

Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Speckled Band"

1. Conan Doyle is Questioning Ideology - Especially Patriarchal Ideology

- a. Ideology: a set of beliefs that justifies a certain social structure. Ideology always presents a social structure as working "for the best." How do we absorb ideology?
 - i. Ideology is instilled in institutions - religion, government, schools, families
 - ii. Ideology is also instilled in popular culture: media, literature, pastimes, games
 - iii. While ideologies frame everything we do, we are not always aware of them. Sometimes we learn them consciously; sometimes we absorb them unconsciously.
 - iv. Conan Doyle wants us to think carefully about our acceptance of ideologies like patriarchy; he is writing at a time in English history when people are beginning to question traditional ideologies, such as the slavery and the oppression of women and children.
- b. Patriarchy: rule by fathers/husbands.
 - i. Patriarchy assumes that men are best fit to rule, make decisions, and handle money. One familiar expression of patriarchal ideology is the saying "Father knows best." Patriarchal ideology holds that men are best fit to run all institutions, from the family to the government.
 - ii. Patriarchy assumes that women are incapable of handling most tasks except domestic ones.
 - (1) In the 1890s, when this story was written, women were legally barred from getting university degrees, owning and transferring property, controlling their own incomes, and holding managerial jobs, voting, and running for office.
 - (2) Though women had recently won the right to sue for divorce on the grounds of extreme cruelty, women were still subject to the authority of their husbands and fathers. The only women who were allowed to own and transfer money and property were widows (like Mrs. Stoner) and brides (like the Stoner twins).
- c. Ideally, an effective patriarch should fulfill the following family responsibilities:
 - i. cause his wife to give birth to sons
 - ii. provide a good family income
 - iii. protect the family from harm
 - iv. name family members after himself
 - v. discipline (beat, if necessary) family members (this was legal)
 - vi. distance himself emotionally from family members
 - vii. be knowledgeable; make decisions for the family
- d. Dr. Roylott clearly fails at the first four responsibilities. "The Roylotts of Stoke Moran" end with him. He succeeds only at the last three. Conan Doyle seems to be suggesting indirectly that when patriarchy goes bad, it can have a very bad effect on a family, resulting in incest and murder.

1. Ideological roles/tropes in "The Speckled Band": The Unprotected Woman, the Malevolent Patriarch, and the Meddlers

- a. Helen Stoner is an emblem of an unprotected Victorian woman

- i. her mother is dead (eight years ago) in railway accident (no protection for Helen)
 - ii. her twin sister Julia died under mysterious circumstances
 - iii. there are no servants in the house capable of protecting her
 - iv. she is cut off from communicating with the world outside
 - v. her stepfather has a history of violent behavior
 - vi. she has access to own income only after marriage; before then, Roylott controls her money

- b. Stepfather Grimesby Roylott is an archetypal patriarch: combines (ancient) feudal tradition and (modern) Victorian imperialism (combination of science and capitalism - doctor).
 - i. Roylott "the last survivor of one of the oldest Saxon families in England, the Roylotts of Stoke Moran" (168). But R's ancestral fortunes and property were long since gambled away and whose house and acreage are now crumbling.
 - ii. To overcome family's lack of money, Roylott became doctor in Calcutta, "where, by his professional skill and force of character, he established a large practice."
 - iii. Roylott's ancient privilege and modern capitalistic fervor are undermined by his violent temperament: "in a fit of anger. . . he beat his native butler to death, and narrowly escaped a capital sentence. As it was, he suffered a long term of imprisonment, and afterwards returned to England a morose and disappointed man" (168).
 - iv. His temperament has actually worsened: "Last week he hurled the local blacksmith over a parapet into a stream and it was only by paying over all the money that I could father together that I was able to avert another public exposure. . . At last he became the terror of the village, and the folks would fly at his approach, for he is a man of immense strength, and absolutely uncontrollable in his anger" (169).

- c. Holmes and Watson are intermediaries who assume neither male nor female roles:
 - i. They facilitate, they "meddle" and act as "busybodies" (Roylott's derisory terms 176-77). They talk and think their way through the problem.
 - ii. Though they recognize his violence, they do not strike back at Roylott. Patriarchal violence, as Holmes points out, must be encouraged "to recoil upon the violent, [so that] the schemer falls into the pit which he digs for another" (188).
 - iii. In short, Holmes and Watson act partly as women - by talking, "meddling," "gossiping" - and partly as men (by entering Stoner's room, by carrying guns, by turning the snake back on its trainer).

2. **"The Speckled Band" and Women's Money: "Father Has His Hand in Your Bank Account."**

- a. In a large number of Holmes stories, including "A Case of Identity" and "The Copper Beeches," young women are held in thrall to older male relatives who want to control their money and are willing to commit a crime (kidnapping, murder, impersonation) to get their hands on the money.
- b. These stories thus question the ideology of "Father Knows Best" by presenting a counter-proposal: "Father is Likely to Raid Your Bank Account."
- c. In "The Speckled Band," Roylott wants to kill the twins Helen and Julia Stoner because, when they marry, he stands to lose their annual income of 250 pounds per year - a substantial sum at the time of the story's writing. Consequently, when each becomes engaged, he arranges to knock them off.

- d. Helen Stoner recognizes that there is something fishy about her stepfather's behavior - and mysterious about her sister's death. But because the coroner's report was inconclusive, because no one has figured out the meaning of Julia Stoner's last words "It was the band! The Speckled Band!", she has no legal case against her stepfather.

3. **"The Speckled Band" and Incest: "Father Wants to Put His Snake in Your Bed."**

The story also reads, disturbingly, as anti-incest fable:

- a. Bedroom.
 - i. One daughter has been symbolically - yet mysteriously, unspeakably, aged and destroyed by her proximity to her father's bedroom.
 - ii. Julia attacked by something in the middle of the night - she emerges from her room not clothed, notes Helen, but "in her nightdress" - the victim of a crime which can't be described directly.
 - iii. The bed itself, Holmes notes, is literally "clamped to the floor. . .the lady could not move her bed" away from the boundary-violating ventilator and dummy rope and stepfather had recently installed in her bedroom.
 - iv. Roylott forces first one daughter and then the next to sleep in the fateful bedroom - even though Helen has no desire to sleep there.
- b. Ventilator.
 - i. Ventilator, like the dummy bell rope, was installed deliberately by Dr. Roylott and doesn't make sense from a builder's viewpoint - as Holmes notes.
 - ii. Holmes notices that the ventilator "does not ventilate," but connects Julia's room to her father's room.
 - iii. Helen corroborates that Julia was bothered by the smell of Dr. Roylott's cigar - a notable phallic symbol and a symbol of violation of boundaries (polluting another's air supply).
- c. Snake.
 - i. Snake a notorious phallic symbol - perhaps the most notorious. Poisonous, independent, mobile: emblem of forbidden knowledge (Garden of Eden) and evil.
 - ii. Snake is emblem - sexual and moral - of the incestuous patriarch who violates the boundaries of the daughters' bedrooms and destroys them in the middle of the night.
 - iii. The snake makes repeated visits to the daughters' bedrooms before it kills: "It might or might not bite the occupant, perhaps she might escape every night for a week, but sooner or later she must fall a victim" (190).
 - iv. Swamp adder of the story significantly a pet of Dr. Roylott's that he keeps hidden in his bedroom and only takes out at night. Holmes notes: "Of course he must recall the snake before the morning light revealed it to the victim" (190).

5. **"The Speckled Band" an Indirect Critique: Ideology Subtly but Surely Refuting**

Ideology. Watson, after Holmes remarks that the bed is clamped to the floor: "Holmes, I see dimly what you are hitting at. We are only just in time to prevent some subtle and horrible crime" (185). In spite of the radical linkage of incest and dowry murder in this story, Doyle must retain Victorian circumspection about the crime. He can't just come out and say, "Hey, bad patriarchs are doing some horrible things out there, and getting away with them."

- d. Only Holmes actually sees the snake in action: though he cries "You see it, Watson? You see it?" (187), Watson admits "But I saw nothing" (187).
- e. Roylott's death is reported euphemistically (both in terms of Holmes's indirect involvement and with reference to the literally unspeakable crime of incest): "The

slow process of official inquiry came the conclusion that the Doctor met his fate while indiscreetly playing with a dangerous pet" (189).

- f. Roylott's death as described by Doyle is thinly veiled description of man dead from sexual crime: "Dr. Grimesby Roylott, clad in a long grey dressing gown, his bare ankles protruding beneath, and his feet thrust into red heelless Turkish slippers. Across his lap lay the short stock with the long lash upwards, and his eyes were fixed in a dreadful rigid stare at the corner of the ceiling." Holmes notes: "Let us thrust his creature back into its den, and we can then remove Miss Stoner to some place of shelter. . ." (188).
- g. The misread sign "The Speckled Band" is once again our clue that we should not take things - like this story - at face value, but dig beneath the surface to see what else is going on.
- h. Though the characters' immediate assumption is to look outside the house - at the gypsies - for the murderers, the true source remains inside the house - in the patriarch whose role as protector generally goes unquestioned.