

The Victorian Gothic Short Story
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Lecture – 12
Arthur Conan Doyle
The Red-Headed League - II

Hello and welcome back to this session on the Red-Headed League. I am going to talk a little bit about John Clay because he is exciting as a physical figure as well as a criminal mastermind. Physically he is interesting because he has a very small stature and if you read the story closely, you will notice that his hands are also very fragile almost feminine in appearance. So, there is something significant about his physical appearance. Of course, we are also told that he is very stout and agile and that has associations with the primitive and kind of animalistic aspects of these criminal figures and we are also reminded of figures such as Edward Hyde from the Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. So, physically this criminal mastermind John Clay is very interesting and his name is also exciting because the name Clay also tells us that his, he is symbolically associated with the baser natures of human species. So, but then the narrator also tells us that he has noble blood in him and then he had been to Eton and Oxford-- these are elite higher institutions of learning. So, on the whole we do get a sense that he is an extremely complex figure and we need to kind of unpack these physical and criminal aspects of this mastermind in The Red Headed League.

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John Watson

- My limbs were weary and stiff, for I feared to change my position; yet my nerves were worked up to the highest pitch of tension, and my hearing was so acute that I could not only hear the gentle breathing of my companions, but I could distinguish the deeper, heavier in-breath of the bulky Jones from the thin, sighing note of the bank director.

*Gothic
supernatural
& sensation
fiction*



And, now we need to remember that John Watson, Holmes, the bank's director Mr. Merryweather and members of the police are waiting in the cellars of this bank and at this stage Watson has something to say about the tension that is almost physically visible to the people who are waiting in this place. Watson says that 'My limbs were weary and stiff for a fear to change my position, yet my nerves were worked up to the highest pitch of tension and my hearing was acute. So, acute that I could not only hear the gentle breathing of my companions, but I could distinguish the heavier, the deeper heavier inbreath of the bulky Jones from the thin sighing note of the bank director'. So, it is a very atmospheric scene. If you could imagine a dark place underneath the bank where the gold of the bank is stored in big crates and we have these men hiding, waiting for John Clay, who is passing off as Vincent Spaulding an assistant of Jabez Wilson and his accomplice to come through and catch them in the act of robbing the bank.

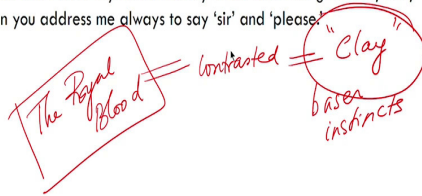
So, Watson's description of the situation is exciting because, it gives us the tension it kind of gives us the mood of the scene in a very very vivid manner and that is done through the capacity of Watson it in distinguishing the different kinds of breathing. If you look at the gentle breathing of his companions, he is able to distinguish the heavier breathing of the bulky Jones from the police force and the sighing note of the bank director Mr. Merryweather and such descriptions I would suggest are the traces of sensation fiction, the fiction of horror, the gothic fiction which is at pains to kind of depict the nervous tension of the participants in a scary horrifying scene. So, we do get

elements of the gothic, supernatural and sensation fiction here in this set of description about the mood inside the underground of the bank.

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John Clay

- "I beg that you will not touch me with your filthy hands," remarked our prisoner as the handcuffs clattered upon his wrists. "You may not be aware that I have royal blood in my veins. Have the goodness, also, when you address me always to say 'sir' and 'please'."



Now, the men do capture John Clay when he comes through the tunnel that he has dug with the help of his accomplice and the policeman Jones is very quick to catch him, even though his friend does escape back through the tunnel, but they have other policemen waiting to capture Duncan Ross, who also passed off as William Morris in this story. So, his accomplice will also be caught at the other end of the tunnel back in the cell of Jabez Wilson. So, when John Clay is arrested by Jones he says that 'I beg that you will not touch me with your filthy hands, remarked our prisoner as the handcuffs clattered upon his wrists. You may not be aware that I have royal blood in my veins. Have the goodness also when you address me always to say sir and please'. So, this is the dominant identity that John Clay who is also known as Vincent Spaulding in the story wants to project to the audience, the royal blood. But this identity is contrasted in the story as I pointed out earlier, with the baser instincts that he embodies and which is signified in his surname Clay. So, we are unable to square we the readers are unable to square these varying strands of identities that are woven in the character of John Clay. So, he has gone to institutions such as Eton and Oxford, which are institutions which accommodate elite students primarily and at the same time he has very base qualities such as murdering, forgery and other evil minded ways which associates him with the primitive, the base qualities in human species and which is also as I said pointed out by his surname.

So, he is very supercilious when Jones arrests him and he says that do not touch me, do not dare to touch me and says and he says that have the goodness also to address me as sir and please. So, he wants that identity to be acknowledged even though he is a criminal and that he has been caught robbing the bank. And this reminds me of Artful Dodger in Dickens's Oliver Twist and when Artful Dodger who is a petty thief in the group of Fagin, when he is arrested he also puts up a similar show of pomposity and superciliousness and he is very condescending towards the people who try him at court, towards the lawyer and the rest of the crowd who is watching him. So, there is a kind of a parallel in the scene with Dickens's work and we also realize that this is also a type in criminal characterization, where criminals once they are arrested also play upon or pretend to be members of the gentility and nobility in order to seek some kind of immunity from the law.

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Sherlock Holmes

- In his singular character the dual nature alternately asserted itself, and his extreme exactness and astuteness represented, as I have often thought, the reaction against the poetic and contemplative mood which occasionally predominated in him.



Now, I want to focus on the dual nature in Sherlock Holmes, we have seen this hybrid quality in John Clay. John Clay slash Vincent Spaulding and I want to focus a little bit on the dual nature that Watson spots in his friend. In his singular, singular means unique, in his singular character the dual nature alternately asserted itself and his extreme exactness and astuteness represented as I have often thought, the reaction against the poetic and the contemplative mood which occasionally predominated in him. In other words we have two distinct qualities in Holmes, one is the poetic and the contemplative mood and we have the extreme exactness and acuteness which is against this concept of

the poetic and the reflective mood. So, these two different qualities are jostling cheek by jowl inside the framework, the spiritual framework of Sherlock Holmes and in fact, Watson assumes that this exactness and astuteness are a reaction to the poetic and the contemplative mood of Holmes so, that these two moods are at war with one another and this is very interesting because there is a duality in human species which we can see in the representation of John Clay and we can also see somewhat in Jabez Wilson who is a working class figure, who is trying to pass off as a gentleman who is also very pompous and supercilious. And so, we have the duality in human nature represented in several characters in The Red Headed League from John Clay through Jabez Wilson to Sherlock Holmes the great detective himself.

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John Watson

□ I trust that I am not more dense than my neighbours, but I was always oppressed with a sense of my own stupidity in my dealings with Sherlock Holmes. Here I had heard what he had heard, I had seen what he had seen, and yet from his words it was evident that he saw clearly not only what had happened but what was about to happen, while to me the whole business was still confused and grotesque.



This perspective that Watson has in the story for us is significant because it is trying to differentiate the mind of Holmes from the rest of humanity and in that humanity Watson is also present and he is almost the representative of the readers. And Watson says that, I trust that I am not more dense than my neighbors, but I always, but I was always oppressed with a sense of my own stupidity in my dealings with Sherlock Holmes. Here I had heard what he had heard, I had seen what he had seen and yet from his words, it was evident that he saw clearly not only what had happened, but what was about to happen while to me the whole business was still confused and grotesque.

So, at one level he is clearly suggesting that he is stupid and that Holmes is awesome and magnificent because he is able to work things out whereas, he is not able to. On another level we are also told that that this is the status of many of the readers who are following the story, because they are also clueless as to what has happened in the past and what is going to happen in the future. So, for readers and for Watson what has happened is a confused and grotesque set of events whereas, the brilliant detective is able to order this confusion, make sense of this confusion and lay out a neat plot which he trots over and takes the readers with him and explains the grotesque set of incidents and scenes that are shown to us and he is able to explain everything away in a logical manner at the end of the story. So, what is exciting about Holmes is also established which is that he is able to understand very clearly the mysterious past and he is able to predict what is going to happen. And, that is what happens in the case of The Red Headed League as soon as he hears about the story of the advertisement which is attracting or taking Jabez Wilson away from his pawn broking business into an office where he is made to sit for a couple of hours together without leaving the building. Holmes is able to understand that there are events at play which wants Wilson away from his place and he figures out that it is something to do with money and not any other vulgar business meaning there is no sexual plot involved, whereas, there is a money plot is involved. And, that money plot would mean that the figures the accomplices the criminals who are inside Jabez Wilson's pawn broking business are going to rob a bank.

So, he is able to understand the past clearly and when he visits the pawn broking business, he is able to understand through his travels to the street which is abutting on Jabez Wilson's pawn broking business, he is able to figure out that there is a tunnel that's being dug from Wilson's pawn broking business to the city bank which is in the neighborhood. So, this ability to predict the future is what is exciting about The Red Headed League narrative. Because we know that something untoward is happening and that Vincent Spaulding is somehow criminally associated because we can read from the reactions of Holmes that he kind of guesses at the nature of this very expert, smart assistant of Jabez Wilson. So, all these clues tell us that something untoward is going to happen, but what is the real mystery is that Sherlock Holmes is making arrangements to capture the criminals, when they are about to proceed with their criminal activity.

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The break-in

□ At first it was but a lurid spark upon the stone pavement. Then it lengthened out until it became a yellow line, and then, without any warning or sound, a gash seemed to open and a hand appeared, a white, almost womanly hand, which felt about in the centre of the little area of light. For a minute or more the hand, with its writhing fingers, protruded out of the floor. Then it was withdrawn as suddenly as it appeared, and all was dark again save the single lurid spark which marked a chink between the stones

*Gothic
Supernatural*



Now, the break-in is very interesting, the break-in into the bank is very interesting because of the physical attributes of John Clay and look at the manner in which John Clay makes an appearance into the cellar of the bank. And, I am going to read that description because it is very exciting because it also once again brings out the atmospheric nature of that crime scene. 'At first it was, but a lurid spark upon the stone pavement, then it lengthened out until it became a yellow line and then without any warning or sound a gash seemed to open and a hand appeared, a white almost womanly hand which felt about in the center of the little area of light, for a minute or more the hand with its writhing fingers protruded out of the floor, then it was withdrawn as suddenly as it appeared and all was dark again save the single lurid spark which marked the chink between the stones.' So, you can imagine the scene there. It is very dark. Everybody is in darkness, nobody is lighting a light and Holmes and his companions are waiting in the darkness and suddenly there is a lurid spark, a garish spark of light upon the stone pavement and that stone is removed and there is a hand. And look at the way it is described- a gash seemed to open, gash would mean an injury, a wound and it seems as if there the opening is like a wound, which is coming to the surface. A gash seemed to open and a hand appeared and that is the hand of John Clay. A white almost womanly hand and, it's very exciting, this description, this feminine attribute or is it the attribute of the upper classes who have very soft gentle womanly hands because they are not used to manual labour.

You can compare this hand with that of Jabez Wilson's hand which is a rough big hand because he has been a ship's carpenter and he has also done a lot of writing as a different kind of physical labour. So, a hand appears from underneath and again the gothic supernatural aspect of the scene is very clear. It is as if a body has come-- a dead body is kind of coming to the surface, a hand that is appearing from underneath and it is kind of feeling about around the floor and for a minute or more the hand with its writhing fingers protruded out of the floor. So, this scene with this protruding hand and writhing fingers kind of establishes the gothic supernatural mood and that is what I wanted to highlight in this particular scene, and suddenly the hand is withdrawn and everything is dark again. And then once again John Clay opens that wound, so to speak, and he comes out through the cellar to that through that opening and he is caught by the police. So, at moments in the story we do get all these gothic sensational, supernatural elements in this detective fiction. So, Holmes is harnessing, Holmes is harnessing the narrative of horror that has come before him and he is coming at the tail end of a big tradition which is about all these unnatural events and activities and people.

Thanks for watching, I will continue in the next session.