

## Literary Art in an Age of Formula Fiction and Mass Consumption: Double Coding in Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Blue Carbuncle"

"To the man who loves art for its own sake . . . it is frequently in the least important and lowest manifestations that the keenest pleasure is to be derived."

—Holmes to Watson in "The Copper Beeches"

The rapid expansion at the end of the nineteenth century of mass-market periodicals, such as the *Strand Magazine* in which the Holmes stories first appeared, opened a gap between literary and popular fiction and instigated a debate about literary standards—would the bad drive out the good?—and about the possible deleterious effect of reading popular fiction on the new mass audience that consumed it. As Frank Kermode wittily remarks, "The [eighteen] eighties and nineties saw a huge expansion in the reading public, or, if you like, an enlarged market for trash" (11).<sup>1</sup> The detective story was often singled out as the very type of the new mass-marketed "trash." Despite its invention by Edgar Allan Poe, it lacked a respectable literary pedigree. It was too close to Gothic and sensation fiction to be taken seriously as literature, and an author who wrote detective fiction was likely to be perceived as pandering to the masses and hence as having abandoned any claim to literary merit, which is precisely what Q. D. Leavis would later argue in her pioneering *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932).

One symptom of this cultural crisis was the art for art's sake movement of the 1880s and 1890s, which drew a clear distinction, one that Modernism inherited and reinforced,<sup>2</sup> between the popular and the literary, a distinction that was often expressed as an opposition between the unique and the mass-produced: the genuine work of art is one of a kind, unique; a piece of popular fiction is virtually indistinguishable from others of its kind because it has been mass-produced according to a formula (hence the pejorative term 'formula fiction'). Popular writers (like Conan Doyle) wrote to entertain the masses or to make money for themselves, whereas literary artists (like Henry James) wrote for the sake of their Art. It was not until John G. Cawelti's groundbreaking study *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* in 1976 that it became possible to treat popular fiction as seriously as literary fiction. As a successful writer with aspirations to write serious fiction, Arthur Conan Doyle was certainly aware of the conflict between writing for Art and writing for money and the masses. He claimed to have killed off Holmes so that he could devote his time to writing historical novels, which he considered a literary rather than a popular form. (His model was Sir Walter Scott, whom he admired, but during his lifetime and for a generation after his death, Scott was also an enormously popular writer whose novels had little influence on the direction of literary fiction.)

Conan Doyle became aware of the conflict between the literary and the popular in his own career while writing the Holmes stories for the recently launched *Strand Magazine*. That conflict forms the sub-text, or latent content, of "The Blue Carbuncle," the seventh Holmes story to appear in the *Strand*. At first glance, it seems to be nothing more than a formulaic Holmes story, but the serious issues that it raises—the role and status of art in society and the relation of art to morality—are ones that it shares with such contemporary literary fiction as Henry James's "The Real Thing," "The Figure in the Carpet," and "The Private Life." "The Blue Carbuncle" is thus double-coded. On one level it is a trivial piece of entertainment: "The matter is a perfectly trivial one" (149), Holmes tells Watson. But "The Blue Carbuncle" can also be read as a cunningly crafted, double-coded story—at once popular and literary—about the fate of art and the artist in a society of mass-marketed popular fiction. When "The Blue Carbuncle" is read as a literary story, Holmes the detective becomes a stand-in

for the artist Conan Doyle, and the story affirms its status as a unique work of art in a society of mass-produced works intended for mass consumption. The challenge facing Holmes the detective —how to find in a seedy, disreputable and violent story an “intellectual problem” (150) that is “striking and bizarre” (149) and thus worthy of his talent—is analogous to the challenge facing Conan Doyle the artist: how to transform a “disreputable” sub-genre of mass-produced fiction, the lowly detective story, into an original work of art. He does this by making this challenge the latent subject of this double-coded story. Its manifest content is of the puzzle of a unique gem deliberately concealed in a commercially produced goose. But if it is read for its latent literary content, it becomes the story of a unique work of art artfully concealed within a commercially produced piece of consumable formula fiction. Reading the story as double-coded will require us to abandon our presuppositions about what we “already know” we are supposed to find in a detective story, as well as our presuppositions about the firm distinction between literary and popular fiction.

**“The matter is a perfectly trivial one.”—Holmes to Watson in  
“The Blue Carbuncle”**

In “The Blue Carbuncle” the tension between the literary and the popular, the unique and the mass-produced, the true artist and the commercial writer, is prefigured by the contrast, in the opening sentence of the story, between the obviously aesthetic Holmes, smoking and lounging in his “purple dressing gown,” and the drab, utilitarian object he is examining, a battered felt hat: “He was lounging upon the sofa,” says Watson,

in a purple dressing gown, a pipe-rack within his reach upon the right, and a pile of crumpled morning papers, evidently newly studied, near at hand. Beside the couch was a wooden chair, and on the angle of the back hung a very seedy and disreputable hard felt hat, much the worse for wear, and cracked in several places. (149)

This description contrasts the aesthete with the “seedy and disreputable” material out of which the unique work of art must be fashioned. Holmes is most Holmes-like when he is portrayed in deepest thought, as he is here, lounging on the sofa while he detachedly examines the hat. He

adopts the pose of the aesthete contemplating Art. The “crumpled morning papers”—through which the known facts about the theft of the gem are later mediated to Holmes and to the reader—appear as the first obvious sign of the mass culture that literary fiction, in contrast to the sub-literary detective story, was ever more sharply defining itself against. The newspaper account of the “Hotel Cosmopolitan Jewel Robbery” will become part of the common raw material out of which Conan Doyle will create the unique work of art known as “The Blue Carbuncle.”

In addition to the newspapers, which are read, tossed into a pile and then discarded—the fate of much formula fiction—there are two other examples of the mass-produced in this story. One is the “battered billycock” (150) that Holmes is carefully examining as the story opens. Doyle’s choice of a billycock, a felt hat similar to a derby, is not merely fortuitous, for it reiterates the contrast between the mass-produced and the “absolutely unique” (155). According to the note in Richard Lancelyn Green’s Oxford edition of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, which is supported by the etymology given in *The American Heritage Dictionary* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.), the first billycock was in fact unique, for it was designed and custom-made in 1850 for William (“Billy”) Coke, nephew of Thomas William Coke, Earl of Leicester. The new style caught on and soon “billycocks,” so named after Billy Coke, were being mass-produced. Anyone could buy one. Even if this etymology is historically inaccurate (it is not given in the *OED*), the fact still remains that this etymology was widely believed, and Henry Baker’s billycock is likely to have been mass-produced rather than custom-made for him by a hatter.

The most obvious and most important examples of mass production in the story are those delectable geese that are mass-produced for the Christmas market (the story takes place during the Christmas season) by Mrs. Oakshott, egg and poultry supplier, of 117 Brixton Road. Her geese are raised and fattened for the sole purpose of being consumed by Londoners for their Christmas dinners. They are not country-bred, but urban geese, raised right in London. So alike are two of Mrs. Oakshott’s geese that her brother, the inept jewel thief James Ryder, mistakes a virtually identical one for the one in which he hid the blue carbuncle by forcing it into the bird’s gullet. Indeed, the geese are so alike that even Mrs. Oakshott can’t tell them apart. In the story, then, the unique, priceless jewel, the blue car-

buncle, is concealed in a common Christmas goose that is indistinguishable from all those other Christmas geese that contain nothing unique or priceless in them. If “The Blue Carbuncle” is read as a popular, mass-market detective story, it is valueless, indistinguishable artistically from the countless other mysteries commercially marketed in the *Strand Magazine* and similar periodicals. As Suzanne Ferguson astutely points out in her illuminating essay “The Rise of the Short Story in the Hierarchy of Genres,” “. . . works of popular art [. . .] are regarded by both their creators and their audience as *consumable*. Designed for immediate gratification, they are not expected to give pleasure and edification over a long period of time” (177; italics added). But if “The Blue Carbuncle” is read as a literary story, it will no longer be seen to be about such a “seedy and disreputable” subject as crime, but about the struggle of the artist to be true to his calling in a society that insists on treating art as just another consumable.

The connection between Mrs. Oakshott’s geese raised to be consumed by Londoners at their Christmas dinner tables and the formula stories written for consumption by readers of mass-market periodicals like the *Strand Magazine* finds support in a famous comment Conan Doyle made about being sated with the Holmes stories. “Poor Holmes is dead and damned,” he wrote in a letter to David Christie Murray; “I couldn’t revive him if I would (at least not for years), for I have had such an overdose of him that I feel towards him as I do towards *pâté de foie gras*, of which I once ate too much, so that the name of it gives me a sickly feeling to this day” (qtd. in Green, “Introduction” xii). Strictly speaking, of course, Conan Doyle is saying that he has had too much of Holmes, just as earlier he ate too much *pâté*. But the production of *pâté* is impossible without the mass forced feeding of geese. The association in the story may have been an unconscious one at the time, but the later comment suggests that geese, at least indirectly, had unpleasant associations for Conan Doyle.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to the mass-produced newspapers, billycocks and Christmas geese stands the “absolutely unique” blue carbuncle. But why a carbuncle, and why a blue one? The detective plot of the story does not require a particular kind of gemstone, and certainly nothing as improbable or unnatural as a blue carbuncle. All that is required is that it be extremely valuable and hence a target for thieves. A rare, valuable diamond, or even a violet amethyst, would do just as well. But in this double-coded story, the

priceless gem has to be double-coded too. It has to serve the needs of both the manifest detective story and of the latent literary story that together form “The Blue Carbuncle.” The detective story requires only that the stone be valuable; it’s the latent literary story that requires the carbuncle to be unique, for the (unique) stone is a metaphor for the (unique) literary story that bears its name.

A carbuncle is a semi-precious stone, not at all rare, and therefore not valuable. What makes this carbuncle so valuable is that it is unique. Carbuncles are most commonly red but can be any colour—except blue. Thus the blue carbuncle is not just any valuable stone that a jewel thief might be interested in. “It’s more than a precious stone,” says Holmes. “It is *the* precious stone.” He adds, “It is absolutely unique, and its value can only be conjectured, but the reward offered of a thousand pounds is certainly not within a twentieth part of the market price” (155). The stone is “absolutely unique,” which is precisely what one would say of a genuine literary work of art, as opposed to works of formula fiction mass-produced and sold to a middle-brow periodical like the *Strand Magazine* for consumption by a mass audience, like so many fatted geese. A central binary opposition in the story, then, is the one between the “absolutely unique” and the mass-produced, between the unique work of art and the mass-produced piece of popular fiction. A blue carbuncle is thus a contradiction, like a literary detective story. It also appears to violate the laws of nature, and is therefore aesthetically connected to that most notorious unnatural rarity, and symbol of the *fin-de-siècle*—the green carnation.

Something rare and beautiful has come out of something common and ordinary, which is exactly what Holmes says of the blue stone that emerges from the goose’s gullet: “[A] most remarkable bird it proved. I don’t wonder that you [Ryder] should take an interest in it. It laid an egg after it was dead—the bonniest, brightest little blue egg that was ever seen” (166). By double-coding his work so that it will satisfy the claims of both Art and the marketplace, Conan Doyle has it both ways: he satisfies his mass audience with yet another formulaic Holmes story (the sixth to appear in the *Strand* and superficially just like all the others) and he satisfies himself and his like-minded readers by creating a kind of allegory of the fate of art in mass society. In this witty, clever and comic story, Conan Doyle appears to be a Grub Street Mrs. Oakshott, turning out yet another consumable story, iden-

tical in form to the previous ones, for the popular fiction market—but this one turns out to be an “absolutely unique” one “whose value can only be conjectured” (155).

**“Now art should never try to be popular. The public should try to make itself artistic.” —Oscar Wilde, “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” (1890)**

The second historical context that discloses the artistic complexity and sophistication, and hence the literary value, of “The Blue Carbuncle” is the debate over the morality of art and the ethical responsibility of the artist that separated aesthetes from philistines at the end of the nineteenth century. As well as separating the literary from the popular, the art for art’s sake movement also separated art from morality. “No artist has ethical sympathies,” said Oscar Wilde in the Preface to *Dorian Gray*. “An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism in style” (41). From this perspective, the “The Blue Carbuncle” can be read as an intervention in the contemporary debate about the relation of art to morality. The evidence for this intervention and for the story’s literary merit is its deliberate violation of several fundamental conventions of the classic detective story. The story creates the expectation that these conventions will be followed—then Conan Doyle subverts those expectations. However, the violation of generic conventions is rarely by itself enough to confer literary value on a piece of fiction, since breaking rules is usually not by itself aesthetically interesting or significant. “So what?” is the obvious response to a competent 13-line, unrhymed sonnet. However, Conan Doyle’s violations of the conventions of the detective story are meaningful and significant—but only, I would argue, if these formal violations are seen within the historical context of the late nineteenth-century debate about the purpose of art and the moral responsibility of the artist, questions in literary fiction of the time.

The two main conventions that the story violates are the requirement that a puzzling crime and its solution are central to the detective story, and that the criminal not only be identified and apprehended but also punished (even if the subsequent trial and punishment are only implied). But in this ‘crime’ story, the crime is shunted off to the periphery of the action and the criminal is never punished. The reason the crime itself gets so little attention

is that it is not, like the gem, unique; it's a common, ordinary jewel theft by a common, ordinary thief. At centre stage are a "seedy and disreputable" hat and an "absolutely unique" gem that mysteriously (there is of course a mystery) turns up in the crop of a Christmas goose innocently purchased by Peterson, the commissionaire. What interests Holmes is not the rather common, unimaginative robbery, but the "striking and bizarre" odyssey of the blue carbuncle as it travels from the Countess's jewel-box to the crop of Peterson's Christmas goose: "The question for us now to solve," he tells Watson, "is the sequence of events leading from a rifled jewel-case at one end to the crop of a goose in Tottenham Court Road at the other" (156). Earlier Holmes had asked Watson to look upon Baker's "seedy and disreputable" hat "not as a battered billycock, but as an intellectual problem" (150). That is exactly the same way he later regards the stolen gem. It, too, presents him with an "intellectual problem." And it is an intellectual problem whose solution is, like a work of art, an end in itself.

What Holmes's focus on the gem rather than the theft does, then, is to unconventionally shift the focus of the story away from what, ever since Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue," had been the perennial subject matter of crime fiction: a sensational crime. Holmes himself misleadingly creates the expectation of sensationalism when he first describes the blue carbuncle. (Readers of detective stories expect, of course, to be misled, but not often about the conventions of the genre.) As well as being both unique and aesthetically beautiful, the gem has, he tells Watson, been "...a nucleus and focus of crime. Every good stone is. They are the devil's pet baits. In the larger and older jewels every facet may stand for a bloody deed." Holmes then goes on to narrate the stone's brief twenty-year violent history: "In spite of its youth, it has already a sinister history. There have been two murders, a vitriol-throwing, a suicide, and several robberies brought about for the sake of this forty-grain weight of crystallized charcoal" (157). But this sinister and violent history is significantly *not* repeated in the latest adventure of the stone. The reader's expectations are frustrated. The events of "The Blue Carbuncle" are not a continuation of the violent history of the stone: there are no murders, suicides, or acts of vitriol-throwing. There is only a bungled burglary, committed by a petty thief who whines and snivels when caught and begs Holmes for mercy—scarcely a worthy opponent for the Great Detective. The stolen gem is eventually returned to its rightful

owner with no violence or loss of life. The only victim of lethal violence in the story is Mrs. Oakshott's Christmas goose.

But a baffling, sensational, crime is not the only convention the story violates. The ending subverts the expectation that the criminal will not only be identified but also arrested and punished so that justice can prevail. This fundamental convention is explicitly mentioned by Watson on the first page of the story: "I suppose that . . . homely as it looks, this thing [Baker's hat] has some deadly story linked to it—that it is the clue which will guide you in the solution of some mystery, and *the punishment of some crime*" (149; italics added). As it turns out, two of Watson's three surmises are dead wrong: the hat has no deadly story linked to it (Watson, like most devotees of detective fiction, expects a murder), and the criminal is never punished, or even turned over to the police. Holmes chooses, since "it is the season of forgiveness" (170), to let Ryder off scot-free, and not even inform the authorities that he has captured him: "I am not retained by the police to supply their deficiencies" (170), he superciliously informs Watson.

Holmes's violation of the law becomes more than just a violation of detective story conventions, however, if this transgression is viewed in terms of the connection that was frequently made in *fin-de-siècle* literature and art between the artist and the criminal. The most famous example, of course, is Oscar Wilde's essay "Pen, Pencil and Poison: A Study in Green," his "brief memoir" of the painter and poisoner Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, who, "though of an extremely artistic temperament, followed many masters other than art, being not merely a poet and a painter, an art-critic, an antiquarian, and a writer of prose, an amateur of beautiful things and a dilettante of things delightful, but also a forger of no mean or ordinary capabilities, and as a subtle and secret poisoner almost without rival in this or any age" (Wilde 75). Wilde concludes his "Study in Green" with the aphorism "There is no essential incongruity between crime and culture" (98). Holmes's love of music (he both plays the violin and composes), his descent on his mother's side from a French artist, his skill as an actor, and (in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*) his interest in modern Belgian painters and knowledge of English painters all testify to his "artistic temperament." While one would perhaps not want to go so far as to say Holmes is a criminal, he certainly does not show a middle-class attitude to the strict adherence to the law, which on more than one occasion he believes he is above.

The unconventional ending makes it clear why earlier, Holmes displayed a merely perfunctory interest in a crime that, in a more conventional detective story, would have been the focus of interest. The really interesting crime in the story is not the theft, but Holmes's decision not to turn Ryder over to the police, which amounts to, in his words, "commuting a felony" (170). (In commuting a felony he is of course also committing one.) He immediately follows up this acknowledgement with his assertion that detection is its own reward: "Chance has put in our way a most singular and *whimsical* problem, and its solution is its own reward" (170). At the beginning of the story, after he finishes examining Baker's hat, Holmes tells Watson that this incident is "[o]nly one of those *whimsical* little incidences which will happen when you have four million human beings all jostling each other within the space of a few square miles" (149; italics added). The view he takes of the "intellectual problem" of the mysterious hat is virtually the same view he takes of the theft of the gem, which is also "a most *whimsical* and singular problem" (170). The detection of crime is detection for detection's sake. The solution to this "whimsical problem" is "its own reward" (170), like the creation of a work of art. Conan Doyle did to the detection of crime what Wilde and the *fin-de-siècle* aesthetes did to art: sever it from morality and make it an end in itself. Holmes's denial that the solution to the mystery has a moral or utilitarian end—"its solution is its own reward"—sounds remarkably like the aesthetes' disavowal of the utility or morality of art. Holmes solves the mystery, not for such utilitarian motives as lowering the crime rate, securing justice, or making money, but for detection's sake.

Even though its primary purpose was to entertain, popular art was not exempt from the moral requirement that it at least tacitly endorse accepted standards of morality. Detective fiction could do this by offering plots in which criminals were revealed and then punished. Detective fiction was, at least implicitly, on the side of the law and conventional morality. "The Blue Carbuncle" certainly does not conform to this expectation. This is of course not the only story to violate this expectation. In "Charles Augustus Milverton," Holmes witnesses the murder of a notorious blackmailer by one of his victims and then declines to provide the police with any information about the crime. But the reader has the sense that Holmes's silence is entirely justified. In "The Blue Carbuncle," however, Holmes not only breaks the law

but also shows a shocking indifference to, if not contempt for, the classes that had the most interest in punishing crimes against property. The role of class in this story is certainly not trivial, and Holmes's lack of respect for the police ("I am not retained by the police to supply their deficiencies" [170]) and the courts ("Hum! So much for the police-court" [156]) is accompanied by a tepid endorsement of the class system. Holmes appears to have more sympathy for the petty thief Ryder than for the victim of his crime, the wealthy Countess of Morcar, who is presumably a foreigner. In *Mid-Victorian Britain 1851-1875*, Geoffrey Best says that the "main function [of the police] was the protection of the property, the amenities and the institutions of the propertied: their homes and business premises, their parks and promenades, their religion and their politics. These good things badly needed protecting" (270). According to Stephen Knight, Holmes served a similar function; in *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, he argues that the success of the Holmes stories "depended on the hero's power to assuage the anxieties of a respectable, London-based, middle-class audience" (67). But after reading this disquieting story, few middle-class Londoners would, I suspect, feel that Holmes had assuaged their fears by upholding the sacred rights of property. If the Scotland Yard took Holmes's aesthetic view of detection, the propertied classes would be justifiably alarmed. In its hostility to bourgeois morality, "The Blue Carbuncle" aligns itself with literary rather than popular fiction.

**"Popular literature ... is obviously still in the doghouse."  
Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture* (1976)**

I would like to conclude by briefly outlining what I think are the implications of my reinterpretation and revaluation of "The Blue Carbuncle" for the study of popular fiction in a discipline that still generally operates within the literary/popular binary even while it legitimizes the academic study of popular art *as* popular art, as well as for the longstanding debate between formalist and historical/cultural approaches to literature.

Whatever else distinguishes literary from popular fiction, there is one thing that the former must be perceived to have: some form of aesthetic complexity. It is tempting to think that this aesthetic complexity (or any other aesthetic feature) is self-evidently visible in a literary work, available for any perceptive reader to see and appreciate. It is often assumed that formalism entails the belief that the aesthetic properties of a literary text somehow enjoy an autonomous existence, that they are “just there” and can be “read off” by a sensitive and appreciative reader. This is especially true of canonical texts, whose literary qualities seem to come naturally with them from the factory, like air bags in cars. But as Jane Tompkins brilliantly demonstrates in her famous analysis of the emergence of Hawthorne as a canonical American author, what we today see as his self-evident aesthetic (and hence moral) complexity was simply not visible to his contemporary readers and reviewers.<sup>4</sup>

Two things are likely to make the aesthetic qualities of popular texts invisible: the other texts in whose context they are read, and the reading strategies we bring (or don't bring) to them. Fiction is often pre-judged by the company it keeps, and short fiction in the late nineteenth-century was rarely published on its own; it usually appeared in periodicals with other kinds of printed material. “Like short poems,” Suzanne Ferguson astutely points out, “short stories must be printed with something else to make their circulation profitable. What they come with—other stories or other kinds of printed materials—may distract readers from perceiving them as discrete works of art” (“Rise of the Short Story” 178). What surrounded the Holmes stories in the *Strand Magazine* was all too likely to distract readers from perceiving them as works of art. But imagine what a contemporary reader's perception of “The Blue Carbuncle” might have been if it had been encountered, next to a short story by Henry James, in *The Athenaeum*, or *The Yellow Book*, or *The Savoy* instead of in the *Strand Magazine*. What we are able to see in a work at least partly depends on what we have learned to see in other works we judge it to be like. If we read “The Blue Carbuncle” in the *Strand*, we assume that it will be like previous stories we have read in the *Strand*. But if we read it in *The Yellow Book* next to a story by James, or in an expensive collection that includes Hawthorne's story “The Great Carbuncle,” we are very likely to read it differently.

But it is not just the context provided by other texts that determines how we read popular texts. Many of us also assume that we are not intended to read popular texts as closely as I have read “The Blue Carbuncle.” Thus most critics, even those who write admiringly about Conan Doyle and who enjoy the Holmes stories, are unlikely to find anything extraordinary in Kim Herzinger’s claim that

the case for the quality of Conan Doyle’s prose generally suffers whenever we pay too much attention to the text. What is interesting [...] is that we usually don’t give Conan Doyle’s prose a close reading; more interesting yet is that we don’t *want* to give it a close reading. To do so would be to have our pleasure checked by the awful claims of aesthetic principle [...].(105; Herzinger’s italics)

Although Herzinger does not say that the popular is associated with pleasure, and literary fiction and “aesthetic principle” with close reading, she implicitly endorses this widespread belief. But the reason that we do not read Conan Doyle closely is not that we fear doing so will check our pleasure—there is no necessary conflict between pleasure and aesthetic principle—but that our prior critical assumptions about reading coerce us into not reading *any* popular text closely. That is simply a thing that is not done. And since aesthetic features are disclosed primarily by a close reading, they will simply not be visible to most readers of popular texts even when they are there.

My reinterpretation and reevaluation of “The Blue Carbuncle” is, I believe, also relevant to the current debate between historicists and formalists (sometimes unhelpfully couched in terms of a battle between Theory and traditional criticism). The choice appears as a stark one: either historicism or formalism, politics or aesthetics. At present, historicism, in the form of gender, ethnic and race studies, cultural studies, new historicism, queer theory and various forms of Marxism, is clearly dominant. Formalism seems never to have recovered from the assaults of Theory over the past four decades, leaving it with the nostalgic aura of a romantic lost cause, like a latter-day Oxford Movement. But the formalism I am advocating is one that is inseparable from the historical contextualizing of literature, from the view that, since neither the writing nor the reading of literary or popular texts takes place in a vacuum, reading a text aesthetically is not separable from reading it historically.

Thus my claim for the formal complexity and artfulness—and hence for the literary *value*—of “The Blue Carbuncle” is inseparable from my claim that the story is engaged with and is responding to a *particular* cultural situation. Unless one places the story in *that* particular historical and cultural context, there will be no evidence of what I have called double coding. My point is not that the reader projects the double coding onto, or reads it into, the text, but that without an awareness of this particular cultural context the double coding simply cannot be seen at all. I concede, of course, that one could detect the story’s violations of the conventions of the classic detective story without such an historical context, but the meaning and significance of those violations nevertheless still depend upon the kind of cultural work the story is undertaking. By themselves, those violations are simply empty playing with the conventions of an established form and have no aesthetic value at all. Few critics would say that playing with its own conventions automatically gives literary status to a popular text.

What I hope my reading of “The Blue Carbuncle” has shown is not just that it participates in contemporary debates about art and morality and the literary and the popular, but that Conan Doyle has devised an artistically complex and sophisticated *form*, consisting of both a double-coded narrative, at once popular and literary, and a meaningful deformation of the classic detective story, that enables him to explore those important literary and cultural issues. It is that *form* that makes “The Blue Carbuncle” a successful and unique work of art, not the mere fact that it participates in a particular cultural debate. And that form, I insist, is visible only when the story is placed in the cultural context of *fin-de-siècle* aestheticism and the accompanying debates about the role of literary art in a society in which mass audiences were rapidly becoming the cultural norm. Without that context, the aesthetic form of the story remains invisible. It’s only against the background of that historical debate that the literary qualities of “The Blue Carbuncle” become foregrounded and hence visible. “Form,” as Terry Eagleton has recently reminded us, “is not a distraction from history but a mode of access to it” (8).

**Nils Claussion**

**University of Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The deleterious effects of novel-reading had been remarked on much earlier in the nineteenth century, e.g. in Percy Shelley's anonymous preface to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, but the greater numbers of readers later in the century emphasized the issue. For a thorough discussion of the fear of mass literacy in the nineteenth century, see Patrick Brantlinger's *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1998). Brantlinger's last chapter, on late nineteenth-century fiction, is especially pertinent to my discussion of Conan Doyle.

<sup>2</sup>The standard analysis remains Andreas Huyssen's *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986).

<sup>3</sup>Even Conan Doyle's seemingly innocent use of the word "overdose" is (again perhaps unconsciously) suggestive: reading mass-market fiction has often been compared, by Q. D. Leavis for example, to an addiction. Reading popular fiction is often figured as a form of bodily consumption—ingestion or injection—whereas reading elite fiction is figured as a form of disengaged mental contemplation, figured by a seated figure reading a book or in a rapt posture viewing a painting or sculpture.

<sup>4</sup>See Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1780-1860* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985), Ch. 1.

## WORKS CITED

- Best, Geoffrey. *Mid-Victorian Britain*. New York: Schocken Books, 1972.
- Brantlinger, Patrick. *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1998.
- Cawelti, John G. *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1976.
- Doyle, Arthur Conan. "The Blue Carbuncle." Originally published in the *Strand* magazine, January 1892. Rpt. in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. Ed. Richard Lancelyn Green. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994. 149-70.
- . "Charles Augustus Milverton." *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*. Ed. Richard Lancelyn Green. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994. 157-75.

- . *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Ed. W. W. Robson. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994.
- Eagleton, Terry. *How to Read a Poem*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.
- Ferguson, Suzanne. "The Rise of the Short Story in the Hierarchy of Genres." *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*. Eds. Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1989. 176-92.
- Frye, Northrop. *The Secular Scripture and Other Writings on Critical Theory, 1976-1991*. Ed. Joseph Adamson and Jean Wilson. *Collected Writings of Northrop Frye*. Vol. 18. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2006.
- Green, Richard Lancelyn. Introduction to Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994.
- Herzinger, Kim. "Inside and Outside Sherlock Holmes: A Rhapsody." *Shenandoah* 36.3 (1986): 91-109. Rpt. in *Critical Essays on Sir Arthur Conan Doyle*. Ed. Harold Orel. New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1992. 103-116.
- Huyssens, Andreas. *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986.
- James, Henry. "The Figure in the Carpet." *"The Figure in the Carpet" and Other Stories*. Ed. Frank Kermode. London: Penguin, 1986. 355-400.
- . "The Private Life." *"The Figure in the Carpet" and Other Stories*. Ed. Frank Kermode. London: Penguin, 1986. 189-232.
- . "The Real Thing." *Selected Tales*. Ed. John Lyon. London: Penguin, 2003. 204-25.
- Kermode, Frank. Introduction to Henry James, *"The Figure in the Carpet" and other Stories*. London: Penguin Books, 1986.
- Knight, Stephen. *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1980.
- Leavis, Q. D. *Fiction and the Reading Public*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1932.
- Shelley, Percy. Preface. *Frankenstein: The 1818 Text, Contexts, Nineteenth-Century Responses, Modern Criticism*. By Mary Shelley. Ed. J. Paul Hunter. A Norton Critical Edition. New York: Norton, 1996. 5-6.
- Tompkins, Jane. *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1780-1860*. New York: Oxford UP, 1985
- Wilde, Oscar. "Pen, Pencil and Poison." *"The Soul of Man under Socialism" and Other Essays*. New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1970. 75-98.
- . Preface. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Ed. Norman Page. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1998.