

**The Victorian Gothic Short Story**  
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**Lecture – 11**  
**Arthur Conan Doyle - The Red-Headed League - I**

Hello and welcome to this course on The Victorian Short Story. In this week we will be looking at Arthur Conan Doyle's The Red Headed League. It is a very famous short story by Doyle; in fact Doyle himself ranks it as his second best story.

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The Nineteenth-Century British Short Stories

- are astonishingly honest and dry-eyed in their examination of human problems that, all too easily, might have been treated sentimentally, or with condescension. They impress us by their economy of means; in them, the questions of why things happen as they do, and why people behave as they do, remain unanswered. (4)

--Harold Orel in *The Victorian Short Story* (1986)



I want to begin this session by giving you an interesting perspective by Harold Orel in his book *The Victorian Short Story* and this book was published in 1986. He says that the 19th century British short stories are astonishingly honest and dry eyed in the examination of human problems that all too easily might have been treated sentimentally or with condescension. They impress us by the economy of means in them, in the questions of why things happen as they do and why people behave as they do remain unanswered.

So, this is a very interesting take on the British short fiction and British short fiction especially in the 19th century can be treated sentimentally or condescendingly. And, but in fact, they have an honest and very very dry eyed way of looking at things and despite this honesty and integrity with which they deal with real life within the world of fiction,

the motives as to why people behave the way they do and why people... why things happen the way they do happen remain unanswered. So, the motives are not clearly examined in 19th century short fiction, even though there is a reality to it even though there is a nitty gritty way of examining life.

So, in this particular session we are going to look at a very a clear cut detective fiction by...by Arthur Conan Doyle and it features this very famous detective called Sherlock Holmes. And as you read the story you will know that the real slice of London is kind of portrayed in a very forthright manner in this short story. So, there is an honesty and dried eyed aspect to The Red Headed League, that is there, but things become complex when we come to the motive of the people's behavior, it is not as straightforward as other aspects of the story.

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The Red-Headed League

- 1891
- The Strand Magazine
- Illustrations by Sidney Paget
- Great detective story

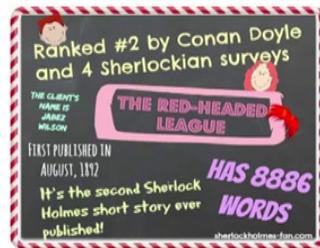
The slide features a title 'The Red-Headed League' at the top, followed by a horizontal bar with an orange segment on the left and a blue segment on the right. Below the bar is a bulleted list of four items. In the bottom right corner of the slide area, there is a small inset image of a woman with dark hair and glasses, wearing a dark top, looking down at a laptop.

Now, The Red Headed League is a story which was published in 1891 in the magazine called the Strand Magazine. The story was very popular in its day and now, and when it was first published the illustrations to the story were done by Sidney Paget and I do have a set of illustrations that he did for this particular story, and I will share them with you at some point in this particular session. And what is interesting about this Red Headed League narrative is its structure, it has an very interesting structure the way the mystery plot, the detective plot is woven in the story is done brilliantly by Arthur Conan Doyle

which is why I have chosen this particular story to examine it in relation to this short story course.

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## The Red-Headed League



<http://www.sherlockholmes-fan.com/the-red-headed-league.html>



Now, I have an image by some of the fans of Sherlock Holmes fiction and as you can see in that image this story is ranked number second by Conan Doyle himself and by Sherlock surveys, Sherlockean surveys. And the most important aspects of the story are also mentioned here- the client's name is Jabez Wilson and it was first published in 1892 as part of a collection called The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes.

And in that collection too it appears in the second place. So, there is a lot of association with the second in terms of The Red Headed League and this is just a very interesting cultural facet of the story that I wanted to share with you. And Sherlock as you know has a massive fan following and in the contemporary period it has reached a kind of a contemporary popularity that is unparalleled in the history of literature. And the BBC Sherlock series has something to do with that kind of popularization of the Sherlock narrative.

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### Sherlock on Watson

□ "I know, my dear Watson, that you share my love of all that is bizarre and outside the conventions and humdrum routine of everyday life. You have shown your relish for it by the enthusiasm which has prompted you to chronicle, and, if you will excuse my saying so, somewhat to embellish so many of my own little adventures."

*History writing*  
*Reality vs Embellishers of reality: Improving on reality*



Now, in the story Sherlock talks to Watson and reminds the readers that it is Watson who is chronicling his adventures. So, in The Red Headed League at the beginning of the story we have Sherlock mentioning that "I know, my dear Watson, that you share my love of all that is bizarre and outside the conventions and humdrum routine of everyday life. You have shown your relish for it by the enthusiasm which has prompted you to chronicle, and, if you will excuse my saying so, somewhat to embellish so many of my little adventures." So, this quip, comment by Holmes takes place at the beginning of The Red Headed League story and he reminds the readers that Watson his friend and companion and partner in detection is also the chronicler. The person who records the adventures in written narratives and it is very interesting that Holmes uses this word chronicle; chronicle is usually associated with history writing.

So, somehow the adventures of Holmes are transforming into a narrative of history, a history of London and its crimes, and you can see that Holmes is accruing a lot of importance to the work that he is doing as part of everyday routine, as part of the everyday humdrum of ordinary existence. And he also mentions that Watson is not just purely recording the adventures, he is also embellishing it; embellishing means that he is making it very attractive, he is improving on it, he is polishing the story in order to make it very entertaining and palatable to the readers.

So, we have the biographer of Holmes right next to him in the figure of Watson. So, I want to go back to the earlier point about 19th century British short stories where there is a kind of a very realistic rendering of life itself. And compare it to this point about Sherlock Holmes about how Watson is improving on reality. So, there is a contrast between reality and embellishing of it in the accounts of Watson.

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### Jabez Wilson

- Our visitor bore every mark of being an average commonplace British tradesman, obese, pompous, and slow. He wore rather baggy grey shepherd's check trousers, a not over-clean black frock-coat, unbuttoned in the front, and a drab waistcoat with a heavy brassy Albert chain, and a square pierced bit of metal dangling down as an ornament

*crucial for the narrative*

*ordinary*



Now, the story begins with this figure called Jabez Wilson with whom Holmes is having a conversation. And Jabez Wilson is very important to the story because he is the one who is pushing the narrative into happening. He is setting the ball rolling in this story and what kind of a figure is influential in the story is what is exciting us at this point. And this is the description of Jabez Wilson. As I said he is crucial for the narrative, because he is responsible for the narrative to come into being and what sort of this person is what is revealed in this particular description. 'Our visitor bore every mark of being an average commonplace British tradesman. Obese, pompous, and slow, he wore rather baggy gray shepherd's check trousers, and not over clean black frock coat, unbuttoned in the front, and a drab waistcoat with a heavy brassy Albert chain, and a square pierced bit of metal dangling down as an ornament.'

There are a lot of details in this description, but what is coming through for me here is the drabness, the dullness, the gray aspect of Jabez Wilson and his average quality. He is commonplace. Look at the word commonplace- very ordinary, and his outfit is not that

of a gentleman, it is baggy, it is gray and, it is not clean; it is not overly clean and it is very drab. So, we do get a sense that Jabez Wilson is an ordinary British tradesman who is not very exciting, who is not very interesting, who is not very extraordinary. And we got to remember that Sherlock Holmes is a figure who thinks that extraordinary things can be hidden under commonplace exteriors. So this figure is exciting in an ordinary way.

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### Vincent Spaulding and Jabez Wilson

□ "His name is Vincent Spaulding, and he's not such a youth, either. It's hard to say his age. I should not wish a smarter assistant, Mr. Holmes; and I know very well that he could better himself and earn twice what I am able to give him. But, after all, if he is satisfied, why should I put ideas in his head?"



Now, what happens in the story is that Jabez Wilson is made to work in a place and the work involves just copying out pages of Encyclopedia Britannica for 4...for 4 pounds a week. So, that is his job, and it is a very very interesting job because this job is won by him in an answer to an advertisement, which says that only redheaded persons can apply towards this advertisement and they would get a good sum of money for a very nominal piece of work on a weekly basis. So, Jabez Wilson responds to this advertisement and he gets the job, and he starts copying out Encyclopedia Britannica during the morning hours and he is paid 4 pounds a week. And he was brought to the attention of the advertisement by his assistant called Vincent Spaulding. And Vincent Spaulding is very interesting because he is working for half wages in Jabez Wilson's pawnbroker's business, and Jabez Wilson gives us a description of the kind of figure that Vincent Spaulding is.

So, he says that 'his name is Vincent Spaulding and he is not such a youth, either. It is hard to say his age. I should not wish a smarter assistant, Mr. Holmes; and I know very

well that he could better himself and earn twice what I am able to give him. But, after all, if he is satisfied, why should I put ideas in his head.' So, Vincent Spaulding is interesting because he is an excellent assistant and he is working for half wages at Jabez Wilson's pawnbroker's business. And he is the one who as I said brings up to the attention of Jabez Wilson this advertisement about The Red Headed League, demanding, a new redheaded person to take up this particular job for a hefty sum of money on a weekly basis.

So, he is an extremely smart person and he is not young, but at the same time it is very difficult to come to a decision about his age. And this set of ideas about Vincent Spaulding is very interesting in retrospect, because once you have read the story and once you know the resolution to the story you might want to go back on your tracks and try to understand the man who is one of the key antagonists in this particular story. So, the nature of crime which is embedded in a figure of indeterminate age becomes interesting in retrospect.

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Vincent Spaulding

- "What is he like, this Vincent Spaulding?"
- "Small, stout-built, very quick in his ways, no hair on his face, though he's not short of thirty. Has a white splash of acid upon his forehead."

*odd detail*



Now, we get further questions from Sherlock Holmes about Vincent Spaulding and Jabez Wilson offers further details. He says that he is "Small, stout-built, very quick in his ways, no hair on his face, though he's not short of thirty. Has a white splash of acid upon his forehead." Once again, a very fascinating set of details about Vincent Spaulding and this is fascinating because he is the master criminal in this particular story, and you want

to know how this criminal appears physically and he is small. The reference to the smallness of Vincent Spaulding as well as his accomplice is exciting. And we also need to know that he is also very quick in his ways and if you compare these attributes with the attributes of another very famous criminal in late nineteenth century fiction who is Mr. Hyde, you will kind of come to see that there is a resemblance between smallness and quickness in terms of these criminal figures, there seems to be a common set of attributes which are associated with criminals. So, that is one stereotype or physical quality that we need to keep in mind in terms of masterminds or in terms of evil minded figures in literature. So, he is small and he is not yet thirty and most interestingly he has a white splash of acid upon his forehead. So, this is a very odd detail and this also very obviously, in a very marked way brings some kind of significance to his face. A splash of acid means that he has been dabbling with chemicals or that he is involved with someone who has dabbled with chemicals.

So, the association of chemistry and this evil minded figure becomes significant if we think about it. So, should we ask this question is science associated with criminal masterminds as well in terms of late 19th century fiction? So, we also need to keep this query in mind. Of course, we also know that Sherlock Holmes also dabbles with chemical experiments and we also know that he works for the good in society at least he is involved in catching criminals and putting them behind bars. But we also know that if push comes to shove he could also have adopted underhand means to catch his criminal. So, science becomes very very complex in terms of these detectives and criminals at this point of 19th century fiction. And once again I am returning to the strange case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde where science is manipulated by Dr. Jekyll in order to transform into Hyde. So, this splash of acid becomes a distinct mark on Vincent Spaulding's face.

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### The Face of Crime

- "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."

The ordinary and  
the mysterious



Now, I want to pay attention to the way in which Holmes is trying to describe crime in society and what fascinates me is the metaphor that he employs. He says that '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'. It is a very interesting set of ideas. Now I want to first look at the first section of this set of perspectives by Holmes. He says, the more bizarre a thing is the less mysterious it proves to be. So, if a thing is obviously bizarre, strange and mysterious it might prove to be a dull case. And if it is kind of commonplace; if the mystery is commonplace, then its end result might be more exciting. So, that is what he is trying to establish, and what I would want you students who have enrolled on this course is to apply this concept to this story Red Headed League and see and test if what he says is true. Is the story commonplace in The Red Headed League? Is the crime commonplace in The Red Headed League and is the result very very mysterious? So, try to test the proposition of Holmes; so that is the homework for you in relation to this particular point that Holmes is trying to establish.

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□ We travelled by the Underground as far as Aldersgate; and a short walk took us to Saxe-Coburg Square, the scene of the singular story which we had listened to in the morning. It was a poky, little, shabby-genteel place, where four lines of dingy two-storied brick houses looked out into a small railed-in enclosure, where a lawn of weedy grass and a few clumps of faded laurel-bushes made a hard fight against a smoke-laden and uncongenial atmosphere. Three gilt balls and a brown board with "Jabez Wilson" in white letters, upon a corner house, announced the place where our red-headed client carried on his business.

*Jabez Wilson - not a gentleman*



Now, Jabez Wilson has given his case to Holmes and he has fascinated Holmes the great detective and therefore, Holmes has accepted the case; and once Wilson has left what the two men do is to visit the space occupied by Jabez Wilson. So, this chunk of text from the story is exciting for the social canvas that we get of late nineteenth century London.

‘We travelled by the underground as far as Aldersgate and a short walk took us to Saxe Coburg Square, the scene of the singular story which we had listened to in the morning. It was a poky, little, shabby genteel place, where four lines of dingy two-storied brick houses looked out into a small railed in enclosure, where a lawn of weedy grass and a few clumps of faded laurel bushes made a hard fight against a smoke laden and uncongenial atmosphere. Three gilt balls and a brown board with Jabez Wilson in white letters, upon a corner house, announced the place where our redheaded client carried on his business.’

So, Watson and Holmes visit the place of business of Jabez Wilson, and the setting of Jabez Wilson’s business is very interesting for us. Look at the description. It is a dingy two storied brick house, and a lot of weedy grass not very healthy grass and a few clumps of faded laurel bushes it is not very bright it is faded, and it is in a smoke laden and uncongenial atmosphere.

And three gilt balls and a brown board, gilt very flashily ornamental, ornamental in a fake way in a flimsy way and a brown board not in a very attractive color it is in a brown

board with Jabez Wilson in white letters. So, the ambience of this place of business is not very attractive. It is dull, it is dingy, it is in an uncongenial, unhealthy atmosphere and this is where Jabez Wilson works. The point of this description is to tell us that Jabez Wilson is a shabby genteel, figure; he is not part of the gentlemanly middle class. In fact, if you look at the early sections of the story, it is made very clear that Jabez Wilson had done manual labor which means that he is not part of the middle classes or the upper classes and then he has even been a ship's carpenter. So, from that position he has risen to the state of a small time tradesman. So, this class position of Jabez Wilson is consciously established by The Red Headed League story. And the physical setting of Jabez Wilson's business is oriented in such a way that we consciously understand his place in society. And the natural elements surrounding his place of work such as the grass and the laurel bushes are also equally dingy and dull and it is all of one piece. And just as the clothing or the outfit of Jabez Wilson also established the class position and the character of this particular small time trader.

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□ The road in which we found ourselves as we turned round the corner from the retired Saxe-Coburg Square presented as great a contrast to it as the front of a picture does to the back. It was one of the main arteries which conveyed the traffic of the City to the north and west. The roadway was blocked with the immense stream of commerce flowing in a double tide inward and outward, while the footpaths were black with the hurrying swarm of pedestrians. It was difficult to realise 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.



Now, once we have been introduced to the place of business in a particular manner the narrator of the story takes us to a different setting in order to suggest the contrasts that are there in the city of London. So, this particular journey that Watson and Holmes undertake after visiting the place of business of Jabez Wilson is also significant to understand widely differing pockets of life in this urban environment of London.

‘The road in which we found ourselves as we turned around the corner from the retired Saxe Coburg square presented as great a contrast to it as the front of a picture does to the back. It was one of the main arteries which conveyed the traffic of the city to the north and west. The roadway was blocked with the immense stream of commerce flowing in a double tide inward and outward, while the footpaths were black with the hurrying swarm of pedestrians. It was difficult to realise 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.’ So, when you read the story, we are conscious of the fact that this is a different side to London. In fact, we can see in the description that the narrator is conscious to point out that difference, look at the comparison here. The retired Saxe-Coburg Square presented as great a contrast to it as the front of a picture does to the back. So, as soon as they turn the corner from where Jabez Wilson has his business they reach a neighborhood which is completely different from the front to the back of a picture. So, that is the kind of difference that we get when we move to this side of London and the narrator says Watson says that it was one of the main arteries which conveyed the traffic of the city to the north and west and the following description about the double tide of people moving inward and outward also reminds us of the inward moving and the outward going traffic of redheaded men who answered the call to that particular advertisement by The Red Headed League which wants a person to occupy a vacancy for a very nominal work on a weekly basis.

So, we see echoes of one setting on the other in this particular story and there are symbolic and ideological significances connected to this echoing of settings at different points in the story. And he says that, it was difficult to realize as we looked at the line of fine shops and stately business that they really abutted on the other side upon the faded and stagnant square. And this faded and stagnant square is the one in which we have Jabez Wilson’s pawnbroker’s business. So, on the one side we have a very drab neighborhood which is dull and dingy and unhealthy and on the other side we have a fine line of shops and stately business, and some of the stately businesses include a big bank as well.

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### John Clay

□ "John Clay, the murderer, thief, smasher, and forger. He's a young man, Mr. Merryweather, but he is at the head of his profession, and I would rather have my bracelets on him than on any criminal in London. He's a remarkable man, is young John Clay. His grandfather was a royal duke, and he himself has been to Eton and Oxford. His brain is as cunning as his fingers, and though we meet signs of him at every turn, we never know where to find the man himself.



Now, it is very easy to kind of follow Holmes's deduction, because it is almost implied that something really untoward is going to happen in terms of the activities of the assistant of Jabez Wilson. So, when we are told by Holmes that there is going to be a big bank robbery and that Jabez Wilson's assistant called Vincent Spaulding who is in fact, the big criminal mastermind John Clay who is trying to dig a tunnel from the pawnbroker's shop from the cellar of the pawnbroker's shop to the city bank and rob the bank of a big sum of money, it is not a massive surprise to the reader. So, we are somehow trying to we have somehow kind of followed the instincts of Sherlock Holmes. But what is the surprise is the fact that he is going to catch him in the act, he is going to stop the crime in the act and the key criminal mastermind is an interesting figure in Holmes's assessment. He says that John Clay—"He is in fact, a murderer, he is a thief, a smasher and forger he is a young man, Mr. Merryweather, but he is at the head of his profession, and I would rather have my bracelets on him than on any criminal in London. He is a remarkable man, he is young John Clay. His grandfather was a royal duke, and he himself has been to Eton and Oxford. His brain is as cunning as his fingers, and though we meet signs of him at every turn, we never know where to find the man himself". So, the man called Vincent Spaulding, who is working for half wages at Jabez Wilson's pawnbroker's business, is in fact a murderer, a thief, a smasher of property and a forger of documents.

And he has hatched this plan to rob the bank which is on the other side of the street by digging a tunnel from Jabez Wilson's cellar and Holmes kind of detects this plan and he is waiting with his set of friends, and his friends from the police as well at the cellar of the bank, and he is waiting to catch this murderer, and thief,

But, what is interesting about John Clay is not that he is a criminal, but he is background, that is what is exciting. In fact, he is of noble blood; his grandfather was a royal duke and he himself has been to Eton and Oxford to institutions of higher learning to elite institutions of higher learning, and he says that his brain is as cunning as his fingers. So, just as he is agile physically his brain is also agile mentally and Holmes says that he is on the verge of catching him at every point, but then he escapes him in the past. So, he is always round the corner for Holmes and at this point in the story, at this stage in his life he thinks that he is going to catch him.

Thank you for watching and I will continue in the next session.