

## M(oriarty) + Z(eck) = 2X

By Victoria Gewe

Sherlock Holmes and Nero Wolfe, two of the greatest detectives found in literature, have distinctly different styles of living and working. Sherlock Holmes actively pursues his leads, following footsteps and analyzing the ashes of cigarettes. Nero Wolfe passively sits in his chair and sends Archie to do any strenuous (by which we mean leaving the house or otherwise moving) detecting for him, preferring to do his job by brain muscles alone. Holmes is tall and slender; Wolfe is big and fat. Holmes enjoys his opium; Wolfe loves his beer. Holmes utilizes Watson as merely a passive observer; Wolfe utilizes Archie as an active participant. Yet with all these differences, the two great detectives have one thing in common: They both face enemies who must be overcome, or they risk being overcome themselves. Sherlock Holmes' Moriarty and Nero Wolfe's Arnold Zeck are cut from the same evil cloth. Both villains serve as foils for the great detectives, demonstrating what these men of great brains might have been had they themselves turned to a life of crime instead of to a life of fighting crime.

Holmes and Wolfe each infer (NOT imply!) the presence of a villain who controls a vast syndicate of crime reaching into all realms of society. In the words of Sherlock Holmes,

“I have felt the presence of this force, and I have deduced its action in many of those undiscovered crimes in which I have not been personally consulted. . . . He is the Napoleon of crime, Watson. He is the organization of half that is evil and of nearly all that is undetected in this great city.”

Holmes notices that someone seems to be behind a great number of the crimes going on in the criminal classes. This could describe Zeck's operation perfectly as well. Wolfe explains that he has noticed an undercurrent of crime working in much the same manner. Therefore,

Zeck is a question mark.

I've heard that he owns twenty assemblymen and six district leaders, and I've also heard that he is merely dried fish. There's rumor that if you print something about him he resents your body is washed ashore on at Montauk Point, mangled by sharks, but you know how the boys talk.

— Lon Cohen, *And Be a Villain*

when “advised” by Zeck to limit the reach of his investigation, Wolfe hires Del Bascom’s men to determine the existence and identity of this master criminal and finds Zeck. According to Wolfe, Zeck has involved himself in

“Narcotics, smuggling, industrial and commercial rackets, gambling, waterfront blackguardism, professional larceny, blackmail, political malfeasance – that by no means exhausts his curriculum, but it sufficiently indicates his character.”

Just as the detectives reach across all manner of society in their search for the truth, so too do their foils, in the forms of Moriarty and Zeck, wield power that reaches from the dregs of society to the highest levels of influence. To illuminate more clearly just how great Holmes and Wolfe are, it becomes necessary to face them with villains who have a seemingly endless reach and who embody all crime. The criminals must participate in all forms of evil in order to provide the contrast that shows the detectives serving the forces of justice. Yet, as we shall soon see, Moriarty and Zeck are not perfect foils for Holmes and Wolfe because while Moriarty and Zeck are the embodiment of evil, Holmes and Wolfe, while still being honest and upright, must circumvent the law and in essence turn criminal themselves in order to achieve the goals of justice.

In addition, both criminals organize their syndicates in a like manner. Holmes continues to explain that this anonymous man controls the crime from behind the scenes, so if the police arrest the smaller players, these people will be unable to lead the police to the man controlling the strings: “But the central power which uses the agent is never caught – never so much as suspected.” Zeck works the same way. Wolfe explains first to the Sperlings in *The Second Confession* and once again to Archie in *In the Best Families* that when Zeck wants something to happen, he first turns to B, who asks something of C, who see that the job is finally accomplished by D. Therefore, there is no way for the crime to be brought back to Zeck’s account. Even when Wolfe has penetrated Zeck’s organization, he must rely on tricking Barry Rackham into murdering Zeck because he is unable to convict Zeck of any of his crimes, despite his own inside knowledge. This anonymity on behalf of Moriarty and Zeck helps them control their crime syndicate much more effectively because they become

unaccountable for the crimes their subordinates commit.

When the detectives (or in Wolfe’s case, his assistant) first meet these villains, both notice distinctly animal characteristics, minimizing their humanity from the start. Holmes tells Watson that Moriarty’s “face protrudes forward and is forever slowly oscillating from side to side in a curiously reptilian fashion.” Likewise, according to Archie, Zeck’s “eyes were intended for a shark but there was an error on the assembly line.” Even Zeck’s voice supports this sense: “hard, slow, precise, and cold as last week’s corpse.” It is interesting to note that both characters are not just animal-like, but cold-blooded. People tend to identify cold-blooded animals, such as reptiles and sharks, as distinctly unpleasant creatures they want nothing to do with. In addition, when one thinks of the description of Moriarty, the image that most readily comes to mind is that of a snake, the least pleasant and often most dangerous type of reptile. These descriptions just serve to further the creepiness of the two villains. These are not characters that one would care to meet face to face.

Another curious characteristic of both criminals is the respect that both great detectives, neither the epitome of modesty, hold for their enemies’ mental capacities. Holmes actually says to Watson, “You know my powers, my dear Watson, and yet at the end of three months I was forced to confess that I had at last met an antagonist who was my intellectual equal.” In the same manner, Wolfe expresses similar respect for his own enemy when talking about his hesitation toward going head to head against Zeck and his need to go into hiding in order to be effective in dealing with his foe. He recognizes that he has met his intellectual equal, and it is only because Wolfe is tenacious and Zeck is not that Wolfe betters his enemy. Thus, both detectives recognize that if not for their own sense of right versus wrong, they would be just like Moriarty and Zeck, and both detectives prove their own differences from the villains by their consciences and their perseverance in fighting for the cause of justice.

But even more curious than the respect that Holmes and Wolfe have for Moriarty and Zeck is the respect the villains have in return for them. When Holmes is face to face with his enemy, Moriarty tries to talk Holmes out of continuing his crusade against Moriarty: “It has been an intellectual treat to me to see the way in which you have grappled with this affair, and I say, unaffectedly, that it would be a

grief to me to be forced to take any extreme measure.” Zeck, likewise, expresses similar sentiments about Nero Wolfe. When Louis Rony is killed and Wolfe is not satisfied with the verdict of accidental death, Zeck pays him to expose the true murderer, recognizing Wolfe’s great genius. Later, in *In the Best Families*, Zeck purposely uses only a smoke bomb instead of something more lethal to send his message to Wolfe to back off, telling Wolfe,

“That little package could have been something really destructive, but I preferred only to give you notice. As I told you about a year ago, it’s a more interesting world with you in it.”

The criminals seem to recognize not only that Holmes and Wolfe are their intellectual equals, but also that a small portion of the detectives lives on in their own selves; that not only would life be more boring without Holmes and Wolfe, but that they would lose some of the definition of their own lives. In giving the detectives this recognition, Moriarty and Zeck show their appreciation for other great minds and perhaps recognize what they themselves could have become had they turned their own great minds towards the cause of justice instead of towards the cause of evil. They do not wish to lose their nemeses because in some ways, they would then be forced to lose a part of themselves.

Upon making the final decision to end the career of their foes, both Holmes and Wolfe feel the need to retire away from society and from their enemies in order to finish their preparations. With Holmes, this time of withdrawal is significantly shorter than with Wolfe: just a few days compared to five months. Holmes first leaves Watson’s house, with arrangements to rendezvous at the train station the next day because “it was evident to me that he thought he might bring trouble to the roof he was under, and that was the motive which impelled him to go.” Indeed, this precaution was proven necessary because someone set their house on fire that very night. Holmes does meet Watson at the train station the next day, and they travel to Reichenbach Falls to get away from the city while the police try to capture Moriarty and his gang. Likewise, Wolfe walks out of his house, leaving the front door standing wide open, as a signal to all that he no longer lives there, so the remaining inhabitants should need fear no attack from Zeck. Wolfe spends one month in the desert, training, fasting, and

preparing himself to meet his enemy and then another four months incognito as he gets close enough to Zeck to be enabled to take the villain down.

In the end, both Holmes and Wolfe are unable to take legal recourse to capture their enemies and must resort to fatal means of dealing with the criminals, in effect having to become criminals themselves in order to overcome their foes. Holmes and Moriarty struggle violently at the Reichenbach Falls, leading to the death of Moriarty and the supposed death of Sherlock Holmes. It is only seven years later that Watson even learns that his friend is still alive. Holmes several times makes statements that he expects this fight with Moriarty to take his own life, but he is satisfied as long as he defeats Moriarty too. While technically exercising self-defense, Holmes does resort to taking the life of his enemy by his own hands, a move which he has planned from the beginning, which leads him at least partway down the path of crime. In addition, Holmes undergoes his own death with the resurrection taking place seven years later. Perhaps this is a form of compensation for having taken the life of another, but perhaps this is the “Moriarty” part of himself dying alongside his enemy.

Wolfe, on the other hand, does not as strongly expect to die, but he does create a complicated subterfuge to trick Barry Rackham into killing Zeck for him. He recognizes that despite his months in Zeck’s employ, he still does not have any proof solid enough to convict Zeck of his crimes, so Zeck must die. So by making Rackham think that Zeck is about to have him convicted of his wife’s murder, Wolfe kills his enemy indirectly, another foray down the pathway of crime. Wolfe’s symbolic death and resurrection take place before his crime of killing Zeck, not after, like Holmes’s, but it does take place. For the five months during which he has gone missing, he experiences his own kind of death and hell, starving himself, forcing himself to ride regularly in automobiles, and doing what it takes to make Zeck pleased with and reliant on him. This also means that Wolfe must participate in Zeck’s life of crime as a “D” in Zeck’s chain of criminal command. In the end, both detectives undergo a resurrection when the villains do not because Holmes and Wolfe have proven themselves not smarter than their foes, but more determined to outlast and defeat them and to fight for the cause of justice.

While Sherlock Holmes and Nero Wolfe have very little in common

other than their brains, they do each share a very similar enemy. Professor Moriarty and Arnold Zeck both control criminal empires that are so complex no one would be able to tie these empires back to them. They both have the characteristics of unpleasant and often dangerous animals, yet both are highly intelligent and hold the respect of the detectives, also returning that respect back to the detectives. Both Moriarty and Zeck force their nemeses to retire from society in order to end them, and ultimately, both villains must die. Thus, both detectives prove their prowess once again in defeating the only men who might equal them in mental acuity, but who do so for the ends of evil instead of justice.

