Lot No. 249 Short Guide

Lot No. 249 by Arthur Conan Doyle

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Contents

Characters

Since this is a short story, the cast of characters is minimal, but each plays a significant part, either in providing information or in the action of the story itself. There are only two major characters: Abercrombie Smith and Edward Bellingham. The former is the perfect type of the public school ideal, a kind of character memorably portrayed in the novel Tom Brown's School Days. And he is established by Doyle as such at the beginning of the story by direct description and by his interaction and conversation with other characters. Smith is a newcomer to Old College, a freshman, even though he attended medical school for four years in Scotland and later in Berlin. He is athletic (participating in and knowledgeable about boxing, running, cricket, and rowing) tolerant, and intellectually solid. He is, clearly, no intellectual, but he manages to do well: With his firm mouth, broad forehead, and clear-cut, somewhat hard-featured face, he was a man who, if he had no brilliant talent, was yet so dogged, so patient, and so strong that he might in the end overtop a more showy genius. A man who can hold his own among Scotchmen and North Germans is not a man to be easily set back.

Smith had left a name at Glasgow and at Berlin, and he was bent now upon doing as much at Oxford, if hard work and devotion could accomplish it.

Smith is portrayed as more tolerant than most and more independent-minded because, unlike the other characters who meet Bellingham, he rather likes him and "found himself, after a time, looking forward to his visits, and even returning them." His function in the story is to be a kind of Sherlock Holmes. He is the reasonable man who gathers information and eventually believes that he has solved the mystery, i.e., found the perpetrator of the violent attacks. He is the only figure in the story whose character even approaches complexity. At first he is quite genial, easy going, and intellectually passive. He meets Bellingham by chance, hears odd or bad rumors about his downstairs neighbor from minor characters, and notices some strange things in Bemngharn's rooms. However, when he learns that William Monkhouse Lee has almost drowned after he broke off his sister's engagement with Bellingham, Smith reveals another side of himself. Once convinced that Bellingham is a criminal, he becomes angry and confronts him. Shortly thereafter he is unmanned by fear when he is pursued by what he thinks is the mummy. Finally he becomes furious, but cool and calculating, as he plans the destruction of the mummy and, possibly, Bellingham.

Bellingham is a flatter character. His physical appearance—small, fat, and paleskinned—separates him from other physically fit and "manly" students. His brilliance as a scholar (a Victorian nerd) as well as his experience in Eastern cultures mark him as alien to the public school ideal.

Smith's first impression of him is of "a man of wide reading, with catholic tastes and an extraordinary memory. His manner, too, was so pleasing and suave that one came, after a time, to overlook his repellant appearance." At the same time he "seemed to detect a dash of insanity in the man," some small delusions of grandeur. Later still he catches him in an obvious lie and his good opinion begins to change.

Bellingham is as physically inactive and Smith is active. He is not a sportsman and spends most of his days and nights studying. Yet Doyle suggests subtle similarities between the two as well. Both are older and more experienced than other students. Both have traveled and lived abroad. Both study hard and long into the night and feel some nervous strain as a result.

"This community of lateness had formed a certain silent bond between them," the narrator tells us. While Smith, a medical student, studies "great coloured maps of that strange internal kingdom of which we are the hapless and helpless monarchs," Bellingham studies ancient and modern kingdoms of the East. While Smith keeps and studies a skeleton in his rooms, Bellingham keeps and studies a mummy in his. Smith's boxing and his death threat suggest that he, like Bellingham, can be violent. It is only appropriate that when Smith accuses Bellingham of using the mummy to attack his enemies, Bellingham should call him a "raving lunatic."

The other characters, Lee, Hastie, Styles, and Peterson, are used to illuminate, through words or actions, the conflict between Smith and Bellingham and the themes of the story. William Monkhouse Lee is a student, a young gentleman and man of honor who learns something terrible about Bellingham, warns Smith about him, but keeps his word and refuses to divulge details. Shortly thereafter he is almost drowned, a fact which is decisive in shaping Smith's judgment that Bellingham is a criminal. Lee kept his word; apparently Bellingham did not.

Jephro Hastie is another public school type: robust, straightforward, loyal, and brave. Doyle uses Hastie to inform the reader about Smith and Bellingham, their characters, and their histories, mainly through his dialogue with Smith. While he is a good friend, Smith recognizes that "he was rough, strong-fibbed, with no imagination or sympathy. He could not tolerate departures from what he looked upon as the model type of manliness." Hastie's early judgment of Bellingham is premature, but it certainly adds to his aura of evil.

Thomas Styles is the classic English servant. Loyal, worried about "his" young gentlemen, their health and well-being, he knows his place and all the gossip. He, too, tells Smith of the strange doings in Bellingham's rooms, but as with other warnings, Smith finds reasons to ignore it.

Finally there is Doctor Plumptree Peterson who plays a crucial role in shaping one of the themes of the story. Smith visits Peterson at his country home quite regularly to discuss new developments in medicine and life. It is during his evening walk to Peterson's home that Smith is pursued and almost caught. Peterson is a sympathetic friend with a scientific perspective. When he hears Smith's solution to the mysterious attacks he gently asserts, "Well, it's a striking chain of events. And yet, my dear fellow, you must allow that each incident in itself is capable of a more natural explanation." He adds, "It is certainly a formidable indictment that you have against Bellingham, but if you were to place it before a police magistrate, he would simply laugh in your face."

Peterson has the character and authority to give weight to his words. His judgment frames for us Smith's decision to take the law into his own hands: Smith is abandoning the law and natural explanations, relying instead on his own perceptions and the stories he hears from others. Smith may be right, but if he is, his actions suggest that the beliefs and ethics of a gentleman are no different than those of a fanatic. And if he is wrong, his image of Bellingham is a mirror for his darker self.

Social Concerns

Lot No. 249" appears in a collection of short stories titled Round the Red Lamp: Being Facts and Fancies of Medical Life, but its only connection to the sometimes painful realism of the stories about medical problems and those who treat them is that its central character, one Abercrombie Smith, is a medical student studying hard for his exams at Old College, Oxford.

Nevertheless, Arthur Conan Doyle's "Preface" to this collection addresses a question about fiction that is quite important, especially about popular fiction. Why, he was asked, should anyone want to write about unpleasant, even scary subjects? He offers a couple of reasons. One has to do with seriousness of purpose: "If you deal with this life at all. . . and if you are anxious to make your doctors something more than marionettes, it is quite essential that you should paint the darker side."

That is all very well when you are dealing with illness and disease, but what about a horror story like "Lot No. 249," which is designed solely to take readers for a scary ride, like a roller coaster, by telling a tale of the supernatural? Such "escapist" fiction, while it does not seem to have any relation to our lives, often plays on fears and anxieties which are very much a part of our lives.

That is certainly true of this story. It purports to tell a true story about a couple of attempted murders which occurred in the otherwise peaceful and bucolic confines of Oxford University. While Abercrombie Smith lives on the top floor of student flats and studies medicine, underneath him, on the second floor, lives Edward Bellingham, a student of "Oriental" languages and culture.

Actually, Bellingham is much more than a student. He is a master of several of these languages, as well as the cultures that they come from, and he has filled his flat with ancient treasures from the "East," (what we now call the Middle East) including a mummy which stands in a box simply marked "Lot No. 249," its identification number from the auction where Bellingham purchased it. Bellingham has also gotten hold of some ancient papyrus scrolls which he is translating and studying, hoping to learn magical secrets of the ancients and use them for his own benefit.

This is not exactly a new premise for a story. There were lots of stories written about English adventurers who go to "exotic lands" and bring back artifacts, treasures, and, sometimes, curses with them. Of course, Doyle's tale skips all that (although we know that Bellingham has been to these exotic places) and focuses on the quest for knowledge and power, a story rather like Faust's, but also similar to Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, in which a man uses (or abuses) his scientific knowledge by attempting to usurp God's function and create human life.

"Lot No. 249" was both set and written at the height of England's imperial expansion, when British colonies spanned the globe and representatives of this previously insular culture were living among, and trying to control, people who were often quite different

racially and culturally than themselves. On the one hand, the English were proud of their empire. It had brought them great wealth, military power, and preeminence in the "great game" of international diplomacy. They celebrated this only a few years after the story was published at Queen Victoria's Jubilee, marking the 60th year of her reign in 1897. But these enormous changes created new problems, fears, and societal tensions as well.

While England had remained at peace since Victoria's reign began in 1837, there had been a number of brush fire wars fought to gain or maintain colonial dominance over territories in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and South and Central America. English men and women had lived as small and often detested minorities in these regions.

They were vulnerable, were often threatened and sometimes killed. In 1884, for instance, at Khartoum, the capital of the Soudan, an English garrison led by General "Chinese" Gordon was massacred by Egyptian rebels. This story takes place in 1884 and we learn, at the end, that Bellingham was last heard of in the Soudan. When alien cultures are perceived as threats, they are often depicted in literature as greedy, depraved, immoral, sometimes monstrous, and, in general, the source of all evil in an otherwise happy community.

While the British certainly wanted to control Egypt—and successfully did until the middle of the twentieth century—because the Suez Canal was crucial to the success of its Asian trading empire, it was both repelled and fascinated by contemporary Egyptian society and by the relics which painted a fragmentary picture of the culture of ancient Egypt. The size of its monumental architecture (i.e., the pyramids), the wealth discovered in them, and the ability of Egyptians to preserve bodies intact for thousands of years through mummification all suggested a civilization as powerful, as knowledgeable, and as imperial in its ambitions as England itself—yet one quite alien to English values and to England's contemporary political ambitions. In Doyle's story this combination of desire and fear is played out in the plot of "Lot No. 249."

Of course, it also plays on the desire/fear ambivalence many cultures feel toward science—in this case toward the historical sciences that revealed human and pre-human history via archeological research. The ambivalence could only have been intensified because the motive for that research was as often the desire for treasure and wealth as it was for knowledge. The many stories of curses which accompanied ancient, often religious, treasure to the West may well represent the cultural guilt and fear of those who disturb, if not rob, graves and monuments to learn their secrets. Knowledge is power and, like power, it is alluring and, at the same time, dangerous.

Techniques

Doyle was among the first generation of writers to earn great sums of money writing for mass-circulation magazines, as opposed to smaller, more literary journals.

This story was published in Harpers's Magazine in 1892. His techniques are really quite similar to those of F. Scott Fitzgerald who published in American magazines like the Saturday Evening Post. Both men wrote simply and clearly about characters who were recognizable social types in a very realistic social environment. In fact, until the late nineteenth century, English writers generally refrained from setting stories in their own time-period. Doyle may have been one of the first to do so. And if his characters now seem to us to be cliches, it may be because other writers have been influenced by Doyle's attempt to fuse social realism with elements of the adventure and gothic tale.

Although it is not set in a remote time and place, there is an element of gothic or horror fiction in the story. Dark hallways, exotic rooms, unexplained noises in the night—all these are present in a realistic environment with realistic characters. Doyle's story is also a good example of the wellmade short story, with its straightforward narrative and a clear conflict which develops from the beginning, gathers tension and momentum, and reaches a climax and resolution at the end. The action is presented by narrative summary interspersed with scenes that are essentially dramatic conversations. But Doyle adds to this form a second layer of narrative, something like the frame narrative which we know from novels like Wuthering Heights or The Great Gatsby. We have a narrator who tells the story, but insists that he is reconstructing it primarily from Smith's narrative with small additions from other characters. So we see things from Abercrombie Smith's point of view and based on his knowledge. The effect of this is to distance readers from Bellingham since we have no direct knowledge of his thoughts and only learn about him at second hand (Smith tells narrator who tells us) or third hand (characters tell Smith, who tells narrator, who tells us).

Bellingham remains a mysterious character, like Heathcliff or Jay Gatsby. We never know his thoughts, which is, of course, a crucial strategy if a mystery is to be sustained.

Themes

Most of Doyle's stories, including "Lot No. 249," are intended for sheer entertainment, much like the mysteries and stories of adventure which we see on television and in the movies today. Doyle's goal was an exciting plot that confirms the values of his readers: patriotism and a belief in hard work, fair play, bravery, and physical prowess. That is to say the story is about the character of a Victorian "public school ideal" of a gentleman. As such it also affirms the chivalric code which was supposed to guide a man's relation to women. In the novel, William Monkhouse Lee's sister Eveline is engaged to Edward Bellingham, and Lee's actions—his early commitment to secrecy and his later turn against Bellingham—are shaped by his desire to protect his sister and his family's honor and good name.

But certainly the focus of the story is on Abercrombie Smith and his fellow students, as well as on Doctor Plumptree Peterson, a professor, and the servant Thomas Styles. It is the character of these men, the quality of their minds and hearts as well as their honesty and integrity, that Doyle affirms in this story.

Bellingham's character is a study in contrast. His thematic significance is as a representation of the knowledge and values of the alien "East." He lives in dark rooms filled with relics from the Semitic cultures he is studying and, we are quickly told, he is not only a master of Eastern languages, he actually talks and interacts with these people "as if he had been born and nursed and weaned among them."

While modern readers might think such learning to be admirable in a student of another culture, for an Englishman of that time it was considered a huge mistake to "go native," as they called it. Bellingham crossed the barrier between the cultures and, at some level, had broken ranks and become untrustworthy. This generally resulted in ostracism from the English community and, in this case, that is exactly what happens to him. Jephro Hastie, Smith's good friend, describes Bellingham as almost subhuman: "There is something damnable about him—something reptilian. My gorge always rises at him."

Notice that Hastie's judgment is almost purely intuitive. All he knows for sure is that Bellingham has been immerse in the languages and cultures of the East and that he is different in his way of life. This gives Smith a chance to demonstrate his fairmindedness and to reintroduce the importance of evidence to the process of fair judgment. As we shall see, judgment, even legal judgment, will play an important part in this story. Smith sees Hastie's judgment as, well, hasty because it is not based on evidence and in fact may be distorted because Hastie is interested in Eveline Lee himself. "What a prejudiced, green-eyed, evil-thinking old man it is," Smith says to his friend. "You have really nothing against the fellow except that."

The importance of evidence, of proof, is introduced by the nameless narrator at the story's beginning. The truth of the strange story of Edward Bellingham's experiments in the black arts, which brings a mummy back to life, rests on our belief in Smith's "full and clear narrative." And since Smith's narrative involves the return to life of a mummy "most

will think that it is more likely that one brain, however outwardly sane, has some subtle warp in its texture, some strange flaw in its workings, than that the path of nature has been overstepped."

That is, a reasonable person would probably conclude that it is more likely that Smith was disturbed or was seeing things, than that the mummy actually chased him.

"Yet," the narrator concludes: when we think how narrow and how devious this path of Nature is, how dimly we can trace it, for all our lamps of science, and how from the darkness which girds it round great and terrible possibilities loom ever shadowly upwards, it is a bold and confident man who will put a limit to the strange by-paths into which the human spirit may wander.

In short, the narrator's remarks suggest that both nature and the human mind are stranger and darker than science and our common sense can fathom. Such a com merit is common in tales of horror and the supernatural. It reasons us out of our reason and encourages us to suspend our disbelief. As such, it may be no more than a narrative convention, but it is also true that in Doyle's time investigations of the mind, and of natural and cultural history, discovered irrationality and monstrous anomalies; in short, realities which the science of the day could not explain. And while Oxford may be a place where the scientific and the rational dominate, there is a strong suggestion in the description of Old College that a dark history is there too: "Yet here were the silent stair and the old grey wall, with bend and saltire and many another heraldic device still to be read upon its surface, like grotesque shadows thrown back from days that had passed." Could these strange, ancient powers still influence both Egypt and Oxford? Modern science erected a barrier against supernatural explanations which, if crossed, allowed for a belief in deities and demons in the universe and the human mind.

We know that Doyle, who trained as a doctor (and created the master detective Sherlock Holmes), deeply respected the methods and findings of science. We also know that he was a proponent of spiritualism, believing in the possibilities of communicating with the spirits of the dead. It is clear from many of his writing that he both desired and feared the possibility of a reality beyond the reach of science.

So we might say that "Lot No. 249" has two intertwined, perhaps contradictory themes. The first accepts Smith's narrative at face value. It is a melodrama, a conflict between a good English gentleman, Abercrombie Smith, and the wicked Edward Bellingham who, having been corrupted by his experiences in, and magical knowledge of, the cultures of the East, returns to England to use his power to threaten and attempt to kill innocent English folk.

Smith takes the law into his own hands, destroys the mummy and ancient manuscripts and, by threatening Bellingham with a pistol, drives this foreign evil from the community.

However Doyle's second theme—that Smith's story itself maybe the result of a mind warped by fear and irrational impulses—turns the melodrama into a rather more complicated story. If we suppose that Smith only imagined that the mummy, at

Bellingham's command, attempted violent acts and tried to hunt down Smith, then Smith has committed the evil deeds he attributed to Bellingham. In that case the story, like Joseph Conrad's "The Secret Sharer" and many others, is about the deep but denied bond between the two men and what they symbolize. Perhaps deliberately, Doyle leaves both possibilities open. In the first sentence the narrator tells us, "Of the dealings of Edward Bellingham with William Monkhouse Lee, and of the cause of the great terror of Abercrombie Smith, it may be that no absolute and final judgment will ever be delivered."

Is the alien the source of all evil present in this idyllic community? Or are even the "outwardly sane" and most honorable of Englishmen shaped by a dark past and capable of the very acts they consciously despise in other?

Key Questions

While "Lot No. 249" is primarily an adventure story, the situation is problematic enough to raise some interesting questions. What does it mean to be a gentleman?

Is it a code of conduct or an attitude of mind? Abercrombie Smith seems to be a true gentleman, but he is placed in a position in which he has to choose between obeying the law and disobeying the law in order to achieve an important social good: the restoration of safety and social order in his small community. As such the story considers the questions of ends and means.

For instance, we see that William Monkhouse Lee has given his word as a gentleman to Edward Bellingham not to reveal a secret.

He keeps his word but may have endangered his own life in doing so. Should he have done so? Abercrombie Smith's actions are just the reverse. His end, destroying the mummy and ridding the community of Bellingham, may be good. But do they justify his means, which are illegal? The situation becomes even more complicated when we consider that he is not absolutely sure that Bellingham is a criminal. Is it ever a gentlemanly act to break the law?

1. The last line of the story is a question: "But the wisdom of men is small, and the ways of nature are strange, and who shall put a bound to the dark things which may be found by those who seek them?" How does it relate to the story?

2. Is Abercrombie Smith a hero? What, in your opinion, makes a person heroic?

How would you compare him to other heroes of fiction and film?

3. If you were William Monkhouse Lee, would you have told Abercrombie Smith what it was about Edward Bellingham that made him break off his sister's engagement? Do you think it plausible for Lee not to tell Smith?

4. What are the qualities of Smith, Lee, Hastie, and Peterson that mark them as gentlemen? Do you think Thomas Styles is a gentleman? What do you think of Smith's treatment of Styles?

5. A significant amount of archeological work done in the last two hundred years or so has involved excavating graves and other sacred sites and taking valuable cultural relics from their original communities and intended locations. What is the value of this kind of research? Is such work justified if living members of the community object to this research?

6. Are there aspects of the human and natural world you think should be off limits to science and scientific research?

In the past some people, including many scientists, believed that we should not have developed and built an atomic bomb. What do you think? Are there scientific projects going on today that you think should be abandoned? What might be their value and their danger?

7. Part of the success of a story like this depends on creating and heightening the mystery and horror? How good is Doyle at doing this? Discuss places in the story where he makes this happen.

Are there places where he fails?

8. Do you think "Lot No. 249" would make a good movie or television show?

Why or why not? What problems would you have in turning it into a good script for a movie? For instance, how would you deal with the contributions of the narrator to the story, since a film seldom has a narrator? Who would you cast as the characters and why would you choose them?

Literary Precedents

The history of the short story is indeed quite short. It is the most modern of popular literary forms, having its roots in the work of Edgar Allen Poe. Doyle is doubly indebted to the American author, first, because he is considered the creator of the modern short story form, and second, because Poe was a master of both horror stories and tales of "ratiocination" (detective fiction).

Doyle, in fact, tips his cap to Poe in the story when there is talk in town that a "great ape" may might be the criminal.

This, of course, was the solution to Poe's great mystery, "The Murder in the Rue Morgue." Doyle was himself a master of detective fiction. He had already gained fame for the first series of Sherlock Holmes stories when he wrote "Lot No. 249."

Although he wrote in a longer form, there seems little doubt that nineteenthcentury novelist Wilkie Collins had some influence on Doyle's style and content. Collins' The Moonstone is a mystery about a gem stolen from India which seems to bring a curse on the English family and is told in the first person by characters who see things quite differently.

"Lot No. 249" is related by theme to Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, and to the various versions of the Faust story. Its elements of imperial adventure connect it as well to Rudyard Kipling's short stories and H. Rider Haggard's novels King Solomon's Mines and She. Doyle's use of realistic setting and character for a gothic story no doubt influenced Stephen King's suburban horror fiction. This makes "Lot No. 249" rather like some of King's horror stories or horror comics of the 1950s in which terrible things happen in modern bucolic suburbs.

Related Titles

"Lot No. 249" synthesizes some popular forms of fiction that Doyle tried his hand at various times. At the time he wrote the story, he had just achieved tremendous success with the Sherlock Holmes short stories and novels. Abercrombie Smith is certainly trying to be a detective and the structure of the story certainly follows the model of the classic detective story, in which a narrator recounts the experience of a detective attempting to solve a crime.

With this story, however, Doyle integrates other popular forms, for example the Gothic tale of terror. One of his best efforts in this genre is "The Captain of the Polestar," (1883) a story about the captain of a ship lured to its destruction by the specter of the woman the captain loves. Another such tale, which adopts the masquerade of a nonfiction first-person narrator is "J.

Habakuk Jephson's Statement" (1884). It attempts to explain the mysterious happenings on the ship Mary Celeste. It was so successful in its masquerade that the advocategeneral of Gibraltar wrote in to denounce it as a pack of lies. Doyle considered this a triumph of his art.

Later in his life Doyle wrote sciencefiction tales and novels, many of which are cautionary stories about the danger of experimentation and the, existence of the inexplicable, both themes which figure in this story. One involves Doyle's most famous character after Holmes and Watson, Professor Challenger. The Lost World, a novel, has as its theme the continued existence of the past in the present. Only in this case it is not a mummy brought back to life, but dinosaurs and cave men who have continued to exist on a high plateau in the jungles of South America, a story made into more than one movie.

Two Sherlock Holmes stories contain themes also present in "Lot No. 249." "The Adventures of Charles Augustus Milverton" (1904) is a rare example of Holmes solving a mystery but not bringing the criminal to justice. In this case a woman badly wronged by a man takes her revenge by killing him.

Meanwhile, Holmes and Watson, who witness the crime, refuse to help the police find the murderer. Like Smith they believe a noble cause allows them to ignore the law.

One of Doyle's later stories, "The Adventure of the Creeping Man" (1923), is about a man who experiments with a drug and, as a result, begins to revert to an animal.

In "When the World Screamed" (1928), another Challenger story, the professor attempts to shoot a dart into the bowels of the planet to get some reaction from "old Mother Earth." A reaction he certainly gets and it is difficult to tell if the story is critical of Challenger or if it exalts his great achievement. In any case, it shows the typical tension in Doyle's fiction between his desire to explore the unknown and his fears and doubts about doing so.

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