

**Doyle, "The Man with the Twisted Lip"  
Singularity, Infinitude and the Multivalence of Signs**

Continue theme of singularity and infinitude begun in discussion of "Red-Headed League."

"I confess that I cannot recall any case within my experience which looked at the first glance so simple, and yet which presented such difficulties" (131).

"I think, Watson, that you are now standing in the presence of one of the most absolute fools in Europe. I deserve to be kicked from here to Charing Cross" (137).

**1. Begins with chain of singular - unusual, unique - characters and incidents.**

- a. Watson takes literally bizarre trip, at Kate Whitney's request, to opium den to find Isa Whitney.
  - i. Atmosphere of opium den singular - bizarre, disorienting - to say the least.
  - ii. Whitney, however, is red herring - not the subject of this story.
  - iii. Holmes, shocking both Watson and reader, turns up disguised - but is looking for someone else.
- b. Mrs. St. Clair's bizarre sighting of husband in London.
  - i. In upper-story window of bad part of town.
  - ii. Cries out, seems to beckon to her; isn't wearing coat or tie.
  - iii. Disappears with only the remotest trace - the packet of children's blocks he had promised to bring home; his clothes, except jacket found later filled with coins.
- c. The menacing-looking Lascar ("Indian sailor") looks like a murderous or at least criminal figure.
- d. Bizarre disappearance of a wealthy upper-middle-class man with traditional family life, no evident money troubles and no evident enemies.

"Neville St. Claire. . . appeared to have plenty of money. He took a large villa. . . and lived generally in good style. . . . He married the daughter of a local brewer, by whom he has now had two children. He had no occupation, but was interested in several companies, and went into town. . . . Mr. St. Clair is now 37 years of age, is a man of temperate habits, a good husband, a very affectionate father, and a man who is popular with all who know him. [His debts are far smaller than his resources] There is no reason, therefore, to think that money troubles have been weighing upon his mind" (126).

- e. Bizarre beggar discovered at scene of disappearance.
  - i. Has both strange, distorted appearance and remarkable wit.

"His appearance, you see, is so remarkable that no one can pass him without observing him. A shock of orange hair, a pale face disfigured by a terrible scar, which, by its contraction, has turned up the outer edge of his lip, a bull-dog chin, and a pair of very penetrating dark eyes, which present a singular contrast to the colour of his hair, all mark him out from amid the common crowd of mendicants. And so too, does his wit, for he is every ready with a reply to any piece of chaff which may be thrown at him by the passers-by.

**2. Singularities are all connected - but in singular ways. Police/detectives/family assume violence and robbery; what has actually happened is willful self-transformation "into something rich and strange."**

**Holmes, the police, the family, and the reader overlay the singularities of this case with stereotypical assumptions that turn out to be the opposite of the truth.**

- a. Watson's bizarre trip to the opium den seems unrelated to NSC's disappearance, but actually prefigures NSC's secret life above the opium den.
  - i. Yet Boone is not an opium addict; instead, he is addicted to *transforming himself* into a person of lower-class standing - an even more strange addiction.
- b. Mrs. St. Clair's bizarre sighting of husband in London turns out to be true - she did see him - but resulting speculations about his disappearance are wrong. wrong.
  - i. The children's blocks, the discarded clothes, the blood on the windowsill, the jacket full of coins are actually traces of his *transformation*, not of violence or disappearance. While the police are searching the room, "Hugh Boone" is standing right there.
    - (1) The blood, we find out later, was not the result of violence, but was spilled when NSC accidentally re-opened an old self-inflicted wound (142).
    - (2) The coins in particular are immediately seen as evidence that someone had tried to sink the coat in the river Thames, when actually they are evidence of "Hugh Boone's" begging profession.
- c. The menacing-looking Lascar turns out to be honorable and trustworthy: NSC says "only one man knew my secret. . . . He was well-paid by me for his rooms, so that I knew my secret was safe in his possession" (142).
- d. The wealthy upper-middle-class man has material and emotional comforts - what he lacks is a meaningful profession.
  - i. So NSC transforms himself into his literal opposite: a disfigured, crazy-seeming beggar.

- e. The beggar's appearance doesn't signify malevolence and insanity.
  - i. it signifies a hidden compassion and intelligence.

**3. Holmes makes a mistaken diagnosis, based on stereotyping, that NSC is dead (133). Why does he make this mistake?**

- a. He shouldn't; in the story, Holmes has analyzed and manipulated singularities effectively.
  - i. Holmes understands how self-transformation can work: at the beginning of the story, he too has effected such a convincing lower-class costume that Watson fails to recognize him in the opium den.
  - ii. When Watson notes that HB is a cripple, Holmes points out "he is a cripple in the sense that he walks with a limp; but in other respects he appears to be a powerful and well-nurtured man. Surely your medical experience would tell you, Watson, that weakness in one limb is often compensated for by exceptional strength in the others" (129-30).
  - iii. Holmes acknowledges that HB had "for years been known as a professional beggar, but his life appeared to have been a very quiet and innocent one" (131).
  - iv. When Mrs. NSC insists that the letter was written by her husband, he concedes "I have seen too much not to know that the impression of a woman may be more valuable than the conclusion of an analytical reasoner" (132).
- b. Holmes's class prejudices override his reasoning ability.
  - i. It is nearly impossible to imagine, in capitalist society, why someone would desire to transform themselves deliberately from a wealthy person to a poor person.

**4. NSC's "error" (not crime) lay in wanting to be common (a part of infinitude) - rather than singular (a member of the upper classes).**

- a. The example of Isa Whitney - found at the opium den, worried about disgracing himself to his wife - sets the tone for the recovery of NSC.
- b. Holmes energetically helps force NSC back into his proper social position: "We will soon make him cut a much more respectable figure" (139) gloats Holmes as he approaches NSC with the washing sponge.
- c. Even though, as NSC points out, "no crime has been committed, and. . .I am illegally detained," the only shame or "error" of which he can be convicted is of potentially disgracing his wife and children.
- d. Hugh Boone is literally imprisoned for having "murdered" NSC; to atone, NSC is made to promise "there must be no more of Hugh Boone" (143).

**5. Yet one of the story's final ironies is that Holmes, as usual, has solved the mystery by invoking precisely the "common," "low-life," and unethical strategies used by Hugh Boone.**

- a. He began the story in disguise in the opium den - looking for Hugh Boone.
- b. He sits up all night smoking (recalling the opium den) and later attributes his solution to this drug-use: "I reached this one. . .by sitting upon five pillows and consuming an ounce of shag" (143). See also the orientalist description of his drug orgy, 137.
- c. Holmes is, as he acknowledges in the beginning of the story, himself a cocaine-addict - thus one who identifies with the "low-lifes" he despises in the opium den.

