

Teacher's notes

Sherlock Holmes Short Stories

by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle



SUMMARY

The six Sherlock Holmes stories in this volume contain examples of the contrasting kinds of story that made the detective famous: those where pure logic solves an apparently insoluble problem, and those of action, where Holmes and the narrator, his friend, Dr Watson, arrive just in time to save innocent victims from villains.

How could a respectable businessman be seen at the window of an opium den and his clothes be found there but no trace of the man himself? Surely the tramp with the twisted lip in the room must have murdered him. Or, why should a millionaire in America have left a fortune to three people who happen to have the unusual surname of Garrideb? Or, will Holmes and Watson be in time to discover the whereabouts of the beautiful Lady Frances Carfax before she is murdered by criminals?

ABOUT SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930) was born in Edinburgh and qualified as a doctor after studying medicine at Edinburgh University. He went into medical practice at Southsea on the south coast but began writing stories to supplement his income and in 1887 published the first long Sherlock Holmes story, *A Study in Scarlet*. Four years later, when his short stories about the detective began to appear regularly in the *Strand* magazine, he gave up his career as a doctor, though he later received a knighthood for organizing the medical services during the Boer War in Africa (1899–1902).

Personally, Conan Doyle looked like a stronger, taller version of the narrator of the Holmes stories, Dr Watson, and his values, too, were like Watson's – those of public schoolboys in the Victorian era (1832–1901). He was brave, good at sport and chivalrous towards women. From childhood he had been fascinated by brave people in history and he much preferred his historical novels to Sherlock Holmes. Consequently, he announced Holmes' death in a story in 1893 and did not write about him again for several years. But in 1901 he had the idea for his most famous Holmes story, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, and Holmes' popularity with the public caused him to bring him back to life for a further series of adventures.

BACKGROUND AND THEMES

Sherlock Holmes is by far the most famous fictional detective. His name has become part of the English language, and the stories still appeal to readers today even though the social background of London has changed completely.

Conan Doyle based Holmes on one of his teachers at Edinburgh University, a man called Bell, who had the ability to guess his patients' background from minute observation of small details. This kind of analysis and explanation continually astonishes Watson and delights readers. In contrast to Watson, who is a thoroughly conventional ex-public schoolboy of his time, Conan Doyle also gave Holmes characteristics that would have appeared rather exotic. He is a confirmed bachelor, he plays the violin, he takes drugs, and he despises authority. Part of his attraction, then, is that he is a rebel, but a rebel on the side of justice, and consequently he has a freedom of thought and action which the average policeman doesn't have. But he is also well able to defend himself physically and a master of disguise so that even Watson fails to recognize him.

The contrast between Holmes and Watson is vital to the success of the stories. Watson asks all the questions the reader wants to ask, and when Holmes impatiently explains what to him is obvious, Watson is acting on our behalf. Apart from that, if Holmes told the stories he would sound arrogant, but instead of that we are full of admiration for him because we see him through Watson's eyes.

Though there are two kinds of Sherlock Holmes story represented in this selection, the themes are similar in both cases. The villains are usually professional criminals, often in hiding under false names, who aim to make money by robbery, fraud, or even, as in 'The Engineer's Thumb', literally, by forgery. Those that are essentially puzzles depend on the idea that there is always a logical explanation for what seems strange. The other stories are rather more conventional tales of action.

The social background accurately reflects the London of a hundred years ago. This was a society where forty per cent of the population were servants. Everyone is respectful to gentlemen like Holmes and Watson, and

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hurries to obey their orders as they would not do today. The police belong to a lower social class and were poorly thought of at that time because of inefficiency and corruption. This is why almost all fictional detectives until the 1920s were amateurs. Another feature in contrast to today is that the trains always seem to run on time, carriages are always on hand when needed, and Holmes and Watson never seem to be delayed by the traffic!

The villains in the stories of action tend to come from abroad. The German villain in 'The Engineer's Thumb' reflects the emergence of Germany as the main threat to the British Empire. When good and bad characters both have a colonial background (Green and Peters in 'The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax'), we are reminded that young men at that time often went to 'the colonies' to make their fortune.

The enduring appeal of the Sherlock Holmes stories is partly due to television. They are ideally suited to short episodes where the characters are already well known and the background can easily be recreated on the screen. The stories depend, too, very greatly on dialogue and adaptation to dramatic form. But above all there is the fact that internationally Holmes has become the perfect example of the private detective.

Communicative activities

The following teacher-led activities cover the same sections of text as the exercises at the back of the reader, and supplement those exercises. For supplementary exercises covering shorter sections of the book, see the photocopiable Student's Activities pages of this Factsheet. These are primarily for use with class readers, but with the exception of pair/groupwork questions, can also be used by students working alone in a self-access centre.

ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK

Put students into small groups to answer these questions:

Look at the front cover of the book. Who are these characters? Which is which? How do you know? Have you ever seen films or videos or TV series about Sherlock Holmes? What were they like? What did you think of them?

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING A SECTION

'The Man with the Twisted Lip'

Put students into small groups. Ask them to list the reasons why Holmes at first believes Neville Saint Clair has been murdered and how he reaches the correct solution to the mystery.

'The Engineer's Thumb'

Put students into small groups. Ask them to write down the steps that make Holmes able to find the house where the engineer lost his thumb.

'The Patient'

Put students into groups of three. One plays the part of Blessington, the others of the two men who pretend to be the patient and his son. The two men must say how they found Blessington again and must accuse him of what he did. They then tell him what they intend to do.

'The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax'

Put students into pairs. They act the conversation between Mr Green and Lady Frances Carfax at the end of the story. They must explain everything they have done since their last meeting.

'The Three Garridebs'

Put students into small groups. Ask them to make a list of the steps that make Holmes able to solve the mystery.

'Wisteria House'

Put students into pairs. One plays the part of Baynes, the other of Sherlock Holmes. They act out the conversations between them on pages 100-1 and 106-7.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK

Put students into small groups to discuss this question. Why do you think Sherlock Holmes is still the most famous name among detectives?

Glossary

It will be useful for your students to know the following new words. They are practised in the 'Before You Read' sections of exercises at the back of the book. (Definitions are based on those in the Longman Active Study Dictionary.)

'The Man with the Twisted Lip'

addict (n) someone who is unable to stop taking drugs
carriage (n) a vehicle with wheels pulled by a horse
cripple (n) someone who has a bad leg and cannot walk properly
opium (n) a drug made from red flowers called poppies
veil (n) a piece of material that women wear to cover their faces

'The Engineer's Thumb'

axe (n) a tool used for cutting wood
brandy (n) a strong alcoholic drink made from wine
cart (n) a vehicle with two or four wheels pulled by a horse
forger (n) someone who makes false bank notes or coins
seal (n) something used to close a container to stop air or liquid getting out

'The Patient'

cataplexy (n) a brain disease that puts the patient into a state of waking sleep
cigar (n) something that people smoke; it is made of tobacco leaves rolled in a thick tube
consult (v) to ask someone for professional advice or information

'The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax'

chloroform (n) a liquid drug used to make people unconscious
coffin (n) a box in which people are buried
maid (n) a woman servant
pawnbroker (n) someone who lends money to people in exchange for objects
undertaker (n) someone who buries people when they die

'The Three Garridebs'

magnifying glass (n) a piece of glass that makes objects look bigger
plough (n) a piece of equipment used on a farm to turn over the ground so that seeds can be planted

'Wisteria House'

straw (n) part of dried plants, in this case used as a bed
telegram (n) a message sent by electrical signals



Student's activities

Sherlock Holmes Short Stories



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These activities can be done alone or with one or more other students. Pair/group-only activities are marked.

Activities before reading the book

What do you think are the main differences between London a hundred years ago and London today? In particular, consider the way in which society is organized, the methods of transport and the role of the Metropolitan Police at Scotland Yard.

Activities while reading the book

'The Man with the Twisted Lip'

- Who is talking, who are they talking to, and who or what are they talking about?
 - 'He's probably at a place called the Bar of Gold, in East London.'
 - 'Your wife has been waiting two days for you. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.'
 - 'I was certainly surprised to find you in that place.'
 - 'He used to leave home every morning and then catch the 5.14 train back from Cannon Street station.'
 - 'She heard a cry, and saw her husband looking down at her.'
 - 'The only person in the upper part of the house was an ugly cripple who lived there.'
 - 'His upper lip is twisted as the result of an old accident.'
 - 'This is written in pencil on a page torn from some book.'
 - 'It is clear that you are breaking the law by keeping me here.'
 - 'My ugly face made everybody pity me, and my pockets quickly filled with money. Only one man knew my secret.'
- Discuss these questions with another student. Have you ever seen beggars like the man described in this story? Do you think they make a lot of money? Do you think they earn more than they would if they had a job as a journalist or actor?

'The Engineer's Thumb'

- Match the name with the description or action.

(a) A guard at Paddington station	(i) is a short, fat man with a beard.
(b) Victor Hatherley	(ii) takes his visitor to see Sherlock Holmes.

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| (c) Dr Watson | (iii) tries to save the engineer's life. |
| (d) Captain Stark | (iv) is a patient of Dr Watson. |
| (e) Mr Ferguson | (v) has read about a missing engineer. |
| (f) Elise | (vi) is a police officer. |
| (g) Sherlock Holmes | (vii) is a very thin German. |
| (h) Bradstreet | (viii) went into business on his own. |

2 Answer these questions.

- What has happened to the engineer's thumb?
- Why does Dr Watson take him to see Sherlock Holmes?
- Why was the engineer eager to accept Captain Stark's offer?
- What did he not like about it?
- What did Stark say the machine was used for?
- How did the engineer realize that Captain Stark was a foreigner?
- What was the machine really used for?
- What caused the fire at the house?

'The Patient'

- Which of these sentences are true, which are false? Correct those that are false.
 - Dr Trevelyan could not start his medical practice at first because he was poor.
 - Mr Blessington helped Dr Trevelyan in return for half the money he earned.
 - The patient who says he is a Russian lord comes to see the doctor alone.
 - The doctor does not believe from the patient's actions that he is suffering from catalepsy.
 - The patient goes to Blessington's rooms while the doctor is looking for a bottle.
 - Mr Blessington says he keeps all his money in a black box in his room.
 - Holmes refuses to help Blessington because he has not told him the truth.
 - The police and Dr Trevelyan think Blessington has hanged himself.
 - Holmes realizes that other people have been in the room because they have smoked different cigars.
 - The murderers are caught and hanged for their crime.



Student's activities

- 2 Imagine that Blessington is so afraid when he sees Sherlock Holmes that he decides to tell him the truth. Act the conversation with another student. Holmes must ask where Blessington got the money in the box, and why he helped Dr Trevelyan. Blessington must tell him why he is afraid and who the strange men are.

'The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax'

- 1 Put the events in order.
- Lady Frances meets Dr and Mrs Schlessinger.
 - A telegram proves that Dr Schlessinger is Peters.
 - Holmes comes to Watson's help, dressed as a workman.
 - Holmes and Watson see an old woman's body in a coffin.
 - Miss Dobney becomes worried because Lady Frances has not written to her.
 - Holmes and Watson find Lady Frances alive in the coffin.
 - Holmes introduces Philip Green to Watson.
 - Green sees Peters' assistant go into an undertaker's.
 - A man with a beard is seen talking to Lady Frances.
 - Holmes sends Dr Watson a telegram which Watson thinks is a joke.
- 2 Discuss this question with another student. Holmes tells Watson that 'The London police would feel lonely if I went abroad'. The police are always polite to him and depend on him to solve their cases for them. How do you think the police in your country today would react if a private detective behaved like Holmes?

'The Three Garridebs'

- 1 Answer these questions.
- Why does Holmes think that the American Mr Garrideb has lived in England for a long time?
 - How, according to the American Garrideb, did Alexander Hamilton Garrideb make his fortune?
 - How does Holmes find out that the American Garrideb is lying?
 - Why is it important to the American Mr Garrideb that Mr Nathan Garrideb never takes any exercise?
 - What is unusual about Mr Howard Garrideb's advertisement?
 - Why does Holmes ask to look at Nathan Garrideb's collection in his absence?

- Why is Watson quite pleased that Evans shoots him and wounds him?
- What is Evans looking for in Mr Nathan Garrideb's room?
- What happens to Mr Nathan Garrideb afterwards?
- And what happens to Evans?

- 2 Discuss this question with other students. In this story, Holmes suggests that there are differences between the way the law operates in Britain and the United States. What were they, in his opinion, a hundred years ago, and what are they now?

'Wisteria House'

- 1 Answer these questions.
- Why does Mr Scott Eccles go to see Sherlock Holmes and not the police?
 - Why does Gregson of Scotland Yard follow Scott Eccles to Holmes' house?
 - How was Garcia's behaviour at dinner strange, according to Scott Eccles?
 - Why was Scott Eccles surprised and angry when he woke up the next morning?
 - Why did Garcia invite Scott Eccles to stay at his house?
 - What information did the letter Garcia received tell him about the house?
 - And why did the letter mention the colours green and white?
 - Why does Baynes arrest Garcia's cook?
 - Why is Miss Burnet involved in the plot to kill Henderson?
 - What happens to Henderson afterwards?
- 2 Discuss this question with another student. Look up *dictator* in your dictionary. In this story people from a Central American country try to kill a former dictator who is living in Britain. What would they do today?

Activities after reading the book

Sherlock Holmes stories fall into two clear categories, those that depend on a logical explanation of something strange, like 'The Man with the Twisted Lip' and 'The Three Garridebs', and others that are really adventure stories. Which do you prefer?

