

Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Red-Headed League"
Lecture: Singularity and Infinitude

1. 2 factors that condition Holmes's world:

- a. "singularity" - what is unique, what stands out, clues, the culprit, the "truth" about events.
- b. "infinitude" - everything else - all possibilities - all other stories about events; other possible solutions to the crimes
- c. **Holmes's method lies in relating the "singular" to the "infinite."** Clues must always be "hooked into" a larger pattern of predictable generality - pigeonholed, understood, implicitly dismissed.

2. Singularity: What Is It?

"The persistent popularity of the Sherlock Holmes stories owes much to his all but invincible accuracy in recognizing which facts are clues and in forcing [those clues] to tell their tales." - Rosemary Jann

- a. The words "singular," "unique," "unusual," "extraordinary" reappear continuously throughout TRHL. The "singularity" or unusualness of an item sometimes marks it as a clue that allows SH to mark the path of a particular solution. SH tells Watson: "you share my love of all that is bizarre and outside the conventions and humdrum routine of everyday life" (51).

He later explains why this love of the "bizarre" is significant: it enables him to solve mysteries. He tells Watson, "As a rule," said Holmes, "the more bizarre a thing is the less mysterious it proves to be. It is your commonplace, featureless crimes which are really puzzling, just as a commonplace face is the most difficult to identify" (63).

- b. Wilson's narrative is one such "singular" clue. SH calls it ". . . a narrative which promises to be one of the most singular which I have listened to for some time." He then emphatically repeats the same judgment of Wilson's tale again, on the same page: "the course of events is certainly among the most singular that I have ever listened to" (both 52).
- c. What makes the narrative "strange" is its concatenation of unusual details.
 - i. The "singular" physical details WITHIN Wilson's "singular" narrative include: red hair in general, and Wilson's red hair in particular; the concept, execution, and apparent dissolution of the RHL, and the smart, capable shop-apprentice who is an amateur photographer and who comes at half-wages and is so strange looking: he has no visible facial hair, earring holes, and acid-splashes in his face.
 - ii. The "singular" ideas implicit in Wilson's narrative include: the idea that smart apprentices would voluntarily work for half price, the notion that men would get paid for having red hair and copying the Encyclopedia Britannica, the idea that anything unusual has happened to this ordinary man.
- d. SH's ability to "read" these codes depends on his knowledge of how clothing, body language, speech, etc. conform to certain PREDICTABLE UNIVERSAL codes. Problem,

however: individuals don't always wear the same clothing or behave predictably. People may wear others' clothing or disguise themselves and deliberately manipulate codes of speech, behavior, and dress to confuse others. (This will become more of a problem for Holmes in "The Man with the Twisted Lip.")

3. London as Symbol, in RHL, of the Potential and Threat of Infinitude

- a. London is infinite, sprawling, comprising hundreds of square miles of neighborhoods on either side of the Thames. So notoriously difficult to navigate that even taxi drivers, carry "London A to Z." SH says "It is a hobby of mine to have an exact knowledge of London." He masters the hugeness of the city by studying it, neighborhood by neighborhood, and demonstrating to Watson the way he makes such memorizations. (See Watson's description of how SH memorizes the stores around Saxe Coburg Square [65].) SH memorizes both its denizens and its geography.
- b. London has no distinctive center (the ancient city walls of Londinium have long since vanished) but is octopus-like. Watson describes it as an "endless labyrinth of gas-lit streets" (68).
- c. London is "the source" - the birthplace of everyone and everything important. The Red-Headed League is described as having been founded by an American, Ezekiah Hopkins, a wealthy Pennsylvania philanthropist born in London who "wanted to do the old town a good turn."
- d. London the infinite is the perfect city in which to commit the perfect crime: hugeness offers cover and anonymity. Watson tells us how lost he feels when he is suddenly overcome by a crowd: "the roadway was blocked with the immense stream of commerce flowing in a double tide inwards and outwards, while the footpaths were black with the hurrying swarm of pedestrians. It was difficult to realize as we looked at the line of fine shops and stately business premises that they really abutted on the other side upon the faded and stagnant square which we had just quitted" (65).

4. Singularity and Infinitude Are Metaphors of Old and New Orders

- a. The "singularities" and "infinitudes" of the story read as binaries that describe how modern culture is emerging from ancient culture.
 - i. In emerging modern culture, what has in previous centuries been "singular" or individually marked or identified is being overtaken by mass production and overpopulation - two emblems of the city of London - infinitude.

singular/old order

handmade objects
 village life where everyone is known
 staying in one place
 recycling/repairing/handing down
 pawn shops
 local magistrates, peer pressure
 apprenticeship/hard work
 hand copying and painting

infinite/new order

mass-produced objects
 the anonymity of city life
 moving many times
 throwing out/minting new
 banks
 judges, the metropolitan police
 ingenuity, a life of crime
 the printing press/photography

- ii. The red hair that appears to "buy" Wilson his "billet" in the RHL is not even a distinguishing characteristic in a huge city filled with people. Hair that might have

seemed "singular" in a village where only a few people had red hair is ordinary in London. A horde of redheads answers the ad. "Fleet Street was choked with red-headed folk, and Pope's Court looked like a coster's orange barrow. I should not have thought that there were so many in the whole country as were brought together by that single advertisement. Every shade of color there were - straw, lemon, orange, brick, Irish-setter, liver, clay; but, as Spaulding said, there were not many who had the real vivid flame-coloured tint (57).

- b. Wilson's notable actions in the story - hiring the apprentice at half-wages and accepting the job at the red-headed league - both result from his mistaken impression that he is somehow "special," marked for distinction and privilege. But Wilson is absolutely unremarkable.
 - c. Only his sense of privilege puts him in the remarkable position of getting involved with TRULY singular men: Sherlock Holmes and John Clay. Both treat Mr. Wilson well while they want something from him and then casually abandon Mr. Wilson when they get what they want. Both are using him only for their own ends: Clay to crack the bank, and Holmes to crack the mystery. Like all people in a modernistic, mass-production-oriented society, he is disposable.
5. What makes geniuses like Sherlock Holmes and John Clay so "singular"?
- a. What distinguishes Sherlock Holmes from ordinary men like Jabez Wilson or Dr. Watson is not simply experience or intelligence - Wilson is somewhat right when he tells Holmes, "I thought at first you had done something clever, but I see that there was nothing in it after all" (54). What distinguishes "singular" men is their doubleness of personality: their ability to link what is particular ("singular") to what is general ("infinite") without losing sight of either.

Watson: "In [SH's] singular character the dual nature alternately asserted itself and his extreme astuteness represented. . . the reaction against the poetic and contemplative mood which occasionally predominated in him."
(66)
 - b. Both Holmes and Clay are true old-world craftsmen (pliers of trades) who know much about "infinite" and anticipate the moves of others. The difference between them and Wilson is that they recognize the need to consider "infinite" as a reality, while he is still living in a world of individuals.
 - c. Both have particular "signatures" or modes of operating - they "leave their unique mark" on a situation
 - d. Both make it their business to know London well.
 - e. Both understand human motivations clearly - can predict "normal" behavior and recognize deviations from the norm. Holmes doubts the motives of an apprentice who comes at half-pay; Clay recognizes that Wilson's greed and desire to feel distinguished will overcome any qualms he might have about the RHL.
 - f. Both Holmes and Clay show a protean ability to hold disparate aspects of experience in easy connection with each other. They have an ability to find singularity in the midst of infinite and to make a plausible "narrative" out of this connection.

- g. both are able to trace the outlines of hidden connections (Clay of the path between the pawnbroker and the bank, and Holmes of the implications of Clay's actions).
 - h. Clay uses his perception of the possibility of hidden connections to construct a scenario: go to work for Wilson, pretend to be developing pictures in the basement, get Wilson out of the picture, dig the tunnel, wait until Saturday to have maximum getaway time, rob the bank of its excess bullion.
 - i. Holmes uses his perception of the possibility of hidden connections to reconstruct Clay's thinking. His only physical clues - the location of the bank building, the dirty knees of Clay's pants, the apparently hollow ground - are flung pretty far apart. To make his deductions, he has to THINK LIKE CLAY.
6. What allows Holmes to prevail over Clay?
- a. Perhaps it's Clay's physical appearance - which is twice "singular" - that has gotten him caught. Holmes first identifies him by his facial description; then a glance at his pants shows that he's been digging holes. Then again, his name, "Clay," is a primary clue to the solution of the mystery: he's digging a tunnel, after all. His outer appearance and name - the things that make us most "individual" - wind up doing him in, making him stand out as a clue (like Wilson's shiny cuffs or Chinese coin watch-chain).
 - b. When the two "singular" geniuses encounter one another, they are struggling for the ultimate "singularity" to be bestowed in the final spotlight. This is what Holmes is looking for when he rudely silences the bank manager and what Clay seeks when he asks to be treated in accordance with his "royal blood."
 - c. As soon as Holmes identifies and collars Clay - remember that the Inspector says he has not been able to catch sight of Clay before - Clay's "singularity" fades into a liability instead of an asset. He has been "fingering." Now he will become part of an undifferentiated mass. Clay's arrest and relegation to the class of prisoners deprives him of his unique, singular status; now he's just another bad guy.
 - d. The only form of "singularity" about Clay that remains is his contribution to the case itself: Holmes says, "it is one of the most singular which I have listened to for some time." His big contribution is that he's relieved Holmes - and the reader - from the boredom of normal life.