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Sidekicks : A study

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Abstract

Where would Holmes be without Watson, Scooby-Doo without Shaggy, Tintin without Snowy or Feluda without Topshe? In each detective pairing, the identity of the central character, or 'hero' derives a large portion of it's definition from the presence of the accompanying character, or the sidekick. And not just in detective fiction, sidekicks are present in all forms, i.e., Frodo and Sam, Batman and Robin, Lyra and Pantalaimon, Eragon and Sahpira and Elijah and Daneel, to name a few. These pairings have filled our literary culture that it is often impossible to separate one character from another. Despite being put at a lower status than our protagonist, they are crucial to the story's development and progress, assisting the protagonist and acting as a proxy for the reader. Generally, the sidekick provides information to the reader, being our looking glass into this fictional world, essentially giving us the necessary details to understand fully the complex characters and plot devices. Sometimes the sidekick works to change the setting, time etc, by recounting the story as it had happened before. Furthermore, just as the 'hero' grows during the course of the story/saga, so does the sidekick, evolving into a more central, more relevant character, however still subservient to the hero. Therefore, this paper focuses on the roles of a sidekick and the relationships between a sidekick and our hero.

1 Introduction

The *companion sidekick* character is a fairly recent phenomenon in Western Literature, developed with the evolving need for collaboration and companionship in modern society. Perhaps one of the oldest detective fiction stories, *Oedipus Rex* showcases the works and life of a single significant character (*Oedipus*) with no partner or sidekick to speak of. Similarly, other classical stories also do not have an important sidekick like *The Iliad* (ensemble of protagonists) or *The Odyssey* (protagonist surrounded by multiple supporting characters).

Since the earliest form of storytelling used to be plays, there was a distinctive "*Chorus*" which undertook certain responsibilities which were later on passed on to the sidekick, i.e., commenting on actions (*Sound cues, exclamations*), marking the passage of time (*narrative devices*) or acting like a mini-audience (*e.g. laughter-tracks still used by some Comedy TV shows today*). However the shift to textual mediums removed the functionality of the *Chorus*, and brought about the need for an alternative method to achieve these functionalities in Fiction.

Over time, the literary *sidekick* assumed additional responsibilities, including but not limited to biographer, contrast, environmental buffer etc. These roles were auxiliary, however still important to their ever evolving dynamic. And in modern times, the *hero-sidekick* have been disbanded for *equal partnerships*.

This analysis will be primarily focusing on *Sherlock Holmes and Watson*, with examples drawn from some contemporary sources and other texts done in class.

2 Partner vs Sidekick vs Ensembles

The sidekick's evolution has not stopped in contemporary times. However, due to the protagonist's curse of being a *social outcast* (due to his superhero role), the burden of *normalcy* falls onto the sidekick, or the supporting character. Another major development is the concept of *sagas*, or stories spanning multiple books (in case of written text) or multiple seasons (in case of TV series). This results in the possibility of the introduction of multiple additional story elements, (*i.e. romance, adventure etc*). This also facilitates the inclusion of new roles into the story, *i.e.* the role of the *partner* (romantic or otherwise), the *protegee* (different from the sidekick), the *archenemies*, etc.

This results in the Sidekick role being broken into multiple characters in contemporary detective fiction. For example in *Tintin*, the traditional role of the sidekick is taken up by *Snowy* however auxiliary characters like *Captain Haddock*, *Professor Calculus*, *Thomson and Thompson* play a lot of the roles which were traditionally played by the sidekick. Similarly, in the TV Series *Castle*, we have the sidekick *Detective Beckett*, who also plays the love interest of our protagonist, and there are other characters who support and aid our detective duo. In this way, the concept of the '*Lone Detective*' followed by a loyal yet inferior sidekick has evolved into either a partnership (*Peter and Jende in A Murder in Mahim*), or an ensemble supporting cast (*TV Series 'Bones'*).

In the *Golden Era of Detective Fiction*, our protagonist was popularised as the *lone wolf* (e.g. Poirot, Holmes, Miss Marple) with a sidekick who served more auxiliary roles which were inessential to solving the mystery. In contrast, the modern detective figures are surrounded by *equals* (Salander and Blomkvist, Peter and Jende, Schmidt and Jenko [21 Jump Street]). This humanizes and normalizes the detective role, having brought it down from an social outcast and unattainable persona to an everyday man, relatable and approachable.

3 The various roles of a sidekick

Apart from the basic responsibilities entrusted to the sidekick after the obsolescence of the *Choir*, the character assumes additional duties and becomes closer and more integral to the plot. The sidekick is often our eyes and ears in the story, and more often than not, he is our direct competition in solving the mystery, since few of us can hope to attain deductive and reasoning skills equal to that of the detective, we make do with the sidekick.

3.1 Companion

The primary role of the sidekick is to *accompany* the protagonist through his journey in the plot. In this way, the sidekick is often *subservient* to the hero, serving menial wishes and demands. Thus, in *Murder on the Orient Express*, Monsieur Bouc and Dr. Constantine aid Poirot in tasks like searching the luggage, interrogating suspects, etc.

In a less inferior manner, the sidekick's role is often just a *companion* for our hero. He plays an almost equal role in the plot, however, is unable to play as important a role in the resolution of the crime. For example Watson conducts his own investigation in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* which supplements Holmes' own findings. Sometimes, Watson also contributes a weapon, or summons the police, he does not solve the mystery or supply significant clues to resolve the challenges the duo faces.

The companionship forms the bedrock of the relationship between the sidekick and the detective, and other more nuanced relationships are built on top of this.

3.2 Confidante

Another major role for the sidekick is to act as a *confidante* for our protagonist. Since the typical detective figure is a *lone fighter* with support neither from the law (traditionally) or society, the sidekick is his one-stop shop for societal interactions. These layered exchanges take place in multiple, nuanced ways.

On one level, the sidekick is merely a *soundboard* for our hero, who thinks out loud, or explains his thoughts and intentions, no matter how

intimate. This is partly for *storytelling*, giving us a glimpse into the mind of our protagonist, and also within the story to keep our sidekick informed of the hero's intentions and ideas.

On another level, the sidekick acts as a *stand-in for the audience*, showcasing their reactions and responses to the information being presented. In this way, the reader almost becomes the sidekick, being exposed to the story from his point of view.

For example, *Topshe* often works questions *Feluda* about his thought process, similarly Holmes often allows Watson to tackle an investigative problem first, thus showcasing his superior deductive skills. This also goes to show us the start difference between Holmes and *Watson(us)*. Watson also grows during the courses of the story, eventually being a minor sleuth himself, after receiving Sherlock's wisdom. In this way, the sidekick turns to be our looking glass, keeping the detective figure beyond reach, however near enough to get glimpses into their working.

3.3 Public Defender

Since the sidekick often outlives the *protagonist* (e.g. Original Sherlock Holmes' death), he often takes up the role of the *story-teller* or the *public defender* for the protagonist. This is also because our sidekick works very closely with our protagonist and has *intimate knowledge* about the intricacies of their work. This puts the sidekick in a unique position to defend and safeguard our protagonist from the public, the press etc. (For example in the *BBC's Sherlock*, when Sherlock is summoned to the Buckingham palace to meet the queen, he goes wearing only his bed sheet, an act which has to be explained away by Watson, else risk the wrath of the British bureaucracy).

All too often, the hero is a *cold, distant* and *aloof* personality with quirks that often alienate them from the audience and society in general. For example, in BBC's *Sherlock*, his standing with the public and press vastly improved once Watson started *chronicling* their adventures, almost becoming a *minor celebrity* to the press. In this way, the sidekick's role is often crucial for the reader and the people's acceptance of the heroic figure. In Holmes' own words, Watson was his *Boswell*. So, Watson was much more than Holmes' companion in his adventures, more than his flatmate, even more

than his friend. The burden of making Holmes' accessible and acceptable to the general populous fell onto Watson's shoulders.

Similarly, the sidekick also *humanises* the hero, bringing him down from the *unattainable pedestal* of perfection and showcasing his flaws for everyone to see. For example Watson balances Holmes' inhuman deductive and reasoning skills with his poor violin skills and cocaine addictions. So, lowering the bar, so to speak, for the detective hero to be a perfect being in every sense, is achieved through the sidekick.

Even *Sir Arthur Conan Doyle* realised Watson's importance to the detective story, which is evidenced by the fact that his creation predates Holmes', as his son Adrian Conan Doyle found the original manuscript for the *Study in Scarlet*, which did not have Holmes in it. [1]

3.4 Tether to Reality

More often than not, the detective figure thinks and lives on a *higher plane*, unable to sometimes understand and deal with basic parts of life like *emotions*, *human responses*, *social etiquette* etc. This is where the sidekick shines, being the *intermediary* between the hero and *reality*, warning them about the possible consequences of their actions, saving them from these consequences and also navigating situations with more finesse than our protagonist possibly could. So, they often bring our hero *back into the realm of reality*, being the more grounded, level headed of the two individuals. For example in the *TV Show Castle*, Beckett often is the voice of reason and normalcy compared to the flamboyant and extravagant Castle.

Further, the sidekick acts as the protagonist's *conscience*, offering *opposing views* and then allowing the former to make his independent decisions. In this way, the sidekick acts as the voice of the other, in the protagonist's thought process, reminding them of morals, consequences, etc.

Generally, the detective figure is portrayed to be a *superior being*, being detached from everyday tasks. For this role, he is often shown to be far above the *common-folk* he lives with, an advanced species if you will. So, the sidekick takes on the role of performing *everyday tasks*, thus providing the hero with a *buffer from society*, i.e., this perfect bubble where he can

continue to be elusive and mysterious.

For example Watson, and Ms. Hudson to some extent, take care of basic tasks like food, sleep, laundry etc., almost reducing Sherlock to an infant in his capacity to function as an individual.

3.5 Contrast

The sidekick, serves as "*the other*" for the hero archetype. Through this comparison between the hero and the sidekick, we get an insight into the *sheer difference* between the hero and our sidekick (the common man). For example, Sherlock always humours Watson by allowing him a first crack at any deduction or observation. However, more often than not, Watson is completely and utterly wrong on all counts. This just seems to show us the *large intellectual and skill disparity* between our hero and their sidekick.

Apart from *ability*, our sidekick also contrasts the hero in his mannerisms, being more approachable, down to earth and sympathetic than our hero. For example, in *BBC's Sherlock*, Ms. Hudson was often consoled by Watson when Sherlock unintentionally hurt her with his unsympathetic comments. Similarly, Blomkvist is the socially well-adjusted counterpart to Salander, evident from even their professions. Salander, the cold-hearted calculating persona is a computer hacker with a photographic memory, having to deal with logic and machines. In contrast, Blomkvist is a journalist, relying on people and emotional persuasion for his source of livelihood. Thus, despite not having a traditional sidekick-protagonist relationship, they still *contrast* and *complement* each other.

In this way, we are able to better understand and perceive the heroic figure due to the contrast brought about by the sidekick. Hence, there is no one without the other.

4 The benefits to our Hero

On a simple level, the hero gains a *dutiful follower* to cater to their every need (e.g. Hailing cabs, calling the police, fetching tea etc.). Furthermore, having a subservient relationship with the sidekick further boosts the hero's *superior self image*, giving him the validation regular society does not offer him. In this way, the *mutually co-dependant relationship* is the basis for a standard detective fiction duo.

However, the partnership must be mutually beneficial for both parties. The sidekick obtains an entry into the fast life, with kills, thrills and suspense, and the hero obtains a companion, a friend, an advisor, a mentor, a buffer etc. The sidekick's friendship slowly evolves into *loyalty*, willing to endure pain and suffering for their companion's sake. For example, Watson is willing to endure clients ignoring or worse, belittling him (e.g. Scandal in Bohemia) for Sherlock's sake, and this is a mark of stark loyalty and affection towards his companion.

5 Conclusion

In truth, we often relate more to sidekicks than we do to the hero figure. In the words of Ron Buchanan, *The hero would parallel Plato's "ideal" while the sidekick would parallel Aristotle's "reality."*[2]

The detective, as with a hero in any genre, represents an *unattainable peak* of humanity, whereas the sidekick is the attainable "close-enough" that most readers relate to. The idealistic viewpoints (honour, justice, duty, etc.) of the hero are often held to too high a standard and they fail to incorporate the intricacies of human fallibility (vengeance, anger, jealousy, pride, etc.) which a sidekick often embodies (albeit to a moderate extent). In this way, a sidekick is a "human" version of our hero, a flimsy imitation which is the best any of us can hope to reach.

References

- [1] Doyle, A. C., & Busch, F. (1987). *The Sherlock Holmes mysteries*. New York: Signet Classic.
- [2] Buchanan, R. (2003). "Side by Side": The Role of the Sidekick. *Studies in Popular Culture*, 26(1), 15-26.
- [3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Detective_fiction

"The criminal is the creative artist; the detective only the critic."
G.K. Chesterton, *The Blue Cross*