

## Construct Of the Stranger: One Further Revelation

by Ross Philpot

*The author is indebted to Michael Duke for having reviewed this follow up to their original article in the May 2023 issue of The Passengers' Log.*

In the Leslie Fielder construct of 'The Stranger' in Shakespeare's works there were four character types analysed: 'Womankind', 'The Religious Outsider', 'The Dark-skinned Person', and 'The Savage'.

By applying these categories to the Holmes & Watson Canon, it was no great challenge to identify:

- Irene Adler (*the woman*), and others.
- The "Jew broker in the Tottenham Court Road" (the source of The Master's iconic Stradivarius violin).
- Little Lucy Munro; the Andaman islander Tonga; various tropical beauties; even the North American indigenous Indian (*washoe* hunter) Jefferson Hope.
- 'Savages' such as Tonga, who interestingly fits two of these character types.



Irene Adler, *the woman*

In the analysis published in the *Passengers' Log*<sup>1</sup> Michael Duke and I extended the concept by adding two more categories:

- 'The Disguised', exemplified especially by Holmes himself, with a cast of over a dozen clever disguises/aliases, and also by one of his foes ("Old woman be damned!").
- 'Odd' individuals, as were the decidedly strange brothers Thaddeus and Bartholemew Sholto, seen by some as caricatures of Oscar Wilde; the one-legged Jonathan Small beloved of Tonga (as in the revelation "Tonga speaks!"<sup>2</sup>); the maid's sweetheart Francis Prosper in "The Beryl Coronet"; even the cruelly deformed Corporal Henry Wood in "The Crooked Man". Also noting that there's an image of a one-legged newspaper vendor on the cover of numerous early issues of *The Sherlock Holmes Journal*.

Having summarised the characters in the now half dozen categories, and surmising whether there might be even more, the answer can persuasively be offered in the affirmative. But who and where is that character?

Has it been 'hiding'? 'Hiding in plain sight', as the saying goes, like Edgar Allan Poe's "purloined letter" which was surely "seen but not observed," or the classical 'elephant in the room'. A modern example might be the most curious gorilla-suited person wandering around the basketball court in the famous 'Selective Attention Test' by Simons and Chabris (1999).<sup>3</sup> The learning point I take away from this is that Holmes would observe the gorilla, while Watson, Lestrade, Gregson and others (like you and I) would congratulate ourselves on being able to correctly see and count the fifteen passes of the basketball, and yet not observe the 'gorilla in the room'. Even more educational is 'The Monkey Business Illusion' by Daniel Simons in 2010.<sup>4</sup> Holmes would see the two additional factors which others would routinely

<sup>1</sup> *The Passengers' Log*. Vol. 26, No.3, pp.24-30.

<sup>2</sup> Duke, Michael. 'Tonga Speaks' in *Victorian Holmes*. Ontario, The Battered Silicon Dispatch Box, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Simons, Daniel and Chabris, Christopher. 'Selective Attention Test'. *YouTube* 11/03/2010. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJG698U2Mvo>

<sup>4</sup> Simons, Daniel 'The Monkey Business Illusion'. *YouTube* 28/04/2010.

see but fail to notice while looking for the gorilla. Links to both these astonishing *YouTube* videos are in the footnotes. If you're interested in other weird phenomena you'd be fascinated by the book [Hidden] *In Plain Sight* by Australian journalist Ross Coulthart.<sup>5</sup>

It can hardly be denied that one of the most unusual, out-of-the-common, special and yes, strange, characters in the sixty story Canon is the Master Himself (“...you are like a magician” [“The Beryl Coronet”])! Holmes has transcended the status of expert, genius, magic man, and master (of disguises, with fourteen listed in Matthew E Bunson’s *The Sherlock Holmes Encyclopaedia*<sup>6</sup>) and is elevated to that of mythology. In Stephen Knight’s *The Politics of Myth*, he’s in the exalted company of legends such as King Arthur, Queen Guinevere, Merlin the magician, and Robin Hood, plus the factual Queen Elizabeth I, Jeanne D’Arc, Ned Kelly and William Shakespeare.<sup>7</sup>

So obvious is Holmes’ outstanding status in the Canon when pointed out, that we routinely take it for granted. He’s unusual or odd in all those respects which makes him so special. He’s *the* only consulting detective. He’s *the* highest authority on crime, to whom even the least worst of the Scotland Yarders come for help when their own efforts have failed. He’s so successful that he says he has been beaten only four times, thrice by men and once by a woman. Furthermore, he openly took responsibility for achieving success: “...it will be entirely our own fault if we do not succeed in clearing the matter up.” So outstanding was Holmes that it was he who actually knew that statistic, and himself acknowledged it, to the ill-fated John Openshaw in ‘The Five Orange Pips’, who was Holmes’ fifth such failure:

*We sat in silence for some minutes, Holmes more depressed and shaken than I had ever seen him [this in 1887 or 1889, a decade after his first cases ‘The Gloria Scott’. and ‘The Musgrave Ritual’ in 1874 and 1879 respectively]. “That hurts my pride, Watson,” he said at last. “It is a petty feeling, no doubt, but it hurts my pride.”*

His pride being hurt, is that all it means to him? Apparently yes, that is all it means to our mean-spirited and narcissistic hero. His failure was John Openshaw, while the fifth person who beat Holmes was Captain Calhoun, the leader of the gang who decoyed Openshaw to his death on the Embankment of the Thames near Waterloo Bridge.

In this he outshone Agatha Christie’s evasive little Belgian invention, whose failings compared with Holmes have been laid bare in publications in *The Western Flyer of the Swan River Colonists of Western Australia*. Admission of his limitations is something which Poirot fudged.



John Openshaw

Regarding other statistics, Holmes’ IQ has been estimated in fiction as 190, compared with Albert Einstein’s of 160,<sup>8</sup> again marking Holmes as being extraordinary.

Yes, one of the ‘strangest’ people in the entire Sherlock Holmes Canon turns out to be Sherlock Holmes himself. Not so surprising after all and helps to explain his stupendous popularity after more than a century.

<sup>5</sup> Coulthart, Ross. *In Plain Sight*. Sydney: HarperCollins, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Bunson, Matthew E. *The Sherlock Holmes Encyclopedia*. London: Pavilion Books, 1995.

<sup>7</sup> Knight, Stephen. *The Politics Of Myth*. Carlton: MUP, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> *What Was Albert Einstein’s IQ?* <https://history-computer.com/albert-einsteins-iq/>. Holmes’ IQ is referenced in *Enola Holmes* (Netflix, 2020).