes regards his methods to be based on purely scientific methods, while Poirot regards his extraordinary ability as being blessed by nature or god.

Thomas (2002) shows throughout his discussion that the detective is a product of society he/she is part of. Therefore, the detective cannot be considered as an unalterable entity in the detective genre.

"Every contact leaves a trace."

Everything the reader has the opportunity of acquiring is a "contact" that leaves a trace in the mind. Although not consciously registered completely at the initial stage it tends to be matched with later similarities in other literary works (empirical experience of the present author, 2015-2016). The unconscious "trace" becomes active when reading similar ideas such as were experienced by the author

through literary works stated below with quoted sections for reference. The exchange-principle of trace is actually developed by Edmond Locard (1877-1966) and applies to forensic science (Gilbert, 2010; Swanson et al. 2011). From the initial “contact”, the mind receives it as a “trace” and reconstructs it in a three dimensional structure as if the story is for real. This point is further addressed by Gilbert (2010, p. 36) in his book on criminal investigation:

The present-day investigator must have both imagination and curiosity – and the ability to use them advantageously. To simply assemble the facts of a case may not be enough to “get the whole picture”. Imagination – forming mental images of what is not present or creating new ideas by combining previous experiences – is indispensable in the many investigations that are not complete.

Also Sherlock Holmes (see Conan Doyle, 2007) emphasizes as well the importance of imagination in his particular method of criminal investigation:

[I have been sluggish in mind and wanting in] that mixture of imagination and reality which is the basis of my art. (The problem of the Thor Bridge, p. 996)

As an example in a short time frame of one year April 2015-April 2016 the present author came accidentally across the following text fragments in his selected sources. In *The Bravo of Market-Drayton* (p. 49) written by Conan Doyle the statement under consideration runs as follows:

The traveller who in the days of our grandfathers...was deeply impressed by the Arcadian simplicity of the peasants, and congratulated himself that innocence, long pushed out of the cities, could still find a refuge amid these peaceful scenes. Most likely he would have smiled incredulously had he been informed that neither in the dens of Whitechapel nor in the slums of Birmingham was morality so lax or human life so cheap as in the fair region which he was admiring. (p. 49)

Not a literal equivalent is present in the Sherlock Holmes canon, but a similar way of juxtaposition is at work in the following statement from *The Adventure of the Copper Beeches* (Conan Doyle, 2007, p. 277).

You [Watson] look at these scattered houses and

you are impressed by their beauty. I [Sherlock Holmes] look at them, and the only thought which comes to me is a feeling of their isolation, and of the impunity with which crime may be committed there. (p. 277)

In one of his stories, *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, Washington Irving (2010) refers also to the dichotomy of rural and urban conditions. Not so much the criminal possibilities are referred to for these rural areas, the boondocks in other words, as the superstitious inclinations do flourish in isolated districts. In this case the rural locality is not equal to the urban locality as in the earlier cases.

Local tales and superstitions thrive best in these sheltered long-settled retreats; but are trampled underfoot by the shifting throng that forms the population of most of our country places [=cities?]. (p. 28)

It is impossible to state positively whether Conan Doyle had read this particular story and subsequently included this stylistic idea in his own works. There is a similarity and difference nonetheless visible. And if he actually has knowledge of this particular statement then also perhaps an exchange principle is at work in his writings. In Tim Burton's film edition (1999) of Washington Irving's story, for example, he changes the storyline even more. Turning it into a detective story wherein Ichabod Crane (Johnny Depp), instead of being the school teacher/priest in the original, is a police constable in New York sent to investigate a mystery. Therefore, the film edition is an adaptation of the story and in itself an interesting departure from the original.

The above cases are all literary cases. In a recent perusal of a 19th century British source (Smethurst, 1914) not written by a literary professional but instead by a police constable in one of the smaller cities, namely Stalybridge, of the UK there is idiom visible and comparable with Conan Doyle's. PC Thomas Smethurst (active duty 1888-1890; 1894-1920) kept a notebook of cases and incidents occurring during his professional life. Having read the Sherlock Holmes canon before, some idiom appearing in Smethurst's notebook seem to resemble Conan Doyle's but probably not intentionally chosen for that purpose. More likely to be a stylistic feature of 19th century English. The idiom therein can be listed through the selected quotations as follows:

.. I concluded that I was on the right scent and took him to the police office.” (p. 16)

In the Sherlock Holmes canon “scent” is a recurrent idiom as a reference to investigation and appears as much as 47 times. (see appendix 1).

In another section, although not exactly a match of what the dog did do (“barking”) recorded by PC Smethurst and that the dog did do nothing (not even barking) in the Sherlock Holmes adventure strikes one as somehow peculiar.

At times, the nights would be still and silent and nothing could be heard but the sound of our foot-steps on the frozen ground as we paced to and fro, or the distant barking of a dog at some farm-stead on the hillside. (p. 24)

In the Adventure of the Silver Blaze there is the famous observation of the singularity that the dog did not bark:

[Inspector Gregory] “Is there any other point to which you would wish to draw my attention?”

[Holmes]: “To the curious incident of the dog in the night time”

[Inspector Gregory]: The dog did nothing in the night time.”

[Holmes]: “That was the curious incident.” (pp. 302 - 303)

A third passage refers to the phrase: “knock up” (wake up):

The Sergeant and I visited the beer house, knocked up the landlord and asked him why he had given us a false explanation on our previous visit. (p. 45)

In the Adventure of the Speckled Band there are sequential knock up incidents starting with Helen Stoker waking up Mrs. Hudson, who in turn wakes up Holmes, who then wakes up Watson.

Very sorry to knock you up, Watson,” said he, “but it’s the common lot this morning. Mrs. Hudson has been knocked up, she retorted upon me, and I on you. (p. 214)

It is very likely that both, Conan Doyle and Smethurst, shared a common way of expressing themselves in a style that was in general use at the time. Although people who need to write as a work requirement (PCs included) might have availed themselves to good models. According to sources on Conan Doyle (Lycett, 2007; O’Brien, 2013) the Sherlock Holmes adventures had a large number of readers at that time as well. Police constables were

also likely to be part of Holmes readers. It would not be surprising if PC Smethurst was one them. It is necessary here to emphasize that PC Smethurst is not the same person as Dr. Smethurst (Wade, 2013, pp. 36-38) who, it is strongly assumed, poisoned his wife in 1859 (the birth year of Arthur Conan Doyle).

The Secondary Transfer of Traces

As Poe influenced Conan Doyle (O’Brien, 2013), Conan Doyle crossed border and landed in Japan where Ikari Uchito (penname of Torikai Hisahiro) has written five novels with the police inspector Sugishita Ukyo as the main character. In *The Casebook of Sugishita Ukyo* [Sugishita Ukyo no jikenbo] (2010) there are four direct references to Sherlock Holmes and an indirect marked idiom taken from the original and appropriately translated into Japanese. Right on the second page of the first story (The Fog and the Casket) as an explanation to the reader the setting shows that Sugishita is strolling around in Edinburgh, “the city where Arthur Conan Doyle was born; the creator of Sherlock Holmes” (p. 7).

On page 18 one of the characters (Susan, the mother of the distillery owner; Sugishita came to this distillery through an introduction) comments: “well, well; you must then be a regular Sherlock Holmes from Japan,” after confessing of having the bad habit to thrust himself into a conversation centered on crimes. A few more similar statements follow on pages 119 and 120 to emphasize the general impression people have of Sugishita as the Sherlock Holmes from Japan. With these initial introductions of Sherlock Holmes at the beginning of the casebook, it will not be difficult to observe indirect references: creative borrowings or homage to the canon cases. In the second story (p. 161), The Forest Spectre, of the notebook there is the indirect reference without any biographical information towards the Sherlock Holmes canon. However, the observant reader is well aware of its source. In this part of the story the reader will see Sugishita’s familiarity with the case details. The description that follows states: “Sugishita takes out the necessary information from his brain storage room.”

In the Sherlock Holmes canon this storage room is referred to as “the brain attic” by Sherlock Holmes in the following sections. On page 15 (Conan Doyle, 2007: A study in Scarlet) Sherlock Holmes explains to Watson his thoughts on the mat-

ter of the brain.

“I consider that a man’s brain is like a little empty attic. Now the skillful workman is very careful indeed as to what he takes into his brain-attic. It is a mistake to think that that little room has elastic walls and can distend to any extent. It is of the highest importance, therefore, not to have useless facts elbowing out the useful ones.”

Actually Sherlock Holmes resumes the issue on page 182 (Conan Doyle, 2007: *Adventure V-The five orange pips*) again and actually elaborates further on the brain-attic and the function of the lumber room:

.. a man should keep his little brain attic stocked with all the furniture that he is likely to use, and the rest he can put away in the lumber room of his library, where he can get it if he wants it.

In the canon the attic appears as a physical entity without any reference to the brain at five locations: p. 177 (2x); p. 178 (2x); and p. 579 (1x). The lumber room as a factual space is mentioned merely twice (pp. 177, 182), and also there in connection with the aforementioned attic. Conan Doyle uses these idiomatic elements in a literal (as actual places) as well as figurative function (the brain).

Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to describe a situation wherein literary works can go through a process of contact and trace in the application of the exchange principle which originally has been developed for forensic science by Edmond Locard during his lifetime. The transfer within the same language (English) within the body of works of the same author (Conan Doyle), or of separate authors (Conan Doyle/Irving) can be considered as the primary transfer although the evidence for the connection between Conan Doyle and Irving is not conclusive and needs more instances to make any strong claims in this light. The secondary transfer would be from one language to another such as I described comparing Conan Doyle’s influence within the novels of Ikari Uhito.

Primary and secondary transfer are actually con-

About the author: Jeroen Bode began working at Tsukuba University as a lecturer in 2005 and was promoted to assistant professor in 2012. From 2007 he began working as an independent official translator of Japanese. His translation work led him to redirect his attention to applied language skills during the process of translating and let to include forensic linguistics as his major academic interests. He received his M.A. in Japanese language and culture in 1996 from Leiden University in the Netherlands

nected to Locard’s principle of exchange of materials (blood, hair, and other physical evidence) and because of its clear implications here transferred to a literary discussion of the detective genre.

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Appendix 1
Occurrences of Scent in the Sherlock Holmes Canon

Page	# of Occurrences
17, 19, 22, 31,	1
33	2
80, 81, 83	1
85, 87, 88	2
89, 93, 95, 117	1
168	2
195, 228, 267, 371, 416, 417, 428, 477, 520	1
541, 550, 577, 617, 708, 747, 756, 761, 771	1
775, (895 + ed), 948, 996, 1042, 1078, 1112	1



Appendix 2

Visual Representations of Detectives

Sherlock Holmes (Source: Strand facsimile)

Philip Marlow (Actor: Humphrey Bogart)

Sugishita Ukyo (Actor: Mizutani Yutaka)

Sherlock Holmes (Actor: Jeremy Brett)

Hercule Poirot (Actor: David Suchet)

JBSH (Actor: himself)

