

A Study Guide to Sherlock Holmes – Volume 1

(The Novels, The Adventures, and The Memoirs)

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FOREWORD

“Why a class in Sherlock Holmes?” someone once asked me when I mentioned the course I was teaching at Vassar College, “Aren’t the stories self-explanatory?”

True enough, a casual reader may readily grasp each of the sixty tales without further explanation. But why stop there? These stories provide a unique and accessible view of a romantic age. They open up a window on the late Victorian and Edwardian eras, and they invite us to learn more. Indeed, the stories suggest so many avenues of exploration that a full college semester is not long enough to follow all the leads. As Sherlock Holmes himself once said: “Education never ends, Watson.”

We can approach the stories from several angles: we can examine the tales themselves, dissecting the method of storytelling and checking for internal consistency – or inconsistency. The former is methodical, the latter, felicitous. For decades, students of the Sherlock Holmes Canon have debated and ruminated about the stories’ contradictions. The questions have enhanced rather than detracted from scholars’ appreciation of the Master Detective. It is all quite a testament to the stories’ engaging and convincing nature.

We can, next, look at Sherlock Holmes in the context of other examples of Victorian literature and the history of detective fiction. In the realm of detective writing, the character of Holmes is in the vanguard, with his faithful friend, John H. Watson, at his side to observe and record.

This prompts us to look into the life and work of Arthur Conan Doyle himself. This physician-author did not consider the Holmesian tales to be among his better works. It is no affront to say that the public knew better than he. Readers, not writers, create icons. Conan Doyle brought Sherlock Holmes into the world with **A Study in Scarlet** in 1887. He followed this book closely with **The Sign of Four**. Between 1891 and 1893, he turned out more than two dozen short stories for the **Strand** magazine, later collected into **The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes** and **The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes**. After this magnificent output, Conan Doyle tired of his sleuth-creation and disposed of him with a dramatic death in the swirling water of Switzerland’s Reichenbach Falls. Forever, he intended.

A reading public, enamored with the Great Detective, pressed for more. In 1901, Conan Doyle relented with **The Hound of the Baskervilles**. Then he brought Holmes back to life in further short stories, published sporadically between 1903 and 1927.

Sherlock Holmes, thus, spans the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries. Starting within the familiar terrain of these well-loved stories, we can venture into further study of the vocabulary, history, or politics of this age.

William Dorn has taught courses on Sherlock Holmes at the University of Denver for more than 25 years, superbly weaving each of these distinctive strands into the course. The study guide is suitable for use in the classroom, but it also provides excellent fodder for the many groups that meet in the recreational study of Sherlock Holmes, or it may serve as a guide for the solitary pursuit of the Great Detective, alone or in front of a cheery fire.

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Introduction

This study guide is intended for the beginning or intermediate scholar of the Sherlock Holmes stories of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. It may be used for self-study or as notes for a formal class. The first volume is divided into three sections: The Novels, The Adventures, and The Memoirs. A second volume will cover The Return, His Last Bow, and The Casebook.

The study guide for each adventure has four parts.

1. An exercise in determining the date of the adventure.
2. A vocabulary list, especially of Victorian terms, in the adventure.
3. Some perplexing puzzles or open questions posed by the adventure.
4. Three short, multiple-choice quizzes of varying degrees of difficulty. There is a simple quiz that tests whether the adventure has been read at all. There is an intermediate quiz that tests if the adventure has been read with some degree of care. Finally there is an advanced quiz that challenges even the most careful reader. So that the reader may enjoy taking all the quizzes, the solutions are given separately.

Exercises in Determining the Date

The reader is given specific clues regarding the date of the adventure and is asked to use Sherlock Holmes' logic to find the date most acceptable in light of the list of clues. The dates, as determined this way, will not lead to a chronology. The latter task requires analyzing all sixty adventures as a body – a much too difficult task for most scholars and certainly beyond the beginning or intermediate scholar.

Vocabulary

The reader is given a list of words or phrases and their definitions. Examples of the vocabulary words and phrases from **A Study in Scarlet** are:

- Commissionaire
- Parthian shot
- four of gin hot.

Open Questions

Many of Sherlock Holmes's adventures leave unanswered questions. For example, from **A Study in Scarlet**, there is the question: Why wasn't Jefferson Hope suspicious when he was summoned to 221B Baker Street? After all, he had sent the old lady to 221B to claim Lucy's lost ring and, therefore, knew who lived there.

And from **The Hound of the Baskervilles**: Dr. Mortimer was an expert on skulls and anatomy. Why didn't he recognize the portrait of Hugo Baskerville as a likeness of Stapleton as Holmes did?

Quizzes

As noted earlier, there are three multiple-choice quizzes for each adventure: a simple quiz, an intermediate quiz, and an advanced quiz.

The simple quizzes are designed to test whether the adventure has been read at all. Even novice Sherlockians will find the simple quizzes easy. Indeed, anyone who has read a story – even cursorily – should get a perfect score on each quiz. A typical simple quiz question, this one taken from **The Valley of Fear**, is:

Holmes searched the moat for: a. the murder weapon; b. a dumb bell; c. clothes; d. none of the above

The intermediate quizzes test whether that particular adventure has been read with some degree of care. Serious students of Sherlock Holmes should have little difficulty with these quizzes. A typical intermediate quiz question, this one taken from **The Valley of Fear**, is:

What was Porlock's first name? a. Andrew; b. Fred; c. Peter; d. none of the above

Finally, the advanced quizzes will challenge the most careful reader and, indeed, may stump even long-standing Sherlockian scholars. A typical advanced quiz question, taken from **The Hound of the Baskervilles**, is:

Which one of the following was NOT in the cloth bundle Cartwright left in the stone hut on the moor for Holmes: a. a loaf of bread; b. two tins of preserved peaches; c. tinned tongue; d. a bottle of spirits

More on Finding the Date

The exercises in finding the date are meant to be lessons in logic – the logic of Sherlock Holmes – for beginning or intermediate scholars of the corpus of the sixty stories written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The reader's goal then should not be to arrive at a consistent chronology of the cases – a task that has left even such accomplished scholars as Baring-Gould, Bell, Brend, Christ, Dakin, and Zeisler in disagreement. After all, to construct a chronology requires tackling the entire 60 stories in the Canon simultaneously. This is much too formidable a task for all but the most skilled scholar.

The reader should simply try to arrive at the most acceptable date consistent with the clues given in this notes. All possible clues from the story are not given in the notes. Rather the reader is given the fewest number of clues that lead to a reasonable date.

Some examples of clues and where they lead are:

From **The Sign of Four**

1. Major John Sholto died April 28, 1882
2. "For weeks and for months (after Major Sholto's death) we (the Sholto brothers) dug...every part of the garden..."

These two clues lead to the conclusion that

- A. The Sholto brothers started digging for the treasure at the end of April or the beginning of May in 1882.

Next

3. Thaddeus Sholto says the treasure was discovered "only yesterday"
4. Holmes says, "...they (the Sholtos) were six years looking for it (the treasure) ..."

The conclusion from A, 3, and 4 is

- B. The treasure was discovered 6 years after the search started give or take 3 months, that is, between late January 1888 and early August 1888.

What is the purpose of these dating exercises if it is not to create a chronology? Each time the reader performs the logical steps leading to a date for one of the adventures, he or she should become more skilled at finding solutions to read problems and, in the process, learn to challenge unsubstantiated claims made by other people or groups. So have some fun and remember that these are exercises in the logic of Sherlock Holmes – nothing more, nothing less.