

Applications in the Classroom: Hardly Elementary— Frontiers for Freshman Composition with Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet*

Kate M. Donley
Norwich University
Northfield, Vermont, USA
kdonley@norwich.edu

ABSTRACT

Three recent television and film adaptations testify to the continuing popularity of Arthur Conan Doyle's consulting detective Sherlock Holmes. The fast-paced novella that introduces detective duo Holmes and Watson, *A Study in Scarlet* involves some astonishing elements, and not just in the plot. With just a little probing, collegiate readers may wonder whether Conan Doyle plagiarized his most famous character, invented forensic science, despised Mormons, and accidentally wrote a Western.

The novel was adapted as *A Study in Pink*, the first episode of the BBC's series *Sherlock* created by Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss. Their vision of Holmes set in present-day London will thrill students and also leave them wondering what happened to the second half of the novel. Beyond the predictable (yet exciting) classroom discussion topic of adaptation, *A Study in Scarlet* presents a rich context for research and discussion by challenging students' modern-day notions of genre, historical truth, political correctness, and academic credibility. Although this novel is well-suited for high-level secondary or freshman composition classes, advanced students of English literature will find much to explore. This book analysis contains a summary of *A Study in Scarlet* with explication of its literary features and associated pedagogical issues for the freshman composition class. Topics for more advanced students are also identified. Instructors can make a free virtual casebook of ancillary readings with the Internet links provided.

Keywords: college composition, first-year writing, freshman composition, Arthur Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holmes, *A Study in Scarlet*, detective fiction, adaptation, pseudo-scholarship, fanfiction

I hate to admit it, but I selected a text for my college English Composition and Literature students based on a television show. In 2010 I was swept away by the series *Sherlock*, created for the BBC by Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat. The premier episode *A Study in Pink* was especially thrilling, so I picked up Arthur Conan Doyle's original work *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) and was impressed by its characters and quirky narrative structure. Subsequent investigation into Conan Doyle's literary allusions and the subject matter of the novel raised deeper questions. I was hooked, an addict who had to bring this novel to the classroom. *A Study in Scarlet* sparked students' exploration of literature, history, and popular culture far beyond my expectations.

Though nearly all of my freshmen were familiar with the recent Sherlock Holmes films starring Robert Downey, Jr. (2009 and 2011), few had been exposed to Conan Doyle's short stories or novels. Conan Doyle's language and the setting of late Victorian-era London posed challenges for some students, but they were tantalized to witness the beginning of the Holmes and Watson "bromance," which is the first of many delightful features of *A Study in Scarlet*. Conan Doyle's narrator Dr. Watson "reminisce[s]" through his journal, describing his return from combat in Afghanistan as a battle-weary convalescent, unable to afford living quarters on a military pension. Luckily a friend introduces him to Holmes, who agrees to room with Watson. Watson tags along to a crime scene where Scotland Yard detectives have botched the investigation. Watson observes as Holmes gathers evidence and profiles the criminal based on his own prodigious mental database of crime history. In an eventful series of twists, Holmes catches the perpetrator Jefferson Hope and solves the murders of American victims Enoch Drebbler and Joseph Stangerson. At this precipice, the reader turns the page into Part II, which unexpectedly detours to a new setting with an omniscient point of view and a different protagonist.

Part II takes place in the 1850s American West, in an ominous landscape called the Alkalai Plain. A charming little girl named Lucy and her protector nearly perish from thirst but are rescued by a wagon train of Mormon pioneers led by Brigham Young. After time passes, the Mormon community turns sinister. Brigham Young himself presents an ultimatum: the now-lovely young woman will be forced into polygamous marriage, but her choice of suitors is limited to Drebbler or Stangerson, both of them repellent and already married. Instead, Lucy and her adoptive father flee with her cowboy fiancé Hope. Alas, Lucy is captured and marries Drebbler under duress, her father is shot, and Hope vows revenge when she dies of a broken heart. The novel then returns to 1880s London where Jefferson Hope describes his method in the crimes. The book's ninety fast-paced pages breezily introduce elements common to Conan Doyle's four novels and fifty-six stories that feature Sherlock Holmes: observation, deduction, technology, police incompetence, exotic cultures, deep friendship full of good humor, and the curious role of a consulting detective.

The novel's two-part structure is a dynamic element for students. Their experience of reading the novel is similar to experiencing a Seth Grahame-Smith mash-up¹— let us call it *Sherlock Holmes and Watson Meet Cowboys*. Students report flipping back and forth through Parts I and II, checking to see if they were reading the right book and wondering how the two parts are connected. The abrupt switch from detective fiction to a Western style illustrates the impact of literary elements such as genre, setting, point of view, character, theme, imagery, symbolism, and dramatic irony. Although contemporary readers classify detective fiction and Westerns as separate genres, Arthur Conan Doyle would not have done so. In the context of Victorian literature, Conan Doyle wrote in the genre of romance,² which encompassed what today's readers would separate into various categories of genre fiction: science fiction, adventure, thriller, horror, fantasy, detective fiction, and Westerns. Students may enjoy perusing Conan Doyle's extensive oeuvre, populated with pirates,

[1] Author of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies: The Classic Regency Romance Now with Ultraviolent Zombie Mayhem!* Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2009. Print.

[2] For a comprehensive discussion of genre and other issues in the novel, see Joseph McLaughlin's "Holmes and the Range: Frontiers Old and New in *A Study in Scarlet*." *Genre* 25.1 (1992): 113-135. Print.

a reanimated mummy, spirits, medieval knights, soldiers, anachronistic dinosaurs, and other adventurous elements.

Sherlock Holmes is a pivotal character in the development of detective fiction, but he has important literary antecedents. The second chapter of *A Study in Scarlet* contains a few significant lines of dialogue: Watson compares Holmes to Edgar Allan Poe's detective Auguste Dupin and Emile Gaboriau's police inspector Monsieur LeCoq. Sherlock Holmes arrogantly claims superiority to them both. This wry metatextual allusion cleverly acknowledges Conan Doyle's debt to both authors. Sherlock Holmes is so similar to Auguste Dupin that some early readers accused Conan Doyle of plagiarism and "piratical appropriating."³ Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue" is a great read for comparison. Likewise, Conan Doyle mimicked the two-part structure of Gaboriau's detective novels. In his autobiography, Conan Doyle himself mentions both authors in connection with his development of *A Study in Scarlet*. Even a third novel is widely considered to have been Conan Doyle's source for Part II, the sensational and bizarre romance *The Dynamiter* by Robert Louis and Fanny Van de Grift Stevenson. Advanced students can research Conan Doyle's intertextuality and the development of the detective genre. Graduate students could debate whether Conan Doyle's appropriations would label him an early "textual poacher," to use a term popularized by Henry Jenkins in fan studies.

No doubt Victorians were titillated by Conan Doyle's references to polygamy, but students today will be more preoccupied by Conan Doyle's offensive portrayal of Brigham Young as a religious despot. Students should discuss whether Conan Doyle's view of Mormons was bigoted and whether some schools were justified in banning the novel, most recently the Albemarle County School District in Virginia in 2011. Research on Brigham Young's biography and the history of the Latter Day Saints yields exciting comparisons between historical fact and fiction. Conan Doyle's colonialist worldview is obvious in his stereotyping of Native Americans and the implication that the United States is just one large cowboy frontier. Students interested in colonialism, cultural studies, and post-colonial literary theory will find much to contemplate in Conan Doyle's work.

Holmes has starred in a variety of adaptations in every sort of media, including theater, radio plays, video games, graphic novels, and of course film and television series. One adaptation in particular is an excellent companion for students studying the novel. Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss's 2010 *A Study in Pink* sets the action of Part I of the novel in present-day London with updated characters and technology, including a prominent role for social media. Actors Martin Freeman and Benedict Cumberbatch breathe new life into Watson and Holmes, creating dynamic characters students will love. *A Study in Pink* incorporates two significant characters that do not appear in *A Study in Scarlet* but loom large in many adaptations, Sherlock's brother Mycroft Holmes and his famous nemesis James Moriarty. Also, the episode ignores the Mormon section from Part II of the novel, which is an exciting deviation from the original narrative structure. Students will be eager to discuss these two artistic choices, which connect to the narrative demands of a series. Although *A Study in Scarlet* is the first of Holmes and Watson's many adventures, the novel was written as a self-contained work. Later, Conan Doyle pioneered an episodic approach for his subsequent Sherlock Holmes stories that were serialized in monthly magazines, notably *The Strand*.⁴ Discussing the narrative structures of a single, stand-alone work versus installments in a series is useful when many Sherlock Holmes adaptations are episodic, as is much of the entertainment students enjoy in contemporary pop culture.

Numerous research topics can tempt students: Conan Doyle's fascinating life, his contributions to the developing genre of detective fiction, the Victorian era, the mental health of Sherlock Holmes, the Western novel, the historical basis of the Mormon setting in Part II of *A Study in Scarlet*, other Sherlock Holmes stories and adaptations, the history of forensic science, and crime in Victorian London. As students conduct research, instructors need to remind their students to exercise judgment in finding sources. Rumor and scandal abound

[3] Chapman, Arthur. "The Unmasking of Sherlock Holmes." *The Critic* 46.2 (1905): 115-117. Web. 10 Jan. 2014

[4] Wiltse, Ed. "'So Constant an Expectation': Sherlock Holmes and Seriality." *Narrative* 6.2 (1998): 105-122. Print.

on the Internet, and gullible students will find themselves persuaded by outlandish blogs with all manner of misinformation, such as accusations that Arthur Conan Doyle was Jack the Ripper.⁵ Of course, this type of information literacy training is a typical part of a freshman writing class. However, research into Sherlock Holmes poses unusual complications for freshmen, and a few issues merit special attention.

Several elements of Sherlock Holmes fandom may baffle student researchers. Since the early 1890s, dedicated fans of Sherlock Holmes have written literary tributes: pastiche, parody, fan fiction, and pseudo-scholarship. Pastiche of Sherlock Holmes occasionally present “newly discovered” Watson journals that may confuse academic novices. One of my students misunderstood something he had read online about Nicholas Meyer’s novel *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution* and reported to me that Sherlock Holmes had been a patient of Sigmund Freud, and he had a citation to prove it! Advanced students will enjoy the homages to Sherlock Holmes penned by an array of literary greats and contemporary writers, such as J. M. Barrie, Mark Twain, Bret Harte, O. Henry, Ellery Queen, Agatha Christie, P. G. Wodehouse, Steven King, Michael Chabon, Steve Hockensmith, Neil Gaiman, Laurie King, Anthony Horowitz, Mitch Cullin, Lyndsay Faye, and even John Lennon. Students researching on the Internet may also encounter the impressive amount of fanfiction connected to the original Conan Doyle stories but more significantly to the BBC’s *Sherlock*. Fanfiction is a worthwhile topic to mention to students, both to raise awareness of the genre so students will understand what they find online and also because of fanfiction’s growing presence in popular culture.

Another longstanding tradition of fan writing presents even greater challenges to credulous student researchers. Some dedicated fans read Conan Doyle’s stories with the attention of Sherlock Holmes himself, acting as detectives investigating inconsistencies and related literary, scientific, and historical topics. These fans identify themselves as “Sherlockians,” and some write in a literary style called the Grand Game, which is a reference to an oft-quoted saying of Sherlock Holmes in midst of an adventure, “The game is on.” Sherlockians maintain a pretense in the Game that Sherlock Holmes was the best detective who ever lived (yes, lived!). In a purposeful misreading of genre, Sherlockians playfully classify the “Canon” of Sherlock Holmes stories as biography written by Watson about Sherlock Holmes. Conan Doyle is considered a minor figure, Watson’s literary agent. Sherlockians are particularly fascinated by *A Study in Scarlet* because it presents a whodunit: if Part I had been written by Watson as biography, where does Part II come from?⁶ Within the tradition of the Game, the omniscient point of view in Part II, obviously not Watson, is an anomaly that needs to be explained.

Sherlockian scholars playing the Game produce pseudo-scholarship, which is rigorous research within this fictional premise. Their academic-style books and articles are fully footnoted with reliable sources, found in libraries, indexed by some academic databases, and widely available online. Several journals and publishers specialize in this genre, and mainstream publishing houses have also released these works. Sherlockian pseudo-scholarship tests novice researchers’ instincts about text reliability because the genre has the usual trappings of non-fiction. Students may need to be reminded that if a book claims to be a biography of Sherlock Holmes, it is fiction not fact; even if a book appears authoritative, Sherlock Holmes was never alive and Arthur Conan Doyle really was the author of the Sherlock Holmes stories. To illustrate this concept, I show students a book called *I, Sherlock Holmes*, published by Dutton in 1977, which purports to have been “edited and annotated” by Michael Harrison. With its slipcover, hard-cover binding, index, footnotes, list of actual references, and photographs, this book has all the textual and paratextual cues of credible nonfiction. To students, the book appears exhaustive, scholarly, well-researched, and boring—a perfect source for their next research paper. I ask students to identify the genre of such a book. Typically, half of my freshmen mistakenly classify the book as autobiography, which continues our discussion of truth, fiction, and genre. In the freshman composition

[5] Scamahorn, Charles. “Jack the Ripper was Arthur Conan Doyle.” *Probaway—Life Hacks*. 2009. Web. 10 Jan. 2014.

[6] Visozkie, Ben. “Who Wrote the American Chapters of *A Study in Scarlet*?” *Baker Street Journal: An Irregular Quarter of Sherlockiana* 50.2 (2000): 29-36. Web and Print.

class, pseudo-scholarship should be discussed in the context of academic credibility, but advanced students may find themselves captivated by this creative fan genre.

Freshman composition students will continue to have popular culture associations with the character of Sherlock Holmes for many years to come. A recent court decision in 2014 against the Conan Doyle Estate confirmed that, with a few small exceptions, the character of Sherlock Holmes is in the public domain, which means that most creators of Holmes adaptations can proceed without paying licensing fees to the estate. Each time I think that the media has become saturated with adaptations, I hear of new creations starring the Great Detective and the Good Doctor. I am eagerly anticipating five projects to be released in 2015: a novel featuring Mycroft Holmes by basketball legend Kareem Abdul-Jabaar; the second installment of the graphic novel *Watson and Holmes: A Study in Black* that sets the action in present-day Harlem; a film starring Ian McKellen called *Mr. Holmes* based on Mitch Cullin's novel *A Slight Trick of the Mind*; the fourth season of the BBC's *Sherlock*; and even another *S(her)lock*, a web series featuring a trans-positive and feminist vision of Holmes and Watson.

Because students are more accustomed to media adaptations featuring Sherlock Holmes, the original novel becomes a high-interest text that portrays familiar characters in a fresh and exciting way. In class, my students use the inexpensive Dover edition of *A Study in Scarlet and the Sign of Four*, but free digitized and html versions are also available. Plentiful online resources can be compiled to create a virtual casebook for student enrichment:

- Digitized old print edition of *A Study in Scarlet* readable online: <https://archive.org/details/studyinscarletno00doyl>
- *A Study in Scarlet* with illustrations: <http://ignisart.com/camdenhouse/canon/1-stud.htm>
- Free fiction by Conan Doyle, Poe, the Stevensons, and Gaboriau: www.projectgutenberg.org
- Examples of Sherlockian scholarship from *The Baker Street Journal*. The free article by Ben Vizoskie (2000) is written in the tradition of the Grand Game and addresses the authorship of Part II in *A Study in Scarlet*: <http://www.bakerstreetjournal.com/morleymontgomeryaward.html>
- Arthur Conan Doyle's autobiography: <http://www.unz.org/Pub/DoyleArthur-1924>
- Early anthology of Sherlock Holmes pastiche and parody: https://archive.org/details/scriblio_test_044
- Parody implying Conan Doyle's plagiarism from 1905: http://books.google.com/books?id=FGMyAQ_AAMAAJ&pg=PA115&ots=bQKQRFI8z&dq=arthur%20chapman%20unmasking%20sherlock%20holmes%20the%20critic&pg=PA115#v=onepage&q=arthur%20chapman%20unmasking%20sherlock%20holmes%20the%20critic&f=false
- *Deseret News* article discussing the novel's Mormon section: <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/705395945/Latter-day-Saints-and-Sherlock-Holmes.html?pg=all>
- Autobiography of an English Mormon woman that may have been one of Conan Doyle's sources for *A Study in Scarlet*: <https://archive.org/details/utahenglishwom00stenrich>
- Historic filmed interview of Arthur Conan Doyle from 1927 in which he discusses creating Sherlock Holmes and also his faith in Spiritualism: https://archive.org/details/SirArthurConanDoyleSpeaks_272
- One site for fanfiction inspired by the Sherlock Holmes short stories and books (search the website separately for fanfiction inspired by film or TV adaptations): <https://www.fanfiction.net/book/Sherlock-Holmes/>
- Update from *Publishers Weekly* on the copyright case involving Sherlock Holmes and the Conan Doyle estate: <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/digital/copyright/article/60503-conan-doyle-estate-says-sherlock-not-free-yet.html>

[7] Berdan, Marshall. "Playing with Dynamite: The Literary Fuse that Led to the Explosion of *A Study in Scarlet*." In *A Tangled Skein: A Companion Volume to The Baker Street Irregulars' Expedition to the Country of the Saints*. Leslie S. Klinger, Ed. New York: *The Baker Street Irregulars*, 2008: 58. Print.

Arthur Conan Doyle's novel *A Study in Scarlet* illustrates the unexpected nuances that students can discover in familiar cultural icons. Instructors of college composition can use students' fascination with Sherlock Holmes to inspire meaningful classroom discussion, research, and writing. The novel can serve as a fine course text on its own or can facilitate a deeper exploration of adaptation, genre, history in literature, allegations of bigotry, the history of detective fiction, academic credibility, and even copyright. Indeed, the first novel starring Holmes and Watson is hardly "elementary:" the numerous pop culture, historical, and literary issues associated with *A Study in Scarlet* support composition and literature instruction at a variety of levels.

AUTHOR BIO:

Kate M. Donley, M.A., is an adjunct faculty member in the Department of English and Communications at Norwich University, where she has taught freshman composition for eight years. Recently she has been exploring the potential of intertextuality, archival documents, and service learning to motivate meaningful writing and undergraduate research. This book analysis reprises a colloquium Kate presented in September 2013 sponsored by the Norwich University College of Liberal Arts, and she is grateful to her colleagues for their kind support. She has a goldfish named Sherlock.

Social Media:

Twitter: @k8donley

REFERENCE CITATION:

MLA:

Donley, Kate M. "Applications in the Classroom: Hardly Elementary—Frontiers for Freshman Composition with Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet*." *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy* 2.1 (2015). Web and Print.

APA:

Donley, K. M. (2015). Applications in the classroom: Hardly elementary—Frontiers for freshman composition with Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet*. *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*. <http://journaldialogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/K-Donley.pdf>

