

WORLDVIEW GUIDE

SHERLOCK HOLMES'S GREATEST CASES



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CONTENTS

Introduction	I
The World Around	3
About the Author	5
What Other Notables Said	11
Setting, Characters, and Plot Summary	15
Worldview Analysis	21
Quotables & Questions and Answers	31
Appendix: In Case of Fire ... Or When In Need of an Incendiary	47
Further Discussion and Review	57
Taking the Classics Quiz	61



INTRODUCTION

Imagine tracking down a criminal mastermind in London or Chicago—doing so by your wits, recognizing the tiny clues others overlooked to lead you faultlessly to the truth. Brilliant, intelligent, and artful adventure; fast-paced and mysterious, with a tinge of the Gothic macabre: here is a recipe for hours of delightful distraction. From the printed page to the movie stage, it may well be that no fictional characters in modern history have so captivated the public imagination in suspense and reading pleasure as Sherlock Holmes and John Watson. Reader, now it's your turn; “the game is afoot!”



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sir Arthur Ignatius Conan Doyle (1859–1930) was the son of Charles and Mary Doyle, and though they lived in Edinburgh, Scotland, the family was of Irish Catholic descent. Arthur's uncles raised funds for Doyle to receive a Jesuit classical education. The family boasted many artistic gifts: his father illustrated and painted, and his mother wove masterful stories, inspiring young Arthur's mind with family lore, chivalrous adventure, and heraldry. Unfortunately, father Charles struggled with drunkenness and depression, increasingly wasting his small income. He spent his later years in various asylums, though he did produce illustrations for his son's first Sherlock Holmes novel. Doyle studied under strict Jesuits in London and more liberal Jesuits in Feldkirch, Austria, returning to London in 1876 to study medicine in a more atheistic environment.

He progressed from botany to medicine to surgery, taking multiple degrees, culminating in an MD. The seed of

Doyle's literary success was planted at Edinburgh University. Dr. Joseph Bell, one of Doyle's teachers, routinely deduced the background of a patient by observing physical minutia (fingernail dirt, gait, skin tone, etc.) and pressed his students to emulate him. Dr. Bell's deductive gift is the prototype of Sherlock Holmes's detective method. In order to apply his medical studies and travel, Doyle served as a ship's doctor on a dangerous Greenland whaling journey (1880) as well as a surgeon on a voyage along the West African coast. Roughly 6'2" and 220 lbs, he was well built and loved physical exercise and adventure. He played amateur soccer and cricket (on various teams, one featuring authors P.G. Wodehouse and A.A. Milne), boxed, cycled, skied, raced cars, golfed, played tennis, hot-air ballooned, and generally took up every opportunity for spirited excursion he could find. In this respect, he reminds one a great deal of his contemporary President Theodore Roosevelt. Doyle threw himself into the midst of whatever action was to be had.

So, when did he begin writing? Like many authors, he showed early aptitude, and while at university, Doyle spent any spare money and time reading and composing short stories to sell in local magazines and papers. In 1885, Doyle married Louisa Hawkins, a young lady he met in the course of his medical practice: "No man could have had a more gentle and amiable life's companion."¹ Soon

1. Arthur Conan Doyle, *Memories and Adventures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 71.



WHAT OTHER NOTABLES SAID

“In 1887 *A Study in Scarlet* was flung like a bombshell into the field of detective fiction, to be followed within a few short and brilliant years by the marvellous series of Sherlock Holmes short stories. The effect was electric.” ~Dorothy Sayers⁷

“There can never have been a more honourable man than Conan Doyle.” ~Sir James Barrie⁸

“If we err, therefore, in our liking for detective stories, we err with Plato.” ~John Carter⁹

7. Dorothy Sayers, “Introduction,” in *The Omnibus of Crime* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1961), 38.

8. Adrian Conan Doyle, *The True Conan Doyle* (London: John Murray, 1945), 24.

9. Jacques Barzun and Wendell Taylor, eds., *A Catalogue of Crime* (New York, Harper Row, 1971), epigraph.



SETTING, CHARACTERS, & PLOT SUMMARY

Setting: The epicenter of all things Sherlock is an apartment—221b Baker St., London, the residence of two bachelors, Sherlock Holmes and Dr. John Watson.

Holmes had lived on Montague street and would later retire to Sussex, and Watson would move out when he married, but the heart of nearly every tale is 221b Baker St. as clients visit here to solicit the services of Holmes, and the pair meditate (well, Holmes seems to do most of thinking) their next action toward the solution of a case. The year ranges from the 1870s to early 1900s, depending on what stage of Holmes's career the tale emerges from. Our stories oscillate between the luxury of class, place, and power (where the mysteries often occur, crime scenes are visited, etc.) and the dirty, scrappy streets of London (where Holmes may find necessary information). The bulk of action rarely moves far beyond London, though an odd



WORLDVIEW ANALYSIS

Sherlock Holmes Inspires a Genre and a Branch of Science

We should pause to consider the cultural imprint from our chief fictional character under consideration, Sherlock Holmes. Perhaps the easiest way to introduce the depth of this imprint is to assert that you and Holmes were already intimately acquainted before you perused the character sketches given above. You knew some (or even all) of that character information whether or not you have read any of the tales. The reason is that Sherlock's character has remained in common cultural currency from the first years of his publication to the present; there is no modern fictional character in the west with greater reach and representation than Sherlock Holmes. Aside from the original astronomical sales of the magazine, newsprint, and books, Holmes has dominated the stage and cinema for

generations. Hundreds of movie and stage productions have featured Holmes. Holmes also inspired virtually every detective and CSI production since, from Agatha Christie's Poirot to *Columbo* to *House*.

In fact, Doyle's clever insights into crime, inspired by the deductive methods of his teacher Dr. Bell, led to the creation of modern crime scene investigation (CSI)! That may be the most incredible thing of all, that a fictional character Doyle spun off in his free time should change the way the world viewed criminal investigation. In the late 1800s, criminal investigation was still largely rounding up the usual suspects and forcing a confession (in the absence of eye-witnesses). Police forces had no criminal labs, offices, or space to analyze evidence. Contrast that to the first moment the reader is introduced to a young Sherlock Holmes as a University student: he is testing a chemical that will change color in the presence of blood (this will become modern bloodstain analysis and blood splatter analysis); Holmes will then carry these and other experiments on at 221B Baker St. When Holmes visits the location of a tragedy, he demands that the police refrain from trampling the scene of the crime so that he can analyze shoe prints, finger prints, dropped tobacco ash, anything to link specific individuals to a particular location. Holmes would not only consider the size and shape of the shoe print, but the depth and turn (gait analysis). This dedication to inspection of minutia invokes the symbol ubiquitously attached to him: the magnifying glass.