

A METHODOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF “THE ADVENTURE OF SILVER BLAZE”

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[Excerpt from *Research Decisions* (2003), pp.325-333]

It's hard to convey the richness of analytic induction in the context of qualitative research, if for no other reason than that the space-saving figures and tables of aggregated quantitative data must be replaced by verbose descriptions of the rationale by which conclusions are generated. Studies that appear in journal article format must fit within the 30- to 35-page limit most journals impose. Many of the classic examples such as Cressey (1953) therefore appear in book-length form, making them tough to summarize in a section of a chapter.

I therefore needed a briefer example of an analysis that illustrates something of the ongoing interaction between theory and data, and induction and deduction, required for a comprehensive analysis. Fortunately, such analyses are prevalent in fiction, where, for example, sleuths sometimes show admirable methodological acumen. In this realm, one can do no better than to look at that master of sleuths, Sherlock Holmes. From Conan Doyle's many suitable stories, I've chosen to focus on “*The Adventure of Silver Blaze*.”

The Phenomena: A Disappearance and a Murder

Silver Blaze is a racehorse, a particularly excellent one who has won many races and prizes for his owner, Colonel Ross. The adventure begins when we find that Silver Blaze has disappeared from his stables and that his trainer, John Straker, has been murdered. Although such a disappearance and murder would likely have been newsworthy in any event, they are particularly so for having occurred within a week of the running of the Wessex Cup, for which Silver Blaze was the favourite until his disappearance.

Holmes, along with many other Britons, has been reading about the case with interest in some of the daily papers. The story begins with his realizing that his preliminary working hypothesis has been refuted. As Holmes describes it,

I made a blunder, my dear Watson—which is, I am afraid, a more common occurrence than anyone would think who only knew me through your memoirs. The fact is that I could not believe it possible that the most remarkable horse in England could long remain concealed, especially in so sparsely inhabited a place as the north of Dartmoor. From hour to hour yesterday I expected to hear that he had been found, and that his abductor was the murderer of John Straker. (Doyle, in Dougle 1987a: 185–86)

With two days having passed since the horse's abduction and Straker's murder, Holmes thus realizes that the case isn't as straightforward as it first appeared and, hence, that immediate closer attention is warranted. The disappearance and the murder are thus the phenomena that await explanation, and Sherlock Holmes applies his investigative

techniques to that end. Will he be successful in time for Silver Blaze to run in the Wessex Cup?

Gathering Preliminary Data

Holmes is often regarded as the master of *deduction*, but it's noteworthy that he begins his efforts at explanation in this case by following the *inductive* practice of gathering data first. His preliminary information regarding Silver Blaze has been based largely on archival sources, primarily the treatment of the case appearing in the daily newspapers. While such sources can be important, Holmes also recognizes their shortcomings:

The tragedy has been so uncommon and so complete, and of such personal importance to so many people that we are suffering from a plethora of surmise, conjecture and hypothesis. The difficulty is to detach the framework of fact—of absolute, undeniable fact—from the embellishments of theorists and reporters. Then, having established ourselves upon this sound basis, it is our duty to see what inferences may be drawn, and which are the special points upon which the whole mystery turns. (Doyle, in Dougle 1987a: 185)

Accordingly, Holmes also supplements his examination of newspaper accounts with direct communication with Colo Ross, who has invited his involvement in the case, and Inspector Gregory, the member of the local constabulary to whom the case has been assigned.

Two stables are approximately two miles (3 kilometres) apart in the otherwise minimally populated moor around Tavistock. Silver Blaze had been housed at King's Pyland; Desborough, his primary rival in the Wessex Cup, is kept at Mapleton Stables under the management of Silas Brown. Silver Blaze had clearly been the early betting favourite. Besides horse and trainer, Straker's wife, a maid, three stableboys, three other horses, and a dog all make their home at King's Pyland.

Security precautions had been taken as the race approached, with the three stableboys rotating through successive eight-hour shifts in the locked barn: while one was on duty, the other two slept in the loft above. The maid brought meals to the stable for the lads. On the night in question, she was carrying a dinner of curried mutton to the barn when a stranger, later identified as Fitzroy Simpson, suddenly emerged from the darkness. He offered a bribe to the maid and to Ned Hunter, the on-shift stableboy, apparently wishing to obtain inside information concerning Silver Blaze's fitness for the upcoming race, but fled when the two refused his money and Hunter set the dog on him. A note of clarification to Holmes from the Inspector reveals that Hunter had locked the stable door behind him before giving chase and that the open window isn't large enough for a person to pass through.

John Straker, the trainer, seemed rather excited when told about these events, and must subsequently have had trouble sleeping: his wife saw him getting dressed and heading out to the barn at 1:00 a.m., despite the rain. Mrs. Straker awoke at 7:00 a.m. to find that her husband had not returned. On going outside, she and the maid found the barn door open, Hunter in a drug-induced stupor, the other two boys still soundly asleep in the loft,

and Silver Blaze gone. About a quarter of a mile (half a kilometre) away from the stables, John Straker's coat was found hanging from a tree branch, flapping in the breeze. Close to it lay the trainer's body.

His head had been shattered by a savage blow from some heavy weapon, and he was wounded in the thigh, where there was a long, clean cut, inflicted evidently by some very sharp instrument ... In his right hand he held a small knife, which was clotted with blood up to the handle, while in his left he grasped a red and black silk cravat, which was recognized by the maid as having been worn on the preceding evening by the stranger who had visited the stables. (Doyle, in Dougle 1987a: 189)

When he regained his senses, Hunter agreed with the maid that the cravat was indeed the one worn by Simpson the night before. He also believed that the stranger must have drugged his food while distracting him with questions about Silver Blaze and the race. Analysis later revealed that his curried mutton was indeed laced with powdered opium, although the people in the house ate the same dish with no apparent effect. A check around the Tavistock area, including an examination of Mapleton Stables, showed Silver Blaze nowhere to be found. But some gypsies who had been seen camping in the area had apparently vanished the day after the crime became news.

Preliminary Induction

The gathering of preliminary data, as Scriven (1976) reminds us, is never done with "immaculate perception." The person who goes about gathering data will bring "common-sensical" or "informed" understandings to the situation, no doubt influenced by ideological and/or theoretical leanings. The data that are gathered, and the interpretations as to what those data mean, influence the range of alternative explanations considered. Preliminary induction involves drawing inferences from one's data to create a plausible account of the causal agent(s) or sequence of events that "produce" the phenomenon.

For Inspector Gregory, suspicion fell immediately on Fitzroy Simpson, the stranger who had appeared on the night of the murder. Witnesses (the maid and stableboy) placed him at the scene of the crime, and his intentions appeared to be less than honourable. Hunter indicated that Simpson had had an opportunity to drug his curried mutton, and John Straker was found with Simpson's cravat in his hand.

Simpson was easily found in one of the villas near Tavistock the day after the crime, and new evidence seemed consistent with the idea that he might have committed the crimes. Apparently Simpson is "a man of excellent birth and education, who had squandered a fortune upon the turf, and lived now by doing a little quiet and genteel bookmaking in the sporting clubs of London. An examination of his betting book shows that bets to the amount of five thousand pounds had been registered by him against the favourite" (Doyle, in Dougle 1987a: 189). Further, his clothes were wet from being in the rain the night before, his red and black cravat was indeed missing, and he was in possession of a lead-weighted walking stick, which might conceivably have caused the head injuries from which the trainer died.

Analytic Induction: A Dialectic of Theory and Data

Preliminary induction from the above data might be sufficient to generate the theory that Fitzroy Simpson was the murderer of John Straker and the abductor of Silver Blaze; however, the process of analytic induction requires that the investigator or researcher pay attention to *all* relevant data, particularly to *negative* evidence that could serve to disconfirm one's theory.

The Inspector was sufficiently confident in his theory to arrest Fitzroy Simpson, but Sherlock Holmes's attention to the case brings with it a healthy air of skepticism over whether the theory has yet been exposed to adequate scrutiny. In explaining his thoughts on the matter to his colleague and biographer, Dr. Watson, Holmes states,

I am afraid that whatever theory we state has very grave objections to it ... The police imagine, I take it, that this Fitzroy Simpson, having drugged the lad, and having in some way obtained a duplicate key, opened the stable door, and took out the horse, with the intention, apparently, of kidnapping him altogether. His bridle is missing, so that Simpson must have put this on. Then, having left the door open behind him, he was leading the horse away over the moor, when he was either met or overtaken by the trainer. A row naturally ensued, Simpson beat out the trainer's brains with his heavy stick without receiving any injury from the small knife which Straker used in self-defense, and then the thief either led the horse on to some secret hiding place, or else it may have bolted during the struggle, and be now wandering out on the moors. That is the case as it appears to the police, and improbable as it is, all other explanations are more improbable still. (Doyle, in Dougle 1987a: 189–90)

Holmes begins by questioning whether all evidence to date is indeed consistent with the theory, a reflection of proper negative case analysis. He wonders first why Straker's body was covered with considerable blood and bore a knife cut, suggesting a struggle, while Simpson's clothes had no bloodstains and showed no signs of struggle. But Dr. Watson notes that the blows to the head might have caused involuntary convulsions, which in turn may have led Straker to have cut himself with his own knife. Holmes next notes that Silver Blaze is still missing; he asks how a stranger from London could know enough about the local area to keep a horse hidden on an apparently barren moor. The Inspector suggests that Simpson might have passed the horse over to the gypsies, who have now vanished, adding that Simpson was *not* a stranger to the area, having stayed there for significant periods during two prior summers.

But Holmes isn't convinced. He suggests that the Inspector's case is still circumstantial, at best:

A clever counsel would tear it all to rags ... Why should he take the horse out of the stable? If he wished to injure it, why could he not do it there? Has a duplicate key been found in his possession? What chemist sold him the powdered opium?"(Doyle, in Dougle 1987a: 191)

The Inspector responds to each query, but the responses are weak insofar as none has any

sort of concrete manifestation. Perhaps he took the horse out so no one would hear the creature when the injury was done, or perhaps the motive was indeed abduction rather than injury. As for the key, perhaps it was acquired during one of his previous summer visits, and he probably threw it away once the crime was committed. The opium was probably bought in London, making it difficult to trace.

Holmes becomes more skeptical than ever at this “shadow” evidence. He gives the *coup de grâce* by noting two events that, to him, make the current theory untenable and direct attention elsewhere. First, Holmes knows that opium powder has a very distinctive flavour, and he considers it too large a coincidence that the maid just happens to have served a curried mutton that night, a dish that would conveniently hide the taste of the opium. Clearly, Simpson could not have caused the particular choice of dinner that night; the perpetrator must therefore be a person in the house who could make such a choice. Further, Holmes notes that although the dog barked loudly when Simpson paid his evening visit to the maid and the stableboy, it did *not* do so when the murderer/abductor arrived at the stable later that night. This fact suggests that the dog must have known the intruder, again focusing attention back on the members of the Straker household.

Another theory is clearly required, and with his attention now directed toward the Strakers, it’s time for Holmes to gather more evidence. Holmes first turns his eye to the murder victim, John Straker, asking what objects were in his pockets on the night of the murder. These include numerous items, the most noteworthy of which are a candle, some papers, and the knife that had apparently caused Straker’s leg wound. Curiously, the papers include a bill for a very expensive dress from a London milliner; the invoice is made out to a Mr. William Darbyshire. Holmes is informed that Darbyshire is apparently a friend of Straker’s and that letters to him are occasionally received at the Straker home. As for the knife, closer inspection by Watson reveals that it is a very small, delicate, razor-sharp knife of a type used for cataract operations, leaving Holmes curious as to why Straker would have possessed such a knife and why he would have taken such a thing along as a weapon against an intruder, when larger kitchen knives were just as easily available.

Because the data that Holmes uncovers suggest that the murder/abduction was an “inside job,” Holmes’s attention clearly turns to the Strakers, for only they could have chosen the menu that allowed the stableboy to be drugged. Although both may have been involved, only John Straker meets all the criteria of being able to determine the meal to disguise the opium, clearly having a key to the stable, being able to handle the horse he trained, and being known to the dog so that it would not bark and wake the sleeping stableboys when he arrived to do something to the horse. But what was he intending to do? How? Why?

After identifying John Straker as having had less than honourable intentions, Holmes wonders whether Mrs. Straker was also involved; he looks for a motive for the crime. His inductive leap emerges from examining the invoice to William Darbyshire that is among Straker’s personal effects. Why would Mr. Darbyshire have millinery bills delivered to the house of John Straker? Could John Straker and William Darbyshire have been the same person? Perhaps Mr. and Mrs. Straker have been living beyond their means, using

double identities, and were led to the crime by a need to meet debts created by an extravagant lifestyle.

To pursue this lead, Holmes employs a technique of indirect questioning to discover whether the dress billed to William Darbyshire had indeed been intended for Mrs. Straker:

“Surely I met you in Plymouth, at a garden party, some little time ago, Mrs. Straker,” said Holmes.

“No, sir; you are mistaken.”

“Dear me; why I could have sworn to it. You wore a costume of dove-coloured silk, with ostrich feather trimming.”

“I never had such a dress, sir,” answered the lady.

“Ah; that quite settles it,” said Holmes. (Doyle 1987a: 192)

And indeed it did. But if Mrs. Straker isn't the woman for whom the dress was intended, then who is? If William Darbyshire was indeed John Straker, is there *another* Mrs. Darbyshire/Straker? Or a mistress, perhaps?

The Master of Deduction

Holmes has arrived at a theory that offers some consistency with the evidence gathered to date. Certainly none of the evidence has yet been demonstrated to be *inconsistent* with the theory that John Straker, due to financial pressures from some possible parallel life he was leading, was involved in some despicable plot to abduct or injure Silver Blaze in order to gain funds, whether through bets or through bribery. But at this point Holmes goes beyond the domain of analytic induction alone: he now also starts including the deductive mode that so characteristically distinguishes him from most other fictional sleuths. More specifically, Holmes begins to hypothesize about data that *should exist if* his theory is true.

Straker's possession of a surgical knife leads Holmes to speculate that Straker may have been intending to somehow surreptitiously injure Silver Blaze temporarily so that the horse wouldn't be able to race. If that was so, Straker probably led Silver Blaze to the depression on the moor where the murder subsequently took place in order to ensure that any cries from Silver Blaze wouldn't wake the stableboys who were asleep in the loft and to ensure that he wouldn't be seen perpetrating this deed. And if that was so, other evidence of that action should be found. Straker's coat, presumably removed in order to better perform the “operation,” and an abundance of hoof- and footprints in the vicinity of the body were certainly consistent with Holmes's theory, although not definitive. Recalling that candles were found in Straker's pocket, and surmising that he would have required a light of some sort in order to undertake an operation, Holmes hypothesizes that *if* his theory is correct, other evidence of candles or matches should be present at the scene. But neither Watson nor the Inspector is aware of Holmes's deductions as Holmes begins to closely scrutinize the area where the body was found:

Stretching himself upon his face and leaning his chin upon his hands, [Holmes] made a

careful study of the trampled mud in front of him.

“Halloa!” said he, suddenly, “what’s this?” It was a wax vesta, half burned, which was so coated with mud that it looked at first like a little chip of wood.

“I cannot think how I came to overlook it,” said the Inspector, with an expression of annoyance.

“It was invisible, buried in the mud. I only saw it because I was looking for it.”

“What! You expected to find it?”

“I thought it not unlikely.” (Doyle, in Dougle 1987a: 193)

Holmes next turns his attention to Silver Blaze. If Straker abducted him but was then killed, Silver Blaze must have run off somewhere. But if so, why hasn’t he been found? Holmes heard the Inspector express the belief that the gypsies might have found and taken him, but views this idea as being based on a convenient but inaccurate stereotype. And even if they had done so, surely it’s absurd to believe that gypsies could have walked off with and sold the most famous and sought-after horse in England without anyone’s noticing. On the basis of his knowledge of horses, Holmes speculates with Watson on Silver Blaze’s location:

“The horse is a very gregarious creature. If left to himself his instincts would have been either to return to King’s Pyland, or go over to Mapleton. Why should he run wild on the moor? He would surely have been seen by now ...”

“Where is he, then?”

“I have already said that he must have gone to King’s Pyland or to Mapleton. He is not at King’s Pyland, therefore he is at Mapleton. Let us take that as a working hypothesis and see what it leads us to.” (193)

But the Inspector had already stated that he checked for 100 yards (90 metres) in all directions from the crime scene and was unable to find any further tracks. Still, acting on his theory and looking for indicators that could further test that theory, Holmes continues:

This part of the moor, as the Inspector remarked, is very hard and dry. But it falls away toward Mapleton, and you can see from here that there is a long hollow over yonder, which must have been very wet on Monday night. If our supposition is correct, then the horse must have crossed that, and there is the point where we should look for his tracks. (193)

Holmes brings along one of Silver Blaze’s horseshoes, and evidence soon turns up that provides some support for Holmes’s theory. Hoofprints are indeed found, indicating that Silver Blaze did walk in the direction of Mapleton. In the process of following them, Watson chances on a second pair of prints—from a human’s square-toed boots—that are seen to come from Mapleton and to intersect with the horse’s hoofprints; horse and human travel in parallel toward King’s Pyland for a short while, after which they reverse ground in tandem and head back to Mapleton.

On the basis of these new observations, found serendipitously while following through with an investigation of implications (i.e., hypotheses) that flowed from his theory, Holmes induces that someone from Mapleton must have come on Silver Blaze as he wandered on the moor after running from Straker and, having begun to return Silver Blaze to King’s Pyland, suddenly had a change of heart, succumbing to the temptation to

take advantage of the act of fate that had brought Mapleton's main rival to its doorstep and taking the opportunity to hide the horse in the Mapleton stables until after the Wessex Cup. The most likely candidate is Silas Brown, the trainer of Desborough and the manager of Mapleton Stables; only he would have known how to disguise or hide a horse, and only he would have the authority to bring a new horse in to the stables unchallenged.

If that theory is true, Brown would have to have been the first to rise that day. When they arrive at Mapleton, Holmes checks his reasoning indirectly, by querying a groom who, seeing Holmes and Watson coming, has directed them to be gone:

"I only wished to ask a question," said Holmes, with his finger and thumb in his waistcoat pocket. "Should I be too early to see your master, Mr. Silas Brown, if I were to call at five o'clock tomorrow morning?"
"Bless you, sir, if anyone is about he will be, for he is always the first stirring. But here he is, sir, to answer your questions for himself." (194)

Holmes's first hypothesis is thus supported, and a second is as well when Silas Brown strides toward him wearing square-toed boots that match the unique footprints Holmes and Watson observed on the moor.

Resistant at first, Brown admits to having hidden Silver Blaze after Holmes describes the events in such detail that Brown believes Holmes must have witnessed the entire scene. Empathizing with Brown's having succumbed to serendipitous temptation without original criminal intent, Holmes provides Brown with a way to show his remorse: by promising to care for the horse and to ensure that the animal appears at the Wessex Cup on racing day.

Back at King's Pyland, feeling confident that his theory is most plausible but still wanting to ensure that all loose ends are covered, Holmes generates two further hypotheses that suggest two final tests of the theory. First, if Straker had been intending to administer a delicate but impairing incision to Silver Blaze, Holmes speculates that Straker would probably have practised on other animals at the stables, and his eyes "[fall] upon the sheep." Accordingly, he questions one of the stableboys:

"You have a few sheep in the paddock," he said. "Who attends to them?"
"I do, sir."
"Have you noticed anything amiss with them of late?"
"Well, sir, not of much account; but three of them have gone lame, sir."
I could see that Holmes was extremely pleased, for he chuckled and rubbed his hands together.
"A long shot, Watson; a very long shot!" said he, pinching my arm. "[Inspector] Gregory, let me recommend to your attention this singular epidemic among the sheep. Drive on, coachman!" (196)

With all but Holmes baffled at the meaning of that interchange, Holmes and Watson leave to test a further hypothesis. Promising Silver Blaze's owner that they'll see him and the horse on racing day, Holmes takes a photo of Straker along to London.

The one portion of the theory that Holmes has not yet tested involves the question of motive. We do not yet know whether John Straker and William Darbyshire were indeed the same person, and whether Straker's extravagant lifestyle led him to attempt to solve his financial problems by fixing the Wessex Cup against Silver Blaze. Taking Straker's photograph to the milliner at the address on William Darbyshire's invoice confirms Holmes's suspicions.

A Satisfying Resolution

On the day of the Wessex Cup, Silver Blaze does indeed appear; moreover, he wins the race. But with Silver Blaze safely found and returned, all of those present are still at a loss as to the identity of Straker's murderer. It is thus with no small sense of satisfaction that Holmes fills in the last piece of the puzzle: the murderer was none other than Silver Blaze!

"The horse!" cried both the Colonel and [Dr. Watson].

"Yes, the horse. And it may lessen his guilt if I say that it was done in self-defense, and that John Straker was a man who was entirely unworthy of your confidence." (198)

Holmes continues with his litany, which is consistent with all the evidence, both inductively and deductively gathered. He recounts the evidence concerning Straker's double identity and the extravagance of his lifestyle. The choice of curried mutton to drug Hunter, the dog that didn't bark, and Straker's possession of the cataract knife are all explained. As for the trainer's death, Holmes describes the chain of events:

"Straker had led the horse to a hollow where his light would be invisible. Simpson, in his flight, had dropped his cravat, and Straker had picked it up with some idea, perhaps, that he might use it in securing the horse's leg. Once in the hollow he had got behind the horse, and had struck a light, but the creature, frightened at the glare, and with the strange instinct of animals feeling that some mischief was intended, had lashed out, and the steel shoe had struck Straker full on the forehead. He had already, in spite of the rain, taken off his overcoat in order to do his delicate task, and so, as he fell, his knife gashed his thigh. Do I make it clear?"

"Wonderful!" cried the Colonel. "Wonderful! You might have been there." (200)

Dénouement

Sherlock Holmes's approach in this tale provides a splendid example of qualitative case study analysis, even though the flow of the reasoning is more characteristic of the realm of fiction than of the realm of social science research, where "truths" are neither so singular nor so straightforwardly amenable to analysis. "The Adventure of Silver Blaze" illustrates the issue of access, which in Holmes's case is facilitated by his considerable reputation and by the invitation he receives from Colonel Ross to participate in the investigation. Although Holmes's initial information comes from the newspaper, he is clearly aware of the strengths and limitations of such data, and he uses this appreciation to whittle down the set of data that are "relevant" and that call for explanation. Further

evidence is gained by visiting the actual scene of the events and by supplementing the archival data with interview data from a purposive sample of respondents who are identified as the investigation evolved.

The gathering of preliminary data is followed by attempts at induction, with inferences regarding particular data combining to generate a preliminary theory. Unlike Inspector Gregory, Holmes doesn't fall into the trap of prematurely accepting an induced theory, but continues to engage in a dialectic of theory and data that specifically includes generating and considering evidence that might disconfirm the theory. The process of analytic induction leads to the generation of a theory that is consistent, or at least not *inconsistent*, with all available evidence. Holmes then deduces the evidence that *should* exist *if* the theory is true, so that actual observation of concrete evidence (as opposed to the "shadow" evidence accepted by Inspector Gregory) will allow him to test the adequacy of his evolving theory.

In the process of undertaking these hypotheses and gathering relevant data to support or refute them, Holmes evinces a splendid understanding of how unobtrusive measures can be used to illuminate human (and equine) behaviour. His speculation regarding Silver Blaze's whereabouts is a beautiful example of how one must look in "visible" places for relevant data; while the Inspector was unable to find hoofprints on the hard ground for 100 yards (90 metres) in all directions around the crime scene, Holmes speculates on *one* direction—toward Mapleton—and identifies a distant low-lying area between the crime scene and Mapleton as the likely location (because of its softness) for finding hoofprints *if* his theory is true. Besides thus providing a test of his speculations, Holmes is also rewarded with the serendipitous discovery of Silas Brown's boot prints, which help round out the sleuth's theoretical descriptions of the events of that fateful day.