

A man wearing a grey tweed jacket and a matching cap. Two strips of torn paper are overlaid on the image. The top strip contains the text "WATSON is NOT an IDIOT" and the bottom strip contains "EDDY WEBB".

**WATSON** is **NOT** an **IDIOT**

**E**d **D**y **W**e **B**B

**WATSON IS NOT AN IDIOT**

An Opinionated Tour of the Sherlock Holmes Canon

by  
Eddy Webb

# Publisher Information

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# Dedication

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*To my grandfather, who instilled in me a passion for mysteries.*

*To my mother, who instilled in me a habit of reading.*

*And to my wife, who instilled in me the courage to write.*

I could not have made this book what it is without the incredible help of my editor, Genevieve Podleski, and my beta readers: Maria Cambone, Laura Desnoit, and Kara Swenson. Also, my sincere thanks to Steve Emecz for being a wonderful publisher.

# Introduction

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I've been a Sherlock Holmes fan for most of my life. One of my first "grown-up" books was a wonderful compilation of *Adventures* and *Memoirs* given to me by my grandfather, and I devoured it. I didn't understand all the words (and the ones I did understand caused me to regularly fail spelling tests because I confused American and British spellings through my childhood), but I loved every page. I didn't quite understand why it was important to study the fact that bruises wouldn't form on a corpse or why there were a wide variety of tobaccos that left an equally wide variety of ash. All I knew is that when Holmes admonished Watson for not knowing how many stairs there were leading up to the rooms at 221B Baker Street in "A Scandal in Bohemia," I went right home and made sure to count the number of stairs leading up to my bedroom (thirteen), so that I would be ready whenever that information became important in a murder investigation.

Much like Dr. Watson, my time with the Great Detective has gone through cycles. Sometimes I spent weeks or months in close company with him, while other times it was years between visits. But he was never far from my mind, and recently I've been thinking of him more than ever. Some years ago, the incomparable Ken Hite released a series of essays, critiques, and rants on his Live Journal about each of the H. P. Lovecraft stories, which he entitled *Tour de Lovecraft* (later compiled into a book by Atomic Overmind Press, which is definitely worth checking out if you're into Lovecraft). I mentioned to him in passing at the time that I should probably get around to doing a similar series based on the original Holmes canon. I remember his response being encouraging, but for some reason I don't recall it clearly - perhaps I have blocked the incident from my mind for my own sanity. But since the release of the Guy Ritchie films, the BBC series *Sherlock*, and the CBS series *Elementary*, Sherlock Holmes has had a new revival in popular culture, and I spend more and more time talking with people about the Great Detective, as well as (more often than not) getting into Internet arguments about him.

Sherlock Holmes is one of the most widely-recognized literary characters in the world, and yet many fans haven't actually read the original stories. Most people's perceptions come from vague recollections of Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce, or from when they were forced to read *Hound of the Baskervilles* in school. The popular culture understanding of Holmes and his world is now a mythology: full of wonderful stories that bear only a passing resemblance to the facts. There are very few people who grew up on Holmes like I did, reading the canon first before experiencing the larger world of Sherlock Holmes afterwards. Those who approach Holmes from the other direction need a guide, someone who can take the hand of the reader either diving into the canon for the first time (you lucky bastard) or who hasn't read it in years. These new readers need a guide who can answer questions or point out dangerous bits along the way. More often than not, my friends turned to me to be that guide.

Thus, this book. Originally a collection of over seventy essays published on my blog, *Watson is Not an Idiot* chronicles my rereading of the entire canon. Like Dr. Watson, I am not a reliable narrator, nor am I an objective critic - my relationship with Holmes is too entrenched and complex for me to be able to act as either. Instead, I point out interesting things and mention personal gripes. Sometimes, I check my facts with essays and books by far more educated people. Other times, I go off on unhinged rants about certain aspects of the stories. For this book, I've rewritten many of the essays to expand on some points, correct whatever errors I could find, and provide even more of my opinionated slant on

the canon.

~~How you use this book is up to you, although you will need your own copy of the original stories~~ do encourage you to read the stories in the publication order of the books where you can (I used the American publication of the stories for this book - a fact that will become important as you make your way through). The actual chronology of the cases is a hopeless mess that is still being debated over a hundred years later, so that is a lost cause. Besides, reading them in publication order will help you see how Sir Arthur Conan Doyle evolved as a writer, and some nuances and quirks of the canon are easier to notice if you take them in the same way that many readers did when the books were first published. Finally, these essays often build on and reference each other, so you may miss some nuances if you read them out of order, but I believe they should more or less hold up if you decide to jump around.

No matter what you do or how you read them, though, I hope this book helps you discover the same thrilling, maddening fascination with the world of Sherlock Holmes that I have. At the least, I hope it gives you something different to fight about on the Internet.

# Themes, Elements, and Spoilers

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There are a number of themes and elements that you should keep in mind as you read through the canon....

No, no. I hear you already. “*Themes?*” “*Elements?*” This does not sound like an opinionated tour. This sounds like literature class! What have you tricked me into, Webb?”

Relax. All I really mean is that there are some common threads that run through Doyle’s Holmes stories. When I started posting these essays on my blog, a few readers liked how I referenced the reoccurring bits that showed up in different stories, but they wanted to know what to look for at the start. That’s all this is: a few suggestions of things to keep in mind as you read through the stories.

These themes and elements, however, may contain mild spoilers for the stories themselves, which leads me to another point. I am under the assumption that, after a hundred years, these stories are safely out of the spoiler zone, particularly things like the end of “The Final Problem” and the beginning of “The Empty House.” If you really want to read the stories fresh for the first time and without spoilers, though, go ahead and read the story first before you read the accompanying essay. Seems pretty straightforward, but it’s easy to get tripped up on these kinds of details when you’re juggling nine different books.

Anyhow, those themes and elements I mentioned.

**Continuity vs. Complexity:** Watson’s wound. Watson’s wives. When Moriarty was first revealed. Doyle is notoriously bad about continuity within the canon, and finding all the errors can be entertaining or frustrating, depending on your inclinations. However, sometimes the more subtle conflicts are actually complexity of character rather than a flat-out mistake. Sherlockians are still arguing these points to this day.

**Integration into Reality/History:** Doyle tried to write his stories as if they really happened, by mentioning real-world events or previous cases as one connected universe. Indeed, that’s part of the reason why Holmes was so popular in his time, and thus why the continuity errors are so jarring. Doyle really wanted Holmes to feel like a real person, and while the techniques Doyle used might sometimes come across as ham-fisted today, they were rarely (if ever) used in literature at the time. It’s worth noting the little clues and details Doyle sprinkles into his stories.

**Case Chronology:** Doyle starts off presenting the cases in chronological order, but pretty soon he goes back and references earlier cases, and by the time you get halfway through the canon, an attempt to try and put the cases into chronological order becomes hopeless. This is a variation on the continuity errors, but it’s a particular point that a lot of Sherlockians have tried to reconcile. However, there are distinct “eras” of Holmes’ career: pre-Watson, pre-Watson’s marriage, pre-Hiatus, post-Hiatus, and post-retirement. You may be surprised at how infrequently the structure of “two bachelors living together in Baker Street” (i.e., pre-Watson’s marriage and possibly post-Hiatus) is actually used.

**Unreliable Narrator:** Aspects of the previous points can sometimes be chalked up to Watson being an unreliable narrator. An “unreliable narrator” is a literary device based on the fact that stories told from a first-person perspective are assumed to be completely accurate in the details they present to the

reader - unreliable narrators, therefore, are... well, unreliable. Some Sherlockians have presented the case that Watson is an unreliable narrator, and certainly the Nigel Bruce interpretation of Watson as a bumbling, forgetful old fool (particular in the Basil Rathbone movies) gives some credibility to the theory. I tend to lean the other direction: Watson underplays his own talents to make his friend look better. Either way, Watson's level of reliability is something to keep in mind as you read.

**Character Mythology vs. Canonical Representation:** Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson are two of the most iconic characters in literature, and yet many people have utterly incorrect ideas of who the characters really are. The first couple of novels do a lot to present different characters than you might expect, but throughout the stories various little bits and details add up. You may find at the end of the canon that you really didn't know Holmes and Watson at all.

**The Extended Cast:** While not quite as famous, there are still characters associated with Holmes and Watson that are just as entrenched in popular culture: Mrs. Hudson, Inspector Lestrade, Wiggins, the Baker Street Irregulars, and Professor Moriarty, for example. Keep a careful eye out for them as well as they aren't as prominent in the canon as you might expect. Particularly, note the large number of Scotland Yard inspectors that Holmes works with aside from Lestrade, and the wide variety of criminal masterminds he goes up against.

**Science vs. Superstition:** Perhaps the most defining theme of the Sherlock Holmes stories, and to a great extent Victorian England as a whole. There are stories where Holmes directly confronts superstitions such as *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and "The Sussex Vampire," but he confronts minor superstitions in many of the stories, as well as biases, stereotypes, and assumptions. And as much as Holmes would like to think otherwise, once in a while he falls prey to such sloppy thinking as well. It is hard for him to work completely outside of the culture he is a part of.

**Other Running Elements:** Drug use (which shows up more or less than you would expect, depending on which depiction of Holmes you are used to), the occasional appearance of Billy the page, Holmes' complex relationship with women, and dozens of other elements pop up over and over throughout the canon. I'll try to point out the more interesting ones as they come up.



# The Great Game

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One last thing before we start our tour. Since I'll be referencing a few outside sources as we go, should explain a bit about a strange quirk in the nature of research in the world of Sherlock Holmes.

Go to any website for fans of a popular property. Check out the scale of fan fiction written about the property. Look at all the arguments, conflicts, and endless discussions of extremely minor points of the canon. Dig into the wide range of fan approaches to it, from positively academic to utterly insane. Extrapolate that to a fandom lasting well over a century, and you start to get a sense of the sheer scale of Sherlock Holmes fandom. Before there was an Internet, radio, or even much mass media beyond publication, Sherlock Holmes fans were writing stories about the Holmes' "missing cases" or arguing about the nature of Watson's war wound. Fans all over the world corresponded with each other (and with Doyle), wrote to periodicals, started their own organizations and publications, created fan fiction, and even violated Arthur Conan Doyle's copyright - all the hallmarks of modern fandom. If there was a medium invented between the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and now, someone has probably used it to write Sherlock Holmes pastiche or give their opinions about something in the canon.

For the moment, let's look at just the analytical portions of this- the "scholarship" if you will, which is often called "Sherlockiana" (with the scholars referred to as "Sherlockians"). The sheer volume of words spent discussing the Great Detective and his companion over the decades is staggering and impossible to accurately know, but beyond sheer size, there's an additional factor to keep in mind when reading through any of it: the conceit that Watson and Holmes were real people, or what is colloquially called "the Great Game." A lot of Sherlockian material is written from the viewpoint that Watson was a real person transcribing actual events, instead of being a fictional conceit to frame the stories of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's imagination. As a result, not only are these fans trying to reconcile inaccuracies and conflicts within the fictional world presented within the stories, but they're also trying to reconcile them within established real world and historical facts as well!

As much as I adore the idea of the Great Game, I won't be playing it for this tour. All my discussions will come from the perspective that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was the author of fictional stories that starred Dr. John Watson and Sherlock Holmes as protagonists. Further, I will be touching on only a percentage of a fraction of a *sliver* of the Sherlockian scholarship and pastiches out there, and only when I think they're interesting, rather than out of any misplaced feeling of being objective.

If you are the kind of fan that feels loves the idea of a lot of outside material to dig into and explore, Holmes fandom is a great place for it. If you want a far more detailed examination of the canon from within the conceit of the Great Game, buy *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes* by Leslie S. Klinge. This collection was a huge inspiration for me and a valuable reference during my work on the essays. It's expensive, but it is worth every penny.

Every. Goddamned. Penny.

However, you don't need any of it to appreciate Sherlock Holmes. This is just a cautionary note that if you do explore outside the confines of this book, read each source carefully to determine if they're playing the Great Game or not, as that will have an impact on what you're reading.

# A Study in Scarlet (1887)

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Since these essays discuss the plot points of each story by necessity, I encourage you to read them after you've read the story in question, as they will contain spoilers. Of course, now that I've said that I'm going to immediately suggest something about *A Study in Scarlet* before you read it. It's only half of a Sherlock Holmes novel, and a slim novel overall, but you can skip chapters one through five of the second part and not miss much of anything. Look up that section of the plot on Wikipedia, or read it if you really want the whole experience, but know going in that I'm going to skip lightly over a chunk of this book.

But don't worry - I'll make it up to you. This is the very first Sherlock Holmes story, so there's a lot of groundwork to establish Watson and Holmes as characters before the case begins in earnest, and I have a lot of opinions about the early portion of the book. Really, even if you decide you don't want to go over the entire canon, reading just the first two chapters of *Scarlet* tells you a lot about the two characters that dispels quite a number of myths and misconceptions about them (as well as introducing a number of controversies down the road, as you'll see).

# Dr. John Watson

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Ah, Watson. One of the most misunderstood and misrepresented characters in the entire Holmes mythology. The injustices that popular culture have heaped upon Watson are multiple and horrid. There is one thing I want to beat into the minds of every person who thinks they know something about Sherlock Holmes, it's that *Watson is not a bumbling, passive idiot*. After a few pages of *Scarlet*, we learn that he's a medical doctor and has served in the military. He's incredibly good at noticing details, such as in chapter five when he rattles off a number of sound observations, even if his deductions are off. He also frequently makes good perceptions regarding the character of people throughout the canon (at least, the male characters - he's a bit of a ladies' man, as we'll learn in *The Sign of the Four*). He's clearly not on Holmes' level as a detective, but even Holmes sometimes calls Watson's observations "invaluable" and, occasionally, it's not even sarcastic.

These first two chapters do a lot to dispel the mythical Stupid Passive Watson. Watson's conversation with Stamford demonstrates that Holmes has difficulty making friends with people, and yet Watson manages it pretty quickly after meeting him. Watson challenges Holmes in chapter two, flat-out chastising him for his lack of knowledge of the solar system. (Granted, later stories put that lack of knowledge into doubt, but it still shows Watson's strength of character that he's willing to butt heads with Holmes.) He even notices Holmes "being addicted to the use of some narcotic" just by watching him lie on the couch. If anything, Watson is guilty of not trusting his own capabilities - he discounts his observation of Holmes' addiction in the same scene.

As we enter the story, Watson has been shot in military action in Afghanistan. He explicitly mentions being shot in the shoulder, and the conversation in chapter two clarifies that it's the left shoulder. Make a note of this - it will come up later in one of the most notoriously debated details in the canon. (In fact, it's so notorious that it's actually a point of mockery in some parodies of Holmes.) Regardless, some point to Watson's passivity in this novel as a common sign of his character, and some portrayals of Watson seem to come from the actor having read the first chapter of *Scarlet* before throwing the rest of the book into the fire and jumping in front of the camera to act like a complete imbecile. The war wound shows that this isn't the case: he's recovering from a debilitating illness, one that caused him to be shipped out of action on very short notice. Watson even confesses that he becomes lazy when he's ill, and that he has "other vices" when he's well. We'll learn about those other vices in later stories, but the key point here is that he's *injured*. I haven't been shot before, but I expect if I was, I damn well wouldn't be keen on running around the city and trying to exercise my mental powers for subtle observation. Even after having minor outpatient surgery, all I want to do is lie on the couch and watch TV. Accusing Watson for being lazy because he's recovering from a bullet wound is damned cruel, and all of popular culture should be ashamed of itself.

One interesting thing I noticed on my rereading *Scarlet* is that Watson actually doesn't like London that much when he first gets there, referring to it as "that great cesspool." Watson is there only because of his disability, and Holmes only because it is the best place to practice his new profession. Their romantic attachment to London develops over the course of the canon (and in Watson's case, it never really forms - later stories make it clear he prefers the country). Also, Watson mentions that he keeps a "bull pup," but that detail never comes up again. It might refer to his service revolver and not a dog, but either way, it only comes up this one time. This reference does explain the appearance of a bulldog in Holmes and Watson's flat in the Guy Ritchie films, though, and reinforces my opinion that the team on those films was actually very aware of the canon (even if I personally feel the second one

loses the thread).

The conversation with Stamford brings up a key point that will come up over and over again in the canon - the conflict of superstition and science in Victorian England. Stamford refers to Holmes as being too “cold-blooded” for his tastes, and ties it to Holmes’ scientific mind and inclination, as those who are *not* scientifically minded are more approachable and human. The fact that a doctor can hold this contradictory viewpoint of science being beneficial and yet damaging to someone’s character is very Victorian - science is good to have, but too much of it is scary and potentially dangerous. One extreme (and well-known) example comes up in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, but it is common in other “scientific romances” of the era.

This point is writ large in stories like *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and “The Sussex Vampire” (as well as in pastiches like *The Italian Secretary* by Caleb Carr), but you’ll see notes of it over and over again throughout the canon. Doyle himself became more inclined toward the Spiritualism movement as he grew older, but his stories constantly have Holmes battling superstition. This conflict is a key part of Watson’s character: he is both a man of science and a man that worries about what science is doing to humanity. He constantly straddles this line as a doctor and as a soldier who has seen terrible things in his life - he wants to believe in Holmes’ rational world, but sometimes he can’t help regressing to superstitious thoughts. That doesn’t make him an idiot; it just makes him a man of Victorian England.

# Mr. Sherlock Holmes

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Much like how many assume that Watson is an idiot, people also assume that Holmes is some kind of super-genius that knows everything. To be fair, he's often written that way in a variety of pastiche (and, to an extent, by Doyle himself), but it's still not entirely true. Once Watson and Holmes are settled into 221B, Watson becomes obsessed with Holmes and writes a list of what Holmes does and doesn't know, as well as what he can do and cannot do. Many points of this list turn out to be completely wrong- I generally take this to mean that Watson doesn't know Holmes as much as he thinks he does, although some of it can certainly be laid at the feet of Doyle's legendary continuity errors - but there are some key points that will resonate throughout the canon. (As a side note, Watson's obsession with Holmes in this scene is one of the little bits in the canon that have fueled the "Watson is gay for Holmes and vice versa" theories for decades. And you thought it all started with Kirk and Spock.)

In fact, this list leads to one of my favorite scenes in the novel, the "brain-attic" speech where Holmes explains that knowledge of how the Earth rotates around the sun is completely irrelevant to him, and how he will try to forget it as soon as possible. I loved this scene as a kid because the idea of learning only what you need to know and nothing else made sense to me (although that logic drove my teachers mad), but as an adult I love it because it shows how Holmes is so quick to impress his new friend that he ends up taking perfectly sound theories and going just a little too far with them. I have personally gone back and forth, for example, on how much knowledge of art and going to the theater is really related to the science of deduction - on the one hand, art does inspire crime, and Holmes has certainly used disguise and stagecraft to help him in his investigations, but on the other hand his encyclopedic knowledge of popular music of the time seems out of place with his own "brain-attic" theory. With careful reading, it's clear that Holmes has developed a series of quotable maxims for his newly-developing science (and *Scarlet* has one of my favorites: "It is a capital mistake to theorize before you have all the evidence"), but he isn't as perfect a practitioner of them as he thinks his is, perhaps as much as he wants to be. It's one of the things that make him such a fascinating character.

Let's look back at Watson's list, so I can rant on another point about Holmes. One of the biggest criticisms I've heard about Robert Downey Jr.'s version of Holmes in the Guy Ritchie films was that Holmes wasn't a fighter. That's just plain wrong- Watson clearly lists Holmes as being an "expert singlestick player, boxer, and swordsman," and this is not the only time it comes up in the canon. Granted, Watson is handier with a gun than Holmes is, but Holmes is by no means a shrinking violet or a sickly man living only in his mind - he is a formidable combatant in his own right. If anything, Watson's military experience only seems to be helpful later in their career - with Holmes' fitness and Watson's illness at this early stage, Holmes is the more dangerous of the two. Personally, I believe this misconception came when Holmes was popular on the radio - it was very hard to portray action on radio drama, so over time those elements were minimized, and later interpretations of the character used the radio version as a basis.

Another commonly misunderstood point is his actual job. Holmes is not a private detective, and certainly not the first detective. Setting aside Auguste Dupin predating Holmes (more on that in a moment), in *Scarlet* Holmes mentions that he is neither a government detective nor a private detective, implying that others of both stripes existed before him. Rather, he is a consulting detective giving advice to both direct clients and other detectives, and only going to the scene of the crime when the case is particularly difficult or interesting. It's an understandably misunderstood point, though

because over time Holmes does take on more and more direct commissions, and becomes a private detective in deed, if not in name. But in his pre-Watson career, Holmes solves most of his cases in his sitting room.

Finally, Doyle plants the seeds for the Great Game in these first two chapters. Not only do we have the conceit that Watson is transcribing actual events in his journal, but Holmes also disparages two detectives that predate him - C. Auguste Dupin, who was created by Edgar Allan Poe, and Monsieur Lecoq, written by Emile Gaboriau. Referring to other writer's detectives caused many people to believe that Sherlock Holmes was real, even if Holmes did come down hard on his predecessor. Interestingly, Holmes disparages Dupin's "trick of breaking in on his friends' thoughts," but it is something that Holmes himself will do in future stories- again, Holmes' words do not always match up with his deeds.

# The Minor Characters

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Some of the more notable minor characters are also introduced in this novel, including the infamous Inspector G. Lestrade. One of controversial aspects of Lestrade is how to pronounce his name. I have heard it pronounced “Leh-strahde” and “Leh-strayed.”(I tend to go with “Leh-strahde” personally.) Like Watson, Lestrade is often presented as an imbecile, although Holmes explicitly says he is “the best of a bad lot.” Over the canon, however, we learn that Lestrade is actually quite an accomplished detective in his own right, and that his frequent conflicts with Holmes are tempered by a prickly loyalty to him. Sadly, he does become more of an idiot, which is unfortunate because here you can see some of the complexities of the character that get lost in the later canon, as well as in many adaptations and pastiches. (For my money, the best Inspector Lestrade was portrayed by Colin Jeavons in the 1984 Granada television series.)

In this story, we also meet Detective Gregson, and find out that Gregson and Lestrade are rivals. This is functionally irrelevant, because throughout the canon Lestrade ends up the defacto winner of the rivalry, taking the lion’s share of the police role in later stories. Lestrade is actually much quicker to admit his limitations than Gregson was, and he’s the only police officer mentioned who consulted Holmes prior to Watson’s regular involvement with the cases. Further, at the murder scene for Enock Drebber, Lestrade makes a number of good observations, and is even the one who finds the word “Rache,” which Holmes might have missed otherwise. Sure, it’s a red herring, but it does add information to Holmes’ description of the murderer. Like I said - Lestrade’s got more going on than most people realize.

The scene with Constable Rance is noteworthy for three things. One of the smaller points is that it demonstrates Holmes’ willingness to bribe people for information - we see that while Holmes can deduce information from looking at someone, he’s willing to use any means necessary to get data (although later he relies more and more on purely observational deduction). We also see the conflict of superstition and reason again, as Rance admits that was afraid of ghosts, although “nothing this side of the grave” scared him otherwise. Finally, Holmes will (in later stories) mock Watson for his florid turns of phrase, but it’s Holmes himself that waxes poetic about this case, and even gives it the name “a study in scarlet.”

Mrs. Hudson appears in this novel, although she’s never referred to by name - only as “the landlady.” Wiggins also appears, as well as Holmes’ “army of street Arabs.” And so, many of the key secondary characters all make their first appearance in this novel... even Watson’s trusty service revolver.

# Oh God, the Mormons

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At the halfway point, the book turns into a completely different story, with no explanation before or after. It's not a section written by Dr. Watson, or indeed by any other character. As a story in and of itself, it's not bad, even if the Mormons are woefully misinterpreted. But think about it - to Doyle in the 1880s America was about as foreign to him as Victorian England is to us. He was going on what he knew from the stories and news he had heard, which was all sensationalism and glorified lies. It's awkward reading in modern times, but taken just as a story, it switches between lines of brilliance ("did God make the country?") and terrible jumps in logic (John Ferrier isn't afraid of anything... except numbers). It really is just a completely different novel smashed into the middle, which Jefferson Hope then explains in part two, chapter six anyhow!

Between the time I wrote my original essays on *Scarlet* and the time I was preparing this book for publication, there was a news article in *The Daily Progress* about how the book was removed from sixth-grade reading lists in Charlottesville, Virginia because it was "derogatory toward Mormons." Let's put aside whether a murder mystery is age-appropriate to begin with, because clearly it was banned from the Mormon section. If anything, though, that's even *more* reason why it needs to be read. *Scarlet* is a perfect example of what happens when people work from ignorance. Doyle's later stories about America were much more respectful after he went on a tour of America (and certainly after American sales helped to increase his profits). Comparing and contrasting *A Study in Scarlet* with *The Valley of Fear* might be useful in showing the difference in outside perceptions of American culture, as well as showing what it's like when the media grossly stereotypes a particular religious group - certainly a valid discussion for the modern day.

But aside from all that, the second half of the book just isn't a Sherlock Holmes story, and the bits that are about Holmes aren't great. The book is a vital part of the canon, though, and there are key scenes that are so impactful that they are a part of my very makeup. I always start any reread of the canon with *Scarlet*, and every time I am thrilled to explore the canon's genesis, even if the execution frustrates me.



# **The Sign of the Four (1890)**

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# Watson and Holmes

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On to the second Holmes story, where points go to Watson right off the bat. Up front, page one, we get to see the drug habit that was only alluded to in *Scarlet*: Holmes uses a “seven-per-cent solution” of cocaine to keep his mind from stagnating when he is not engaged on a case. This on-again, off-again (and, in Victorian times, *entirely legal*) drug use is one of the many misconceptions about the Great Detective. Before Nicholas Meyer’s fantastic pastiche *The Seven-Percent Solution*, it was never mentioned at all in pop culture depictions of Holmes. Since then, the topic has been portrayed extremely inconsistently. Perhaps the most unusual example of divergence from the canon is the Granada television series, where Jeremy Brett’s Holmes actually kicks the habit due to the series getting complaints about drug use on television. (Up to that point, the show’s Holmes had been portrayed pretty close to how the original stories were written). The most extreme example of drug abuse, however, is probably Hugh Laurie’s portrayal of Gregory House on *House, M.D.* Though *House* is not technically a Holmes pastiche, there’s so much obvious inspiration drawn between Gregory House and Sherlock Holmes that it’s bled back over into other portrayals of Holmes over the past decade - a strange case of a Holmes-inspired character cycling back to inspire portrayals of Holmes.

Back to Watson. A key part of understanding him is the line “... my conscience swelled nightly within me...” Watson is Holmes’ conscience in many ways, constantly questioning and challenging not only Holmes’ deductions but his motives, and the dialogue in the early chapters of the novel attests to that. Notice how Watson encourages Holmes to deduce and exercise his brain, just to keep him from turning back to the needle. Yet, when Watson announces his intention to marry, it is to the needle that Holmes returns - Watson, his conscience, has fled him. From one book to the next, the relationship between the men has changed and grown - far from the unchanging, staid relationship we see in various adaptations (or, to be fair, in the middle part of Doyle’s canon).

Watson’s wound is now in his leg. In fact, Doyle has decided so completely that the wound is in Watson’s leg that the point is brought up at least three times during the course of the novel, even though it was clearly his left shoulder in *Scarlet*. I expect Doyle was called on this, because the balance of the canon keeps it vaguely referred to as “my wound” or “the wound in my limb.” Also, Watson still claims he is recovering from his illness sustained in Afghanistan, even though it was explicitly after the events in *Scarlet* (and, we learn in later stories, several years after their meeting). Thus here we are, only two stories into the canon, and already there are errors in continuity. Get used to this, gentle reader - you will see me rant about Doyle’s inaccuracies many times before we are through.

Another attempt by Doyle to break down the divide between fiction and reality is to have Holmes refer to the previous novel and comment upon it, even if it does introduce problems in chronology later. As Watson defends his publication of *Scarlet*, Holmes chides him for his “romanticism,” even though it was Holmes who poetically named the case! It’s possible that this is another continuity error, but I prefer to think that Holmes has just conveniently rewritten the incident in his mind as something that he has done a couple of times already.

We also learn, through Holmes’ deduction of Watson’s pocket watch, the reason why Watson has “no kith and kin in England”: both his father and his elder brother are dead. Both men had the first initial H., and popular Sherlockian lore calls them Henry Sr. and Jr., although the canon never addresses the point directly.

Finally, Watson is quite the ladies’ man. Not only does he remark on his “experience of women

which extends over many nations and three separate continents,” but Mary is clearly flirting with Watson shortly after their introduction. Watson is very taken by her as well, although either his emotions or his illness cause him to make several mistakes throughout the story as a result. Watson also ends up engaged, which opens up another infamous Watson continuity snarl - his married life. Despite his shortcomings, Watson’s relationship with Mary shows is that he is not the fat, overblown buffoon portrayed by Nigel Bruce. (Oh, Nigel Bruce, you have so much to answer for.)

Holmes at one point says “It is simplicity itself,” which reminds me of another peeve I have about misconceptions of the canon. Holmes does refer to things as “elementary,” and he does say such things to Watson, but he never uses the phrase “Elementary, my dear Watson.” Not once. Where it actually comes from or when it became popular is a bit of a muddle, but signs point to the William Gillette play *Sherlock Holmes*, which premiered in 1899. What makes it more confusing is that Conan Doyle did write an early draft of that play before William Gillette rewrote it, so some argue for the play being part of the “extended canon,” but since the play is rewritten from three other stories and takes drastic liberties with the characters, as well as Doyle’s overall apathy towards the whole production, I consider it an adaptation at best.

We also see more in this story of Holmes’ snobbery. He laments that crime in London and existence as a whole is “commonplace,” and how he can’t abide the commonplace. We also see his sense of humor. After chiding Watson for his lack of observation, Watson remarks on Mary Morstan being beautiful. Holmes’ reply is “Is she? I did not observe.” Finally, Holmes demonstrates his opinion of women quite clearly. “Women are never to be entirely trusted - not the best of them.” This will come into play in the very next story.

## Other Points

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We learn that this case is set in 1888, based on Mary's story (which causes *lots* of problems later). However, Watson and Holmes have been rooming together for "years," so *Scarlet* is likely set before its 1887 publication date.

To touch back on an earlier rant about Holmes being good at fighting, the conversation with McMurdo reinforces Holmes' aptitude with boxing and fists. Further, McMurdo mentions that his bout with Holmes was "four years back," which means it was in 1884. It's possible that, since Holmes was entertaining clients before he moved to 221B Baker Street, he may have been boxing after he started his career as a consulting detective.

This story has another famous axiom of Holmes': "How often have I said to you that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however impossible, must be the truth?"

*Four* also introduces Toby, the amazing tracking mongrel. As a kid, I had a soft spot for Toby because of his expanded role in *The Great Mouse Detective*. Granted, in the movie Toby is Holmes' pet, but whatever. Toby is awesome, even if he only shows up for one story, and I'll fight anyone who says otherwise.

Mrs. Hudson gets named in this story, but the maid that was mentioned in passing in *Scarlet* seems to have disappeared. But the Baker Street Irregulars get their name, so it all works out.

## Doyle's Style

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*Sign of the Four* was written three years after *Scarlet*, and there's a noticeable difference in Doyle's style - the most noteworthy being a firmer adherence to the conceit of being Watson's memoirist. Further, it's very different from a lot of Victorian literature and other serialized storytellers of the time, like Dickens. The opening is positively modern, dropping you right into a dramatic situation between Holmes and Watson. The rest of the novel is well-paced as well - even during lengthy expositions (of which there are several), Doyle works in little quirks and ticks of character to keep the reader engaged. This style of writing is one of the many reasons why the stories still hold up today.

Doyle also has a penchant for eccentric characters - all the Sholtos ooze quirky fun, and even the presence of the dead ones are felt through the course of the story through the stories and anecdotes of the other characters. There's also a boat chase near the end, and Holmes demonstrates his famous mastery of disguise. Doyle is, at heart, an adventure writer, and there's plenty of it in this novel.

Doyle also uses the contrivance of "nested stories," where one character tells a story that another character narrates. Obviously, Watson is one character, and he transcribes the narration of other characters. But at one point, Sholto himself narrates another character's story. This is a really hard thing to pull off, and yet Doyle does so to great effect in this book (and indeed, in many of his stories).

On the other hand, with this story we do run into some of the prejudices of the age. Strange Oriental treasures are just the top of the list of awkward stereotypes. Manipulative Indians and blood-thirsty black savages abound in this story. To be fair, Doyle is no Sax Rohmer or H.P. Lovecraft - it is possible to read this story and see these characters are merely bad examples of their various cultures. But it certainly skirts the comfort zone of modern sensibilities.

And, sadly, Doyle does have his moments of being positively overwrought:

*He pointed to what looked like a long dark thorn stuck in the skin just above the ear.*

*"It looks like a thorn," said I.*

*"It is a thorn..."*

# **The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes**

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# A Scandal in Bohemia (1891)

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Now we start with the first book of short stories, and the very first story is one of my favorites (as well as Doyle's) - "A Scandal in Bohemia." One of the reasons why this story is so fondly remembered is because of Irene Adler, or "The Woman" as Holmes calls her. Compare Holmes' rather glowing opinion of Adler here to his generally low opinions of women in the previous stories. Despite Watson's protestations that Holmes is devoid of emotion, it's clear that this isn't the case. Sadly, before we meet the woman that Watson mysteriously refers to as "the late Irene Adler" (even though she doesn't die in the course of this story), we run into more continuity snags.

Watson is married by the time this story starts. He mentions reading at least three of Holmes' cases in the paper, has put on seven and a half pounds since he last met Holmes, and has become nostalgic for his time in 221B. And yet, the story clearly starts on March 20<sup>th</sup>, 1888, which is a few months *before* he met Mary! This has led some Sherlockians to claim that *The Sign of the Four* is actually set in the middle of 1887, but it's still less than a year for an engagement, a marriage, a move into a new home, establishing a new medical practice, and the hiring of a new servant girl. Others have pointed out the fact that Mary isn't mentioned by name, and therefore Watson is referring to a second wife, one he had before he met Mary. Personally, I figure Doyle probably meant that the story is set in 1889, but don't worry - the chronology of the stories gets even worse as we go deeper. This doesn't touch on other errors, like why Mrs. Hudson is suddenly changed into "Mrs. Turner." Poor Mrs. Hudson.

This story also has some of my favorite bits in the canon, like "you see but you do not observe" and "It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data." This is also the case where Holmes mentions there are seventeen steps leading up to their rooms, a detail which I noted during the Introduction and which has had such a bizarrely influential role in my youth. There's also the scene where Holmes relates his efforts in following Irene Adler in disguise, only to get coerced into being the best man at her secret wedding.

There's some good Watson watching here. For the third time, Watson tries to excuse himself from being Holmes' client, and Holmes insists he stay. It speaks to Watson's sense of propriety (although, you might think by this point he'd be more comfortable acting as Holmes' assistant), as does his discomfort and shame at being instructed to act against the "beautiful creature" that tended to Holmes. We also learn of Watson's strong sense of justice - he's willing to break the law and risk arrest in the name of a good cause. Finally, Watson's simple statement of "Then you may entirely rely on me" is a powerful statement of his loyalty to Holmes. This is a huge deal, as this is the first story where Watson takes an active part in the case, instead of merely reporting the facts.

As mentioned previously, Holmes continues to make it clear his opinion that women are "natural secretives," and is initially shocked when Adler outsmarts him. His misogyny has backfired on him, and while his ego is bruised, he clearly respects Adler's outmaneuvering him, and his opinion of women as a whole seems to have evolved. We also learn that Holmes likes to have trophies of his cases (or at least his most interesting ones), regardless of the outcome. We'll see these trophies again in later stories.

Interestingly, as influential as Adler is in the canon and to Holmes, we don't see much of her directly. All we learn of her is second-hand, with the exception of one conversation and a letter she writes to Holmes. Further, although Watson claims that Holmes called her "The Woman" afterwards, in fact whenever Holmes (rarely) mentions her in later stories, it's always as "Irene Adler." In the end, she's barely a blip in the overall canon, less impactful than Inspector Gregson. However, even her

light touch on the life of Sherlock Holmes is enough to enshrine her in his mind, and in the canon as whole.

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