The Red-Headed League Study Guide

The Red-Headed League by Arthur Conan Doyle

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Contents

The Red-Headed League Study Guide.....1

Contents.....2

Introduction.....3

Author Biography.....4

Plot Summary.....6

Detailed Summary & Analysis.....8

Characters.....15

Themes.....17

Style.....19

Historical Context.....21

Critical Overview.....22

Criticism.....24

Critical Essay #1.....25

Critical Essay #2.....28

Critical Essay #3.....33

Adaptations.....37

Topics for Further Study.....38

Compare and Contrast.....39

What Do I Read Next?.....41

Further Study.....42

Bibliography.....44

Copyright Information.....45

Introduction

"The Red-Headed League" first appeared in a popular British magazine, the *Strand*, in August of 1891. It was republished in 1892, along with eleven other Sherlock Holmes stories, in the collection *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. Its style and structure make it a nearly perfect example of the modern detective story, first devised by Edgar Allan Poe fifty years previously. Doyle's ingenious plots and captivating central characters, Holmes and his sidekick Watson, brought the author literary success in his own time. Further, the Sherlock Holmes stories provided later writers with models for their own work. The existence of today's popular detective tales, whether in the form of books, movies, or television shows, are in large part due to Doyle's influence.

Many readers enjoy matching their wits against Sherlock Holmes, trying to see if they can solve the mystery along with him. This is usually a task doomed to failure because of the first-person narrative style, in which the detective's less-intelligent friend Watson tells the story and is as amazed as any reader when the detective reveals his solution.' "The Red-Headed League," like Doyle's other detective stories, presents a detailed portrait of turn-of-the-century London and gives readers glimpses of a society undergoing rapid change. Among these changes are alterations in the class structure, Britain's rise as a world economic power, and urban growth—along with a rising crime rate. As he attempts to restore a social order threatened by criminals like those in "The Red-Headed League," Sherlock Holmes embodies the values of intelligence and individual achievement.

Author Biography

The elements in Doyle's life that most influenced his Sherlock Holmes' stories were his background as a doctor and his pressing need to earn a living. Born in Scotland in 1859, Doyle entered medical school at the age of seventeen. One of his teachers was Dr. Joseph Bell, whose skill in diagnosing illness had sharpened his powers of observation and reasoning. As a result Bell could, while diagnosing a patient's illness, accurately read clues to his or her background and personality as well. Bell's unusual ability made a lasting impression on Doyle, who modeled some of Holmes' deductive powers on his teacher's example. Doyle served as a ship's surgeon in the early 1880s, traveling to Africa and the Arctic, before returning to England and finishing his degree. At that time, establishing a medical practice was difficult, and Doyle waited in vain for patients to appear.

Fortunately, Doyle had another ambition: to become a writer. Several of his early stories, which featured adventure and mystery aboard ship and in Africa, had appeared in magazines while he was still a medical student. The increasing burden of time on his hands—along with a wife and growing family to support—led Doyle to attempt a novel. Doyle turned to his memories of Dr. Bell and his knowledge that detective stories often brought their writers popular success. Relying on the model set by Edgar Allan Poe's stories of the amateur detective Dupin, whose cases are narrated by an admiring and less clever friend, Doyle introduced Holmes and his sidekick Dr. John Watson in *A Study in Scarlet* in 1887.

This novel met with only a lukewarm reception from readers, but an American publisher encouraged Doyle to continue the series with *The Sign of Four* in 1890. Even though Doyle continued to write and publish other kinds of stories, especially science fiction and historical fiction, the need for money kept taking him back to the profitable Sherlock Holmes. He was able to give up his unprofitable medical practice in 1891 when short tales of Holmes' exploits began to command larger and larger payments from the British *Strand* magazine, where they were being published. "The Red-Headed League" was collected in the 1892 volume *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, which Doyle dedicated to Dr. Bell,

Doyle eventually tired of composing detective stories, considering them inferior to his other fiction. He wanted to be best known for his writing on more serious subjects. This led him to kill off Holmes in "The Final Problem," a short story published in 1893. However, so many people complained, and the monetary offers for a change of heart were so tempting, that Doyle was persuaded to bring back his detective in 1902 with *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, a case set during the period before Holmes's death. The resurrection was completed in the next year, when "The Empty House" revealed that Holmes had actually been in hiding during the time he was thought dead. Sherlock Holmes stories continued to appear until 1927, three years before Doyle's death.

The early twentieth century brought Doyle success in other areas as well. In 1902, he was knighted and given the title "Sir" for his volunteer work as a surgeon in South Africa

during the Boer War, along with his writings in support of this war. In the period after World War I, he became an authority on spiritualism, the belief that the dead can communicate with the living. He wrote extensively on this subject and lectured throughout Europe, Africa, Australia, and North America. Doyle's historical fiction, science fiction, and nonfiction books about his life, beliefs, and travels are not often read today, but his Sherlock Holmes stories continue to win fans and inspire imitators throughout the world.

Plot Summary

Dr. Watson drops in on his friend Sherlock Holmes to find him in conversation with a man with fiery red hair, a Mr. Jabez Wilson. Wilson has come to Holmes with a problem concerning an organization for which he was working but that has mysteriously disappeared. Wilson owns a pawnshop but had for the last two months been employed part-time. At Holmes' urging, he tells his story.

Wilson's assistant Vincent Spaulding had pointed out to Wilson a job notice in the newspaper. It was a job sponsored by the Red-Headed League, and only men with red hair need apply. Spaulding convinced Wilson to go to the interview, and because of the bright color of his hair, Wilson was hired. His job was to copy the Encyclopaedia Britannica from 10 A.M. until 2 P.M. He was not to leave the room at all, or he would lose his job. Wilson enjoyed the extra money he made but one Saturday, when he showed up at work, he saw a sign that said the League was dissolved. Wilson set out to discover what had happened to the League, and his well-paying job, but could learn nothing. Spaulding advised that he wait until the League got in touch with him, but Wilson came to seek the advice of Sherlock Holmes.

Holmes asks a few questions about Spaulding, finding out that he has been with Wilson for only three months, that he works for half the wages of anyone else, that he develops photographs in the pawnshop's cellar, and that he has a mark upon his forehead. Holmes gets excited at the last bit of information, and it seems that he recognizes Spaulding. Holmes then sends Wilson home, saying he will give him advice in a few days. After reflecting for an hour, Holmes, accompanied by Watson, goes to the square in which Wilson's shop is located. Holmes examines the neighborhood, thumps upon the pavement in front of the shop with his walkingstick, and then knocks on the door. A young man, presumably Spaulding, answers, and Holmes asks directions of him. However, he is most interested in observing the knees of the shop assistant's trousers; he sees there what he had expected to see. The two men then walk around the block to see what shops are behind Wilson's shop. There is a tobacco store, a newspaper store, a restaurant, a carriage-depot, and the City and Suburban Bank.

The two men attend a concert that afternoon. Afterwards, Holmes tells Watson that a serious crime is about to be committed and that he needs Watson's help that evening. Watson returns to Holmes' residence at ten that evening, where police agent Peter Jones, of the Scotland Yard, and Mr. Merry weather, of the City and Suburban Bank, are already gathered. Holmes explains that they are going to meet the master criminal John Clay this evening. The men take carriages to the bank and wait in the vault. Merry weather realizes that Clay is about to attempt to steal a large reserve of gold. The four men then quiet down and wait.

After more than an hour, one of the stones on the floor begins to move. John Clay emerges through the hole in the floor. He pulls his partner, a man with fiery red hair, up after him. Holmes springs out from his hiding place and uses his hunting crop to knock the gun out of Clay's hand. The accomplice has dashed back through the hole, but

Holmes had warned Jones to put guards in front of Wilson's house, where the tunnel leads. Jones leads Clay outside to take him to the police station.

In the early hours of the morning, Holmes explains to Watson how he solved the crime. He realized immediately that Wilson's job copying the encyclopedia was simply a ruse to get him out of the pawnshop for several hours a day. Holmes figured that Spaulding, who spent so much time in the pawnshop's cellar, was digging a tunnel leading to a nearby building. By thumping his walkingstick on the pavement, Holmes determined Wilson's cellar stretched behind the house, so he walked around the block to see what businesses were there. When he saw a bank, the tunnel's destination was obvious. Holmes also looked at the knees of Spaulding's trousers to see that they were worn and stained from hours of digging out a tunnel. He knew Spaulding would rob the bank that evening, Saturday, because he would thus have an extra day before the robbery would be discovered and he could make his escape. After solving the problem mentally, Holmes called Jones and Merryweather to help catch the thieves.

Watson openly admires Holmes, but Holmes merely says that solving the case saved him from boredom, a boredom which is already beginning to settle on him again. He says that his life is simply an attempt to "escape from the commonplaces of existence." Watson points out that he helps people as well. Holmes agrees, noting that man himself is nothing, but that his work is everything.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

This story starts out with the narrator, Dr. Watson, visiting his friend Sherlock Holmes at his home on Baker Street. When Watson sees that Holmes has a redheaded visitor he tries to leave but Holmes invites him in and introduces him to Mr. Wilson. Holmes tells Wilson that Watson has been his assistant on many cases.

Holmes then asks Wilson to repeat his story. He says that he wants it retold for two reasons. The first is so that Watson will get to hear it, and the second is that he himself can listen to the details again. He also notes that while he can usually compare things he hears with other events, Wilson's story is like nothing he has heard before.

Wilson looks proud of this, and immediately begins searching through a newspaper. As he does so, Watson examines him to see what he can learn about him. Watson says that he can see nothing very interesting about Wilson. He describes Wilson's clothing, and then says that Wilson's red hair is his only remarkable feature.

Watson then tells the reader that Holmes had been watching him observe Wilson, and he is prepared with observations of his own. Holmes tells Watson that Wilson has been a manual laborer at some point in his life, that he belongs to the Freemason society, that he takes snuff, has been to China, and has done a lot of writing lately.

Wilson is amazed by these deductions, and asks Holmes how he has figured all this out just by looking at him. He then asks about each fact that Holmes has brought out, receiving an answer from Holmes each time.

Holmes' clarifies with answers for each issue including:

1. Manual Laborer: Holmes says this is because Wilson's right hand is larger and more muscular than his right.

2. Freemason: Holmes says this is because of an arc-and-compass breast pin that Wilson is wearing. Holmes notes this is against Freemason rules.

3. Writing: Holmes says this is because of the wear on Wilson's sleeves. The right cuff is worn away close to the hand and near the elbow.

4. China: Holmes notes that Wilson has a fish tattoo that "could only have been done in China" because of the colors being unique to that country. Wilson is also wearing a Chinese coin on a necklace.

Wilson says that once Holmes has explained he can see all the facts were there all along. Holmes notes that he will have to stop explaining then so that people will still think of him as a genius.

Holmes then prompts Wilson to begin his story. Wilson does so by showing Watson a newspaper advertisement asking redheaded men to apply for jobs with the "Red-Headed League." The ad says that anyone over 21 with red hair can apply for a position that pays 4 pounds a week for "nominal" (minor) work. The ad directs applicants to report to an office on Fleet Street.

Wilson explains that he runs a pawnbroker's business. He notes that his business has decreased in recent years, and this has meant a reduction in staff – he previously employed two assistants, but he has recently been reduced to just one assistant who works at half wages "to learn the business."

Holmes interjects at this point, asking about the young assistant. He notes that Spaulding is a good assistant who could easily make more money elsewhere, but that he is not about to tell Spaulding that. Holmes agrees, noting that Wilson is lucky to have someone who works for half-pay. Wilson does say that Spaulding has faults, most notably a passion for photography that causes him to spend several hours a day in the cellar developing pictures.

Wilson goes on with his story at this point, telling Holmes and Watson that it was Spaulding who brought the advertisement to his attention. Wilson explains that Spaulding had explained that the League of Red Headed Gentlemen provided good paying jobs for red headed men and that anyone with red hair is virtually assured of getting one of the jobs.

Wilson says that he then asked Spaulding what the league was. Spaulding explained to him that the League provided an income of about 200 pounds a year for work that would not interfere with "one's other occupations" (such as running a shop). Wilson notes that he was very interested, especially since his business had been failing for several years.

Pressed for more details, Spaulding explained that the league was started by Ezekiel Hopkins, an eccentric American who had an interest in redheaded men. Hopkins's will apparently provided for a trust, which paid redheaded men a good wage for very little work.

Wilson then notes that there would be many applicants for these jobs. Spaulding replies that the patronage is only for men in London, and is only available for men with bright red hair, like Wilson. Spaulding encourages Wilson to apply.

Wilson says that Fleet Street was full of men waiting to apply for the position and that he began to lose hope. Spaulding, however, tells him not to worry and gets Wilson to the head of the line and into the office. Wilson states that the office was bare except for a small redheaded man who looked at each applicant and dismissed him.

Spaulding introduces Wilson to the man who says that Wilson looks perfect for the job. He then pulls Wilson's hair to check if it is real. He tells Wilson that they have been deceived in many different ways by men pretending to have red hair. The man then tells the waiting applicants to leave, since Wilson has been hired.

Ross offers him the job and asks when Wilson can start. Ross tells Wilson that that he would have to work from 10:00 until 2:00 each day. Wilson tells Holmes and Watson that this suited him fine, since pawn-broking was mostly an evening business, and Spaulding could easily handle the daytime trade.

Ross explains that the pay is four pounds a week and that there are conditions to the job. The most important of these, says Ross is that Wilson remain in the office for the whole four hours and that if Wilson leaves during this time he will lose his job. Wilson agrees and learns that the job entails copying pages of the Encyclopedia Britannica.

Wilson is amazed at this job and begins to worry that the whole affair is some kind of joke. The next day Wilson sets out to start his new job, which turns out to be legitimate. He explains how Ross set him up in the office and then left him there to copy out the pages of the first volume of the Encyclopedia.

Ross did not stay to supervise Wilson, instead checking on him periodically. Wilson reported that he was paid regularly and on time, and that Ross's visits reduced in frequency to only one a day over the next 8 weeks. Wilson reports that he had almost copied all of the "A" entries when the position abruptly ended that morning. He then shows Watson and Holmes a placard that says the Red-Headed League has been dissolved. Holmes then asks what Wilson has done since discovering that the league is no more.

Wilson reports that he then asked the landlord what happened to the Red-Headed League. The landlord tells him that Ross's real name was William Morris, and that he had moved out that day. The forwarding address, said Wilson, turned out to be a factory and the people there had never heard of Morris or Ross. Wilson says that he then went home to ask Spaulding for his advice. Spaulding tells him he should wait for a letter explaining the affair. Wilson says that he was unsatisfied with this and instead went to Holmes for advice.

Holmes commends Wilson for seeking his help, noting that there may be no serious matter resulting from the deception. When Wilson notes that it already seems serious because of the money he has lost, Holmes tells him he has been fortunate to get more than 30 pounds for doing very little. Wilson replies that he would like to know more about the league and especially whether or not he has been the victim of some sort of practical joke.

Holmes agrees to help him, and asks Wilson a series of questions. He learns that Spaulding started working for Wilson about a month before the ad for the Red-Headed league appeared after answering Wilson's own ad for an assistant. Wilson says that he hired Spaulding because he was talented and would work for lower wages than other applicants.

Holmes then asks for a physical description and is particularly interested when he learns that Spaulding has pierced ears and a white mark on his forehead. Home then solicits the information that Spaulding still works for Wilson and has done a good job.

Holmes tells Wilson that he will find the answer for him by Monday – two days from that day. He and Watson send Wilson away and then sit down to discuss the case. Holmes tells Watson that the strangest cases often turn out to have the simplest solutions. He then says he must think about the case while smoking and asks Watson to leave him alone. Holmes curls up in his chair with his eyes closed. Watson tells us he had "come to the conclusion that he had dropped asleep" when Holmes burst into activity. Holmes tells Watson that they are going to a concert to help him think but first they will visit the city.

Watson then describes how he and Holmes traveled to the road in front of Wilson's shop. Holmes looks at the neighborhood and then bangs in the pavement in front of the Wilson shop with his stick. He then knocks on Wilson's door and asks for directions. After receiving a curt response, Holmes says that Spaulding is a very smart man.

Watson replies that Spaulding is deeply involved in the mystery of the Red-Headed League. He assumes that Holmes has knocked on the door to see Spaulding. Holmes says no, that he wanted to see" the knees of his trousers" and then refuses to answer any more questions. The two then look at the next street over, behind Wilson's shop.

Holmes then notes all the businesses on that street and then takes Watson off to have some food and head to the concert. Watson takes great care in describing Holmes as he listens to the music. Once the concert is over Holmes tells Watson that he thinks the Wilson case is serious. He asks Watson to meet him at 10 that night at Baker Street and urges Watson to bring his revolver.

Watson then tells the reader he feels he is smarter than some people are, but that talking with Holmes often baffled him. He confesses that he cannot see what has caused Holmes's alarm and cannot figure out why they need to go out in the middle of the night.

Watson then describes how he left for Baker Street. He notes that there are two horse drawn carriages parked outside when he gets there. He discovers Holmes has two visitors: Mr. Merryweather and a policeman named Mr. Jones. Holmes then tells Merryweather about John Clay, a criminal with a remarkable history. Clay, says Holmes, is brilliant and is descended from royalty. Holmes adds that Clay is elusive, and that he has been pursuing him for several years.

The group then set off, and Watson is unable to get any information from Holmes on the way to their destination. Holmes tells Watson that Merryweather is a bank director who is "personally interested" in the Red-Headed League case. He adds that Jones has been brought along for his tenacity and perseverance.

Watson notes that the two cabs travel to the area around Wilson's shop, and then travel up an alley to a door Merryweather opens for them. The men proceed underground into a cellar filled with boxes. Holmes notes to Merryweather that, from above, this cellar is safe. Merryweather agrees and bangs his stick on the floor only to discover a hollow spot.

Merryweather expresses anger at this and Holmes advises them to be quiet and sit on the crates. Holmes then reveals that they are in the basement of a bank that Merryweather runs. Merryweather explains that the cellar is full of French gold that has not been placed in the bank's vault. He also notes that the bank has heard rumors about possible theft of the gold.

Holmes notes that the bank was justifiably worried. He then asks Merryweather to cover their lamp and arranges the group to pounce on anyone emerging from the floor. He also asks Jones if he has placed police officers outside Wilson's shop to prevent the escape of the thieves. On hearing that all is in readiness, Holmes tells them all to wait in the dark. At last, there is a light emerging from the floor, and eventually a hand appears.

The hand is followed by a person who emerges from the floor. The person looks around and then starts hauling his accomplice up behind him. When he perceives that he is not alone in the cellar, the first man tells his friend to run away. Holmes grabs the first man and knocks a pistol out of his hands. Holmes then tells John Clay (the intruder) that he has been caught. Clay (who is also Spaulding) congratulates Holmes on doing a thorough job of catching him and his friend.

In the last scene of the story, we see Holmes explaining his brilliance to Watson over drinks at Baker Street. He explains that the "Red-Headed League" was simply a hoax to get Wilson out of his shop long enough for Clay and Ross (Morris) to dig a tunnel to the bank behind Wilson's shop. He notes that Spaulding/Clay's willingness to work at half pay was what piqued his curiosity.

When Watson asks how Holmes knew the thieves' target, Holmes replies that Wilson did not have enough money to be a target himself and that there was no romantic motive. This left him curious, and he deduced from Spaulding/clay's frequent visits to the cellar (supposedly for his photography hobby) that he was digging a tunnel. Holmes and Watson's visit to the area, rapping the street and looking at Spaulding/Clay were all in an attempt to prove his tunnel hypothesis. Once he saw the bank, said Holmes, he knew exactly what was going on and called Scotland Yard and Mr. Merryweather.

Watson then asks about timing. Holmes replies that he knew the crime would be committed that Saturday night because a) they ended the Red-Headed League ruse (b) a Saturday night would give them the most time to escape before the bank noticed the theft. Watson praises Holmes for his brilliance and Holmes ends the story by noting that his work is all that saves him from boredom and unhappiness.

Analysis

As the story begins, it becomes clear to the reader that we will see the events of the story through Dr. Watson's eyes. This will deny the reader access to many insights, but also allows us to view Holmes' powers of deduction from a removed standpoint. The introductory pages of the story establish several relevant bits of information, including the fact that Holmes and Watson have collaborated with each other on previous

mysteries. In light of this knowledge, the fact that Holmes considers Wilson's story to be so special tells the reader that they will now be witnessing something spectacular.

One of the first things Watson notices about Wilson is his red hair. Red hair has long been held superstitiously as a sign of evil, especially for women with red hair. Men with red hair are also often regarded as simple-minded or poor, and are easily fooled. This image is often associated in English literature with the Irish, due to the long-standing conflicts between England and Ireland.

Although Wilson is not Irish, he is clearly seen as a person who has had the wool pulled over his eyes by a pair of con men. In fact, both Watson and Holmes ridicule him by smiling and laughing after his story, mostly because Wilson has only really come forward because he has lost an extraordinarily simple source of income. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle reinforces the symbolism of associating red hair with gullibility by having the "Red-Headed League." This organization was created to fool just one man (Wilson) but attracts hundreds, proving that red heads really are more gullible (although this is tongue-in-cheek, since people with almost any hair color might flock to an advertisement such as the one Wilson displays).

The main purpose of Wilson's story and Wilson himself is to allow Holmes to impress the reader with his powers of deductive reasoning. Using information gathered from a close inspection of Wilson's appearance and clothing, Holmes is able to piece together a mostly complete biography of the pawnbroker. However, to make Holmes seem even more brilliant Watson fails to see most of the things that Holmes remarks on. This lack of observance, on Watson's part, serves as a counterpoint to Holmes' "brilliant" reasoning.

Modern readers may find several holes in Holmes' logic however, especially in his observations of Wilson's appearance. For example, there may be other explanations for Wilson's tattered right sleeve or enlarged right hand. Although Holmes is right in this case, the reader will note that he is relying on assumptions and stereotypes for most of his deductions. However, the idea that you could reason out every problem with careful observation and critical thinking is central to Victorian literature in general and Sherlock Holmes stories in particular.

Watson also makes it clear that Holmes' deductions are, in view of hindsight, obvious. Holmes' skill, therefore, lies as much in carefully interpreting the obvious clues (such at the shirt cuff or the freemason pin) as it does in knowing obscure facts such as the specific origins of ink color in a tattoo.

Wilson's story is highly detailed and causes the reader to be skeptical at once. The first and most obvious question it raises is why anyone would pay someone to copy pages of the encyclopedia. Another troublesome issue is the terms of employment, which require Wilson essentially to remain stationary for four hours each day. The unbelievable nature of the task, coupled with Spaulding's strong encouragement of Wilson, make it hard for anyone not to immediately suspect Wilson's assistant.

However, Wilson's story does not contain enough information to solve the crime. For that, Holmes has to venture forth to examine Wilson's shop and neighborhood. Watson further enhances the mystique of Holmes' ability by recounting the detective's trance-like state. The reader is left to wonder whether this long period of silence is when Holmes makes his leaps of logic.

Although Watson follows Holmes' every move when they visit Wilson's shop, he does not observe the same level of detail that Holmes does. Holding back valuable details is an important characteristic of all mystery stories, and by using Watson as a narrator, Conan Doyle is able to make these omissions a natural part of the story. Watson himself even refers to his comparatively weak powers of deduction in the story, and finally decides that he will wait for Holmes to decipher the mystery later on.

Although the reader is told many of the visible details in the story, such as the fact that there is a bank one street over from Wilson's shop, we are never given a detailed enough picture to piece the mystery together. The final pieces of the puzzle, as in most Sherlock Holmes stories are revealed near the end of the story. The reader would never have been able to discover these things just from reading the text of the story (the facts about Clay and the contents of the bank's cellar).

Arthur Conan Doyle was one of the first mystery writers to use the device of the end of story "reveal." In *The Red-Headed League* this revelation of previously unknown facts takes almost as long as Wilson's story, and proves that Watson has once again made a brilliant discovery by using the facts presented to him. He is also privy to information Watson does not know, such as the history of John Clay/Spaulding.

Still, at the end of the story the reader is left with the impression that although Holmes is brilliant, anyone who was paying attention could have solved the mystery without difficulty. This was one of Conan Doyle's intentions: to show how observation, deduction, and the application of dispassionate logic could help solve any mystery.

Characters

Archie

See Duncan Ross

John Clay

Clay's apparent desire to learn the pawnbroking trade and his hobby of photography, like the assumed name of Spaulding, mask his intent to rob the City and Suburban Bank. Identified as a "murderer, thief, smasher, and forger," he is skilled enough at crime to have eluded the police for years. Holmes seems almost respectful when he identifies Clay as "the fourth smartest man in London" and compliments him on the ingenuity of his scheme. Clay's acid-splashed forehead and pierced ears hint at a colorful past, but the reader learns little about him aside from his royal blood, aristocratic education, and extreme pride. These attributes suggest that Clay was led to crime by the challenge, rather than the need for money. He may even have a Robin Hood-like motive of stealing from the rich to aid the poor, since police agent Jones mentions that Clay "will crack a crib in Scotland one week, and be raising money to build an orphanage in Cornwall the next."

Sherlock Holmes

Holmes's reputation as a lover of puzzles and solver of crimes leads people with particularly baffling problems, like the one confounding Jabez Wilson, to seek him out. Holmes possesses a nearly superhuman ability to read a person's background by observing small, seemingly-insignificant details, and Watson states that Holmes's powers of reasoning make him appear to be "a man whose knowledge was not that of other mortals." Holmes is aided in his task by a thorough familiarity with previous criminal cases and the inhabitants of London's underworld, along with a scholarly knowledge of such obscure topics as varieties of cigarette ash and kinds of tattoo marks. Possessing a sort of split personality, Holmes swings between moods of thoughtful inactivity and intense action. Even though he is happy to help the police catch criminals when a case interests him, Holmes is more concerned with the pleasure he derives from these mental games. As he tells Watson, "My life is spent in one long effort to escape from the commonplaces of existence. These little problems help me to do so."

Peter Jones

This police officer eagerly accepts Holmes's help in catching John Clay, whom Jones has been unsuccessfully trying to capture for years. Holmes describes Jones as unintelligent and unskilled in his profession, but he does praise the officer's bravery and persistence.

Mr. Merryweather

The director of the City and Suburban Bank, Merryweather is portrayed as solemn and respectable. He also shows that he is overconfident and has a one-track mind when he seems more concerned about missing his weekly card game than about the possibility that his bank vaults are in danger.

William Morris

See Duncan Ross

Duncan Ross

When John Clay refers to his red-headed accomplice as Archie in the bank vault, we learn the real name of the manager who supervises Jabez Wilson's employment with the Red-Headed League. He plays the role of businessman well, even convincing the accountant from whom he borrows the office that he is a lawyer.

Vincent SpauMing

See John Clay

Dr. John Watson

Watson's admiration for his friend Holmes prompts him to chronicle their many adventures together, such as this one. A medical doctor and married man, Watson is willing to drop his own pursuits to follow his friend at a moment's notice. His devotion and trust lead him to accompany Holmes to Wilson's pawnbroking shop and the bank vault, even though he does not understand his friend's motive. Because Watson asks the questions that allow Holmes to reveal his knowledge and his reasoning, Watson serves as a stand-in for the reader. Watson confesses himself "oppressed with a sense of my own stupidity in my dealings with Sherlock Holmes," but he is a careful observer of people and events.

Jabez Wilson

A red-haired widower and pawnbroker, Wilson seeks out Sherlock Holmes to solve one mystery, only to find out that he is being used as part of an elaborate scheme to rob a bank. Holmes reads clues in Wilson's appearance that reveal his earlier seafaring profession and visit to China, but even Watson can discern Wilson's mental slowness and mediocrity. Wilson's overriding motivation is his love of money, which allows him to be manipulated by Clay and his accomplice.

Themes

Knowledge and Ignorance

Sherlock Holmes's love of mental puzzles leads to his interest in the odd story Jabez Wilson tells him. His knowledge of crime and ability to reason allow him to discern that a serious motive must lie behind Wilson's singular experience with the bizarre Red-Headed League. Guided by this knowledge, and the observations he makes as a result, he stops a bank robbery and the further lawless career of a master criminal. Through Jabez Wilson, whom Holmes disdains as "not over-bright," readers learn that ignorance—especially when it is accompanied by greed—can make people unwitting accomplices to crime.

A keen intellect is not always a force for good, however. Only a brilliant mind like John Clay's could pinpoint Wilson as the ideal target and conceive of the Red-Headed League as the perfect scheme to divert Wilson's attention from his business while a tunnel is being dug in his cellar. This is where the motives and morality guiding the actions of an intelligent mind become important, and where the key differences between the detective and criminal emerge.

Greed

The bank robber John Clay and his accomplice Archie are motivated by the fabulous sum of money they hope to steal from the City and Suburban Bank. Their greed takes them outside the bounds of law and leads to their capture. Even though the story ends before their trial and punishment, the likely penalty for their history of criminal acts would be execution, demonstrating the fatal consequences of greed.

Jabez Wilson's love of money also promotes crime and makes him an easy target for exploitation. Not only does the promise of money in return for very little work take him away from his shop so John Clay will have free rein; he first becomes vulnerable when he hires Clay as his assistant, thinking he is getting the better bargain because Clay was "willing to come for half wages so as to learn the business." Sherlock Holmes, by contrast, personifies the virtue of unselfishness. After foiling the attempted bank robbery, he tells the manager Mr. Merryweather that he expects no reward beyond the repayment of his expenses.

Order and Disorder

The orderliness of a society is always threatened by crime. By helping good to triumph over evil, Sherlock Holmes eliminates the threat to his community's stability. Even though Holmes works with the police, and his investigation serves the interests of law and justice, this is not his greatest concern. In fact, Holmes does not appear to

recognize that he has accomplished a humanitarian act until Watson reminds him that he is "a benefactor of the race."

Instead, the most important type of order restored when the mystery is solved is an economic order. The belief that money received should be directly proportionate to the amount of work accomplished is jeopardized during the course of the story. Not only do the bank robbers desire money they have not earned, but Jabez Wilson twice attempts to get something for nothing: the labor of John Clay as his assistant, and payment from the Red-Headed League based solely on the color of Wilson's hair and ability to copy from the dictionary. Sherlock Holmes correctly perceives that his strongest clue rests in this imbalance between work and payment, and at the story's end, balance is restored.

Appearance and Reality

Throughout the story, readers are confronted with a series of situations that are not what they first seem. Jabez Wilson simply wishes to learn what has happened to the Red-Headed League and his weekly payment of four pounds, unaware that this odd mystery is a smokescreen for bank robbery. Watson contrasts the "uncongenial atmosphere" surrounding Jabez Wilson's pawnshop with the "fine shops and stately business premises" that adjoin the City and Suburban Bank, but the two apparently divided locales are connected by an underground tunnel. The criminals themselves do not even appear criminal. Watson describes John Clay, a thief and murderer, as "a bright-looking, clean-shaven young fellow" when he first sees Clay at the pawnshop door, later noting his "white, almost womanly hand" and "clean-cut, boyish face" at the moment of Clay's capture.

Little can be taken at face value in "The Red-Headed League." Because both Wilson and Watson so readily believe that outward appearances reveal truth, we are reminded that this is a common human failing. It is even sometimes appropriate, as readers learn when Jabez Wilson turns out to be exactly the kind of man that both Watson and Holmes guessed him to be. But it is also the detective's job—and a skill readers might imitate—to be suspicious of appearances and suspend judgment until all the evidence has been unearthed.

Style

Point of View

"The Red-Headed League" is narrated from the first-person perspective of Dr. Watson, who participates in all aspects of Sherlock Holmes's case. What makes this narrative style especially clever is that Doyle creates a narrator who sees and hears the same information that Holmes does and who can relay the information systematically to readers, but who cannot interpret it. This technique is characteristic of the early detective story, pioneered by Edgar Allan Poe's tales of the sleuth Dupin. It creates suspense, since readers—along with the sidekick narrator—do not have access to the detective's innermost thoughts until he finally chooses to reveal them after the mystery is solved.

Setting

When Jabez Wilson shows Holmes and Watson the newspaper in which he first learned of the Red-Headed League, we learn that the events of the story take place in 1890, only a year before Doyle wrote the story. Few details allow a reader to picture Holmes's rooms at 221B Baker Street, where he interviews Wilson and where over half the story takes place. However, Doyle gives readers the flavor of late-Victorian London when Holmes and Watson venture outside to examine Wilson's pawnshop and its surroundings. Readers catch glimpses of the bustling commercial district, gas-lit evening streets, and the Underground (subway). The most fully developed setting is the bank vault, where increasing detail draws out the story's climax and increases suspense.

Structure

The detective story is often seen as one of the purest forms of plot. Not only are the protagonist (the detective) and his antagonist (the criminal) clearly identified by the time the story concludes; in addition, the process of solving a case precisely parallels conventional plot structure. The story begins with exposition, as the case is presented to Holmes. While Holmes investigates the case, forms a theory, and prepares to test this theory, the action rises. The climax comes when Holmes's theory is demonstrated to be correct because a criminal who would have otherwise escaped detection has been apprehended. Holmes's explanation to Watson, which fills in missing information and provides a sense of closure because all loose ends have been tied up, serves as the story's denouement, or falling action.

One additional element often present in detective stories, especially typical of Doyle's Sherlock Holmes tales, is a step in the story's exposition through which Holmes gains his client's—and his reader's—trust. Just as Holmes reads the evidence of Wilson's appearance to reveal his background, he often repeats this action with those who seek

him out, sometimes even guessing the nature of their inquiry before they tell him. This establishes Holmes's credibility from the story's outset and gives readers faith that, however impossible a solution may seem at times, one will finally emerge if the reader perseveres until the story's final paragraphs.

Symbols

The movement and meaning of a detective story most often come through the mental and physical operations of the detective, rather than through intricate structures of symbols and images. However, the detective himself can be seen as a concrete symbol of abstract traits the author values, such as intelligence, imagination, curiosity, and unselfishness. Giving humanity to the abstraction are Sherlock Holmes' character quirks, such as his sense of humor, pipe-smoking (along with a cocaine habit, mentioned in several other stories), musical tastes, and fluctuation between the poetic and energetic poles of his "dual nature."

Critics have also suggested that Doyle's settings carry symbolic meanings. In Rosemary Jann's judgment, the tunnel that connects the seedy world of Jabez Wilson's pawnshop to the more refined business district of the City and Suburban bank symbolizes the insecurity and vulnerability of middle- and upper-class life.

Doppelganger

Even though they act on different sides of the law, it is curious that the character most resembling Sherlock Holmes in "The Red-Headed League" is the bank robber, John Clay. Both are intelligent and imaginative, and Clay's pride in his royal background mirrors Holmes' pride in his mental powers and detecting success. In Clay, Holmes recognizes a formidable mind that nearly matches his own. As police agent Jones suggests, Clay even has a charitable impulse to complement Holmes's.

It is understandable that a detective must think like a criminal to understand his thought processes and predict his behavior, accentuating in the detective those qualities most comparable to his quarry. However, detective stories like Doyle's often emphasize innate similarities between these two figures. Critics such as Ian Ousby trace this doubling to nineteenth-century distrust of the police, through which even an amateur detective bears traces of the negative qualities frequently attributed to early police forces. On a broader level, similarities between the detective and his doppelganger, or mirrored reflection, demonstrate that both good and evil can spring from the same sources. Only individual choice determines whether talents and skills are used positively or negatively.

Historical Context

The detective stories Doyle published in the *Strand* magazine during the 1890s, including "The Red-Headed League," are credited with doubling subscribers to the magazine. During the Victorian Age, which stretched from the beginning of Queen Victoria's reign in 1837 to her death in 1901, major writers such as Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy often published novels serially, in weekly or monthly parts. Doyle, however, was the first to write short stories using a similar method, relying upon interest in a central character rather than an ongoing plot to keep readers coming back for more. The factors that led to this amazing popularity reveal the interests and make-up of the reading public in Doyle's day.

England increasingly became a nation of readers in the decades before Sherlock Holmes first appeared, since the Education Act of 1870 and legislation to limit child labor made it possible for a wider segment of the population to attend school. In 1880, all children were guaranteed schooling through the age often. Since recreational reading among this newly literate class was often done in short spans of time—while riding the train or subway, for instance—forms of writing flourished that could be quickly consumed, like articles or short stories in newspapers and magazines. Similarly, true or fictional accounts of action, adventure, and crime captivated the attention of lower- and middle-class readers who worked hard for a living and whose lives often contained little of the excitement they sought in literature. Doyle wrote for such readers, often reinforcing through his stories beliefs that his readers would be likely to hold.

Critical Overview

Detective fiction has often been categorized as pure entertainment. For this reason, much critical opinion of "The Red-Headed League" and Doyle's other Sherlock Holmes stories is influenced by a particular critic's viewpoint on the value of this literary niche. In recent decades, criticism has begun to shift toward a more serious consideration of these tales. Doyle's detective stories are seen as fascinating clues to the culture in which they were written and as explorations of the attitudes characteristic of late-Victorian life.

Most early book reviewers had favorable opinions of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, in which "The Red-Headed League" appeared. Typical is the judgment voiced by one anonymous critic in a British periodical, *The Athenaeum*, who said of the collection, "Of its kind it is excellent; there is little literary pretension about it, and there is hardly any waste of time about subtle character-drawing; but incident succeeds incident with the most businesslike rapidity, and the unexpected always occurs with appropriate regularity." Another reviewer, William Morton Payne, singled out "The Red-Headed League" for particular note in an American journal, *The Dial*, remarking that the story "is a striking illustration of the author's originality." Years later, Doyle cited the same reason for ranking "The Red-Headed League" as his second favorite Holmes story (with "The Speckled Band" first). In 1959, a poll among readers of the *Baker Street Journal*, a magazine for Sherlock Holmes fans, concurred with Doyle.

The largest body of criticism on the Sherlock Holmes stories comes from groups of enthusiasts who call themselves "Sherlockians" or "Holmesians." In over 50 journals and newsletters published worldwide, the most prominent being the American *Baker Street Journal* and British *Sherlock Holmes Journal*, writers attempt to resolve inconsistencies in the stories or deduce aspects of Holmes's and Watson's lives from clues given in the stories. The central premise shared by these writers, from which much of the fun of their essays arises, is that Holmes was an actual person who solved real mysteries. As a result, writers on "The Red-Headed League" have produced wonderfully logical articles attempting to establish the true location of Saxe-Coburg Square, since no place by this name exists in London, or arguing that the Red-Headed League might really have existed.

Such articles must obviously be read from the same tongue-in-cheek perspective in which they were written. However, they often provide worthwhile information on the historical background of Doyle's stories and testify to the mystique Sherlock Holmes still holds today. One of the best examples of criticism in this "Sherlockian" vein is Gordon L. Iseminger's essay on Holmes as a Victorian archetype, since it demonstrates ways in which Holmes was a product of the culture from which he emerged.

A similar appreciative tone marks much critical writing on Doyle during the early and middle decades of the twentieth century. Writers occasionally disparage the form in which Doyle chose to write, but they nevertheless praise his clever plots. One exception was the poet T.S. Eliot, who enjoyed the character of Sherlock Holmes but complained,

in a 1929 review of the complete collection of the Holmes stories, that the solution to "The Red-Headed League" was "perfectly obvious from the beginning." Critics then, as now, frequently marvel at the level of popularity Holmes had achieved and speculate on the reasons for this phenomenon.

More recent criticism has often focused on Doyle's life as an influence upon his detective stories. Links are often drawn between the characterization of Holmes and Doyle's own scientific interests and political convictions, including his patriotism, contradictory views on women's rights, and skepticism toward the British judicial system. By these critics' reasoning, Holmes becomes an extension of Doyle himself, perhaps even Doyle's vision of an ideal self. A central problem for these biographical critics is Doyle's intense interest in spiritualism, especially during his later life, because it appears to deny the spirit of rationalism that infuses the Holmes stories.

The work of most contemporary scholars builds from the assumption that the popular literature of any time period provides special insight into that period. Attitudes regarding class status, gender, and race are of special interest to these critics. Along with the qualities in Holmes that are a debt to his times, the types of crimes he encounters are often seen as symptoms of the anxieties that plagued late-Victorian readers—and for which only a superhuman figure like Holmes could find a solution. For these reasons, "The Red-Headed League" has attracted critical attention because of contrasts between the class positions of Jabez Wilson, Holmes, and John Clay. In her discussion of the story, for instance, critic Rosemary Jann demonstrates that both Wilson and Clay, as poles on the spectrum of class status, represent threats to the middle class and its strongly ingrained work ethic. She also argues that Doyle may use Clay, with his "white, almost womanly hand," pierced ears, and partnership with another man, to play upon and then relieve through Clay's eventual capture another set of late-Victorian fears regarding homosexuality.

Along with their interest in the social issues that play arole in Doyle's stories, critics are also exploring literary trends current in the nineteenth century that may have influenced his writing. The aesthetic or decadent movement in late-Victorian literature is often perceived as one such influence. This movement prized the mental and sensory experiences of art over the mundane details of everyday existence, and the artificial over the natural. Even though Doyle writes in a realistic style, the character of Sherlock Holmes, with his artistic interests and habit of uttering witty statements, or epigrams, is indebted to the aesthetic movement.

Growing attention to both popular fiction as a category and Doyle as a writer has led critics and readers alike to reexamine Doyle's other writing, such as his science fiction and historical novels. This nearly forgotten body of work is proving to be of interest in its own right, along with its value in illuminating relationships between different types of popular fiction and parallels to the immortal Holmes stories.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Rena Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay she provides an overview of the continuing popularity of the Sherlock Holmes' saga and examines the elements that make up "The Red-Headed League."

L Watson, although a "bright man and a medical doctor, plays the slow-witted counterpart to Holmes' quick deductive reasoning."

Sherlock Holmes is one of the most legendary literary figures, not only among lovers of detective fiction. Stories of Holmes' adventures—and there are only 56 short stories and 4 novels—have been translated throughout the world and made into plays, films, and television programs. There are more than 50 magazines devoted to the discussion of Sherlock Holmes and countless societies formed by people to celebrate him. When Arthur Conan Doyle sold all rights to *A Study in Scarlet* in 1886 for a mere 25 pounds, he could not possibly have imagined what a star he, Holmes' assistant Dr. Watson, and the detective himself would become.

Why is Sherlock Holmes so popular? Even his dedicated readers admit that his plots are sometimes rather thin and that the details do not always add up. For instance, "The Red-Headed League" has inspired several articles pointing out its inconsistencies; notes from a Sherlock Holmes' society meeting discussing the same matter have even been published. Yet enjoyment in the story has never abated. It seems that Doyle has succeeded at something far more important than fabricating complicated mysteries: he has recreated the world of London in the 1880s; he has supplied rich detail and compelling characters; most important, he has invented Sherlock Holmes, one of modern literature's most enduring characters.

"The Red-Headed League" is one of the earliest Holmes stories. It shows Holmes foiling a bank robbery attempted by a master criminal. The affair is brought to Holmes' attention by a pawnbroker, upset at having lost his job with a group called the Red-Headed League of copying the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Holmes is rightly suspicious, and after doing a bit of investigating, figures out when and where a robbery will take place. He then arrives at the scene first, accompanied by an agent from Scotland Yard, to arrest the criminals.

Michael Atkinson sees in this story "a symbolic commentary on the nature of plot itself'; it shows the reader how the plot of the story can be used to get underneath the plot to show deeper connections between characters and action. This is highlighted by Holmes' movements and thoughts mirroring the physical action of the story. As Holmes physically moves from Baker Street to Saxe-Coburg Square to the concert hall and back to Baker Street again, his mental process proceeds from logical guess to confirmation, reflection, and finally, to the formulation of a plan. The aptly named John Clay is the anti-Holmes. His scarred forehead, symbolizing "reason disfigured," provides a contrast to Holmes, whose reason is straight and sure. Clay insists on his nobility while Holmes

brushes aside any idea of nobility as playing a part in his foiling of the crime. The two men even react to their knowledge of each other in a similar fashion. When he recognizes the description of Clay, "Holmes sat up in his chair in considerable excitement" but then lapsed into his usual calm demeanor; Clay exclaims "Great Scott!" when he sees Holmes but then composes himself "with the utmost coolness." According to Atkinson, these correspondences serve to show "an abyss which is always in the neighborhood of a Holmes story, the chasm which separates thought from moral feeling here, the terrible gulf between the powers of reason and the health of the soul."

Other readers appoint themselves critics in enumerating the inconsistencies and the flawed logic of the plot. Vernon Goslin actually copied pages out of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in order to make the discovery that "Wilson had just achieved the incredible feat of writing, with a quill pen, *over one million words in longhand,* in precisely 224 hours!" Other issues abound. Where did the criminals put the dirt they dug out of the ground to make the tunnel? If Wilson applied for the job in late April, "0]ust two months ago," how could the League have closed its doors in mid-October? More irking, perhaps, is the fact that Holmes and Clay are clearly acquainted, for Holmes "had one or two little scores of [his] own fo settle with Mr. Clay." Clay, aka Vincent Spaulding, therefore, must have recognized Holmes at the pawnshop—why then did this criminal "at the head of his profession" and, according to Holmes' estimation, "the fourth smartest man in London," continue with the plan that could only deliver him into the hands of the arch sleuth? For other readers of "The Red-Headed League," the story is best appreciated through the sheer enjoyment of the reading. As with other Holmes' stories, the humor, plot-enriching details, and characters are certainly enough to make the story successful.

Humor is perhaps the most apparent aspect of the story. The very plot itself centers around comedy. Jabez Wilson seems not to understand the incongruity of the tale he relates, though his narrative abounds with ludicrous details: Spaulding's unprefaced declaration that "I wish to the Lord, Mr. Wilson, that I was a red-headed man "; Wilson's description of the London street as men came out in answer to the advertisement —"From north, south, east, and west every man who had a shade of red in his hair had tramped into the city.. .Fleet Street was choked with red-headed folk, and Pope's Court looked like a coster's orange barrow"; the criminals' insistence that Wilson provide his own pen and paper, all while paying him the generous-for-the-time sum of four pounds a week to copy the encyclopedia; and, of course, the image of Wilson himself, laboring over his longhand and hoping to "get on to the B's before very long," who never realizes that such a foolish task must be a ruse to get him out of his shop. Surely one can overlook a few inaccurate dates for the sake of such an imaginative tale.

The details of character and those of the London surroundings work in conjunction with the unraveling and meaning of the plot. Very little in "The Red-Headed League" is superfluous—everything has significance. Names play an important role. John Clay is so named because he travels underneath the earth. Perhaps less apparent is the implication of the name of Jabez Wilson, though certainly many readers may note its uniqueness. The name *Jabez,* however, belonged to a Biblical scribe who belonged to the tribe of Judah. Compare tfiese two men then, one who recorded the words of an

important tribe in the development of the Judeo-Christian religion, the other who blindly records the dry words of an encyclopedia. On the other hand, Merry weather's name does not have such strong implications but simply provides another spot of humor; he is "sad-faced" and "solemn," speaks "gloomily" and bemoans that he is missing his bridge game to save his bank. The descriptions of London, too, highlight the unraveling of the plot Holmes and Watson, along their journey through the maze of lies, "rattled through an endless labyrinth of gas-lit streets until [they] emerged into Farrington Street." "We are close there," Holmes then says, "there" being the physical destination as well as the solution to the puzzle.

Much has been said about the characters, Sherlock Holmes and Dr. John Watson, as an integral part of Doyle's success. Indeed, the two men work off each other, but in a complementary fashion as opposed to the adversarial relationship between Holmes and Clay. Watson, although a bright man and a medical doctor, plays the slow-witted counterpart to Holmes' quick deductive reasoning. When presented with the same clues, Watson never sees things through Holmes' eyes. Indeed in "The Red-Headed League" Watson "thought over it all, from the extraordinary story of the red-headed copier of the Encyclopedia down to the visit to Saxe-Coburg Square," yet has no inkling as to what the details he has observed and heard mean; "I tried to puzzle it out," Watson says, "but gave up in despair." The reader, on the other hand, can put together at least a shadow plot of the mystery. That Wilson's shop abuts a bank is a clear indicator. When Holmes explains the solving of the crime to Watson, it is clear that Watson—and the reader—has been privy to almost all the same information as the detective. Exceptions include what Holmes saw on Spaulding's trousers (they were "worn, wrinkled, and stained") and what he determined from tapping the pavement with his walking stick (the cellar extended underneath the building to the rear). Holmes certainly is pnvy to greater knowledge about European criminals and their tendencies, yet it is not necessary to know that one "John Clay, the murderer, thief, smasher, and forger" seeks to rob the City bank to know that the bank will be robbed.

Some critics find that the Holmes character is presented to the reader as a nearly perfect crime solver. Others, however, find that much of the appeal in Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories lies in the reader's being allowed to practice his or her own deductive powers along with Holmes. These two ideas are not contrary. All readers can reason out some of the mysteries as does Holmes. But Holmes is far different from the average reader of his cases. Not all readers have Holmes' keen perceptive ability or his firsthand knowledge of the criminal. Most importantly, readers do not share Holmes' ennui, a boredom with life so great that he is driven to solve crimes in "one long effort to escape from the commonplaces of existence." Doyle has said, "Sherlock is utterly inhuman, no heart, but with a beautiful logical intellect." Truly, Holmes does not interact with the world around him except to step in, briefly, and make it right again. Chances are that the reader does not share these commonalties with Holmes. Thus the stories about this singular character's exploits provide a bit of adventure and challenge in the reader's own existence.

Source: Rena Korb, for *Short Stones for Students*, Gale Research, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Atkinson discusses "The Red-Headed League" as a supreme example of the nature of plot, in which a "sequence of events" becomes "a structure of revelation."

Most Sherlock Holmes stories begin with someone coming to visit the famous detective. The master sleuth listens judiciously as the hapless visitor spells out the details of his story, a confusing sequence of events uninformed by a clear meaning, a chain of mysterious occurrences of which the visitor feels himself somehow to be the victim, and thus now turns to the renowned intellect in the hope he can illuminate the puzzle—in short, the kind of encounter familiar to any English teacher who has ever held office hours the day before a major essay came due.

But this moment in which a relationship between fact and meaning, event and pattern, occurrence and revelation is about to be created has higher purposes than the elucidation of the archetypal roots of the essay conference. In particular, Sherlock Holmes stories can help us explain to our students the difference between a plot and a story—a distinction that is crucial to understanding the process of fiction itself. In the Introduction to Literary Study course taught to prepare majors for the further serious study of literature, I use "The Red Headed League" (conveniently included in Lynn Altenbernd's standard Anthology) to introduce and demonstrate the process by which a story (a sequence of events) becomes plot (a structure of revelation)—not only because this tale embodies this concept of plot paradigmatically, as many Holmes stories do, but because among these stories "The Red-Headed League" is so clearly *a symbolic commentary on the nature of plot itself*. Students love it, and learn, in a way they like to remember, an understanding of plot which, if not elementary, is at least fundamental.

The story itself is easy to summarize. Watson stumbles in on Holmes who is listening to the tale of Jabez Wilson, a red-headed pawnbroker who, two months before, had been alerted to the existence of the Red-Headed League by his assistant, one Vincent Spaulding, a man so eager to learn the pawnbroker's trade that he had hired on for half wages, his only personal quirk being a penchant for photography which frequently took him to the basement where he developed things. Spaulding showed Wilson an advertisement offering a sinecure to the right redheaded man, even guided him to the Leagued office, where Wilson was selected from a horde of carrot-tops, for the singular duty of copying the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* daily from ten to two for four pounds a week. This he proceeded to do for eight weeks, only to arrive at the office one day to find a notice proclaiming the dissolution of the League. Unable to trace his former red-headed patron (one "William Morris," under whose tutelage he has copied out articles on Abbots, Armour, Archery, Architecture, and Attica!), and too disturbed to take the advice of his assistant to wait and see what developed, the porcine Jabez Wilson, ruing the loss of his extra income, has come to consult Holmes.

Holmes starts involuntarily at the description of Wilson's assistant, a small, stout man with a white splash of acid on his forehead, and satisfies himself and us that he knows

the man when Wilson confirms Holmes' guess that Spaulding's ears are pierced. Holmes dismisses Wilson for the duration (the man is so thick Doyle puts him to sleep during the climactic action) and what began as the pawnbroker's story becomes the detective's. Holmes predicts this will be a three-pipe problem; but before retiring to smoke it out, he invites Watson to join him for an afternoon concert later in the day. On their way to the hall, the pair stop off in Saxe-Coburg Square, and as they stand before Wilson's shop, Holmes thumps the pavement with his walking stick, then knocks on the door and feigns to inquire directions of the assistant, his actual purpose being a surreptitious glance at the man's knees. Then Holmes and Watson go around to "explore the parts which lie behind" the shabby-genteel square and observe, among the sequence of buildings along the busy thoroughfare, a bank. Once at the concert, Holmes ponders mightily while Watson reflects upon his friend's genius, sure (and assuring the reader) that it is at work. The concert over, they agree to meet at ten; Watson is to pack a revolver against potential danger—and for heightened suspense.

At ten, Watson reaches Baker Street to find Holmes with the fundamentally stupid but tenacious Inspector Jones and a phlegmatic Mr. Merryweather, who sporadically whines about missing his rubber of bridge for this caper (he is chairman of the bank whose back abuts the pawnshop). Holmes' announced mission is to deliver into Jones' hands one nefarious criminal, John Clay (a.k.a. Vincent Spaulding) and to keep in the hands of Merryweather some 30,000 napoleons of French gold. The foursome proceed to the cellar of the bank where Merryweather proclaims the soundness of the vault, for emphasis tapping its floor with his cane. The floor rings as hollow as his boast, and confirmed in the knowledge the bank's security is undermined, the four shut the lantern and sit down in the dark to await the arrival of the felons. In just over an hour's time, John Clay chips his way through the floor to carry out the theft and is apprehended by Holmes. Clay's companion flees to the tunnel's other end and into the arms of the law. Holmes and Clay swap compliments about the crime and the capture respectively. But as Jones handcuffs him, Clay disdainfully insists on being addressed as nobility, a whim Jones indulges as he leads him off to jail. Accepting Merryweather's thanks, Holmes confesses he had old scores to settle with Clay, and is glad too to have heard the story of the Red-Headed League.

To Watson, Holmes explains what was obvious to him from the first—that the League was a ruse to clear Wilson from his shop and that the assistant who worked for half wages was behind it. His frequent visits to the cellar meant tunneling, confirmed by the worn knees on his trousers, and the solid tap on the sidewalk in front of the shop meant the cellar tunnel went behind it, confirmed by the presence of the bank on the thoroughfare. When the tunnel was fully opened, the League was closed, and the robbery promised to take place on Saturday night, leaving all Sunday for undetected escape. Hence Holmes could know the crime, the place, the time. Watson praises Holmes' virtue as benefactor to mankind, but Holmes graciously avers it was but an escape from ennui for him—as it has certainly been for us.

What a fiction like this can highlight for students of literature is the conversion of story into significance. Perhaps the first point to be made about any plot—of a tale by Borges, a novel by Dickens, a play by Shakespeare, or a legend set down by Ovid—is that as

the action unfolds, the meaning of each action changes. Insignificant actions become significant in light of later revelations, one person's story becomes another's, the casual becomes the causal, the immoral becomes the principled, the irrational is revealed to be reason itself. In the tale of ratiocination, this element of retrospective re-patterning is especially pronounced, because the characters (not just the readers) are engaged in the process. Events become clues, and clues solve the mystery, explaining the puzzle of events we began with. This retrospective patterning is what turns a story (sequence of events) into a plot (generator of meaning, structure of revelation).

In the typical Holmes story, this process is formalized by splitting the narrative into three stages, the narration of each stage governed by a different character (though all are filtered through Watson). The first stage is the truly puzzling relation of events by the perplexed client (Wilson's inability to connect fact to meaning is symbolized by his being given an encyclopaedia to copy); Holmes' actions— responses to the facts and simultaneously investigations of them—narrated by Watson, who misses most of the clues we pick up, comprise the second stage (here meaning is not absent or present, but palpably potential); and, of course, the third stage is the final full revelation of meaning by Holmes. At each stage, there is an increase of significance, which is why our marks in the margins of this or any other story get denser as the tale goes on Beneath this sequence of events is another, invisible to us for the most part, but reflected in the events we witness and powerfully affecting our interest in those events. As Holmes moves from Baker Street to Saxe-Coburg Square to the concert hall and back, he also moves from educated guess, to confirmation, reflection, and articulation of a plan (in the twin sense of diagram and directive). His movement is the quickening movement of meaning itself in the narrative.

The second point to be made about the emergence of event into meaning is that in art as in life all meaning emerges tiirough correspondence. A scientific theory is meaningful when the several terms of its mathematical formulae prove adequate metaphors for the observed data. A proverb has meaning for us when its "if and "then" correspond to and illuminate the perceived sequences of our acts and feelings. A story gains meaning as we perceive its life corresponding metaphorically to our own—but also as we perceive one part corresponding to another, internally. Daisy's green dock light, her green cards for kisses, Gatsby's car's green upholstery, and the fresh green breast of the new world; Huck's faked death and new way of living on the river; the blinding of Gloucester, the blindness of Lear; Holden's feelings for sister, for nuns, for a young prostitute; Robin Molineaux's response to this man, to that man, to his kinsman in the cart. Meaning emerges through correspondence.

So we move from the fact that Holmes' theories correspond to and thus explain the strange facts of the case, to a deeper level of correspondence. "The Red-Headed League" is typical of Holmes stories and typical of fiction in general because such correspondences abound. But it is unusual in that the correspondences not only are fictional—giving us the sense of something made—but are also symbolic of fiction, plot making and plot realization.

Probably the most noticeable correspondence in the story is the one between the taps of Holmes' stick on the pavement and the tap of Merry weather's cane on the vault floor. It takes no Hermes Tnsmegistus to see that with the echo of this second tap resonating with the first we have dramatically been admitted to the realm of "as above, so below." Suddenly we have been given access to Holmes' thoughts, which have been running silently beneath the events all along, like an underground stream ready to burst up in a spring—or, to put a very fine point on it, like a tunnel connecting two buildings, structures, which face in different directions but have secret connections, like the structure of events in Wilson's tale and the peripatetics of Holmes— both his strolling and explaining.

And this leads us straight to the symbolic plot, for what goes on in "The Red-Headed League" is not just what goes on behind the facade—here the facades of the pawnshop and bank as well as the duplicitous fac. ade of the League. A plot is an action, but as we know from county and cemetery maps, it is also a piece of ground. And this is a tale about providing (constructing) a mental plat-map (that is, a plot map, a land diagram) to survey the shape of things beneath the Square. The story points to the truth behind this and all stories; the plot is there so that we can find out what goes on beneath the plot. Like Holmes, good readers infer the existence of secret tunnels which link the trivial to the treasured, pawnshops to banks, enabling us to pull off "raids on the inarticulate." And to do so we must go down into the basement to see what develops—or (at the other end of the tunnel) be willing to sit "in the dark" for a spell and wait for meaning and confirmation to burst through intuitively before we can apprehend and illuminate it.

Of course, other correspondences at both ends of the tunnel connect Holmes to the Clay he finds under the earth. For beneath this plot do we not find a radical correspondence?—the common Clay, his forehead symbolically scarred, reflecting reason disfigured, yet insisting on his nobility; while Holmes' lofty brow remains unwrinkled as he insists on the absence of noble motives, claiming to have solved the crime to settle an old score and drive off ennui (a point Doyle underscores by making all those who benefit from Holmes' action either ridiculous or repellent). No wonder Holmes is content to put his hands on the Clay that worked beneath his feet and has no inclination to curse or mock him. And except for Clay's being startled, which corresponds with Holmes' jumping when he recognizes Clay's description, Clay is as cool as Holmes. The two men even exchange compliments, a tacit acknowledgement of their complementary natures.

The face-to-face meeting between Holmes and Clay opens beneath us an abyss which is always in the neighborhood of a Holmes story, the chasm which separates thought from moral feeling here, the terrible gulf between the powers of reason and the health of the soul—linked only by quirk and chance in Holmes' alignment with, rather than against, humane sentiments and their encodement into law.

Using plot to get beneath plot is always a sobering as well as a delightful experience, one which makes us more reserved in our judgments as it increases the catholicity of our appreciation. A study of a Sherlock Holmes story such as "The Red-Headed League" can lead to some absolutely fundamental insights about plot—and it can also

help us understand that such a tale of ratiocination lies beneath literature, not in being inferior or a subspecies, but in being a root, a radical paradigm for fiction, as charm and riddle are for poetry.

Source: Michael Atkinson, "Sherlock Holmes and 'The Red-Headed League': A Symbolic Paradigm for the Teaching of Plot," in *College Literature*, Vol. VII, No. 2, Spring, 1980, pp. 153-57.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Iseminger explains how the character of Sherlock Holmes epitomizes the British Victorian man in terms of attitude, behavior, and beliefs.

The typical nineteenth-century Englishman of the upper or middle classes considered himself a citizen of the greatest nation in the world. The foremost beneficiary of the industrial revolution, he shared with Lord Macaulay an unshakable belief in progress and took material prosperity in stride. He took it for granted that enterprise and invention would produce more and more convenience and abundance. He was a Thomas Gradgrind, a man of realities, a man of facts and calculations. He may have been aware of his rights under the constitution, but he emphasized more the duty of which Charles Kingsley wrote in his famous novel Westward Ho!. He taught by example and did not sympathize with the Robert Owenses who believed they could engineer a positive change in human behaviour. Victorian to his fingertips, this typical Englishman may have been vigorously disliked around the world, but he set the moral tone for the age and in many ways was the most successful and the most representative being in the nineteenth century.

Victorians believed firmly in the doctrine of *laissez-faire*, which in its most naked form allowed the utmost of competition and individualism. The classical school of economics was seemingly in the interests of the businessman, but the best interests of all society would be served when each individual sought his own interests. What was good for business was good for Britain, and businessmen were accorded status and respectability in a society whose greatest rewards and honours had traditionally been bestowed upon military figures, statesmen, and members of the nobility. By competing with their fellows and producing ever-greater profits, entrepreneurs were serving and benefiting all of society....

The English historian David Thomson once wrote that it was perhaps natural that an England as prosperous and proud as she was at the mid-point of the nineteenth century would find a suitable historian to reinterpret English history. Lord Macaulay was that historian. Inevitably a figure would be found who typified the character traits associated with Victorianism. That man was Sherlock Holmes, the world's first consulting detective. Englishmen needed someone who could unravel the mysteries of a hostile world and ensure a highly personal justice. This person could function in a mechanistic universe whose rules for operation could be laid bare by a logical mind. For every confusing effect this person could supply the logical cause. The reading public turned eagerly to Dr. Watson's accounts of the great detective's adventures.

The stones often opened in much the same way, and the introductions provide the first insight into the Victorianism manifested in the adventures. Holmes was usually in his sitting room waiting for business to come to him, the dream of the aggressive Victorian entrepreneur who had to seek out his customers and create his own business opportunities. Holmes was often performing chemical experiments, which was typical of the mechanistic Victorian approach to the riddle of the universe. There was a pull on the

bell and the sound of someone mounting the seventeen steps of the stairs. The prospective client was shown in, often by the long-suffering but properly deferential housekeeper. Mrs. Hudson knew her place in society and did not presume to rise above it. Holmes thereupon proceeded to unsettle the client with what observation and deduction revealed about that client's background and profession. Then the client unburdened himself of his problem and Holmes set to work.

The great detective's Baker Street address provides another insight into the Victorianism depicted in the adventures. Baker Street was more *bon-ton* in the nineteenth century than it is today. It was on the outskirts of London proper, boasted a railway station leading to the suburbs, and was in close proximity to the London Zoo and to Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum. The famous 221B was also close enough to the theatrical and business centres of London and to the museums, universities, and hospitals to be quite convenient. Yet Baker Street was sufficiently far removed for an inhabitant, if he wished, to consider himself "in" London without being "of London.

But Holmes's London never got mixed up with the real London. Victorians did not question society and averted their eyes from what they did not wish to see. In the great detective's day a third of the British people were housed in wretched slums, and were undernourished and underpaid. Very few of this third of the population figured in the stones. The humanitarian work of William Ewart Gladstone and the Earl of Shaftesbury document that there were large numbers of prostitutes in the nation's capital, but Holmes's female clients were respectable women—gainfully employed or dutifully married. Holmes and Watson were abroad on London's streets and alleys in all seasons and at all hours. Never once were they accosted by a woman of the night....

Victorian society was male-dominated and -oriented and Holmes did not question this arrangement. Nearly all his cases centered upon a male figure. With rare exceptions, women were not credited with having been endowed with intuitive powers or possessing any shrewdness. Women needed to be protected. Holmes declared that if Violet Hunter were his sister, he would never have allowed her to take the position of governess at the Copper Beeches. The women in Holmes's cases were quite often shallow, dominated, retiring, and emotional. Victorian wives were expected to be subordinate, unassuming, uncomplaining, and useful. So much was this accepted behaviour that Holmes deduced from examining Henry Baker's hat (in "Blue Carbuncle ") that Baker's wife no longer loved him: the hat had not been brushed for weeks. Holmes's advice to Watson on women in ["*The Sign of Four*"] reflected a generally held Victorian attitude. Said the misogynous Holmes, "I would not tell them too much, women are never to be entirely trusted—not the best of them."

An emphasis on science was another dominant characteristic of Victorian society and Holmes was a scientist, a scientist of crime. Like his colleagues in the laboratory, he was willing to risk his life in the service of his calling but he took no chances and was careful to an extreme. In "A Case of Identity" he scrutinised two typewritten notes with his ever-present glass and concluded from his comparison that they had been typed on the same machine and by the same person. He examined dust and minute soil particles found at the sites of crimes to establish the identity and home territory of criminals.

Readers learned in "Boscombe Valley" that Holmes could identify 140 types of tobacco ash. Also like his fellow scientists, Holmes wrote papers summarizing his studies and experiments. He composed monographs on cyphers, on perfumes, and on the influence of a trade upon the form of the hand. He had two short monographs on what could be learned from the distinctive features of the human ear....

Holding himself above the ordinary in typical Victorian fashion, Holmes often did not deign to discuss money matters, such as fees for his services. Even he on occasion showed his susceptibility, however. When what later proved to be a royal client drew up to the kerb at 221B in ["A Scandal in Bohemia"], Holmes (as he so often did) speculated on the visitor's profession and purpose while observing him from the window. After appraising the fine carriage and magnificent team of horses, he gave a whistle of amazement and to Watson exclaimed in what could only have been gleeful anticipation, "A nice little brougham and a pair of beauties. A hundred and fifty guineas apiece. There's money in this case, Watson, if there is nothing else." Nineteenth-century aesthetes may have believed in art for art's sake, but Holmes, like his fellow Victorians, preferred material rewards. They knew and respected the power of money.

For all their unseemly devotion to mammon, Victorians found room in their hearts for yet another object of worship. Many revered Queen Victoria, and Sherlock Holmes was among them. No matter how preoccupied he was with his chemical analyses or with his investigations, he left everything to serve the crown. "The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans" drew him away from work on the polyphonic motets of Lassus. In this celebrated case Holmes performed a valuable service for his country by recovering plans for the highly secret Bruce-Partington submarine, an invention that would completely alter naval warfare. But Holmes brushed aside his brother Mycroft's suggestion that if he liked his name could be on the next Honours List. Holmes insisted that he played the game for the game's own sake. At the successful conclusion of the case, however, he spent a memorable day at Windsor and returned with a remarkably fine emerald tie pin. When asked by Watson whether he had purchased it, Holmes replied that it was a gift from a certain gracious lady in whose interests he had been able to carry out a small commission.

Holmes also shared the Victorians' views on law and lawbreakers. There was certainty here. Crime was crime and criminals were criminals. Victorians did not question society, nor did Holmes. He did not believe that environment, social conditions, or disadvantage motivated a person to commit crimes. Nor were crimes committed out of passion; the murder in "*A Study in Scarlet*" was one exception. Crimes were carefully planned by men with motives. Victorians held every man responsible for his actions, and Holmes was certain that a man became a criminal of his own volition. Charles Augustus Milverton the blackmailer and Professor Moriarty, the Napoleon of crime, were the best examples. Both men came from respectable backgrounds, both were afforded every opportunity and both possessed outstanding abilities. Yet both opted for a life of crime....

Holmes had only one serious vice, but it was fittingly and excusably aristocratic. He was addicted at least for a time to cocaine—to the famous seven-per-cent solution. He was not addicted to the alcohol of the ordinary man nor to the opium of the decadent wastrel.

Only cocaine would suffice to drive away the ordinariness of life and allow the free play of his great intelligence.

The usually impeccable Holmes committed at least one sin, an unpardonable breach of decency and good manners. Victorians often treated the love affairs of their domestic servants as something comic, as matters not to be taken seriously. And in "Charles Augustus Milverton" Holmes displayed an unattractive side of his Victorian character by trifling with the affections of Agatha, a maid in the blackmailer's household. Needing to secure information and to familiarise himself with the interior of the house, the great detective posed as a plumber, paid court to Agatha, and proposed marriage....

Like many Victorians, Holmes accepted without question that he was extraordinary. His great mind, unexcelled abilities, and position as the world's greatest detective allowed him prerogatives denied to others, and placed him, when circumstances warranted, above the law. He burgled Charles Augustus Milverton's house and emptied the blackmailer's files of incriminating material, into the fire. Holmes told Watson that the action was morally justifiable because there were some crimes which the law could not deal with and which therefore allowed private revenge. In ["Five Orange Pips"] Holmes bluntly informed Watson that he would be his own police, and he often dispensed justice himself, unhindered by legal considerations. He allowed Ryder to go free in ["Blue Carbuncle"] and advised the king of Bohemia to steal, lie, and commit perjury in order to spare himself from being blackmailed. When Watson suggested obtaining a search warrant in ["The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans"], the impatient Holmes insisted that one should not stick at trifles. "Think of Mycroft's note," he said, "of the Admiralty, the Cabinet, the exalted person who awaits the news." Thus convinced, Watson aided Holmes in rifling the house of Mr. Hugo Oberstein to find matenals with which to incriminate him. Like the nation in which he lived, Holmes was responsible only to himself.

As vehicles to convey accurate historical information, Holmes's adventures as reported have some limitations, but they provide an insight into Victoriamsm. The insight is the more valuable because it is presented unpretentiously and unconsciously. Conan Doyle's observations on Victorian society were candid and unassuming. He presented underlying social assumptions, unexamined attitudes, and unguarded comments. In the great detective's cases, the Victorians can be observed without their being aware that they are being observed. They appear at their best and at their worst, naturally and unembarrassed. And the archetypical Victorian Sherlock Holmes wears his Victorianism as comfortably and as unaffectedly as he wears his familiar mouse-coloured dressing gown.

Source: Gordon L Iseminger, "Sherlock Holmes- Victorian Archetype," in The *Baker Street Journal* Vol 29, No. 3, September, 1979, pp 156-66.

Adaptations

A silent, black and white version of "The Red-Headed League" was filmed in 1921 for a series, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. This version was produced in Britain by Stoll Picture Productions and stars Eille Norwood as Holmes and Hubert Willis as Watson.

"The Red-Headed League" was adapted in 1954 for a British television series of Sherlock Holmes's cases, starring Ronald Howard as Holmes. It appears on videotape along with the story "The Deadly Prophecy" from Nostalgia Family Video.

With Jeremy Brett as Holmes, "The Red-Headed League" appeared in the 1985 PBS series, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (second series). This adaptation was produced in Britain by Granada Television.

Topics for Further Study

Investigate psychological theories current in the late nineteenth century, and examine ways that Doyle makes use of these theories within his story. You may want to focus on a specific branch of psychology, a related field such as criminology, or the theories of one particular psychologist.

Research German composers whose music was frequently performed near the end of the nineteenth century. Use this information to speculate on the further knowledge of Sherlock Holmes's character provided by the story's reference to his musical tastes. You might also consider Italian and French music of the same time period, which Holmes dislikes. What does this contrast in Holmes's musical interests reveal about him?

Examine cultural factors in turn-of-the-century America that could account for the popularity of the Sherlock Holmes stories. You could locate specific developments in American society comparable to the British ones mentioned in this entry. Conversely, you might investigate unique characteristics of American life, thought, or tastes during this time period that would make Doyle's stories appealing to Americans for reasons that differ from those of British readers.

Research the principles of logic known as induction and deduction. Distinguish between them, and identify the elements of each demonstrated by Sherlock Holmes's reasoning in "The Red-Headed League." You might wish to judge which principle predominates in Holmes's thinking, or which most aids Holmes in solving the mystery.

Compare and Contrast

1890s: A middle-class gentleman could support his family, including several servants, on an annual income of 500 pounds. The maximum pay for a police constable was just under 2 pounds a week.

Today: The average annual household income in the United Kingdom in the early 1990s was 15,800 pounds, or approximately $25,900 in U.S. dollars.

1890: The world's first electrically operated underground subway system opens in London.

Today: Over 270 miles of electrically powered subway lines—the second-longest system in the world behind New York's—snake beneath the London metropolitan area.

1890s: The ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, its 24 volumes appearing between 1875 and 1889, runs to a total of 21,572 pages.

Today: With its 32 volumes and 31,729 pages, the fifteenth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* was completed in 1991.

The Police

Even though a British police force had been established in 1829, the institution was not held in universal high esteem. Early police had often been seen as paid spies, and cases of bribery, corruption, and incompetence made the public skeptical of police honesty and expertise. Due in part to low wages, the police were often drawn from the lowest ranks of society, leading many people who considered themselves socially superior to question their authority and skill. Doyle's portrayal of police agent Jones and Holmes's attitude toward him repeat these stereotypes. In other Sherlock Holmes stories, too, the police are depicted as earnest in their desire to promote justice but unable to accomplish this without Holmes's aid.

Class and Urbanization in British Society

Changes in class structure and living conditions of British society are also reflected in Doyle's stories. London became a world center of industry and commerce during the nineteenth century, its population rising from approximately 850,000 in 1810 to almost 5 million by the end of the century.

Many were drawn to the city by dreams of financial success. In this environment of progress, skill and intelligence became keys to social advancement and prosperity, rather than the prominence of one's family. Sherlock Holmes represents this new ideal of the gentleman, someone who achieves distinction and respect through his own merit and talents.

The average British citizen also began to question why the upper class should be considered naturally superior. On numerous occasions, members of the British aristocracy, even of the royal family, had been involved in well-publicized sexual, marital, and economic scandals. Such behavior was little in keeping with the moral standards the middle class was proud to uphold. John Clay in "The Red-Headed League" confirms widespread suspicions of aristocratic corruption. He has turned to crime when his background and education would have opened the doors of more honorable professions to him. His pride in his social rank appears ridiculous, since he has given up all claims to true respectability.

Scientific Advances

The middle and late decades of the nineteenth century also represented an explosion in scientific thought. This flowering of the sciences came in the wake of Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection, announced in his 1859 The Origin of and 1871 *The Descent of Man*. Darwin had proposed that each element of the natural world was not only part of an ongoing and orderly process of evolution but also carried physical signs of these evolutionary stages. His concept, and later theories indebted to it, led to increasing belief that all phenomenon could be explained using the skills of observation and reasoning. Sherlock Holmes is seen by many critics as an embodiment of this new faith in scientific reasoning as a way of giving order and meaning to the world.

But because science also threatened previous systems of belief, especially deeply held religious beliefs, Sherlock Holmes also presents a reassuring example of the usefulness of the scientist to society. Even though Holmes spends much of his time amassing information that might seem little more than academic or even humorous to the average reader—such as the study of tattoo marks mentioned in "The Red-Headed League"—the same methods of thinking that promote these academic studies prove vital to achieving the goals of justice and social order.

Just as advances in scientific thought spread worldwide, the social changes and attitudes discussed above were not unique to England. Growing literacy, urbanization, changes in class structure, and the questioning of police authority and competence typical of British society had especially strong parallels in American culture. This might explain why Sherlock Holmes quickly became as familiar and appealing to American readers as to those in the country where his adventures were first published.

What Do I Read Next?

"The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Purloined Letter," and "The Mystery of Marie Roget" are Edgar Allan Poe's pioneering detective stories. Poe's Dupin character and the unnamed friend who narrates the stones present parallels to Holmes and Watson.

Dr. Jekyll and Mr, Hyde, the 1886 novel by Robert Louis Stevenson, is, like Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, concerned with human psychology and the role of science in society.

Oscar Wilde's controversial 1891 novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, is often seen as the bible of the late-Victorian aesthetic and decadent philosophy.

Bram Stoker's 1897 *Dracula*, although concerned more with supernatural rather than rational phenomena, portrays in its characters' hunt for the vampire Dracula detective work that rivals Holmes's own.

The Hound of the Baskervilles, Doyle's short Holmes novel published in 1902, in which Holmes, with the help of the devoted Watson, investigates an unexplained death, a family curse, and a ghostly dog on the moors surrounding ancient Baskerville Hall.

The Maltese Falcon by Dashiell Hammett introduced readers to the hard-boiled, rough-edged detective Sam Spade.

Further Study

Barolsky, Paul. "The Case of the Domesticated Aesthete," in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Vol. 60, no. 3, Summer, 1984, pp. 438-52.

Gives examples from Doyle's stories to demonstrate Holmes's artistic interests.

Clausen, Christopher. "Sherlock Holmes, Order, and the Late-Victorian Mind," in *Georgia Review*, Vol. 38, no. 1, Spring, 1984, pp 104-23.

Early portions of this article discuss the relationship between Sherlock Holmes and nmeteenth-century interests in science and rationality. Clausen argues that Doyle prizes social order above all other values and that his later stones are less interesting than the earlier ones.

Hoffman, Banesh, "Red Faces and 'The Red-Headed League," in *Beyond Baker Street*, edited by Michael Harrison, Bobbs-Merall, 1976, pp. 175-85.

This essay examines some deliberate lies told by Holmes while solving the mystery, reasons why Clay continues with his plot after being exposed to Holmes, and puts forth a mathematical solution to the issue of where the criminals put the dirt from the tunnel

Moorman, Charles, "The Appeal of Sherlock Holmes," in *The Southern Quarterly*, Vol. 14,1976, pp. 71-82. Through an examination of several different Holmes works, Moorman explicates the detective's wide appeal

Orel, Harold, introduction to *Critical Essays on Sir Arthur Conan Doyle*, G. K. Hall, 1992, pp. 1-24.

The introduction provides a broad overview to the work of Doyle and its reception by the reading public

Ousby, Ian *The Bloodhounds of Heaven- The Detective in English Fiction from Godwin to Doyle*, Harvard University Press, 1976.

Ousby explores the social factors that influenced the development of the fictional detective, focusing especially on the growth of police forces and public attitudes toward them.

Scholefield, C. E, "Red-Headed Clients' Conundrums," in *Sherlock Holmes Journal*, Vol. 10, no. 3, Winter, 1971, pp 74-76.

Scholefield raises several of the seeming flaws of logic and unexplained details in "The Red-Headed League" and poses some answers

Wertheim, Mary, "Sherlock Holmes: The Detective as Hero," in *Columbia Library Columns*, Vol. 35, no. 2, February, 1986, pp. 12-24.

Wertheim discusses both Holmes and Watson in their roles as detectives and with regard to each other

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Payne, William Morton. "*Recent English and Canadian Fiction: The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*," in *The Dial*, Vol. 13, no. 154, November 16,1892, p. 311.

Review of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, in *The Athenaeum*, November 5,1892, p. 626.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale'sFor Students Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on classic novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of classic novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members educational professionals helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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