

## Response Sheet #1

**Title:** The Red Headed League

**Composer:** Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

**Date Composed:** 1890

### **Setting: Place and time**

The story is set in London during 1890. The story opens in Sherlock Holmes' office eight weeks after the advertisement appeared in *The Morning Chronicle* on April 27, 1890. The series of events unfold from that date in which the advertisement was placed in the newspaper.

The crime itself unfolds and then takes place in Saxe-Coburg Square in London, a business district not far from Aldersgate. This is a very much wealth orientated part of London and yet backs on to the humble pawnbroker business.

### **Context & Values: Cultural and societal influences**

The text is set in 1890 in the middle of the Victorian era. It is this Victorian influence that provides much of the context and values. The society was one that was confident in its industrial and imperial might, and one that valued science and rationality. The society was very conscious of improving all aspects of life, an attitude that arose from its power and prosperity. The primary attitude towards crime was that if crime did occur, it could be solved by rational means. It was also a time that social divisions were well-defined and this fact provides the catalyst for the entire series of events. Mr Jabez Wilson is a relatively poor man, describing his financial situation as just enough to put "a roof over our heads, pay our debts, if we do nothing more." This is the reason why Mr Wilson is lured in to applying for the job as the money is extremely enticing. It is quite noticeable that Mr Wilson is the only character in the story that is not of some standing in the community. All other major characters, including Mr Merryweather, the bank manager, Mr Jones, the official police agent of Scotland Yard, Dr Watson, a respected doctor and even the criminal mastermind John Clay, who claims to be of royal blood are of high standing within their community. It is ironic that it is an honest but poor man that provides the means for the crime to take place. Mr Wilson's series of events are also assisted by the fact that Mr Wilson wants to be a part of that high-society, a trait noticed by Dr Watson when he noticed that Mr Wilson bore an "arc and compass breastpin" despite it being "rather against the strict rules" of the order.

The other noticeable facet of the text that has been affected by the cultural and societal influences is the lack of women characters. In fact, the only female character is the fourteen year-old girl Mr Wilson employs who does a “bit of simple cooking, and keeps the place clean.” This reflects the attitudes of the Victorian era that women were housekeepers who were there to cook and clean. In the text, no women have the intelligence or nous to solve such a tricky crime and Holmes only calls upon men to help him with his crime solving.

Another concept explored is that of authority. The Victorian era was a time when law and order was in its development in Europe. In this text, the ‘official’ detectives of Scotland Yard are unable to help and the likes of Mr Wilson choose instead to go to the cunning mind of a sleuth named Sherlock Holmes who pokes and prods to solve a crime. Holmes works for next-to-nothing in a profession we now know as a private eye.

### **Form, Purpose and Audience:**

The text is in the form of a short story written for publication in *The Strand* newsletter. *The Strand* was a magazine produced for the literate middle-class. It contains a middle-class hero who helps those in the lower classes of society solve their various problems or crimes.

The intended audience of this piece is the literate middle-class who are readers of *The Strand* magazine.

### **Mystery:**

The mystery in this text is spread out and not definite. The main mystery presented from the outset is that of the Red Headed League. The Red Headed league is an apparent organisation that supports red headed men. This mystery develops into more mysteries. One of these sub-mysteries is why Mr Duncan Ross pays a humble pawnbroker four pounds a week to copy out the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*? Another mystery is why Mr Wilson’s assistant at the pawnbrokers, Mr Vincent Spaulding, aka John Clay, would work for such a low salary? Then there is the mystery of why the league merely and instantly dissolved? The other mystery is why Mr Spaulding spends hours at a time in the cellar of the pawnbrokers?

### **Conventions:**

The text contains a detective and a string of mysteries. While there is no crime committed, the suspect is wanted for a number of previous crimes not connected with the current mystery. The crime in this text is thwarted by Holmes before it could eventuate. There are many clues that Holmes detects to help him solve the mystery. The tapping of the pavement, the trousers of Vincent Spaulding, the luncheon in Saxe-Coburg Square, the high salary for such nominal services and

behaviour of both Vincent Spaulding and Mr Duncan Ross are clues that Holmes detects in his searches.

Denouement is also prevalent right from the beginning as Holmes works to unravel the clues and solve the mystery. In traditional crime fiction style, once the crime is over Holmes explains to Dr Watson, and the audience, exactly how he pieced together the clues.

Another convention that is noticeable is that of Holmes' superiority. During the text, Holmes works with Mr Wilson, Dr Watson, Mr Jones and Mr Merryweather yet is always running the show and does not hold them, with the exception of Dr Watson, in very high regard. Mr Wilson is described by Holmes as a "not over-bright pawnbroker", Mr Jones as an "absolute imbecile", and Mr Merryweather as merely a bank manager who is "personally interested in the matter." Holmes is also smarter and quicker than those around him and even Dr Watson notes that he feels "oppressed with a sense of my own stupidity" when he is around Holmes. Dr Watson is privileged to the same clues, the same experiences that Holmes is yet even he cannot come to the conclusions Holmes does.

Another crime fiction convention that is evident in the text is the concept that the hero must be placed in danger. The climax of the text involves Holmes, Watson, Jones and Merryweather hiding in a basement with the possibility of being sprung by armed bandits. It is through Holmes foresight however, that the plot is thwarted.

### **Sleuths: Appearance, location, methods, traits, flaws**

The sleuth in *The Red Headed League* is possibly the most well known detective from popular literature. Sherlock Holmes and his trusty sidekick Dr Watson are the two sleuths from this text.

Holmes, a tall stern-browed figure, lives in a London apartment. His methods rely upon a visit from a concerned citizen who approaches his help. He is a very precise man in all his facets. He tells Watson that the case in this text is a "three-pipe problem" and asks Watson not to speak to him for fifty minutes. He is precise and concrete in everything he says and does. He prefers to smoke or sit quietly by himself to solve a case but once he has come to a conclusion he is adamant in his verdict and knows exactly what to do next. As Watson correctly notes, Holmes puts his "finger-tips together" when in "judicial moods." Innocent investigation is his preferred method of clue extraction such as when he asks Vincent Spaulding for directions when his true motive was to examine the man's knees. He rarely accepts payment for his work but is much more satisfied by the perquisite of solving the case.

Dr Watson, on the other hand, is much keener to observe and make judgements on the more obvious. His extremely accurate description of Mr Wilson's life just by looking at him is testimony to his ability to deduce facts from observations. Being in the medical industry also contributes to this attitude as he is very formulaic in his approach to a case, a contrast to Holmes who never accepts

facts at face value. Watson, like Holmes, has a suspicious mind and can pick when something is out of place, for instance, when Vincent Spaulding agrees to work for only half-wages.

### **Suspects or Criminals: crime, appearance, traits and methods**

The two criminals in the text are Duncan Ross and John Clay. John Clay is a wanted murderer from previous stories in the Sherlock Holmes' series. Clay is the mastermind behind the creation of the Red Headed League. Whilst Clay doesn't actually succeed in his crime, his plan is well thought out and only Holmes is able to thwart it. Clay is aware that the bank is carrying an extra 30,000 bullions in an underground cellar. Clay is also aware that Mr Wilson's pawnbroker shop backs on to the bank. When Mr Wilson advertised for an assistant, Clay applied, offering to work for half-wages to guarantee his position. Mr Duncan Ross then ran the advertisement for the position at the phoney Red Headed League to keep Mr Wilson away from the shop for four hours each day so Clay could construct a tunnel between Wilson's cellar and the bank's cellar. It would have worked had it not been for Holmes' intuition that told him something was amiss.

Clay's methods involve selecting a vulnerable target, in this case Mr Wilson. Another of Clay's methods is to use an assistant, in this case Duncan Ross. Clay then encourages Mr Wilson to take the job at the Red Headed League. Clay also uses an alias to throw off anyone suspicious of him. In the text, Clay goes under the name of Vincent Spaulding. His assistant goes under the names of Duncan Ross and William Morris.

### **Issues:**

The main issue raised in *The Red Headed League* is that of the socio-economic divide in London during the Victorian era. The lower class citizens, such as Mr Wilson, are portrayed as dim-witted and unable to solve their own problems. Indeed, both Holmes and Dr Watson laugh at Mr Wilson when he presents them with the notice that the Red Headed League has dissolved. Mr Wilson at this point still believes in the existence of the Red Headed League while both Holmes and Watson have recognised it as a farce. The greed and arrogance of the society is shown by the lengths to which John Clay and his assistant will go to gain money.

This concept of social divisions is the key issue addressed in *The Red Headed League* and is an accurate reflection of the Victorian society in which the text was written.

### **Alterations to Generic Conventions:**

As *The Red Headed League* is an embryonic crime fiction text, alterations to generic conventions are barely noticeable.

There is one alteration, however, that is evident in the text. In a classic crime fiction text a crime is committed and the sleuth investigates and solves the crime, bringing the perpetrators to justice. In *The Red Headed League* it is not a crime that is committed but a disgruntled pawnbroker who is unhappy at losing a job worth four pounds a week. It is only when Holmes looks into the case that he discovers more sinister forces at work. The crime is then solved before it occurs.

### **Language Features: Include quotes**

- Use of first person. The story is written in first person from the point of view of Dr Watson. This gives the story a more personal feel and adds to its realism. It also adds to the mystery of solving the crime and allows Holmes' brilliance to stand out even more. Watson is privileged to the same clues as Holmes yet is just as confused as the reader until Holmes explains how he drew the conclusions he did.
- Use of direct speech. Right from the beginning, despite the text being written in past tense, the use of direct speech such as, "You could not possibly have come at a better time," once again adds to the realism and makes the text seem more fluent just like a real case. This is especially useful to compensate for the fact that the case has already happened, yet it still manages to build up suspense. A key area of crime fiction is to be able to give the case a flowing feel, which direct speech allows to happen.
- Use of adjectives. Whilst adjectives would normally be a commonplace in most texts, in this text it is especially important. Being a crime fiction text, clues must flow on and every little detail must be noted. The text begins with Holmes describing a "very stout, florid-faced, elderly gentlemen, with fiery red hair." The adjectives become clues to help understand the case.
- Use of foreign language. The use of foreign language in this text often seems to sum up an attitude of Holmes' or the case itself. The quote made by Holmes, "Omne ignotum pro magnifico" translates to 'everything unknown is taken for magnificent.' This sums up Holmes' attitude to unsolved riddles and cases in general. The final line of the text, "L'homme c'est rien – l'oeuvre c'est tout" translates to 'The man, this is nothing – the work, this is all.' This shows Holmes reaction to a suggestion that he is a "benefactor of the race" by stating that it is the work that he values most. This shows how a sleuth must have a broad knowledge in order to solve a crime.
- Newspaper Articles. The newspaper advertisement adds to the realism of the story by giving the text another medium to give information to the reader. They act as another set of clues that must be understood by both characters and the reader.
- Use of similes. Conan Doyle uses similes very effectively to introduce new characters who are needed for the text to be complete without taking up too much time and slow the text down. When Holmes sets off to thwart

Clay's robbery attempt, the characters of Mr Merryweather and Mr Jones must be introduced quickly so as to keep the text flowing. Conan Doyle does this by describing Jones using the phrase "as brave as a bulldog, and as tenacious as a lobster." This describes Jones quickly and accurately to keep the story flowing. Once again, similes are used to add clues to the case quickly.

### **Contrast/Comparison with *The Big Sleep*:**

#### **Comparison:**

- Both texts have characters that have committed previous crimes before the setting of the texts. They are both known criminals who meet their end to their respective sleuths, Holmes and Marlowe.
- Both texts ignore certain classes and ethnic groups in society. No black citizens or citizens of other races are present in *The Big Sleep* or *The Red Headed League*. Both texts concentrate solely on the upper classes of society and lower class citizens are only presented as those who wish to up their societal rankings. Both settings are ones that do not fit the description of a modern multicultural society.
- Both stories are seen from the point of view of a male sleuth who solves the case after they have been paid or with no payment at all. This shows that both detectives are more concerned with solving the case than earning payment.
- Both sleuths, Holmes and Marlowe, are always portrayed as intellectually smarter than those around them. They are always shown as being on top of a situation and never short of ideas.
- Both sleuths have little idiosyncrasies when they are thinking about a case. Holmes, for instance, smokes a pipe whilst thinking. Marlowe on the other hand clicks and pulls his ear.
- Both crimes centre on greed and the pursuit of wealth.

#### **Contrast:**

- *The Big Sleep* is a film set in 1940's America whilst *The Red Headed League* is a short story in the print medium and set during the 1890's in London, England.
- Phillip Marlowe is a sleuth who works alone during the solving process whereas Holmes is inclined to share his experiences with Dr Watson and always welcomes his opinion, as is evident at the beginning of the text when Holmes asks Watson for his first thoughts on seeing Mr Wilson.
- The film, *The Big Sleep*, is viewed in the third person, with no narration from the characters themselves. *The Red Headed League*, by contrast, is

written in the first person by none other than Dr Watson himself. Also, Holmes is aware of the fact that his tale is being chronicled by Watson, whereas Marlowe has no knowledge of his tale being recorded.

- Whilst women are marginalised in both texts, the women in *The Big Sleep* do have actual roles to play and do have secrets relating to the cases. In *The Red Headed League*, the only female character, the fourteen year-old assistant to Mr Wilson, has no secretive characteristics and does not take part in the crime or case at hand.

### **Personal Response:**

The text has an enticing beginning with the prowess of Holmes and Watson shown at the start. This made me want to see how brilliant they actually were and whether they could actually solve what appeared to be an extremely “unique” case.

The little details given about Mr Wilson, his work and his assistants gave me plenty to think about right from the beginning as a lot of information was presented to me. Right from the start, I began to question what was the crime, and how did it relate to the Red Headed League?

The plot thickened and the clues were unravelled, with each new action adding more mystery as to what was to come. When Holmes meets Vincent Spaulding, looks at his knees and taps the pavement, I began to realise what was coming. This enlightenment gave me a sense of excitement and intrigue as I waited for the climax to occur.

I also enjoyed the denouement at the end where Holmes explains to Watson (and to me), how he pieced together each clue and solved the case.

All in all, I enjoyed it immensely and *The Red Headed League* is indeed a classic of the genre.