

# How is mystery and suspense cr



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How is mystery and suspense created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in the short stories

' The Engineers Thumb',

' The Beryl Coronet' and ' Charles Augustus Milverton'

In this essay, I will compare and analyse how Sir Arthur Conan Doyle creates mystery and suspense in three short stories. In retrospect, mystery and suspense go together. If one of the two is present in a story, so is another. Both of these elements are evident in the three short stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. I intend to go into the intriguing world of this master of mystery and explore the methods used by the writer. I aim to analyze the stories and highlight common traits in the way in which he creates mystery and suspense. In order to fully grasp the essence of the stories, we must first know some background information about the writer and the period in which the characters involved in the stories lived.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle studied medicine in Edinburgh and graduated in 1881. He set up practice soon afterwards but unfortunately his patients were far and few between. He then turned to writing. In the duration of his stay in Edinburgh, he met Joseph Bell who was a professor at the University that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle attended. Bell had an intriguing hobby of deducing people's characters from their appearance. Bell became the model for the protagonist of the Sherlock Holmes stories, which were introduced in 1887. In these stories, Doyle portrays himself as Dr. Watson, a friend of Holmes who spends a great amount of time with him.

The story of 'The Engineer's Thumb'; starts in a way that is typical of many of the Sherlock Holmes stories. Dr Watson is recalling one of the numerous mysteries that he and his friend have solved and he explains which story he is going to tell and why he is going to tell the story. By telling us the reasons for telling the story, the author is provoking the interest of the reader. He also makes the story seem realistic thus gaining the readers belief, which is vital in a story because people prefer not to read stories that develop no sense of credibility. The reader feels that they must read on and find out more about the details offered by the writer. This method is simultaneously setting the story whilst gaining the reader's attention. Another way he builds of the inquisitiveness of the reader is by showing the impacts of the event such as 'The Engineers Thumb'; and where he states the effect the case made on him.

' And the lapse of two years has hardly served to weaken the effect.';

This style makes the reader ponder what the event was that made such a considerable impact on Dr Watson.

When the client is introduced, he appears to be visibly shaken and has a stump where his thumb used to be. It is obvious to the reader that something has happened. This provokes the reader curiosity to wonder about what has happened to this man. The rest of the story is spent explaining the events that lead up to the patient coming into the office with his thumb cut off. I call this 'BABC'; format 'b'; being the section where you are already in the turn of events. 'A'; is the beginning of the story, and 'C'; is continuing on from point 'B'; in the story. In other words, Doyle starts the

story abruptly where the patient comes in. He then explains the events proceeding to that and he then describes the subsequent events. The solution to the story is always provided at ' C';.

Many of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's short stories conform to this style, as do many other short story writers. The reason this method builds up mystery is that the reader is entering the story where all the events have already taken place so the reader is often pondering about what events have occurred previously. He uses this method to build up the story on a large scale, the way that he builds up the story and lays down the plot on a smaller scale is by letting the reader obtain small but very significant parts of information of the plot over a long period of time. By doing this, Doyle is maintaining the readers interest by giving out the significant facts while building up a climax to the next fact over a long period thus building up tension. This method of climax is used in all of Doyle's short stories and could be perceived as a key feature of his style.

Returning now to the subject of the story, when the patient is admitted he was laughing wildly and the author states;

' He was off in one of those hysterical outbursts which come on a strong nature

When some great crisis is over and gone';

The reader here is wondering what the crisis was and thus mystery is created. One of the main ways that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle creates mystery and suspense in this short story is through the unknown. What is known is

less frightening than what is unknown and Doyle uses this fact to the fullest extent possible. The reader also knows that something significant has happened but Sir Arthur Conan Doyle lets out only small clues (as stated before) as to what it was. For instance, where he exclaims that it was,

‘ A murderous attack’;.

By exerting these statements, he is maintaining the suspense without copious revelation of the full plot of the story. Doyle emphasizes on the seriousness of the event in the sentence,

‘ Railway cases were seldom trivial’;

The above sentence is a segment of the climax of suspense and mystery leading to the point where the patient tells his story. Other sentences that follow suit are those listed below.

‘ I was very weak, but I have had a good deal to go through.’;

‘ I should be surprised if they believed my statement, for it is a very extraordinary one.’;

‘ I shall not feel easy until I have told my story.’;

The first sentence is involved in the climax because it mentions the scale of the event that has taken place, the second is important because it mentions how different his story is from all others and the third story is significant because it shows how much the client was affected by the event.

When the climax has been reached, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle describes the events that took place by using the patient to narrate the story to the reader. Close to the beginning of when he starts to tell his, story the client states,

‘ I suppose that everyone finds his first independent start in business a dreary experience’;

This extremely interesting because Doyle also had problems when he set up his business. This is an example of Doyle basing part of his story on reality that is common in his stories.

When the client is chosen for the secrecy and his discreetness, the reader ponders on why. Mystery is in use here because the secrecy is suspicious. The reader is wondering why secrecy is so vital in such a simple case.

Imperfect notches in the storyline build up the tension because the reader knows something is wrong but they cannot pinpoint it exactly, thus amplifying the effect. This is shown in the sentence below,

‘ I could not think that his explanation of the fuller’s earth was sufficient.’

At this point, the reader is wondering what the machine is really used for and why they were lying to him. Behavior that is even more suspicious is witnessed by the reader when the client is pushed into the carriage as if they were trying to cover something up. The climax of suspicion is reached where the servant enters the room, shaken and tells him that he must leave. At this point, the protagonist of the story faces a choice, which is imminent in many of Doyle’s stories. The protagonist has to choose whether he will stay and

ignore the warnings or leave. He chose to stay due to money, which superceded his initial fears. This choice causes suspense because the reader knows that something is going to happen to the protagonist as they found out at the beginning of the story. At this point, the reader has seen the result and the build up to the event and so the mystery and suspense is immense for them. This can be compared to if they were just being told the story from the beginning to the end this is one of the advantages of ' ABAC' form. After this point in the story, mystery and suspense is not in place because Sir Arthur Conan Doyle is simply explaining the turn of events. At the end of the story it conforms to a ' happy conclusion' in which all the events are explained and the mystery and suspense are all dulled.

The ' happy conclusion' is that the client, although he has lost his thumb has gained popularity through the case. This can be proven by looking at the very beginning of the story where Sir Arthur Conan Doyle notes that the case has been published many times before.

The first sentence of ' The Beryl Coronet'; is ironic, even humorous and grasps the reader's attention.

' Holmes,' said I, as I stood one morning in our bow window looking down the street, ' Here is a madman coming along. It seems rather sad that his relatives should

Allow him to come out alone.';

This sentence is funny because one soon finds out that the character is, in fact a distinguished person, which provides a great contrast.

In 'The Beryl Coronet', Doyle briefly describes the characters then rapidly proceeds to describe the story. This has a great impact on the story in the way that the reader does not feel at any point uninterested. It also means that the story is entering a section of suspense early in the story. This style conforms to the short story genre as little time is spent normally describing the character. It is the events that take place that matter and these often describe or define the character instead. The quote is the first section of suspense.

'The very nobles of this land may suffer unless some way be found out of this horrible affair.';

The quoted sentence is very powerful in that it grasps attention and creates the first section of suspense in the story by mentioning the seriousness of the affair that it describes as 'horrible'. It is also powerful because it mentions the nobles of the land.

One aspect of style that Doyle uses to the fullest extent possible in this story is vocabulary. He uses very effective language such as

'Dangerously, wearily, writhed, grief.';

These words convey suspense and tension to the reader as they are all related in some way to evil. They show how much effect the event had on the client.

Major themes of 'The Beryl Coronet' are nobility, royalty, the prosperous and money. All of these things build up tension because in the 1900's, and even more today, money was the backbone of society. It is what we all work



for, what we spend all our lives working towards and what we leave when we die. It is therefore a very powerful element to be included in a story. This theme is evident where the client is rich and the person who trusted even richer.

‘ One of the highest, noblest, most exalted names in England.’;

Another aspect that produces suspense is not only the wealth of the people involved, but also the great value of the coronet.

‘ One of the most precious public possessions of the empire.’;

The price of the object is important because if it were lost there would be a greater sense of loss. The circumstances that Doyle creates are very effective in creating suspense and mystery than would otherwise, for instance, if he wrote the story as a wealthy man giving in a beryl coronet. The effect of suspense would be far less if it was a man from the middle class giving in a silver trumpet.

In this particular story, Doyle describes only two people’s characters, only because of relevance to the story. These characters are Arthur and Mary. Doyle portrays these two characters as opposites, good and evil. He describes the characters as clear-cut personalities, Arthur is evil, and Mary is good. He makes the reader believe that Arthur and Mary would behave outside these stereotypical images. This is effective in building up mystery because the reader believes in the way in which Doyle describes their characters. When it comes to choosing which character did the crime. The reader does not know what to believe, the past evidence of the persons

character or the present evidence, this is a very effective method. At the end of the story, Doyle fuses both together and forms a viable conclusion.

Doyle describes Arthur as a bad person, this is proven wrong at the end of the story where he does something contrary to his past. This is due to love.

Below are two quotes describing Arthur's character,

' He has been a disappointment to me';

' He was wild, wayward, and, to speak the truth, I could not trust him in the handling of large sums of money.';

These quotes show that Arthur was an untrustworthy character and a squanderer of money. The reason these sentences are also quite powerful is that it is Arthur's own father making these statements.

Arthur also seems suspicious in the way in which he talks,

' Well I hope to goodness the house won't get burgled tonight';

This seems like very suspicious behavior for him.

Doyle describes Mary as a good person, for instance, in the quote he writes,

' Sweet, loving, beautiful, a wonderful manager and housekeeper, yet as tender

and quiet as women can be.';

Both of these descriptions are deceptive because they are both contradicted at the end of the story. When Arthur is seen with the broken coronet in his

hand, the reader immediately assumes that it was him because he is the ‘bad’ character.

Doyle uses imagery with these two characters comparing them as good and evil. What is so interesting about his story is that at the end, good becomes evil and evil becomes good.

One aspect that contributes to the mystery of the piece is how all the evidence points towards Arthur and yet how Holmes is convinced that it was someone else from the beginning. This builds up mystery because the reader does not find out until the end who committed the crime and is left to ponder who did it for the most of the beginning of the story.

In the beginning of Charles Augustus Milverton, the author addresses the reader personally

‘The reader will excuse me if I conceal the date.’;

The fact that the reader is mentioned in the story makes the reader feel that he/she is involved in the story and that the story is non-fiction, even though it is fiction. This forms the basis on which Doyle can build up suspense. When he is describing the character of Charles Augustus Milverton, he describes him as an extremely evil person,

‘He is the worst man in London, he is the king of blackmailers.’;

This sentence shows how evil the man is. Doyle also compares the feeling he gets around him to the feeling he gets looking at the snakes in the London zoo. This method helps fabricate suspense, both because the reader is trying

to comprehend what the man has done to make him such a bad man. Doyle describes Milverton as an evil man, yet as a person with great skill in his line of work. One could even say that Holmes admires his work even though he is on the other side of the law, for instance he describes him as the king of blackmailers, which is complimentary in a sense. This is also evident where he states

‘ The fellow is a genius in his way, and would have made mark in some more savory trade.’;

The vocabulary that is used to describe Milverton is evil for instance the words listed below.

‘ Ruffian, heart of marble, worst, treacherous and torture.’;

All of these sections of vocabulary add up to give an end result, which is an atmosphere of evil hatred.

Another way that suspense is built up in this story is the point where they are in the room and Sherlock Holmes tells Watson to shut Milverton in the room. This one event creates suspense for the rest of the story because the reader is waiting for the point for Milverton to be captured.

The main section in this story is where they are preparing to rob the house and when they actually rob it. The first evident segment of suspense and mystery being built up is where they are considering whether it is morally acceptable to do what they are doing. This builds up suspense because they are considering the dangers of what they are about to do and comparing it to other things. The sentences are short during this segment. These probably

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intended to show the speed of thought and nervousness this is because much more thoughts go through your head when you are put under pressure and you also speak faster, as I imagine Holmes and Watson are. The pace of the story then slows down again when they have finished planning and they are going to the house. When they reach the house, the pace of the story speeds up once more again and the length of the sentences declines. All of the sentences from now until the end of the robbery are describing their actions. The vocabulary at this point becomes very urgent and serious,

‘ We had become felons in the eye of the law’;

Rather than using short sentence structure, Doyle uses quite long sentences with frequent commas, thus giving the same effect. The climax of the suspense is the few sentences quoted below.

‘ There was a noise somewhere in the house. A door slammed in the distance. Then a confused, dull murmur broke itself into the measured thud of heavy footsteps rapidly approaching. They were in the passage outside the room. They paused at the door. The door opened.’;

This quote is also the climax of mystery because the reader does not know who the person is. In the quote the sentence structure is short, emphasizing on the fast speed of events. The vocabulary used also emphasizes on the climax of the story. I have underlined the vocabulary that builds up the tension in the climax. It is also at the climax of Holmes’s and Watson’s robbery and it is unexpected, causing panic. There is then an anticlimax in the story where they are simply watching Milverton from the curtains. There is then another climax where a woman enters the room whose life he has

ruined. There is quite a lot of tension where they are having an argument because the reader does not know anything about the woman. She then shoots him. This then means that the whole household was awoken by the gunshots, thus creating suspense because Holmes and Watson had to get the letters and escape. During their escape, suspense was high once again where they were running from their pursuers.

I will now compare the three stories and similarities and differences in his style in each of the three stories.

When Doyle is describing a character, he wastes little space and rather than describe their personality, he describes their physical appearance. This method of writing means that the reader knows what a character looks like while also deducing his/her character from that. The general rule that I have discovered about describing the characters is that Doyle notes the age, clothes and features of the person. Below is an example of Doyle describing a character.

‘ He was quietly dressed in a suit of heather tweed, with a soft cap, which he had laid down upon my books. He was young not more than five and twenty, I should say, with a strong masculine face’;

In the quote above, the protagonist of “ The Engineer’s Thumb” is described. This method of description of a person’s character aides in the building up of mystery in two ways. The first way is that it takes up less space so the author can focus on building up mystery and suspense. The second way is that the reader is not completely certain about the behavior of the character therefore the character actions are less predictable and more mysterious.

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This is evident in all three of the stories except 'The Beryl Coronet'; where Doyle describes the characters and the background information on Mary and Arthur. It was vital in that story to describe the characters, as Doyle was trying to emphasize on the differences between the two characters.

In each of the three stories, the protagonist of the story faces an important choice. The choice is normally one of the key elements of the story. In 'The Engineer's Thumb';, it is Hatherley, the client who faces the choice. The choice is where the maid comes into the room and warns him of the danger and that he must go.

'For the love of heaven, get away from here before it is too late.';

He chooses to stay due to the fact that he was offered a large amount of money. In choosing wrongly, he brushed extremely close to death yet he supplies an exciting story to the reader. This choice supplies more suspense to the story because there is something much like dramatical irony where the reader knows that something terrible is going to happen to the main character. The character in the story denies this because he is blinded by his goal, which is money.

The choice faced in 'The Beryl Coronet'; is where Holder, the client, has to decide whether to let Arthur out for five minutes. He chooses to say, no. The reader later finds out that Arthur had wanted to get the beryls back. In this story, the protagonist chose wrongly because he assumes that it was Arthur's fault. If he had let Arthur go the story would not have been told.

The choice that is faced in the last story, Charles Augustus Milverton is an unusual one as it is faced by Holmes and Watson. The choice is whether to rob the house or to let evil prevail. They choose to rob the house. This choice is an unusual one because it is not a mistake since in the end, justice prevails. This could be because Holmes and Watson are the main characters in all of the stories and they always solve the crimes. If they chose to let the woman be blackmailed, there would be no happy ending which is my next point. All of the three choices in the stories help build up suspense because they are the fork in the road for the stories. Each character faces two options right or wrong. Doyle varies on what the character chooses and that makes his style individual and unique.

All of the short stories written by Doyle have a successful conclusion in some way that I have read. What makes the reader want to read on in these stories is because it is a happy ending because each ending is individual. In the engineers thumb, the happy ending is that the house was burnt down. In the beryl coronet, it is that they get the coronet back. In ' Charles Augustus Milverton'; the successful conclusion is that he is killed.

Each of the three short stories conforms to the short story genre by having a twist in them. These build up mystery because the reader does not know what the twist is going to be. The twist in ' The Engineer's Thumb';, is that he gains experience and popularity from the publicity that following the case. The twist in ' The Beryl Coronet'; is that it was Mary, not Arthur who stole the coronet. The twist in ' Charles Augustus Milverton'; was that someone shot Charles Augustus Milverton when they were robbing him and they were the suspects.



In all of the short stories, the characters appear to be clear cut good and evil. Good examples of this are Sherlock Holmes and Charles Augustus Milverton. The reader believes this to be the final description and the people do not change. This image is shattered in the beryl coronet with Mary and Arthur thus making the reader feel uneasy of their knowledge of the characters personalities (also known as mystery)

In my opinion, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle is a literary genius and his stories are works of art. I feel that his use of mystery and suspense in his stories was amazing and that his plots were unforgettable. The amount of knowledge I gained from reading his stories was immense. This man deserved his knighthood.