

THE DEDUCTIVE METHOD



BY MOLLY TANZER



Unhappy is the graduate student who has to actually do things other than homework while on the work-study clock. I was lucky, as far as those gigs went. Spending twenty hours a week checking DVDs in and out of the film library for the Humanities Department of Miskatonic University wasn't bad. Only a few TAs ever came in; with YouTube for clips and most of our DVDs available in digital format from the Orne Library or on pirate sites, we didn't see a lot of action.

Well, the film library didn't. I was obsolete—mostly I existed to service the handful of older professors who couldn't understand streaming sites. But, given the library's positioning just off the student computer lab, in a disused office, I had a front row seat for the scandalous and torrid affair Dr. Hernandez was currently conducting with one of her graduate students.

Last year, it had been *me* sneaking around with Dr. Hernandez—partly I had a bit of a crush, but if I'm being honest, mostly it was because I'd been seeking one of her rare and coveted letters of recommendation so I could transfer to a different school. The truth

was, Miskatonic University hadn't proven to be all I'd dreamed when I'd applied. While the professors were outstanding and the diplomas valued when it came for that all important job search, the place was a total creep show. Grad school was supposed to be full of eccentrics, but twice in my first year professors had retired under mysterious circumstances, and three students had been institutionalized. Even the shadows cast by the buildings seemed . . . wrong. Darker than they should be. So along with the course offerings that were also significantly more outré than I'd been after, I'd sought to go elsewhere. Fast, and by whatever means it took.

Anyway, I'd thought being Dr. Hernandez's annual conquest would increase my chances of scoring a recommendation.

I'd thought wrong.

"What do you mean you '*can't in good conscience*' recommend me to another program?" I'd said.

"You're better off here," she'd replied coolly. "Not because of *this*," she added, gesturing dismissively between the two of us, "but because you'd be out of your depth anywhere else. Not every department is as supportive as ours, Simcha. You're not self-motivated enough for anywhere else."

I'd protested this unkind assessment of my flaws. "If you're talking about me still needing to take my French for Reading Comprehension course, I've registered—"

“Simcha. Calm down—try to see things from *my* perspective. Imagine if you were accepted somewhere because of my endorsement, and then you didn’t do well. My reputation would be compromised.”

Dr. Hernandez had been my advisor; when it came to my merits, without her good word why should anyone take mine?

Frustrated, I had raised my voice, and my raised voice had attracted attention, which had in turn led to discovery. The subsequent inquiry went about as one might expect. Dr. Hernandez wasn’t just tenured, she was a feather in our little department’s cap. Whenever Dr. De Luca of the University of Florence passed away, she’d be the world’s foremost authority on Dante. She was also the head of about a zillion committees and initiatives, and well liked socially because of her seemingly inexhaustible supply of energy and her warm personality.

As for me, I was a graduate student, and not an especially promising one. I was nothing, nobody. Even so, the department muckety-mucks hadn’t been able to kick me out, but they had definitely encouraged me to leave. I’d stuck it out, though, even when they took my TAship away, instead plopping me in the film library to satisfy my student aid requirements. They’d meant it as an insult, but I wasn’t stupid. I knew I’d be making the same amount of money but doing vastly less work.

The only real downside was that clear view of Dr. Hernandez’s office. I’d be in her shadow, one that was even darker than those I’d been trying to escape.

Thankfully, my course load was so terrible that semester that I didn't have much time to think about it. My lit seminar in particular, *Medicine and Morality in 19th Century British Literature*, was coming close to breaking me. The prof was a total hard-ass, and we had to do a huge paper. As a lifelong Sherlock Holmes fan I had thought it would be fun to do said paper on some aspect of Doyle's copious medical references in his work. But now, more than halfway through the semester, I still had no idea what I could say about Doyle or his work that would be new and exciting. I had been surprised at the Holmes-shaped hole on the syllabus, but now I understood why—those stories had already been picked over by other scholars. At length.

One of my major complaints with graduate school, other than the obvious, had been that it often stripped away the joy I experienced when reading. Now was definitely one of those times. "The Adventure of the Dying Detective" felt leaden to me, with telegraphed twists and predictable turns. My life felt leaden and predictable too: I was a disgraced and frankly mediocre grad student running out of time to produce even an adequate paper for an elective credit. If I got anything below a B+ in this class it would wreck my GPA, and then they'd have the reason they needed to give me the boot.

I'm sure that's why the stress finally just got to me that day when I noticed Josephine sneaking into Dr. Hernandez's office. And do I

mean sneaking literally—she paused before the door and furtively glanced both ways before slipping inside. I tried not to pay them any attention, but then I heard some sort of indeterminate thump and my mood spiraled further.

I couldn't concentrate, not with *that* going on just across the way. But just as my hand had strayed to my phone to once again text my source for Adderall, the door to Dr. Hernandez's office eased open with a plaintive whine. A few whispered farewells reached my ears, including a mawkish "When will I see you again?" from Josephine.

"Pet," said Dr. Hernandez—that had been her name for me, too, but I guess it made things simpler for her if she just called everyone the same thing—"you know I want to see you all the time, but—"

I never heard but *what*, for something happened then that had literally never occurred since I started working in the film library.

The phone rang.

The silence after that first buzz felt enormous. I let it ring a second time, wondering if I should pick it up or let it go to voicemail. If I picked it up, Dr. Hernandez and her latest paramour would know I'd been there the whole time, so I decided to go for it. Beloved Dr. Hernandez might be, but I'd noticed the frustration on the faces of the other members of the department during all those meetings about what had happened between us. I was no Holmes, but I could deduce that I hadn't been her first conquest.

She'd ruined my chances at transferring. I could ruin her afternoon.

"Humanities Department Film Library," I said, speaking clearly and loudly. "How may I help you?"

"Film . . . what?" asked a very young, very confused woman on the phone.

"Library," I said. "We're a resource open to students of the Humanit—" The beep on the other end of the line let me know she'd dialed the number in error.

I replaced the receiver and looked up to see Dr. Hernandez affecting a casual lean against the doorjamb as if she were just curious to see if we had a copy of *The Lion in Winter*.

Resentful of her though I might be, I could not deny that she was exceptional. She didn't look like she'd just been getting laid in her office; her dark hair was unmussed, her black dress unwrinkled. Even the herringbone pattern of her stockings was perfectly straight.

"Simcha," she said, and not for the first time I noticed how her red lips moved as she said my name. "I didn't even know you were here. You've been so quiet."

"Just doing some research," I said, indicating my copy of *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* on my desk.

"Must be fun for you," said Dr. Hernandez. "You're a big fan."

We'd never discussed such a thing, so she caught me off guard with this canny observation.

She pointed at my chest when I looked confused, and I remembered that I'd put on my I AM SHER-LOCKED shirt that day to try to psych myself into making some real headway on the paper.

"Oh," I said, annoyed that she'd managed to wrangle the power back in this situation. "Yeah, I am."

It was such a low-stakes conversation, and yet it felt incredibly tense.

"I had no idea you were a Sherlockian," said Dr. Hernandez, in this way that made it seem like we were old friends who'd talked over so much of our lives that this omission came as a real surprise. "I am too. What are you researching?"

Nothing much. But I couldn't let her know that. "Oh, it's for my Medicine in Lit class," I said, hedging.

"I think it'd be challenging to find something new to say about the Sherlock Holmes stories and medical matters," she mused, as if she really had simply stopped by to check on me. Behind her, I saw Josephine rush past. She cast a nervous glance at her lover; it went unacknowledged, to Josephine's obvious dismay.

"Yeah," I said with a shrug, conceding her point but not my current struggle.

"You know, I have something that just might help you . . ." She looked at me appraisingly. "That is, if you need help. Not saying you do. Even if you are fine, you might like to see it anyway? It's an apocryphal Holmes story. My father was a big fan, and he bought

it at auction a long time ago. It's definitely Victorian but only debatably Doyle."

She was trying to buy my silence. That was obvious—*elementary*. But at the same time, I was desperate, and a Holmes text unexplored by other scholars was just what the doctor ordered, so to speak.

I knew that if I accepted her help I couldn't hold this latest of her indiscretions over her, but we'd also be even, having each done the other a good turn. Maybe she'd even put in a word for me with the other professors—"no hard feelings" and all of that.

For a brief moment I saw a very different future before me. With a brilliant paper I could emerge, phoenix-like, from the ashes of my former academic career. I'd go on to finish up my coursework and successfully defend a dissertation. Maybe I'd even get a job! It wouldn't be at an R1 or anything, but a cushy liberal arts position would be better for someone like me anyway.

"Thanks," I said. "I'd love to see it."

"Come into my office," said Dr. Hernandez, with a crook of her finger.

Of course I followed.

"You keep it here?" I asked, stepping inside her office for the first time since that terrible day. I couldn't believe she'd be so cavalier with such a document; rare as it must be, she ought to have the archivist at the library looking after it. Given the sorts of strange and occult

things I'd seen in their Special Collections, a Doyle story might be a nice change of pace for them, given the relatively mundane nature of it.

"I'm just going to put the scan onto a thumb drive for you," she said, sitting down at her laptop; I was back under her spell and the touch of irony in her voice only made me hungry to hear her speak again. "It's an interesting story, as you'll see. On the sentence level it's a match—stylistically, I mean—but that's easy enough for a clever writer to do. There are whole paragraphs in *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution* that can make you forget it's not a real Holmes adventure; Meyer really nails Watson's narrative voice. But this piece . . . I'm not sure. It's pretty self-aware and sensationalist."

"More self-aware and sensationalist than Doyle?" I took a seat—the armchair she liked to read in, and be pleased in, not the harder seat for advisees and penitents.

"The plot revolves around an advertisement Watson sees in *The Lancet* for a correspondence course taught by the one and only Sherlock Holmes. The class promises to increase memory, sharpen powers of observation, and quicken the mind itself. This discovery is a bit fraught for Watson, of course, as he senses it must be someone trying to capitalize on his friend's reputation as well as the popularity of his own stories. And yet, the idea is intriguing to him."

"I bet."

“That evening, he asks if Holmes could ever teach someone else how to use his methods. Holmes is pretty typically Holmes about it, replying that his ‘methods’ are pure reason, inference, and logic, so of course they could be taught, but that only the brightest pupil could really *absorb* what lessons he might teach.”

“How does Watson respond to that?” I asked.

“He signs up for the course under a false name,” said Dr. Hernandez. She set the thumb drive on her desk. “Just in case it really is Holmes teaching it for some Holmesian reason. That’s when it gets a bit . . . well. You’ll see.”

I stood and grabbed the goods—I didn’t need to be dismissed twice. “Thanks,” I said. “I can’t wait to read it.”

“Enjoy,” she said, her eyes already back on her laptop screen.

I rushed home and had the thumb drive in my laptop before I had my shoes off. A manuscript like this was definitely the answer to my problems. At least, the problems I was experiencing where my lit class was concerned.

The resolution on the scan was breathtaking. In the solitude of my dumpy studio apartment I marveled at the mysterious, ancient stains, the small imperfections, the stiffly feathered edges of old rips. It hadn’t been published in *The Strand* or *Lippincott’s*, but a less well-known (and a quick Google search confirmed, vastly less reputable) Victorian periodical. I couldn’t find anything confirming that the story really

had been published in the issue listed at the top of the pages, either on the Internet at large or any academic search engine, but if I needed to cite this story, most likely the certificate from the auction house would be sufficient proof it was of the era, if not an authentic Doyle.

As to the story itself, Dr. Hernandez had been correct. The style was indistinguishable from Doyle's, with brisk pacing and the easy, almost unconscious characterization you only really find with writers working within their oeuvre. My earlier complaints about grad school ruining all my reading were forgotten as I felt myself drawn into a fresh Holmes mystery for the first time since I was a child.

In "The Correspondence Course" Watson does indeed sign up for the class that promises to teach him "Holmes's Very Own Deductive Method." He thinks it will be intriguing to see if the class works—and if it does, to see if Holmes notices. There were five lessons, each based in what Watson correctly identifies as James Braid's method of self-hypnosis. The point is to clear out the cobwebs of the waking mind, making the self more suggestible to radical observation and logical deduction, as well as increase stamina. A modern person would describe it as trying to "hack" the mind, sort of like what all those Silicon Valley types were trying to do with microdosing LSD a few years ago. Curiously, the exercises were listed in the story itself—lyric mantras as a relaxation aid, words to focus on to increase concentration, and instructions to direct the mind while under self-hypnosis.

At one point, Holmes almost catches Watson at it, but the good doctor manages to narrowly escape detection. It was really quite a thrilling read, especially when Watson's powers of deduction do get better—after he'd worked his way through most of the course, Watson even surprises Holmes with several observations when a client comes by to solicit Holmes's service.

The climax of the story comes with the final lesson. A postman enters Watson's office bearing the last of the packages, asking after the correspondence course advertised on the wrapping. Watson explains what he's up to and invites the courier to observe, if he likes. He's just about to hypnotize himself when Holmes bursts in on the two of them, stopping Watson with the revelation that the delivery man is actually a former stage magician and current racketeer who was poised to take advantage of Watson while he was in a highly suggestible state. Holmes had spied the blackguard making one of his earlier deliveries, and the detective had been watching Watson's medical practice ever since.

It's never made entirely clear if the final lesson would have permanently opened up Watson's mind or merely made him suggestible to the confidence man; Watson declines to risk it, and Holmes—while quite complimentary of the method itself, after looking it all over—agrees it's probably for the best. He remarks that it would be unfortunate if Watson fell prey to the same peccadilloes

and addictions Holmes endured as a result of his unique mind, and order is restored. A very Doyle ending.

A very Doyle story. In fact, the longer I thought on it the more I became convinced the story couldn't be a fake. It was too perfect.

I think back on it all now and I see I had everything I needed to write an acceptably fresh paper for a graduate seminar. But my chaotic mind, stunned by my interview with Dr. Hernandez and dazzled by the fantastic wonder of stumbling upon what I felt quite sure was a forgotten, authentic Holmes story, would not stop at that. If I *really* stretched myself, I might possibly write something of publishable quality. Getting an article into a peer-reviewed journal as a graduate student would be a coup. But for that, I would need an angle beyond making a case for the story itself being "real." That wasn't the focus of my class anyway.

But what about the technique? If *that* were effective, and I could prove it, I would have a new and extremely intriguing angle on the ways Doyle's medical career influenced his fiction writing.

Self-hypnosis was real. Even back in Victorian times, Doyle, a former physician, would have known that. He was obviously extremely familiar with Braid's work. So, what if Braid's techniques had allowed Doyle to mimic his famed detective's signature skills?

I remember telling myself to slow down. If Doyle could have sold "Holmes's Deductive Method" to the general public he surely

would have done so. Then again, he might have had some personal reason for letting the story lapse into obscurity; after all, he never republished it as part of his collected Holmes stories.

All those questions could wait, however. If the method worked, I'd have the stamina to research it all, and the insight to use what I found for something magnificent.

I got up and fed my cat and poured myself a glass of wine. Relaxation was key, after all. And anyway, I wanted to celebrate. I had an excellent feeling about my academic prospects for the first time in a long time.

The initial lesson was easy enough—not only that, it seemed to work. I felt my concerns, my “monkey mind” (as the very last man I would ever date, back during my undergrad, called it) slipping away, to be replaced by clarity of purpose and an almost warm feeling of calm and collected focus. Without hesitation I moved on to the second lesson. As far as I could tell, there was no reason not to do it all in one fell swoop; why not achieve “my ultimate form” (as that same ex-boyfriend would say) as quickly as possible?

Unfortunately, it was not to be. As I reached the final set of instructions, my mind spinning like a top, I perceived that the scan of the last page was blurrier than the others. I hadn't noticed as I read the story for pleasure, carried along by the plot, but the image was so bad that the final few words of the final lesson were nigh on illegible.

I could guess vaguely at what it said, but it seemed to me that I would be unwise to attempt the exercise with imperfect instructions.

I was capable of beginning my researches with my new quickness of mind—I knew I would get no sleep that night—but I needed the original manuscript to finish my experiment. I brought up my gmail and sent a message to Dr. Hernandez: *Thanks again for the story; it's great. Would you mind if I saw the original sometime? The final page of the scan is a bit blurry.* I was surprised that her response came so quickly, within minutes: *Of course. I'll bring it tomorrow. Glad it's working for you. —M.H.*

The next day found me rushing along the grim alleys between the various buildings on campus to get to Dr. Hernandez's office before the first of the undergraduates yawned their way to their early classes. But after using Doyle's techniques, even a bleary-eyed inspection of this troubled institution of higher learning revealed more to me about the place than I'd managed to observe in the years I'd spent there. While before I'd tolerated the Gothic buildings and deep shadows as eccentric, now they were repulsive to me. I sensed whatever secrets Miskatonic University contained, they were not pleasant. The same went for the Humanities Department office. For example, from just the shabbiness of the office furniture I saw fresh evidence of our chair's lack of motivation to secure adequate funding for us—and when he rushed past me, cup of coffee in his hand and

the Boston University course catalogue under his arm, I inferred that he was too busy looking for a new position to pay any attention to what was happening here.

No, I realized—that was wrong. He wasn't looking; he had an interview already, today, via Skype; he'd taken extra care with his personal appearance and was running a little late because of it. That's why his necktie was tied in a full Windsor knot and he was drinking our department's intolerable drip coffee instead of sipping his usual cardamom latte from Black Heart, the independent coffee shop across the street. I trembled, delirious; I was almost paralyzed by this new mental state. The altered edifice in which I now stood was scarcely recognizable and yet wholly comprehensible, the reverse of my former experiences at this damned university.

"Simcha? You're early."

Dr. Hernandez looked wonderful as always, her slate-gray sheath dress skimming her lines like the peel of an extremely stylish fruit.

"I was just so excited," I said.

"I can see that."

She unlocked her office; I followed her inside. I was bouncing on the tips of my toes as she set her things down and turned her laptop on.

"I take it you tried the eponymous course?" she said wryly, as at last she extracted a yellowed periodical, encased in a Ziploc bag, from her large purse.

For some reason I didn't want to admit I had followed the instructions. While it had worked, saying so felt like . . . well, almost like cheating.

"I did, too," she admitted, and I relaxed. "I find self-hypnosis beneficial in general; I have some podcasts I could recommend if you're interested. Anyway, for this sequence, the final lesson really is crucial."

"That's why I was so eager to see it," I admitted. "It's been a remarkable experience already."

"I agree. Well, please, feel free to copy down what you need. I'd prefer if the manuscript stayed in my possession," she said, handing it over, along with a pair of latex gloves.

"Oh . . . of course," I said, hesitating only because the weathered periodical felt far heavier in my hand than I had expected. My enhanced mind could not deduce why that might be, so I set that data aside to consider later. Perhaps, once I'd thoroughly unlocked my mind, I would be able to perceive a reason.

"I'm going to nip out and grab some breakfast," she said, and disappeared. I paid little mind to her words as I slithered my hands inside the gloves and began to hunt for the final page of "The Correspondence Course." Only as I found it, and began to read aloud the final instructions, did I remember that Dr. Hernandez never ate breakfast.

That moment of clarity lasted long enough for me to realize that something was seriously wrong, but I found I could not stop my recitation. It was like a nightmare, the sort where you know something is horribly amiss but you're powerless to stop whatever it is.

As I continued to speak I was vaguely aware that the door to Dr. Hernandez's office had eased open and then shut softly again, but I could not even look up to see if it was she. I sensed it was, however, by the soft tread on the fancy rug she'd put down over the dreadful institutional carpet tile.

Instead of the embracing focus and welcoming sense of purpose that had infused my mind and body after the first four lessons, the phrases I intoned felt like a syringe drawing something out of me. As it turned out, that was so; that *something* coalesced into a translucent, peacock-shimmering cloud that hovered between myself and the manuscript, growing ever larger as I continued.

When at last I'd finished the final lesson, the quietude that fell upon me felt unwholesome. I writhed against it, but my limbs were not my own, nor was my voice. I could not even glance up from the words on the page. Looking at them through the ephemeral mist that had been conjured from within me I could see that they had taken on a new and different form, alive and unfamiliar. The letters were crawling centipedes and twisting parasites written in a horrifyingly brownish ink on a page that looked more like leather than paper. In

my peripheral vision I saw the book was no Victorian digest but a massive tome bound in yet more leather, stitched together in places with what looked like sinew.

“Thank you,” said Dr. Hernandez, her low, melodious voice doing nothing to make me more at ease. “Every so often I need someone to provide me with a fresh infusion of, well, *zeal*, I suppose. Appetite. Focus. Drive. Academia is draining. Getting a PhD and a job and tenure and everything, people think it’s about intelligence—well, it is, but it’s also about marshaling your stamina. Teaching, researching, negotiating departmental politics—it’ll grind you down. So, every so often, when I get the chance, I top myself off.”

I could feel her beside me, and then her hand entered my field of vision. Her perfectly manicured finger poked into the cloud; she swirled it around, collecting the oily, blue-green, spiderweb-thin filaments like she was helping herself to a bit of frosting out of a mixing bowl. I heard her licking, and when she’d finished I felt my joints loosen and my muscles relax; I slumped back against the chair.

“You see, it wasn’t a Doyle manuscript that my father bought at auction. It was a . . . grimoire—yes, I suppose you could call it that.” I couldn’t really concentrate on what she was saying, but I felt it was very important to try. “The book has many intriguing properties, one of them being that if you know how, you can make it appear to the desperate as exactly what they need most. That’s served me well, as you can see.”

“Yes.” My voice had no vigor to it, even in my own ears.

“What I took from you—it comes back, eventually,” she said with false kindness. “But for now, you’re toast. I’ll be impressed if you last the semester.”

She was right. I dropped out not long after that fateful morning, fleeing from that haunted, accursed school. I couldn’t stay when I couldn’t focus on anything—not even on the report I tried to write on what happened to me, blaming Dr. Hernandez for my unnatural lassitude. I’d open a word processing program or pull up a webpage and my mind would wander away like a neglected child in a grocery store.

But, in this world there comes good with bad, and in this case the good was my new inability to give a crap. Though my powers of concentration have been returning to me in dribs and drabs, I have not gone back to campus; I am not sorry, for I realize how much I hated it. Now I make lattes with the mocking and friendly baristas at the coffee shop across the way from Miskatonic University and play video games and read novels and go on dates in my free time. I know that higher education is not for me, save for the study of the faces of those hopefuls who every semester crash themselves like so many waves upon the flinty shore of academia. They come in so fresh, so eager; eventually, when I observe the creeping melancholy and increasingly mournful desperation in their expressions, I embrace

my alienage. I am an outsider, a stranger among my co-workers and customers who are still students, but I am not bitter. I have my freedom, from academia and from whatever rots Miskatonic University from within, and I need no enhanced understanding to appreciate that.

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