Using Literature to Promote Awareness

"The Adventure of the Devil's Foot"

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I shall move quickly from a synopsis of one of my favorite Sherlock Holmes stories, "The Adventure of the Devil's Foot" (Doyle, 1964) to a characterization of two salient moral issues which the story raises. The first issue concerns the relation between a formalized legal system and what I shall call judicial good judgment. The second issue concerns two ways in which it is possible to act outside of the law: one way provides fertile ground for evil, the second way builds upon and refines the very idea of law. Finally, I shall offer suggestions for introducing this Sherlock Holmes story to junior high school and high school students such that it may increase their growing awareness of moral situations.

In the story, Mortimer Tregennis steals an extremely poisonous African root (which looks like a devil's foot) from Dr. Sterndale, the great African lion hunter and explorer. Then, for personal economic gain, Tregennis uses this root to poison his sister and two brothers. Meanwhile, Sterndale, who has for years been in love with Tregennis's sister, and who at the time of the murder had started by boat back to Africa, receives notice of the woman's death and returns quickly to England. There he discovers that Tregennis was the murderer. Believing he could not prove this in court, Sterndale poisons Tregennis in the same way Tregennis had poisoned the others. In the course of the story, Holmes, our trusty sleuth, discovers all. In his last interview with Sterndale — to which we shall turn shortly — Holmes confronts Sterndale with the murder of Tregennis.

The celebrated silhouette, posed here by Basil Rathbone.

Before highlighting moral issues raised by this story, I wish to make a few general points related to criminal action and law. To begin, even when criminal actions appear identical (e.g., every case of murder involves a dead person), every one is different because of the different motivations and personalities of those involved and because of the different social context in which every crime is embedded. For instance, one person may engage in premeditated murder to revenge a personal injustice done to oneself, another person to revenge a personal injustice to a loved one, a third person to revenge the death of a friend, an acquaintance, or even an unloved family member, and so on.

To account for the inherent differences in every case, our system of law — which aims to provide a basis for fair assignment of punishment — incorporates two overarching features. The first is the formal or systematic part; it specifies as clearly as possible distinguishing aspects between cases that warrant different assessments, as, say, between voluntary and involuntary manslaughter. The second less salient feature that provides a basis for fairness lies in what I call judicial "good judgment." That is, when the formal part of the system becomes unable to systematize differences among cases but human intuition clearly discerns differences, judges often do (and should) act on the basis of that intuition.

It is this judicial good judgment that Holmes demonstrates in his last interview with Sterndale. During the interview, Sterndale tells his side of the story. He emphasizes the horribleness of Tregennis's crime, the love he felt for Tregennis's sister, and the improbability of achieving justice through the courts. The interview ends as follows:

"There is my story, Mr. Holmes . . . I am in your hands . . ."

Holmes sat for some little time in silence.

"What were your plans?" he [Holmes] asked at last.

"I had intended to bury myself in central Africa. My work there is but half finished."

"Go and do the other half," said Holmes. "I, at least, am not prepared to prevent you."

Dr. Sterndale raised his giant figure, bowed gravely, and walked from the arbour. (p. 174)

By letting Sterndale return to Africa, Holmes does not aid the law, which would state roughly that a murderer should be put on trial and punished.

However, this is not to say that Holmes makes his decision easily. He had earlier left undisturbed half the remains of the poison, for the police to discover if they could. Holmes recognizes that the police may catch Sterndale, and he is not prepared to go further than he has in promoting Sterndale's freedom. In addition, Holmes is not sure what the right action would have been had he himself been

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# of Moral Situations

Holmes and Watson recover from a poisonous substance in Gilbert Holiday's illustration accompanying "The Adventure of the Devil's Foot."

placed in Sterndale's position. He says, "I have never loved, Watson, but if I did and if the woman I loved had met such an end, I might act even as our lawless lion-hunter has done. Who knows?" (p. 174).

In short, Holmes confronts a situation that does not lend itself easily to legal formalization (if Sterndale gets off, why not all murderers who kill to revenge the murder of a loved one?). Yet Holmes's judicial judgment is, I believe, the correct one, one that depends upon good judgment rather than legal systematization. And it is for this reason that I suspect most readers applaud Holmes's decision.

I would like now to point to a character trait to which we are drawn in Holmes, and to the extent that it characterizes Sterndale, it explains what I take to be some commonality between these two main figures. Most of us live conventional lives: as youngsters, we go to school, and at some later point we take on jobs and family and become encumbered with many responsibilities. Within the context of the resulting daily bustle and obligations, there is a part of us which would like to part company with the "rat race." Some of the appeal of the cowboy in our modern society (from Marlboro ads to John Wayne reruns to country and western music motifs) stems from the cowboy's portrayal as a loner who rebuffs convention and takes life and law into his own hands. Such, then, captures some of the appeal of Sterndale. As Sterndale tells Holmes: "I have spent much of my life outside the law, and . . . have come at last to be a law to myself" (p. 173).

As much as we may admire the individualist and loner in Sterndale, however, I think we are also uneasy with the power he wields. How different is Sterndale's position from that of any dictator? Dictators take the law into their own hands — and, as it is said, power corrupts, and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely. It is in this sense that Sterndale's character is flawed; not flawed in how he himself acts on it, but in the sense that the same qualities provide fertile ground for great evil.

Holmes portrays the same individualistic loner and yet builds upon and refines the idea of law, rather than stepping outside it. He rejects the legal system that would require his aid in Sterndale's arrest and bases his action (of letting Sterndale go back to Africa) on what I called judicial good judgment. Moreover, Holmes himself is not entirely settled about what morality requires of Sterndale, and it is this level of internal conflict — which may lead to humility — which I believe is necessary for those who, in exercising good judgment, proceed to step beyond formalized law.

We can note a further example of this character trait in Holmes. Recall that in the beginning of the story, Watson explains that he has been unable to chronicle many of Holmes's cases because of the sleuth's aversion to publicity:

To his [Holmes's] sombre and cynical spirit all popular applause was always abhorrent, and nothing amused him more at the end of a successful case than to hand over the actual exposure to some orthodox official, and to listen with a mocking smile to the general chorus of misplaced congratulation. (p. 148)

Holmes does not need the praise, recommendations, promotions, and monetary gains that are usually seen as the goal and rewards, if not content, of conventional life. In fact, he snubs his nose to it all and pursues his vocation as an end unto itself. But what adds the balance to Holmes is that his vocation is one that in fact builds upon the law and enhances the well-being of civilization. In short, what Holmes, as a character, manages to pull off so well is the blending of a principled and caring person, responsible to himself, within the context of a social and legal system which he accepts. This, in my view, is the difficult path that those like Gandhi and Martin Luther King walked along, individually resisting part of the law while working within its context, and it is part of the reason for the power of Holmes as a fictional character.

Teaching suggestions

Have students read the story and afterward, if you wish, the above essay. For discussion or written assignments draw upon some of the following questions and issues:

1. What do you admire about Holmes? About Sterndale? In what ways are Holmes and Sterndale similar and in what ways are they different?
2. What do you think about Sterndale's decision to murder Tregennis after Tregennis had killed the woman he loved?
3. What do you think about Holmes's decision to keep to himself findings about the case and to let Sterndale return to Africa?
4. What significance do you place on the fact that Holmes did not actually ever undermine the police efforts to discover the murderer of Tregennis? How can you make sense of this when Holmes allowed Sterndale to return to Africa?
5. It has been said that Holmes is an analytical and emotionally cold character. In what ways do you agree and disagree with this statement?
6. Holmes is uninterested in public applause. Is this necessarily a sign of humility? What does it mean to be humble?
7. If you were a judge, and Sterndale was brought before you in a court of law, what would be your verdict and punishment (if any?) Defend your judgment taking into account (a) a defence attorney's claim that the case involves special circumstances that obviate the need for punishment and (b) a prosecutor's claim that society must uphold the law, which states that murderers should be convicted and punished.
8. In light of the distinctions between Holmes and Sterndale, consider a popular historical or current political figure who has acted contrary to law (e.g., Gandhi or, more recently, Oliver North). How do you judge whether such a person is acting correctly? In what ways might it be important that such a person feel some tension or ambiguity when moving beyond formalized law rather than a blind certainty that the action is right? ■

Reference

Doyle, Sir A. C. (1964). *His last bow.* New York: Berkley Publishing Corporation.

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