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**The Decoding Skill of Sherlock Holmes in Detection**

**A. Kayalvizhi, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Scholar**



**A Legendary Detective**

Sherlock Holmes is a legendary detective who is well known for his skills such as observation, inference, and logical reasoning. His profession as a crime investigator makes demands on him to be competent so as to identify and catch the criminals. His competency is the outcome of his brilliant reasoning power that leads him in his quest for truth and pursuit of offenders.

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## **The Criminal Trade and Codes**

The trade of the criminal society involves illegal activities. So, they try to take all care to keep them away from the hold of law. This cautiousness alerts them to be secretive at times of communicating with their fellow gangsters, and the formation of secret codes is the product of such effort. The detective, whose work is to unravel every secret of the criminals, must have the capability to decipher their codes.

Sherlock Holmes, using his proficient reasoning power, never fails to see through the criminals' enigmatic messages. His confidence to succeed in such affairs is well expressed when he says, "What one man can invent another can discover." (Doyle 365)

### **Definition of Decoding**

Dictionaries generally define decoding as the process "to extract meaning from spoken or written symbols." It is "a process to translate (data or a message) from a code into the original language or form" (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/decoding?s=t>).

Closely related to decoding is the process of deduction. It is generally described as "a process of reasoning in which a conclusion follows necessarily from the premises presented, so that the conclusion cannot be false if the premises are true" (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/deduction?s=t>).

### **Decoding in *The Adventure of the Dancing Men***

Holmes's brilliance in decoding the ciphers is clearly seen in *The Adventure of the Dancing Men*. In this story, Mr. Hilton Cubitt approaches Holmes with a problem that someone drew the pictures of dancing men outside his house at night. The pictures frightened his wife Elsie to a dead faint and kept her always in a terror. She, an American woman, married him a year before only on a condition that her past life must not be enquired about. Thus, unable to get information from her, Mr. Cubitt seeks the help of Holmes to save her from danger, if any. And Holmes instantly recognises that the hieroglyphics is a cipher, and decides to wait until he gets more messages for the analysis of finding the meaning. After having gathered those sufficient data, Holmes, with his powerful reasoning and analytical

ability, sets out for scrutinising the pictures in order to find the corresponding letter every picture represents.

The way Holmes decodes the cipher and discerns the meaning is strikingly portrayed in the story. His deciphering of the messages clarifies that the lady was threatened by a man Abe Slaney to leave her husband and go with him. Furthermore, Holmes's communication with the American police notifies him that Abe Slaney is the most dangerous crook of Chicago. Hence, Holmes hurries to warn the couple about the looming danger and protect them; but before he reaches, Mr. Hilton Cubitt was murdered by Abe Slaney.

Sherlock Holmes turns his attention to assure justice done. So, he decides to make use of his knowledge of the secret code in catching the murderer. He writes the message 'Come here at once' using the same hieroglyphic language, and sends it to the address of the murderer which was also discerned from the cipher. Abe Slaney, in the belief that none but Elsie could write such message, hurries immediately to her house, and falls into the trap of Holmes to get arrested.



*The Adventure of the Dancing Men* ("The Complete Sherlock Holmes")

### **The First Case of Sherlock Holmes**

The very first case Sherlock Holmes ever involved is presented in the story *The "Gloria Scott"*; and it comprises a problem that demanded the deciphering ability of Holmes even before he thought of becoming a professional detective. The event happened during Holmes's college days. Trevor senior, the father of Holmes's college friend Victor Trevor, received a letter that drove him out of his senses, caused stroke, and finally killed him. Holmes read the letter which made such an abysmal impact on the old man. The message of the letter was as follows: "The supply of game for London is going steadily up. Head-keeper

Hudson, we believe, has been now told to receive all orders for fly-paper and for preservation of your hen-pheasant's life" (219).

Though the message seemed grotesque, its impression upon old Trevor made Holmes to consider it seriously. He was certain that the message was enigmatic that implied some different meaning, and so he tried to decode it. He later narrates to Watson how he deciphered the meaning from the message:

I daresay my face looked as bewildered as yours did just now when first I read this message. Then I reread it very carefully. It was evidently as I had thought, and some secret meaning must lie buried in this strange combination of words. Or could it be that there was a prearranged significance to such phrases as 'fly-paper' and 'hen-pheasant'? Such a meaning would be arbitrary and could not be deduced in any way. And yet I was loath to believe that this was the case, and the presence of the word Hudson seemed to show that the subject of the message was as I had guessed, and that it was from Beddoes rather than the sailor. I tried it backward, but the combination 'life pheasant's hen' was not encouraging. Then I tried alternate words, but neither 'the of for' nor 'supply game London' promised to throw any light upon it.

And then in an instant the key of the riddle was in my hands, and I saw that every third word, beginning with the first, would give a message which might well drive old Trevor to despair.

It was short and terse, the warning, as I now read it to my companion:

'The game is up. Hudson has told all. Fly for your life.' (Doyle 220)

In this way, Holmes's deciphering found the cause for the sudden death of old Trevor. The complete revelation of old Trevor's past was known from a statement written by himself before his death. It disclosed that he had been a convict in his youth, and was sent to Australia for penal servitude in a ship in which a mutiny had broken out and some prisoners

including him had escaped. Hudson, who was in the ship then, had found him and other prisoner Beddoes after thirty years, and had been blackmailing of exposure of truth. The warning message was from Beddoes informing about Hudson's disclosure, and it had a devastating effect upon the old man who feared for the loss of honour.

### **Discovery of Truth via Understanding Signals**

*The Adventure of the Red Circle* exhibits Sherlock Holmes's thorough understanding of signal message that plays its part in the discovery of truth. In this story, a landlady approaches Holmes complaining about her tenant's seclusion and his alertness to remain unseen by anyone. The indications direct Holmes to consider that the person inside the room may not be the man who took the room; and his verification proves him right, since the one who is inside the room is a woman. The tenant's getting *Daily Gazette* every day suggests Holmes that she is being communicated through that newspaper, and his perusal of it enables him to find the enigmatic messages. One of the messages informs the lady the spot and time for receiving a signal message. The flash of light is used for signalling the message; and Holmes, who is also awaiting it on time, easily interprets the cipher which is warning her of danger. The sudden stop of the signal steers him to the spot where he finds the dead body of a huge man Gorgiano, a notorious criminal who is pursued by an American policeman. Since Holmes knows that the lady in the room can provide explanation for it, he exploits the same signal to bring the lady to the scene of crime. As he expected, the lady rushes to the spot; and from her, the truth is learnt that the dead man Gorgiano was a member of the secret criminal society "Red Circle" and he was on pursuit of the couple to kill the man and own the woman for his amorous desire. Gennaro, the husband of the woman, after safeguarding her secretly in the room, committed justifiable homicide to ensure their safety; and the lady feels proud of her husband for killing such an infernal villain.

### **Strange Catechism of the Ancients**

The decoding ability of Sherlock Holmes can also be appreciated from the way he deciphers the content of the Musgrave Ritual in the short story *The Musgrave Ritual*. Here, Holmes is to solve the problem of inexplicable missing of Mr. Brunton, the butler, inside the house of Reginald Musgrave. Since Brunton showed interest in reading a document called

Musgrave Ritual, Holmes believes that the mystery of Brunton is entangled with the mystery of the Musgrave ritual. Therefore he decides to unravel the secret of the strange catechism of the ancient Musgraves which is as follows:

‘Whose was it?’

‘His who is gone.’

‘Who shall have it?’

‘He who will come.’

‘Where was the sun?’

‘Over the oak.’

‘Where was the shadow?’

‘Under the elm.’

‘How was it stepped?’

‘North by ten and by ten, east by five and by five, south by two and by two, west by one and by one, and so under.’

‘What shall we give for it?’

‘All that is ours.’

‘Why should we give it?’

‘For the sake of the trust.’ (Doyle 232)

Sherlock Holmes, by his cerebral analysis, deciphers the meaning, and finds that the cellar is the spot mentioned in the document. As he presumed, the mystery of the missing Brunton also gets solved that he is found dead in the cellar where he went for stealing the crown of Charles I.

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## Decoding, a Vital Element of Detective Work

Thus, it is apparent that decoding is a skill of vital importance for detective work. Unless Sherlock Holmes has the knack in deciphering, he could not have achieved success in some of his cases.

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