

“Our Case Is Not Complete”:

Sherlock Holmes, Victorian Spiritualism, and the Scientific Use of the Imagination

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“Our case is not complete... It is not what we know, but what we can prove.” – Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*

In 1887, the year Arthur Conan Doyle published the first *Sherlock Holmes* novel, *A Study in Scarlet*, he wrote to the Spiritualist journal *Light*, proclaiming his belief in Spiritualist phenomena. In his letter, Conan Doyle stated: “After weighing the evidence, I could no more doubt the existence of the [Spiritual] phenomena than I could doubt the existence of lions in Africa, though I have never been to that continent and have never chanced to see one.”¹ This message, and his later official conversion in 1916, have confused and irritated generations of readers, who often dismiss Conan Doyle’s belief as a rash decision prompted by the deaths of his son and brother in World War I.² The source of their perplexity stems largely from the seeming disparity between the irrationality of Conan Doyle’s beliefs, and the hyper-rationality of his most famous character, Sherlock Holmes.

Victorian Spiritualism can be best understood as an umbrella term—there was no single Spiritualist organization, but rather a number of groups with varying beliefs. These groups, however, shared a conviction that “reality as we are taught to understand it accounts for only a fraction of the ultimate reality which lies just beyond our immediate senses.”³ Conan Doyle broadly defined his Spiritualism as the belief that “death makes no change in personality, and that communication under proper conditions is possible.”⁴ Spiritualists often claimed their beliefs were derived through investigations, which they modeled on scientific experiments. The

¹ Arthur Conan Doyle, “A Test Message: To the Editor of *Light*,” *Light* 7.339 (1887): 303.

² Alex Owen, “‘Borderland Forms’: Arthur Conan Doyle, Albion’s Daughters, and the Politics of the Cottingley Fairies,” *History Workshop* 38 (1994): 67.

³ Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern*, (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2004), 19.

⁴ Arthur Conan Doyle, *Spiritualism: Some Straight Questions and Direct Answers*, (Cambridge: Rupert Brooks, 1998), 1.

séance became the most commonly repeated test of Spiritualist phenomena. As Gauri Viswanathan notes in her article, “The Ordinary Business of Occultism,” the Western world required “that esoteric knowledge conform to the expectations of regularity, predictability, and control.”⁵

Conan Doyle has been ridiculed, and at times completely dismissed, for his Spiritualist beliefs by both his contemporary readers and modern critics. Alex Owen discusses early reactions to Conan Doyle’s Spiritualism, saying: “one American review of [Conan Doyle’s Spiritualist book] *The Coming of the Fairies* was entitled, ‘Poor Sherlock Holmes—Hopelessly Crazy?’, whilst *Punch* settled for a gentle lampoon showing Conan Doyle, head in the clouds, manacled to a scowling Holmes.”⁶ Michael Saler, in *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality*, stresses that this discomfort stems from the discord between Sherlock Holmes’s strict rationalism, and Conan Doyle’s professed Spiritualism:

Many readers of the early Sherlock Holmes stories assumed that his creator must have shared the attributes that made Holmes so quintessentially modern: his secularism, his rationalism, his skepticism. But from an early age, Conan Doyle expressed ambivalence about modernity.... He was not comfortable with modern atheism and materialism either; his disenchantment with these aspects of modernity and dissatisfaction with agnosticism led him to explore Theosophy in 1884 and Spiritualism shortly thereafter, before he wrote the first Holmes story.⁷

⁵Gauri Viswanathan, “The Ordinary Business of Occultism,” *Critical Inquiry* 27.1 (Autumn, 2000): 11. See Also: Mark S. Morrisson’s “The Periodical Culture of the Occult Revival: Esoteric Wisdom, Modernity and Counter-Public Spheres,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 31.2 (Winter, 2008): 1-22, for an interesting discussion of scientific style Spiritualist periodicals.

⁶Owen, “Borderland Forms,” 67.

⁷Michael Saler, *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality* (New York: Oxford World Classics, 2012), 111.

Saler's examination of the reception of Sherlock Holmes reveals three key assumptions: firstly, that a literary character must resemble his creator. Secondly, that Sherlock Holmes was secular, rational, and skeptical. And lastly, that Conan Doyle's spiritual explorations were irrational, and demonstrate the author's extreme credulity. Saler shows that this belief continues among modern critics when he later refers to Spiritualism as a "premodern form of enchantment."⁸ The perceived distance between Holmes and Conan Doyle has led some readers, most famously the Baker Street Irregulars, to ironically refer to Conan Doyle as Dr. Watson's literary agent, while others have taken Sherlock Holmes existence to be literally true.⁹

In this essay, I will argue that Conan Doyle's Spiritualist works and his *Sherlock Holmes* canon do, in fact, share an underlying philosophy. This philosophy is characterized by a belief in an objective truth that underlies reality, and creates an impression on the physical world. The chaos of the everyday world obscures truth and meaning for most people, but can be read using scientific techniques—both Sherlock Holmes and Spiritualist investigators apply forensic technologies to the material world in order to reveal life's hidden order. Yet they also show that facts alone do not constitute reality; physical evidence must be interpreted by using the imagination in order to reveal truth. In doing so, they problematize the reconstructive sciences upon which their methods are based by showing that these sciences—such as archeology and paleontology—themselves rely upon imaginative leaps, despite claiming to utilize only scientific deductions. Rather than condemning these sciences for using imagination, Conan Doyle's works emulate them, and in doing so suggest that the use of imagination is *necessary* in order to bridge the gap between the material world and the objective truth that underlies it. In both these bodies of work, therefore, imagination is held to have a unique and epistemologically valid access to

⁸ *Ibid*, 113.

⁹ *Ibid*, 113-120.

truth. When an investigator relies upon his imaginative faculties he can not only accurately reconstruct the past, but also channel other people—an ability that Holmes uses in order to solve cases by apprehending criminals.

In the beginning of the second *Sherlock Holmes* novel, *The Sign of Four*, Sherlock Holmes receives a letter from a French detective whom he has been helping with a case. Holmes explains to Watson that the detective “has considerable gifts himself. He possesses two out of the three qualities necessary for the ideal detective. He has the power of observation and that of deduction. He is only wanting in knowledge, and that may come in time.”¹⁰ This essay is structured after this triptych. I will begin by examining the worldview that underlies both the *Sherlock Holmes* canon and the Spiritualist works, and then explore how forensic technologies work in each. I will then interrogate claims of Sherlock Holmes’s rationalism in a section on deduction, suggesting that Holmes relies on a science of imagination, rather than a science of deduction. Finally, I will explore how observation, deduction, and imagination combine with knowledge, and are used to contain criminals, in the *Sherlock Holmes* canon by following Holmes’s method as he solves the mystery of *The Sign of Four*.

Before proceeding, I wish to briefly elaborate on my methodology. I will be approaching the *Sherlock Holmes* canon and the Spiritualist writings as two bodies of work by the same author, rather than treating the character Sherlock Holmes as if he literally existed. Relatedly, while I am arguing that Holmes is not as rational as he claims to be, and shares a philosophy and thought process with Conan Doyle’s Spiritualist work, I do not mean to suggest that the character Sherlock Holmes believed in Spiritualism. I will also not be approaching Spiritualism as either true or false. Rather, I will use Spiritualism as a window into the cultural beliefs and anxieties of

¹⁰ Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Sign of Four* (Orchard Park, N.Y.: Broadview Press, 2001), 11.

the day, which I seek to explore, especially as they relate to the fields of anthropology, archaeology, paleontology, and forensics.

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Observation

In Conan Doyle's first *Sherlock Holmes* novel, *A Study in Scarlet*, Holmes introduces his theory of a fundamentally ordered world, which can be seen only by the astute observer. After moving in with Holmes, Dr. Watson picks up a magazine and reads an article titled "The Book of Life," which claims that its conclusions are "as infallible as so many propositions of Euclid."¹¹ Watson grows irate as he reads the grandiose claims of the "Science of Deduction and Analysis" outlined in the paper, which is authored by Sherlock Holmes:

'From a drop of water,' said the writer, 'a logician could infer the possibility of an Atlantic or a Niagara without having seen or heard of one or the other. So all life is a great chain, the nature of which is known whenever we are shown a single link of it... By a man's finger-nails, by his coat-sleeve, by his boot, by his trouser-knees, by the callosities of his forefinger and thumb, by his expression, by his shirt-cuffs – by each of these things a man's calling is plainly revealed. That all united should fail to enlighten the competent inquirer in any case is almost inconceivable.'¹²

The minutest physical details, when viewed correctly, reveal a world that is ordered and logical. Reality is a great chain of causes and effects, all of which are linked. Given any one event, Holmes claims, the logician can reason all of its sources and its consequences. In his essay "Sherlock Holmes vs. the Bureaucrat," Marshall McLuhan argues, "[Holmes's] is a mind for

¹¹ Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet* (New York, N.Y.: Penguin, 2001), 20.

¹² *Ibid.*

which situations are total and inclusive unities. Every facet, every item of a situation, for Holmes, has total relevance... In an organic complex all parts have total relevance, not just *some* relevance to the whole.”¹³ This applies to inanimate objects as miniscule and uniform as a drop of water, which can be used by the superior logician, to infer the existence of unimaginably greater counterparts. In Holmes’s system, therefore, even the smallest clue is a synecdoche; the clue reveals an interconnected and meaningful world because it is both a product and an integral part of the world.

For Holmes, the most important record of order and meaning is the body. Seemingly inconsequential physical details, usually made unintentionally, expose, among other things, a person’s habits and profession. This extends to an individual’s inner-life as well. Watson notes when reading *The Book of Life* that “the writer claimed by a momentary expression, a twitch of a muscle or a glance of an eye, to fathom a man’s inmost thoughts.”¹⁴ In this way, individuals can be read like a text. A twitch of an eye, for example, is caused by a man’s innermost thoughts, and can therefore reveal those thoughts. In *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science*, Ronald Thomas argues that to the forensic scientist and the literary detective, there is “an empirically definable identity – a series of discrete material signs that may be categorized, be documented, recorded, and compared to the corresponding traces of the criminal body left at the crime scene.”¹⁵ Sherlock Holmes’s Science of Deduction allows the investigator to read identity through these physical traces. In Holmes’s science, clues must first be noticed, and then be deciphered through deductive logic. In this section I will be examining how clues are observed

¹³ Marshall McLuhan, “Sherlock Holmes vs. the Bureaucrat,” in *The Baker Street Reader*, ed. Philip A. Shreffler (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1984), 39.

¹⁴ Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*, 20

¹⁵ Ronald Thomas, *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 288.

in both the *Sherlock Holmes* canon and Conan Doyle's Spiritualist writings, arguing that the reliance on physical minutiae in each signals a meaningful order underlying the material world. I will then explore the reliability forensic techniques are thought to have, and suggest that the both bodies of Conan Doyle's work claim forensic technologies convey self-evident truths.

Sherlock Holmes's London is a city that, on its surface, is disturbingly chaotic. In *The Sign of Four*, Holmes and Dr. Watson speed through London in a hansom cab. Holmes gazes out at the London streets and remarks to Watson: "See how the folk swarm over yonder in the gaslight... Dirty-looking rascals, but I suppose every one has some little immortal spark concealed about him. You would not think it, to look at them. There is no *a priori* probability about it. A strange enigma is man!"¹⁶ Sherlock Holmes lives in a world that is crowded and superficially disordered—it is full of dirty, swarming masses. Ever the elitist, Holmes grudgingly admits that even common people have both meaning and agency. He further remarks, "You can... never foretell what any one man will do."¹⁷ On its surface, industrial London is unpredictable and threatening. It is overflowing with people who are simply anonymous workers to Holmes, whose actions cannot be anticipated or controlled.

By taking the correct approach, however, Sherlock Holmes reveals his world to be highly ordered. Though individuals are unique, populations are predictable. Holmes continues musing to Watson in the cab, saying: "While the individual man is an insoluble puzzle, in the aggregate he becomes a mathematical certainty... You can say with precision what an average number will be up to. Individuals vary, but percentages remain constant. So says the statistician."¹⁸ For Holmes, there is a deep order to the world, which is both disguised by, and revealed through, the

¹⁶ Conan Doyle, *The Sign of Four*, 119.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid*

chaotic and seemingly mundane streets of London. Here Holmes reveals a dichotomy between the unpredictable individual and the comprehensible type. This opposition is present throughout the Canon. As Rosemary Jann remarks, “in the face of a universe that seems incoherent and incomprehensible, Holmes affirms a fantasy of control by implying that all it takes to uncover nature’s hidden order is a sufficient exercise of human intellect.”¹⁹ Holmes applies his intellect, and therefore control, by first identifying and isolating an individual from the crowded streets of London, and then predicting that individual’s actions by classifying him as a type of person.

This divide between the individual and the group is rooted in forensic sciences of the Victorian era. Thomas explores the historical trends underlying detective fiction, suggesting that Francis Galton, one of the foremost forensic scientists in England and inventor of eugenics influenced Conan Doyle. Galton “[used] the rhetoric of the ‘type,’ the ‘ideal,’ and the ‘generic’ to suggest the higher reality of an abstract yet authentic human norm, compared to which individuals are reduced to ghostly traces, existing literally as mere shadows of the more substantial type.”²⁰ According to Galton, personality and behavior were innate and tied to physical features. Arsonists, for instance, might be defined not only by a predilection for setting fires, but also by a marked hooked nose. Galton attempted to determine the correlations between physiology and behavior by using composite photography—the technique of combining multiple images of individuals in order to generate the picture of a type. From its origins, therefore, forensics attempted “on the one hand, to isolate the deviant individual from everyone else by inscribing a unique identity on the body, and, on the other, to recognize a generalizable criminal

¹⁹ Rosemary Jann, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes: Detecting Social Order*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), 50.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 25.

type that can be made visible in a set of bodily traits.”²¹ This can be seen in the cases of Sherlock Holmes, in which forensics is used to first identify, and then group, the individual.

The first stage of this process requires Holmes to collect evidence, invariably in the form of material clues, which reveals the interior life of a person. Thomas notes “the detective always urges us to consider the objects of his investigation—persons or texts—as a series of discrete physical facts or functions, as data recorded by the machinery of his own scientific techniques rather than as a story to be told.”²² Holmes uses the cutting edge forensic sciences in order to find clues with unquestionable epistemological value. One of the strongest modes of evidence in the *Sherlock Holmes* canon is photography. In *A Scandal in Bohemia*, the King of Bohemia requests Holmes help him after being blackmailed by Irene Adler. Before knowing the form of the blackmail, Holmes is flippant about the King’s worries. Writing, Holmes states can be dismissed as “forgery,” private note-paper can be said to have been “stolen,” and the King’s seal “imitated.”²³ When, however, the King states he and Ms. Adler were in a photograph together, Holmes replies “Oh, dear! That is very bad! Your majesty has indeed committed an indiscretion.”²⁴ Thomas notes that this is because the photograph, “like the polygraph, is based on the principle that however a suspect might present himself or whatever he might say to defend himself, his photograph spoke the ‘real’ truth about him.”²⁵ Photography, in the *Sherlock Holmes* canon is a medium that conveys indisputable and unintentional evidence. Holmes does not consider the possibility of the photograph being a narrative in itself; he never suggests that the Irene Adler’s photo is a forgery. Instead photography is believed to speak for itself. The

²¹ *Ibid*, 126.

²² *Ibid*, 78.

²³ Arthur Conan Doyle, “A Scandal in Bohemia,” in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes and the Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 10-11.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 11.

²⁵ Thomas, *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science*, 122.

value of visual evidence is seen even in paintings. In *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, the key to the villain Jack Stapleton's true identity is in a family portrait. Though Holmes inquires about the portrait instead of simply accepting it as he does with photography, he concludes that "the family portrait did not lie, and that this fellow [Stapleton] was indeed a Baskerville."²⁶

Holmes relies upon physical traces, because they are left involuntarily, unlike testimony, which is unreliable because of its intentionality. This is best demonstrated in *A Study in Scarlet*, when Watson first chronicles Holmes analyzing a crime scene. Holmes is shown a message—"Rache" or "revenge" in German—written on the wall of the crime scene in blood. He dismisses the meaning of word, however, as having no evidentiary value, and instead examines what the form of the word says about its author. Holmes explains his reasoning to the bewildered Watson:

As to poor Lestrade's discovery, it was simply a blind intended to put the police upon a wrong track, by suggesting Socialism and secret societies. It was not done by a German. The A, if you noticed, was printed somewhat after the German fashion. Now, a real German invariably prints in the Latin character, so that we may safely say that this was not written by one, but by a clumsy imitator who overdid his part.²⁷

One of the first appearances of writing in the *Sherlock Holmes* is immediately dismissed for its misleading nature. The writing on the wall, in *A Study in Scarlet*, is meant to manipulate its reader. Holmes, however, focuses on the mechanical process of writing, and in doing so is able to find meaning in the form, rather than definition of the word. Holmes's gaze operates like the technologies he utilizes—he is able to reveal truth hidden in visual artifacts. Holmes "[personifies] the array of nineteenth-century observing machines that made visible what had

²⁶ Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (London: Vintage, 2008), 160.

²⁷ Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*, 38.

always been invisible beforehand.”²⁸ Ultimately, it is the blood in which the word “rache” is written that signals to Holmes key aspects of the killer’s identity. By examining the blood in the room, which was left without a wound, Holmes infers that the murderer had a nosebleed and was therefore “very full-blooded... robust and ruddy-faced.”²⁹ Thomas argues that Holmes’s distrust of testimony reflected a Victorian anxiety about the role and reliability of testimony: “These suspicions coincide perfectly with the diminished value placed on the testimony of witnesses in Anglo-American courtroom practice in the latter half of the century and the rising authority in forensic science that was being accorded to material evidence and expert advice in the process of fixing an individual’s true identity.”³⁰ For Holmes, testimony is suspect because it is produced intentionally, and therefore can be designed to manipulate. Physical clues, on the other hand, are left involuntarily and without intention to sway their interpreter. They are presumed to be truthful and reliable.

In his Spiritualist works, Conan Doyle reveals a similar philosophy—in which the everyday world is imbued with metaphysical meaning, and the minutest details reveal great hidden truths—despite his claims that Spiritualism is the enemy of materialism. Conan Doyle discusses the unique position of Spiritualism in his pamphlet, *Spiritualism: Some Straight Questions and Direct Answers*:

What does the religious movement aim at? It aims at destroying the present materialism by proving clearly that life carries on... How, then, does it differ from the present religious scheme? We propose to substitute proof for faith, and certainty for a vague

²⁸ Thomas, *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science*, 120.

²⁹ Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*, 125.

³⁰ Thomas, *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science*, 78.

belief. How do you get your certainty? By the testimony of the “dead” themselves, who send us long coherent messages, giving their actual experience.³¹

Conan Doyle frames his Spiritualism in opposition to the materialist position that nothing exists outside of physical realm. Spiritualism and materialism cannot be correctly classified as opposites, however, as while Spiritualism postulates a non-material realm, it believes that inhabitants of that plane may interact with the physical world, and in doing so, leave evidence. Because of this, Conan Doyle claims that his Spiritualism can be proven. By conversing with the dead, one can base their religion on fact, rather than faith.

Conan Doyle’s statement that his certainty is derived by testimony, however, actually obscures the role of forensic verification in his search for religious truth. Conan Doyle did not rely on testimony alone to inform his faith. Like many Spiritualists he participated in controlled, or “scientific” séances, in which testimony had to be corroborated.³² Sometimes in the course of a séance, a medium would summon a spirit hand, or claim that a ghost was moving an object. Conan Doyle investigated at least one of these occurrences by attempting to take fingerprints purportedly left by a ghost: “This morning Conan Doyle writes to me that the Crandons have got a print of Walter’s thumb, likewise a print of everyone’s in the room... He is going to submit them to further experts, at Scotland Yard and everywhere else, hoping that this will be regarded as conclusive.”³³ Conan Doyle reaction to these phenomena reveals the same underlying philosophy seen in the *Sherlock Holmes* canon: a belief that immaterial things, such as personality, thoughts, and in this case spirits, create physical impressions in the material world. Testimony alone, however, was suspect. In a letter to Sir Oliver Lodge, a Spiritualist and

³¹ Conan Doyle, *Spiritualism: Some Straight Questions and Direct Answers*, 3.

³² Roger Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 36.

³³ Memo from Oliver Lodge, Society of Psychical Research Manuscripts 35/546, June 11, 1927.

renowned physicist, Conan Doyle considered a posthumous memoir—that is one ghostwritten by a dead author³⁴—ultimately dismissing it because of the unreliable nature of its testimony: “I am convinced that harm would come from publishing [the manuscript]. There is not evidential matter enough... Can we satisfy ourselves that it is true? That is the all important question... It is an amazing document, more readable than most posthumous memoirs. But it really reminds me of Alice’s Adventures in parts.”³⁵ For Conan Doyle, therefore, testimony is not sufficient proof. It must be corroborated by either physical clues or further testimony. Like the word “rache” written on the wall, words can lie in Conan Doyle’s Spiritualist documents.

Because of the unreliability of testimony, Conan Doyle utilized forensic techniques in order to validate his faith. One mode of evidence Conan Doyle relied upon was spirit photography—photographs which claim to depict ghosts, fairies, and spirit matter. In a letter to Conan Doyle, Oliver Lodge concisely states the most basic premise of spirit photography: “if [spirit] materialisations exist they must be photographable.”³⁶ These investigations are predicated on the idea that the physical world both obscures and, under the right circumstances, conveys meaning and order, just as seen in the *Sherlock Holmes* canon. Sophie Schmit, in her overview of Conan Doyle and spirit photography states, “Conan Doyle... wrote prolifically on photography. He believed the process played an important role in communication with the dead and, like the rise of spiritualism, had been predicted from the beyond.”³⁷ According to Conan

³⁴ For a further exploration of this topic, see Helen Swords, “Necrobibliography: Books in the Spirit World,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 60 (Mar. 1999): 85-113.

³⁵ Arthur Conan Doyle to Oliver Lodge, Society of Psychical Research Manuscripts 35/489, November 25, 1924.

³⁶ Oliver Lodge to Arthur Conan Doyle, Society of Psychical Research Manuscripts 35/438, December 20, 1922.

³⁷ Sophie Schmit, “Conan Doyle: A Study in Black and White,” in *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult* ed. Jean-Loup Champion *et al.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 92.

Doyle, spirit photography not just reveals meaning in the world, but had a meaningful origin, being prophesied by spirits themselves. Thomas has interpreted Conan Doyle's belief in spirit photography as a testament to the epistemological value of the photograph: "That a person of Doyle's scientific turn of mind was so susceptible to the hoaxes these photographs turned out to be is a testimony to the prestige the photograph had achieved as a virtually unassailable form of evidence by the turn of the century."³⁸ Conan Doyle, however, did not blindly accept spirit photographs, and in his letters conveys more skepticism of photographic evidence than even his famous detective. This often meant conducting experiments in a photographer's lab, or on one occasion, Conan Doyle "sent [a spirit photograph] to Sir Arthur Keith to take Anthropometric measurements."³⁹ In Conan Doyle's Spiritual works and investigations, just as in his *Sherlock Holmes* canon, physical evidence is used to verify metaphysical truths. In doing so, Conan Doyle displays a belief that forensic sciences have access not only to the natural world, but also to the supernatural realm.

In this brief survey of Conan Doyle's Spiritualist investigations, I do not wish to imply that his methods were truly scientific. As Viswanathan notes, "No amount of rationalization can write away the discrepancy between empiricist ways of knowing (as the profession sciences understand them) and occult knowledge."⁴⁰ Rather, I hope to have demonstrated a consistent worldview underlying the *Sherlock Holmes* Canon and the Spiritualist works—a philosophy in which everything is linked in a web of causes and effects, and the immaterial, whether it be a person's internal life, or a spirit, creates an impression in the material world. Because of this, even the minutest aspects of the physical world are meaningful. The everyday, in Conan Doyle's

³⁸ Thomas, *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science*, 180.

³⁹ Arthur Conan Doyle to Oliver Lodge, Society of Psychical Research Manuscripts 35/490, November 25, 1924.

⁴⁰ Viswanathan, "The Ordinary Business of Occultism," 6.

works, hides this meaning from the common observer. A trained investigator, however, using the technologies of science, is able to access truth through these material clues.

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Deduction

In *The Sign of Four*, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's second Sherlock Holmes novel, Dr. Watson castigates the famous detective for his cold rationality, saying: "You really are an automaton,—a calculating machine!"⁴¹ This formulation of Sherlock Holmes as a purely logical individual has been accepted by generations of readers, and is frequently propagated by Holmes himself, yet it obscures the logic that underlies Holmes's method. Holmes's Science of Deduction is retrospective—it seeks to reconstruct the past. By emphasizing this, Conan Doyle likens Holmes's method to that of the conjectural sciences, such as paleontology and geology. I will argue that despite Sherlock Holmes's claims about his method of solving cases, his Science of Deduction relies upon assumptions, logical leaps, and most importantly, imagination. This is because, though clues in Holmes's world are imbued with meaning, they must be interpreted and made in to narrative in order to be understood. The need for interpretation highlights a fundamental gap between facts and meaning, which can only be bridged by imagination. This reliance on imagination subverts claims made by the conjectural sciences, which often asserted a positivist access to historical truth that supposedly did not rely upon any logical leaps. This formulation is strikingly similar to that seen in Conan Doyle's Spiritualist writings, in which scientific techniques must be combined with imagination, but scientific institutions are to be distrusted. This similarity, I will ultimately argue, displays a belief common to Conan Doyle's

⁴¹ Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Sign of Four*, 24.

Sherlock Holmes canon, and his Spiritualist writings—the belief that imagination is an epistemologically sound way to access truth.

On a methodological note, the logical validity of Holmes’s method cannot be judged by his successful closing of cases. Rather, one must examine the steps that Sherlock Holmes takes in order to reach his conclusions, paying close attention to intellectual leaps. As Marcello Truzzi astutely notes: “[Sherlock Holmes] concludes correctly simply because the author of the stories allows it so.”⁴² Throughout this section I will be following Truzzi’s approach by focusing on the logical stages of Holmes’s method, and disregarding the outcomes of cases as a metric of Holmes’s logical validity and soundness. I will, however, suggest that the successful closing of cases reflects Conan Doyle’s beliefs in the efficacy of Holmes’s method.

Holmes is supremely confident in his logical method, which he refers to as his Science of Deduction.⁴³ As discussed in the previous section, this method is predicated on the idea that the immaterial (personality, thoughts, etc.) impacts the material world. The physical traces of this effect can then be deciphered and read by a strong reasoner, in order to determine the immaterial cause. Holmes boldly compares his reasoning to the propositions of Euclid, suggesting that his conclusions are as logically valid and indisputable as those in geometry.⁴⁴ Holmes’s attitude is later epitomized by his assertion that, “detection is, or ought to be, an exact science, and should be treated in the same cold and unemotional manner.”⁴⁵ In a later short story, Holmes criticizes Watson’s narrative version of his cases, saying: “Your fatal habit of looking at everything from the point of view of a story instead of as a scientific exercise has ruined what might have been an

⁴² Marcello Truzzi, “Sherlock Holmes: Applied Social Psychologist,” in *Sign of Three*, ed. Umberto Eco & Thomas A. Sebeok (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 70.

⁴³ Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*, 20.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Conan Doyle, *The Sign of Four*, 10.

instructive and even classical series of demonstrations.”⁴⁶ Holmes expresses the belief that his method is a science which can exist outside the realm of narrative. Yet in doing so, Holmes obscures the process by which he arranges disparate facts into a theory of a crime; by disguising this process, it appears as if Holmes’s conclusions are the natural rather than constructed.

Holmes demonstrates his method to the skeptical Watson in *A Study in Scarlet*, and in doing so, reveals the logic underlying the Science of Deduction. Watson, curious how Holmes knew he was a medical doctor who served in the Anglo-Afghan war, asks Holmes to explain. Holmes explicates his mental processes, saying:

Here is a gentleman of a medical type, but with the air of a military man. Clearly an army doctor then. He has just come from the tropics, for his face is dark, and that is not the natural tint of his skin, for his wrists are fair. He has undergone hardships and sickness, as his haggard face says clearly. His left arm has been injured. He holds it in a stiff and unnatural manner. Where in the tropics could an English army doctor have seen much hardship and got his arm wounded? Clearly in Afghanistan.⁴⁷

Interestingly, Holmes does not explain how he reached two important conclusions—that Watson is a doctor, and that he served in the military. Despite this vagueness, Holmes’s explanation still foregrounds the logic of his method. In reflecting on his process, Holmes shows Watson that the Science of Deduction is a series of syllogisms. For example, Holmes uses Watson’s “haggard” appearance, and an unspoken assumption (either that hardships and sickness create haggard faces, or that most/all people with haggard faces have undergone hardships and sickness) to reach the conclusion that Watson has undergone hardships and sickness.

⁴⁶ Conan Doyle, “Abbey Grange,” quoted in Thomas, *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science*, 77.

⁴⁷ Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*, 23.

Despite the suggestion of the title, however, the Science of Deduction cannot be said to rely on deductive logic. Using deductive logic, a reasoner determines outcomes given two premises—a major premise, or general rule, and a minor premise, also called a specific case. By utilizing a deductive syllogism, one seeks to determine an effect, when given causes. If the two or more premises a logician begins with are true, the logician's conclusion is logically valid and sound. For example, from the rule, "all serious knife wounds result in bleeding," and the case, "this was a serious knife wound," one could definitively know that there will be bleeding.⁴⁸ This type of statement is self-contained; it does not need to be externally validated, and does not necessitate educated guesses or logical leaps because its conclusions are tautological. Holmes's approach to solving cases, however, is not deductive. Rather than attempting to derive an outcome given premises, Holmes begins with an outcome, and then seeks to determine the cause. If Holmes were to use deductive logic, he would begin with an explicit rule, such as "all people who have undergone hardships will have haggard faces," and the minor premise, "Watson has undergone hardships," to reach the conclusion that Watson has haggard face. This reasoning is of little use for a detective. though, as by the time Holmes approaches a case, the outcome is already clear; instead, he must discover the causes of that result.

Holmes's Science of Deduction is not deductive; importantly, it is also not inductive. Using inductive reasoning, a logician begins with the specific case, and its result, and uses these premises to derive a rule. Using the example above, the logician would begin with the statement, "this was a serious knife wound," and the result, "there was bleeding," to derive a rule—in this case, "all serious knife wounds result in bleeding."⁴⁹ Importantly, an induction, as opposed to a deduction, is neither self-contained nor logically certain. An investigator can never record all

⁴⁸ Truzzi, "Sherlock Holmes: Applied Social Psychologist," 69.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

relevant cases, so there could be a serious knife wound that does not result in bleeding, however unlikely. This type of logic is used in sciences to derive general rules based on experiments, which are held as true until they are disproven. If Holmes were to use induction when analyzing Watson, he would begin with the statement, “Watson had been through hardships,” and the result, “Watson had a haggard face,” to generate the rule, “people who have been through hardships have haggard faces.” While Holmes sometimes uses inductive inferences to develop a body of forensic knowledge, he does not utilize inductive logic to solve his cases. Rather, as seen in his examination of Watson, Holmes begins with the result (Watson’s haggard face), and an unspoken rule (perhaps that hardships create haggard faces), and uses these to derive an immediate cause (Watson has been through hardships).

Because Sherlock Holmes’s method does rely on either inductive or deductive logic, it cannot be accurately compared to geometry or the natural sciences. Carlo Ginzburg, in his essay “Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method,” divides scientific reasoning into two broad categories—conjectural and Galileian—arguing that Holmes uses the former method. Galileian reasoning, according to Ginzburg, is the paradigm of the natural sciences, such as physics and chemistry.⁵⁰ As Yumna Siddiqi summarizes in *Anxieties of Empire*, in the Galileian model, “one makes deductions about particulars on the basis of general principles that have been arrived at by establishing a relation of identity between particulars and suppressing their unique aspects.”⁵¹ The Galileian paradigm, therefore, is deductive and future-oriented—effects are hypothesized on the basis of general rules and a specific event or cause. The scientific rules are generated through induction, and checked through repeated experiments,

⁵⁰ Carlo Ginzburg, “Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method,” trans. Anna Davin, *History Workshop* 9 (Spring, 1980): 15.

⁵¹ Yumna Siddiqi, *Anxieties of Empire and the Fiction of Intrigue* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 29.

which can either support or undermine a scientific rule. Sherlock Holmes, in *A Study in Scarlet*, claims his Science of Deduction is as reliable as the “propositions of Euclid,” however it lacks the tautological certainty of geometry.⁵² Further, his method cannot be Galileian as his conclusions are retrospective rather than predictive, and the phenomena he investigates are not repeatable.

Instead of using either deductive or inductive logic, Holmes’s Science of Deduction utilizes what the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce deemed *abductive logic*. In his biography of Conan Doyle, Andrew Lycett remarks that using abductive logic, one: “[assesses] various clues and [concludes] that on the best balance of probabilities something happened.”⁵³ As compared to deduction—in which a rule is applied to a specific case to derive a result—and induction—in which a specific case and its result are used to generate a rule—abduction infers a cause after knowing a rule and a result. Continuing the example above, in abductive logic, one would begin with the clue, “there was bleeding,” and the rule, “all serious knife wounds result in bleeding,” to determine the cause, “this was a serious knife wound.”⁵⁴ Abductive logic, therefore, is inherently reconstructive, and well suited for detection. Thus, for example, Holmes can infer that Watson has been in the tropics based on the unspoken rule that tans are only gotten in the tropics, and the fact that Watson has a tan. This mode of logic, however, is less reliable than deduction. Using abduction, the reasoner must at some point make an educated guess based on probabilities. For instance, while it may be true that all serious knife wounds result in bleeding, one cannot definitively attribute all bleeding, even at crime scenes, to serious knife wounds. Sherlock Holmes is often reaches correct conclusions when using abductive logic—

⁵² Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*, 20.

⁵³ Andrew Lycett, *The Man Who Created Sherlock Holmes: The Life and Times of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle* (New York: Free Press, 2008), 116.

⁵⁴ Truzzi, “Sherlock Holmes: Applied Social Psychologist,” 69.

such as when he realizes the pool in blood in *A Study in Scarlet* is from a nosebleed rather than a wound—but the efficacy of Holmes’s method in the canon does not make it logically sound. Holmes’s speculations may be the most likely solution, but it remains only one possibility among many.

Holmes’s abductive reasoning, Ginzburg argues, relies upon what he deems the conjectural paradigm: the method of interpreting clues and symptoms used in medicine and the sciences of deep time (disciplines such as paleontology and archaeology, which claim access to historical fact). These sciences rapidly gained legitimacy before and during Conan Doyle’s time, Ginzburg writes:

Between the 18th and the 19th century, with the emergence of the ‘human sciences’, the constellation of conjectural disciplines changed profoundly: new stars were born, which (like phrenology) were soon to fall, or which (like paleontology) would achieve great things, but above all it was medicine which confirmed its high status, both socially and in the standing of its theory. It became the reference point, explicit or by implication, of all the human sciences.⁵⁵

The conjectural sciences make “retrospective predictions,” and in doing so, abandoned the Galileian model of investigating effects rather than causes.⁵⁶ Practitioners in these fields attempt to reconstruct histories by examining physical clues. Because the causes of these physical impressions have long since vanished—the events which created each clue is in the past and by definition non-repeatable—the conjectural scientist *must* create a narrative explanation of an event that cannot be verified through experimentation. Thus Sherlock Holmes castigation of Watson for providing narrative rather than only facts is misleading. Watson cannot provide *only*

⁵⁵ Carlo Ginzburg, “Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes,” 24.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 23.

facts, as each fact is open to multiple interpretations. Sumathi Ramaswamy, in *The Lost Land of Lemuria*, emphasizes that despite the inherent epistemological uncertainty of retrospective predictions: “these sciences were... underwritten by the hubris of a positivist paradigm which assumed that global and complete knowledge is possible and attainable.”⁵⁷

Holmes is aware of these types of reasoning, though he refers to them with different names. In *A Study in Scarlet*, Holmes compares his logical method to that of the average man, saying:

Most people, if you describe a train of events to them, will tell you what the result would be. They can put those events together in their minds, and argue from them that something will come to pass. There are few people, however, who, if you told them a result, would be able to evolve from their own inner consciousness what the steps were which led up to that result. This power is what I mean when I talk of reasoning backwards, or analytically.⁵⁸

Rather than deductive and abductive, or Galileian and conjectural, Holmes uses the terms synthetic and analytic, respectively. Synthetic reasoners think in a forward direction—they use their logical faculties to predict results based on general rules and specific cases. Analytic thinkers, on the other hand, reason backwards. They begin with clues and general rules, which they use to infer causes. Holmes stresses that synthetic reasoning is the more common mode, saying: “In solving a problem of this sort, the grand thing is to be able to reason backwards... In everyday life it is much more useful to reason forwards... There are fifty who can reason

⁵⁷ Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Lost Land of Lemuria* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 21.

⁵⁸ Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*, 123.

synthetically for one who can reason analytically.”⁵⁹ Analytic reasoning is only done by a capable, select few. Importantly, Holmes recognizes that analytic reasoning is not practical in everyday life. Analytic reasoning is, therefore, practiced by those who have the freedom to ignore the problems of everyday life, suggesting that these modes of thinking are related to social class, with the educated and moneyed classes have greater use for analytic reasoning.

Holmes unknowingly betrays the epistemological uncertainty of his method in his examination of Watson. As he concludes his assessment, Holmes asks: “Where in the tropics could an English army doctor have seen much hardship and got his arm wounded? Clearly in Afghanistan.”⁶⁰ In this last inference, Holmes notes all the physical facts he has observed—that Watson is English, tan, wounded, haggard, and an army doctor. He then utilizes his knowledge that the Anglo-Afghan war has both tanned and wounded many English soldiers. These two propositions lead Holmes to the *clear* conclusion that Watson must have served in Afghanistan. Yet, as Ed Glinert comments in his footnotes to *A Study in Scarlet*: “Afghanistan is not in the tropics. Watson could have received such injuries – and a better tan – in South Africa where the British army waged war against the Zulus 1879-80.”⁶¹ It is possible that Holmes simply did not explicate his entire process, and had reason to conclude Watson served in Afghanistan as opposed to South Africa. Even if this is so, Holmes’s reconstructive method still relies upon probabilities, in which there is always a degree of uncertainty. Holmes’s confidence in and understanding of his own abilities, therefore, is at odds with the reliability of his logic.

In *The Sign of Four*, published three years later, Holmes clearly shows his method rests on assumptions, and he is aware of its fallibility. At the beginning of the novel, Holmes

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶¹ Ed Glinert, notes to *A Study in Scarlet*, by Arthur Conan Doyle (New York, N.Y.: Penguin, 2001), fn. 17, 135.

languishes in boredom while waiting for an interesting case. In order to occupy him, Watson asks Holmes to identify the characteristics of the former owner of Watson's pocket watch. Holmes correctly identifies the former owner as Watson's brother, a down on his luck alcoholic. Even Holmes is surprised by his success, exclaiming: "Ah, that is good luck. I could only say what was the balance of probability. I did not at all expect to be accurate."⁶² This fluctuation between extreme confidence in his method, and a more tempered caution, reflects an unstable valuation of analytic reasoning in the new sciences of deep time.

The paleontologist Georges Cuvier's 1834 speech typifies an early trend in the conjectural sciences toward positivism, which can be seen reflected in Holmes's grandiose claims in *A Study in Scarlet*. Cuvier extols the accuracy and validity of the conjectural method in paleontology, saying:

"Today, someone who sees the print of a cloven hoof can conclude that the animal which left the print was a ruminative one, and this conclusion is as certain as any that can be made in physics or moral philosophy. This single track therefore tells the observer about the kind of teeth, the kind of jaws, the haunches, the shoulder, and the pelvis of the animal which has passed."⁶³

Paleontologists, according to Cuvier, can reconstruct entire anatomies and histories of animals from a few tracks and bones. Cuvier makes the strong claim that the conjectural method is as accurate as the classical Galileian method used in physics, which seeks to predict results, and has the epistemological advantage of being able to utilize repeatable experiments. Moreover, Cuvier startlingly asserts that paleontology's conclusions are as certain as those of moral philosophy, suggesting a parallel between the veracity of scientific reconstruction and the purely logical

⁶² Conan Doyle, *Sign of Four*, 16.

⁶³ Cuvier quoted in Ginzburg, 23

investigations of moral philosophy. Thus, at the beginning of paleontology, Cuvier compares its accuracy to both the physical sciences, and the purely mental activity of philosophical investigation. These comparisons, while grandiose, somewhat accurately locate the reconstructive sciences between physical studies and mental constructions. Yet as Ginzburg notes, these fields rose and fell, most notably with phrenology, as their conjectures were challenged. The disparity between the grand claims made by Cuvier, and the sometimes-dubious status of the reconstructive sciences in Victorian society, are reflected in the fluctuation of Holmes's evaluation of his own conjectural method.

In contrast to Cuvier, Charles Darwin's writing about conjectural sciences displayed humility in the face of the geological record. Darwin used the metaphor of an incomplete book to convey the conjectural scientist's starting point:

I look at the natural geological record, as a history of the world imperfectly kept, and written in a changing dialect; of this history we possess the last volume alone, relating only to two or three countries. Of this volume, only here and there a short chapter has been preserved; and of each page, only here and there a few lines. Each word of the slowly-changing language, in which the history is supposed to be written, being more or less different in the interrupted succession of chapters, may represent apparently abruptly changed forms of life, entombed in our consecutive, but widely separated formations.⁶⁴

Darwin's geological record is one that is all but impossible to interpret, yet which the naturalist must try to decipher. The geologist must "read" this text of the earth, of which only a handful of lines and words are available. Furthermore, the text that is available is constantly changing dialect. This understanding of the reconstructive sciences differs greatly from Cuvier's, in which

⁶⁴ From Darwin's chapter "On the Imperfection of the Geological Record," quoted in Lawrence Frank, "Reading the Gravel Page: Lyell, Darwin, and Conan Doyle," 374.

history can be definitively reconstructed by examining a single fossil. It also established a theory of the conjectural sciences in which the natural world contains a definitive meaning that must be accessed through correct “readings.”

The *Sherlock Holmes* canon engages with both these understandings of the conjectural sciences, first supporting Cuvier’s position, and then questioning it. In the short story *The Five Orange Pips*, published in 1891, Holmes explicitly compares his Science of Deduction to the methods of paleontologists. While reflecting on the case, Holmes describes the efficacy of the conjectural method to Watson:

The ideal reasoners [sic]... would, when he has once been shown a single fact in all its bearings, deduce from it not only all the chain of events which led up to it but also all the results which would follow from it. As Cuvier could correctly describe a whole animal by the contemplation of a single bone, so the observer who has thoroughly understood one link in a series of incidents, should be able accurately to state all other ones, both before and after.⁶⁵

Here, Holmes returns to a level of certitude comparable to that shown in *A Study in Scarlet*. He does not expect to get some conclusions wrong, as in *The Sign of Four*. Rather, Holmes follows Cuvier’s paleontological model by suggesting that history can be completely understood, and goes further, suggesting that even future events can be accurately predicted. Holmes’s worldview—in which all facts are linked in a chain of cause and effect, and all clues hold significant meaning and history—fits well with that seen in the conjectural sciences. By echoing Cuvier’s claims of epistemological certitude, Holmes emphasizes that his world can be known through scientific understanding. Yet Holmes’s frequent oscillations between complete

⁶⁵ Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Five Orange Pips,” in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes and the Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 105.

confidence in his method and doubt in the conjectural paradigm suggest an anxiety about the conjectural paradigm's access to truth.

This anxiety can be most clearly seen in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, which problematizes the claims of conjectural sciences by playing with the literary metaphors Darwin used. As Lawrence Frank argues in his paper "Reading the Gravel Page: Lyell, Darwin, and Conan Doyle," "Conan Doyle was alert to the figures of speech [the geologist, Charles] Lyell and Darwin used: he responded to their discussion of the geological record as a fragmentary text written in different languages demanding decipherment and interpretation."⁶⁶ Frank suggests that rather than supporting a prevailing ideology, in this case, the ideology of the conjectural sciences, *Sherlock Holmes* subverts it. I will argue that while Conan Doyle is subverting the positivist claims of the institutions of conjectural sciences, as represented by Cuvier, he actually affirms their access to truth, showing that the meaningful nature of reality is accessible through imagination.

This is best seen in the beginning of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, when Watson and Holmes try to read key details from a fragmentary piece of writing in a literalization of Darwin's metaphor. Holmes asks Watson to "reconstruct [a] man by an examination of [his cane]," which the unknown visitor accidentally left at Baker Street when both Holmes and Watson were absent. The cane is inscribed with the writing, "To James Mortimer, M.R.C.S., from friends of the C.C.H."⁶⁷ Watson first concludes that Mortimer is a doctor, given his membership to the Royal College of Surgeons. Further, Watson is able to infer that Mortimer lives in the country, where he is an active hiker, given the cane's heavy use. The last remaining mystery is the phrase

⁶⁶ Lawrence Frank, "Reading the Gravel Page: Lyell, Darwin, and Conan Doyle," *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 44.3 (Dec., 1989) 365.

⁶⁷ Conan Doyle, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, 4, 3.

“Friends of the C.C.H.,” which Watson suggests is “the Something Hunt, the local hunt whose members he has possibly given some surgical assistance, and which has made him a small present in return.”⁶⁸ Given this reading, Watson constructs Mortimer as a middle-aged gentleman, who is a country doctor. Frank suggests that this textual reconstruction likens the detective figure to the conjectural scientist, saying, “In reconstructing the man from the stick, Watson is at once the philologist, the geologist, and the paleontologist.”⁶⁹ Here Conan Doyle literalizes the literary metaphors used by Doyle and Lyell. Holmes, however, disputes Watson’s reading of the cane, on the basis that his textual analysis is incorrect.

Holmes disagrees with Watson, suggesting an entirely different “reconstruction” of the same man, which hinges on the meaning of the acronym, C.C.H. After examining the cane, Holmes states that Watson’s initial reading was mostly correct: “the man is certainly a country practitioner. And he walks a good deal.”⁷⁰ Holmes then offers a different reading of the text on the cane, based solely on the inscribed acronym: “I would suggest, for example, that a presentation to a doctor is more likely to come from an hospital than from a hunt, and that when the initials ‘C.C.’ are placed before that hospital the words ‘Charing Cross’ very naturally suggest themselves.”⁷¹ Armed with this new interpretation, Holmes suggests that the doctor must have been a young student at the hospital, who left the city to start his own country practice. The mysterious James Mortimer is then shown to be not a “grave, middle-aged family practitioner,” as Watson thought, but rather “a young fellow under thirty, amiable, unambitious, absent-minded, and the possessor of a favourite dog, which I should describe roughly as being

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶⁹ Frank, “Lyell, Darwin, and Conan Doyle,” 367.

⁷⁰ Conan Doyle, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, 5.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

larger than a terrier and smaller than a mastiff.”⁷² Holmes’s construction of Mortimer is nearly the opposite of Watson’s, and is almost entirely based on his reading of the acronym C.C.H. Holmes claims his interpretation of the acronym “naturally suggests” itself, as if its meaning is being revealed rather than created. Like Darwin’s “geological book,” the C.C.H. inscribed on Mortimer’s cane is highly fragmentary, and can be read differently, yet conceals a “correct” meaning. When this meaning is properly understood, it becomes a way to access truth, a historical narrative that is neatly ordered. Rosemary Jann suggests that Holmes, “unlike most modern semioticians... operates as if the order he discovers is transcendent and natural, rather than arbitrary or artificially constructed.”⁷³ Thus Holmes says he is *reconstructing* the man from his cane, rather than constructing him. There is an accessible and objective truth that underlies the clues, despite their multiple interpretations. Jann continues: “The detective... is not interested in celebrating the complexity or multiplicity of meanings in a text. For Holmes, there is only one correct interpretation. His task is to select this solution from ‘the finite and predetermined set of... clue-fitting’ possibilities.”⁷⁴ As the acronym on Mortimer’s cane demonstrates, however, it is difficult, if not impossible, to know which interpretation is correct without additional validation.

The problem of confirming theories in the conjectural sciences was on the forefront of scientists’ minds during the Victorian era. Frank notes that Thomas Huxley, one of Darwin’s greatest supporters, “worried aloud about the fact that the paleontological record shows ‘no evidence of [evolutionary] modification...’”. In *Origin of Species* Darwin’s imagination had

⁷² *Ibid*, 6.

⁷³ Jann, *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, 50.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 53.

driven him beyond the evidence available to him.”⁷⁵ The fossil record, by definition, only shows extinct species, and as Darwin notes, yields very few specimens. Huxley worried about Darwin’s leap from noting extinct species to suggesting that those species represent ancestors of modern species. Roger Luckhurst explores the anxieties created by new scientific discoveries further in his book *The Invention of Telepathy*, where he suggests that the occult sciences grew out of spaces of epistemological doubt in the institutional sciences: “[Telepathy] does not derive from anti-materialist Spiritualism, but emerged from the interspaces [the Spiritualist and scientist, William] Crookes levered open from anomalies in mechanical models. The phenomena he examined were part of the occasion for inaugurating, in Kuhnian terms, a phase of extraordinary science, where experiment runs in advance of theoretical paradigms and becomes messy and unbounded, and full of ‘many speculative and unarticulated theories.’”⁷⁶ *Sherlock Holmes*, therefore, was created in an era in which scientists made grand claims about their access to knowledge, while simultaneously and unintentionally showing that they did not understand all the phenomena they observed. Spiritualism, as Luckhurst argues, did not arise in opposition to science, but rather from its areas of epistemological uncertainty.

The failure of scientific institutions to quickly account for these areas of epistemological uncertainty created anxieties, as well as entry points for further exploration. These trends can be seen in one of Conan Doyle’s early novels, *The Mystery of Cloomber*, published two years after *A Study in Scarlet*. The novel is an orientalist story of the revenge of three Eastern mystics for Western transgressions, very much like Wilkie Collins’s early detective novel, *The Moonstone*. The narrator ends the book by stating:

⁷⁵ Frank, “Lyell, Darwin, and Conan Doyle,” 382.

⁷⁶ Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy*, 36.

Science will tell you that there are no such powers as those claimed by the Eastern mystics. I, John Fothergill West can confidently answer that science is wrong. For what is science? Science is the consensus of opinion of scientific men, and history has shown that it is slow to accept a truth. Science sneered at Newton for twenty years. Science proved mathematically that an iron ship could not swim, and science declared that a steamship could not cross the Atlantic.⁷⁷

The Mystery of Cloomber can comfortably fit within Conan Doyle's corpus of Spiritualist works. An addendum found in some editions of the novel, quoting from A.P. Sinnett's theosophist work *The Occult World*, suggest that the book was written "around 1884, when Arthur was at the height of his interest in theosophy."⁷⁸ Conan Doyle's Spiritualist works distinguish between scientific institutions and scientific methods. As shown in the first section, Conan Doyle embraced forensic techniques in his Spiritualist works, suggesting that scientific methods are a valid way to access truth. The narrator of *The Mystery of Cloomber* deems scientific institutions, on the other hand, a set of conservative organizations, which impede the expansion of knowledge.

Spiritualists were fascinated by the areas of epistemological uncertainty in the reconstructive sciences, and suggested that access to historical fact is achieved through a combination of scientific conjectural technique and imagination. H.P. Blavatsky, one of the founders of Theosophy, which Conan Doyle was studied during the 1880s, suggested that some

⁷⁷ Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Mystery of Cloomber* (Leipzig: B. Tauchnitz, 1909), 285-286. Accessed March 10, 2013,

<http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=inu.39000001656086;seq=5;view=1up;num=1>.

⁷⁸ Lycett, *The Man Who Created Sherlock Holmes*, 136

archaeological artifacts are beyond the understanding of conjectural techniques.⁷⁹ In *A Land of Mystery*, Blavatsky discusses this issue in reference to quipus, or colorful pieces of cord found in Peru and Central America:

Each color [denotes] a sensible object, and knots [serve] as ciphers... Each locality, however, had its own method of interpreting these elaborate records, hence a quipus was only intelligible in the place where it was kept. “Many quipus have been taken from the graves, in excellent state of preservation in color and texture,” writes Dr. Heath “but the lips, that alone could pronounce the verbal key, have for ever ceased their function... the records [that would unlock their meaning]... will remain sealed till all is revealed at the last day.”⁸⁰

Blavatsky, along with the quoted Dr. Heath, suggests that physical objects hold normally unseen meanings. This philosophy is highly similar to that of both Conan Doyle’s *Sherlock Holmes* canon, and his Spiritualist writings. Similarly, like Darwin’s fragmented and ever changing geological book, a quipus has an objective, correct meaning, which is encoded into its physical form. As Blavatsky points out, however, the key to this code can be forever lost to time. The existence and preservation of these physical artifacts, therefore, is not sufficient for understanding its meaning. Rather the quipus functions as a physical code, or what I deem a *cryptospace*. They cannot speak for themselves, but instead must be interpreted. With the key to their understanding lost to time, the meaning of a quipus is also irrecoverably lost. Holmes and Watson face a similar problem when examining James Mortimer’s cane in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. The acronym C.C.H. obviously contains meaning, but without further evidence, its

⁷⁹ For the purposes of this essay, I am referring to Theosophy as a Spiritualist group. Some, such as Logie Barrow, *Independent Spirits: Spiritualism and English Plebeians, 1850-1910* (London, 1986) would only classify Theosophy as semi-spiritualist. I will continue to utilize Alex Owen’s definition of Spiritualist groups as those for which conventional reality only represents a small fraction of ultimate reality.

⁸⁰ H.P. Blavatsky, *A Land of Mystery* (Mysore: Theosophy Company, 1982), 31.

original meaning is unverifiable. Blavatsky continues her exploration of cryptospaces, suggesting that this epistemological inaccessibility through scientific means should not stop an investigation, “With such facts before us to puzzle exact science herself, and show our entire ignorance of the past verily, we recognize no right of any man on earth—whether in geography or ethnology, in exact or abstract sciences—to tell his neighbor—‘so far shalt though go, and no further!’”⁸¹ The Theosophical investigator, when reaching the edge of science, must continue to explore, Blavatsky suggests. When the techniques of science have been exhausted, the investigator must use imagination to access truth.

While Holmes’s claims about his use of imagination range from story to story, his reliance on the faculty is consistent. Early in *A Study in Scarlet*, Holmes returns to Baker Street from a concert: “[The performance] was magnificent... Do you remember what Darwin says about music? He claims that the power of producing and appreciating it existed among the human race long before the power of speech was arrived at. Perhaps that is why we are so subtly influenced by it. There are vague memories in our souls of those misty centuries when the world was in its childhood.”⁸² Holmes claims that the ancient, pre-historical human past is accessible not through archeological or forensic technology, but rather through a collective, vague memory shared among humans. In doing so, he acknowledges Darwin’s theorizing, which is necessarily based upon unverifiable speculation. Darwin, therefore, is drawn into the realm of imagination as well, a realm that is suggested by Holmes to have access to historical truth otherwise lost to deep time.

The use of imagination helps explain why Holmes leaves key inferences unspoken when he explicates his method, as his interpretations are not only developed through the imagination,

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 33.

⁸² Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*, 44.

but also in the unconscious. In *A Study in Scarlet*, before Holmes attempts to explain his method to Watson, he exclaims: “I *knew* you came from Afghanistan. From my long habit the train of thoughts ran so swiftly through my mind that I arrived at the conclusion without being conscious of intermediate steps... The whole train of thought did not occupy a second” (emphasis in text).⁸³ Holmes’s inferences are calculated so quickly that he is normally unconscious of their path. Even when he slows to explain his process, some conclusions remain unjustified, as when Holmes, looking at Watson, states, “here is a gentleman of a medical type, but with the air of a military man.”⁸⁴ Holmes does not elaborate on what signals Watson’s “type,” and “air.” Rather, he simply proceeds from this assumed knowledge to reach further conclusions. When later discussing his theory of synthetic and analytic reasoning, Holmes again suggests that his Science of Deduction is automatic and unconscious. He states that some people, when given a result “evolve from their own inner consciousness what the steps were which led up to that result.”⁸⁵ Evolve here means “to extract; to derive or deduce (a conclusion, law, or principle); to develop (an idea, theory, or system).”⁸⁶ According to Holmes, an inquirer using analytic reasoning will use his “inner consciousness” to understand the causes of a result. His method, therefore, relies on processing information and reaching conclusions at a subconscious level.

Holmes’s interpretations of clues during cases are also shown to be correct because of his masterful use of imagination. When examining the cane in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Watson’s interpretation is equally as plausible as Holmes’s. As suggested above, the acronym on the cane functions as a cryptospace—it holds a meaning that is inaccessible through scientific

⁸³ Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*, 20.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁸⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. “Evolve” 6a, <http://www.oed.com/> (accessed April 3, 2013).

methods. Thus, all other things being equal, it is only Holmes's reliance upon a mixture of probabilities and, most importantly, imagination leads to his success. Holmes refers to this faculty as "the scientific use of the imagination," which is scientific because it "always [has] some material basis on which to start our speculations."⁸⁷ Thus Holmes can claim to be both scientific and imaginative, or more properly, that imagination is itself a scientific mode of investigation; Holmes begins with established and cutting edge forensic techniques, which he then uses as a springboard for his imagination.

Because Holmes's logic is often no more valid than Watson's, the *Sherlock Holmes* stories are structured to confirm Holmes's imaginative interpretations. These confirmations often take the form of an external, authoritative source. After both Watson and Holmes suggest their readings, Watson checks his Medical directory, from which he reads aloud "Mortimer, James... House surgeon, from 1882 to 1884, at Charing Cross Hospital."⁸⁸ Holmes's interpretation of the acronym on the cane is shown to be the correct one. This formula is seen in almost all *Sherlock Holmes* stories: Holmes constructs a narrative of events based on clues and imagination, which is then validated at the closing of the case, usually by the criminal himself (the criminals are almost always male). This is the only situation in which testimony is trusted, as the criminal is already contained, and presumably has no reason to lie. The disordered beginnings of the case are transformed into an ordered narrative through the use of scientific imagination.

Because of facts in the *Sherlock Holmes* canon are open to multiple interpretations, Holmes often reaches a conclusion before he can conclusively prove it or have it verified by an authoritative source. Holmes frequently denies this, famously saying, "It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of

⁸⁷ Conan Doyle, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, 34.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 6.

theories to suit facts.”⁸⁹ Despite this admonition, though, Holmes does theorize before having conclusive data, a process that is foregrounded in *The Hounds of Baskervilles*. While in the middle of an investigation into the mysterious death of a gentleman in the English countryside, Watson suggests they approach the police with their theory. Holmes replies:

You and I know that he died of sheer fright, and we know also what frightened him; but how are we to get twelve stolid jurymen to know it? What signs are there of a hound? Where are the marks of its fangs? Of course, we know that a hound does not bite a dead body, and that Sir Charles was dead before ever the brute overtook him. But we have to *prove* all this, and we are not in a position to do it.⁹⁰ (Emphasis in text).

Holmes’s theory is based on negative evidence—the absence of bite marks. Frank compares this building of theory on negative evidence to Darwin’s theory of evolution, saying, “The geological record, with its fossils and mineralogical characteristics, demonstrated that species had become extinct; it did not prove that existing species had, in fact, evolved from now-extinct ancestors.”⁹¹ Thus, Frank continues, “Holmes’s words [spoken in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*] ‘it is not what we know, but what we can prove’ go to the heart of a nineteenth-century dilemma.”⁹² *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, unlike most other *Sherlock Holmes* stories revolves around this dilemma of evidence. Holmes’s theories developed based on negative evidence. Furthermore his theories cannot be directly corroborated at the end of the novel, because the criminal disappears, presumably to his accidental death at the bottom of the town’s deadly moor.

This reliance on negative evidence both highlights and undermines reconstructive science’s positivist claims, but also legitimates the use of scientific imagination. The *Sherlock Holmes*

⁸⁹ Conan Doyle, *A Scandal in Bohemia*, 6.

⁹⁰ Conan Doyle, *The Hounds of Baskerville*, 135.

⁹¹ Frank, “Lyell, Darwin, and Conan Doyle,” 372.

⁹² *Ibid*, 382.

canon does not exhibit the hostility towards scientific institutions seen in Conan Doyle's Spiritualist work, but I suggest both bodies of writings call attention to, and problematize these scientific institution's claims about their own methods. At the end of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Frank argues that, "The reassuring summation of the detective, the very emblem of all that is solid, becomes inherently suspect. No account can ever explain mysteries that originate from and disappear into the sealike depths of a Grimpen Mire."⁹³ I disagree with this reading. Holmes's theories in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, while not confirmed verbally by the criminal himself, are shown to be accurate through the action of the story. The detective does not become suspect, as his conclusions are still effective. Holmes, using his imagination, is able to not only explain the death of the murder victim and identify the perpetrator, but also predict and foil the murderer's next planned crime. By having Holmes's case end in his success, Conan Doyle instead suggests that the imaginative paradigm which underlies his method, and by extension the reconstructive sciences is valid in a way a catalogue of facts is not. Imagination, interpretation, and narrative are necessary for Holmes to solve a case, just as they are necessary in the conjectural sciences.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 386.

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Knowledge

In *The Sign of Four*, Holmes receives a letter from a French detective whom he has been helping with a case. Holmes tells Watson that the detective “He possesses two out of the three qualities necessary for the ideal detective. He has the power of observation and that of deduction. He is only wanting in knowledge, and that may come in time.”⁹⁴ In this section I will examine what constitutes knowledge in the *Sherlock Holmes* canon by following Holmes’s process as he catches the criminals in *The Sign of Four*. The structure of a *Sherlock Holmes* cases can generally be divided into two phases: “On the one hand, [Holmes] *collects data*, and on the other, he *sets stratagems in motion* in order to trap the culprit.”⁹⁵ I will argue that first Holmes uses facts, combined with the knowledge of types, and the application of scientific imagination to construct a model of the criminal and a theory of the crime. Then he uses this model as an entry point into the criminal’s mind, which he uses in order to predict and contain the perpetrator. I suggest, therefore, that for Holmes, knowledge is both product and a means of societal and colonial control, which is applied to the poor and foreign classes. Knowledge allows Holmes to inhabit a criminal’s mind; he is able to channel them like a medium, conjuring up both a physical description and a mental model of a person, which allows him to predict and neutralize criminal threats. Knowledge and scientific imagination are, therefore, inherently political in the *Sherlock Holmes* canon.

Using forensic techniques, Holmes is able to begin to identify the murderer in *The Sign of Four*. The story begins with Miss Morstan—the daughter of a missing British officer who

⁹⁴ Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Sign of Four* (Orchard Park, N.Y.: Broadview Press, 2001), 11.

⁹⁵ Massimo A Bonfantini and Giampaolo Proni, “To Guess or Not To Guess,” in *Sign of Three* ed. Umberto Eco & Thomas A. Sebeok (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 123.

served in India—asking Holmes to find the source of the anonymous letters filled with pearls that she has been receiving. In the course of his investigation, Holmes finds the body of Bartholomew Sholto, who held an Indian treasure central to the case, until he was murdered and it was stolen. Examining the crime scene, Holmes collects physical traces left by assailants in order to discern their identities: “He whipped out his lens and a tape measure, and hurried about the room on his knees, measuring, comparing, examining.... His movements [were]... like those of a trained bloodhound picking out a scent.”⁹⁶ Through the act of measuring the physical imprints left by the criminals, Holmes is able to begin to form an image of each. For Holmes, as discussed in the first section of this essay, physical evidence is caused by, and can therefore reveal, a person’s identity. Thus Holmes, when inspecting the crime scene, says to himself, “Let us see if we can find some other traces of his individuality.”⁹⁷ Having inspected the crime scene to his content, Holmes tells the policeman Athelney Jones: “[The perpetrator’s] name, I have every reason to believe, is Jonathan Small. He is a poorly educated man, small, active, with his right leg off, and wearing a wooden stump which is worn away upon the inner side.”⁹⁸ Because, in the Victorian model of forensics there existed “a generalizable criminal type that can be made visible in a set of bodily traits,” determining a criminal’s physical description is the same as understanding his individuality, and the first step for Holmes in solving a crime and capturing the criminal.⁹⁹ Thus Holmes cannot only say that Jonathan small is a small man, but also that he is poorly educated. In constructing this narrative, Holmes synthesis the knowledge gained from examining clues with the contextual information provided by Miss Morstan, and the victim’s twin brother, Thaddeus Sholto.

⁹⁶ Conan Doyle, *The Sign of Four*, 62.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁹⁹ Thomas, *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science*, 126.

For Holmes determining nationality is essential to solving the case. After examining the crime scene, Holmes has determined Jonathan Small was helped by a violent and savage foreign accomplice. Holmes infers Small's own history by applying forensic science to marks left by Small, and by fitting this information with a document Small signed. Small's name alone is enough to provide key details of the nature of the case: "Now only one white man's name is on the chart. The others are Hindoos or Mohammedans. There is no other white man. Therefore we may say with confidence that the wooden-legged man is identical with Jonathan Small."¹⁰⁰

For Holmes, nationality is *the* key aspect of an identity. It is literally encoded in a name. Part of the threat that Small presents, therefore, is his "going-native." He and his mysterious foreign accomplice, Tonga, both defy the clear borders of Holmes' world, and therefore must be apprehended and contained.

Holmes develops a corresponding profile for Small's accomplice, Tonga, by using the imperial archive. After returning home from the scene of Bartholomew's murder, Holmes immediately searches for his encyclopedia, noting that the small, bare feet, and primitive weapons found at the crime scene are obvious clues to the killer's identity:

This is the first volume of a gazetteer which is now being published. It may be looked upon as the very latest authority. What have we here? "Andaman Islands, situated 340 miles to the north of Sumatra, in the Bay of Bengal... the aborigines of the Andaman Islands may perhaps claim the distinction of being the smallest race upon the earth... They are a fierce, morose, and intractable people, though capable of forming most devoted friendships once their confidence has been gained."¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Conan Doyle, *Sign of Four*, 80.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, 97.

Using the forensic data he gained at the crime scene, Holmes constructs a history and character-profile for the foreign criminal. He locates his origins geographically, and has access to the history of the Tonga's people and culture. Further, Holmes is able to learn about Tonga's personality, finding that he is "fierce, morose, and intractable." This approach to the colony is based upon typological thinking seen in Galton's work, in which each race, identifiable through morphology, has a character that can be found in all members of the people. Using this logic, Holmes is able to read the physical clues left by the Tonga to form a physical and behavioral profile of him.

Here, as in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, the same material objects can lead to a variety of conclusions. The use of scientific imagination, however, is the key to reaching the correct interpretation. Holmes's process is mirrored by the police officer Antheley Jones, who is comparatively inept:

Let us apply common-sense to the matter. This Thaddeus Sholto *was* with his brother; and there *was* a quarrel: so much we know. The brother is dead and the jewels are gone. So much also we know. No one saw the brother from the time Thaddeus left him... You see that I am weaving my web round Thaddeus.¹⁰²

Jones's theorizing, which is later shown by Holmes to be completely wrong, does not incorporate the physical clues found at the scene of the crime, but rather relies on testimony. Jones theory is also *too* linear and neat, as McLuhan notes, "Scotland Yard [is] hostile to the inclusive and instantaneous grasping of situations. The Yard technology is serial, segmented and circumstantial. They conclude effect immediately from preceding cause in lineal and

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 65.

chronological order. They do not dream of totalities or of the major relevance of details.”¹⁰³

Jones’s theory of the crime is deficient because he does not share Holmes’s philosophy, which underlies the Science of Deduction. For Jones, truth is not hidden, but common sense. Because of this, only *some* facts are relevant to any case, while others can be ignored. Evidence, therefore, is taken at face value rather than investigated, so that Jones is blind to the history of the case conveyed by the physical traces.

Using the forensically derived physical profile and the contextual colonial knowledge, Holmes constructs an accurate historical narrative of the case. While on Small’s trail, Holmes explains his theory of the origins of their current case to Watson:

Two officers who are in command of a convict guard learn an important secret as to buried treasure. A map is drawn for them by an Englishman named Jonathan Small. You remember that we saw the name upon the chart in Captain Morstan’s possession...

Aided by this chart, the officers—or one of them—gets the treasure and brings it to

England, leaving, we suppose, some condition under which he received it unfulfilled.¹⁰⁴

As explored in the previous section, Holmes’s reconstructions are derived through a combination of physical evidence and scientific imagination. Unlike Jones, Holmes believes that *all* clues are significant and meaningful, revealing key details about the identity and behavior of a criminal.

With a correct historical narrative, built on scientific imagination, Holmes can enter Jonathan Small’s frame of mind, in order to understand his motives: “Well, now, let us put ourselves in the place of Jonathan Small. Let us look at it from his point of view. He comes to England with the double idea of regaining what he would consider to be his rights, and of having his revenge upon

¹⁰³ Marshall McLuhan, “Sherlock Holmes vs. the Bureaucrat,” 40.

¹⁰⁴ Conan Doyle, *Sign of Four*, 79.

the man who had wronged him.”¹⁰⁵ Small, according to Holmes, entered Bartholomew Sholto’s house to reclaim the treasure that he believed was rightfully his. Using the physical traces left unintentionally at the crime scene, and applying his colonial knowledge to the case, Holmes is able to construct a model of not only Jonathan Small’s body, but also of his ideation and intentions.

With this theory in place, Holmes can begin to contain the destabilizing role of nationality. Holmes first demonstrates that Bartholomew was killed with a poisoned dart. He then states that, because Small was looking for revenge against Bartholomew’s father rather than Bartholomew himself, the crime must have been perpetrated by out-of-control Tonga, not Jonathan Small. The forensic evidence reveals to Holmes that this happened “rather to Jonathan’s disgust, to judge by the way he stamped about when he got into the room.”¹⁰⁶ Holmes almost completely exonerates Small, suggesting that he was horrified by Tonga’s actions. Thus forensics combined with colonial knowledge and scientific imagination begin to order and stabilize the threatening world of international crime. Disturbingly, at the conclusion of the case, Small is able to be captured, while Tonga is shot and killed as he attempts to attack Watson and Holmes.

Despite often taking cases that involve international crime, Holmes’ mysteries are strikingly domestic. Thomas notes that while many *Sherlock Holmes* novels begin with seemingly political motivations, most end by containing crime in the domestic sphere: “Once subjected to his scientific gaze, what might have appeared to be a political crime turns out time

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 80.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 81-82.

and again to be a mere domestic intrigue or personal betrayal, even though the case may have involved an influential government official engaged in a politically volatile situation.¹⁰⁷

The Sign of Four fits this conception perfectly. The origin of the theft and murder in the novel is shown to be personal revenge, rather than governmental plotting. Using forensic science and archival knowledge of the colonies, Holmes is able to isolate the crime to the realm of the domestic—it is at heart a personal feud between Englishmen.

Through his reconstructive method, Holmes has created a theory of both the crime and its perpetrators, and can now turn to the task of catching and containing the criminals. As explored in the previous section, Holmes Science of Deduction is retrospective, as it is based on the conjectural sciences of deep time. Because of this, Holmes claims that his strength is understanding the past, not the future: “The past and the present are within the field of my inquiry, but what a man may do in the future is a hard question to answer.”¹⁰⁸ Holmes is a powerful analytic reasoner, but much less accomplished as a future-oriented synthetic thinker.

Holmes’s relative weakness in predicting and therefore containing criminals is first seen in *A Study in Scarlet*. Whereas Holmes is a self-sufficient analytical reasoner, he must rely upon others to catch the criminal in *A Study in Scarlet*, Jefferson Hope. The case has a similar structure to *The Sign of Four*, as Holmes begins by using physical clues to construct a model of the criminal: “I then proceeded to make a careful examination of the room, which confirmed me in my opinion as to the murderer’s height, and furnished me with the additional details as to the Trichinopoly cigar and the length of his nails.”¹⁰⁹ The details Holmes notices, such as the murderer’s choice of tobacco, do not help Holmes *catch* the criminal but rather allow Holmes to

¹⁰⁷ Thomas, *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Sciences*, 224.

¹⁰⁸ Conan Doyle, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, 168.

¹⁰⁹ Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*, 125.

delimit his identity before developing a history of the case. Holmes determines that the crime must have been personal, related to a past romance, rather than political. Tasked with shifting from his analytical reasoning to a more synthetic mode of thinking, Holmes reaches out to others for help: “There was no reason to suppose that he was going under an assumed name... I therefore organized my Street Arab detective corps, and sent them systematically to every cab proprietor in London until they ferreted out the man I wanted. How well they succeeded, and how quickly I took advantage of it.”¹¹⁰ Whereas, when reconstructing the history of a crime, Holmes only needs his intellect, imagination, and scientific techniques, he must here rely upon others to catch a criminal. His synthetic thinking is comparatively imprecise—Holmes is able to know details as minute as the length of Hope’s fingernails from basic clues, but must resort to sending the Baker Street Irregulars on a blanket-search of all cabbies in London when thinking forward.

In *The Sign of Four*, Holmes seeks help from other in his attempt to catch Small, but unlike in *A Study in Scarlet*, these others fail to ultimately help him contain the criminal. Holmes first turns to Toby, a dog with a particularly prodigious nose. While explaining his theory of the case to Watson, Holmes states, “[Small] takes with him, however, a rather curious associate, who gets over this difficulty, but dips his naked foot into creosote, whence come Toby.”¹¹¹ As Holmes turns from the task of reconstruction, to the goal of capturing the criminals, he immediately relies upon external help. Toby, however, loses the trail in the dirty streets of London. Consequently, Holmes turns to his reliable Baker Street Irregulars, who in this case also fail: “My boys had been up the river and down the river without result.”¹¹² Unlike

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 126.

¹¹¹ Conan Doyle, *The Sign of Four*, 81.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 115.

in *A Study in Scarlet*, in *The Sign of Four* Holmes is forced to rely upon his own intellect to capture the criminal.

Holmes is ultimately able to close the case by channeling Small in a way comparable to Spiritualist mediumship. First Holmes utilizes his earlier models of the criminal and the crime, focusing on Small's mental capabilities, stating: "I knew that this man Small had a certain degree of low cunning, but I did not think him capable of anything in the nature of delicate finesse. That is usually a product of higher education."¹¹³ Holmes uses his knowledge of Small's class to construct a model of his mind, which is characterized by a relatively lower intelligence, despite some "low cunning." Holmes then enters this mental model, explaining, "I then put myself in the place of Small and looked at it as a man of his capacity would. . . . I wondered what I should do myself if I were in his shoes. I could only think of one way of doing it."¹¹⁴ Holmes's method, here, is a neat progression from examining physical traces to capturing the criminal. First Holmes gathers material clues. He then constructs a model of the criminal and the crime by applying his imagination to the evidence, which results in the revelation of key details about the criminal's behavior and motivations, and contextualizes the crime in a linear historical progression. At this point, Holmes has "solved," as he knows who committed the crime and why, yet he must then turn to containing the criminal. The physical evidence of the crime, which reveals the interiority of the criminal, also allows Holmes to channel the perpetrators, correctly predicting their actions and capturing them. Holmes's application of knowledge and imagination is, therefore, inherently political. Holmes's method both reveals order, and produces it, by containing the dangerous elements of society

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 116.

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Conclusion

Conan Doyle's Spiritualist work and his *Sherlock Holmes* canon have traditionally been separated into the irreconcilable categories of illogical and rational, respectively. Despite this, they share a consistent underlying philosophy. Each depicts a world in which everything is meaningful. Immaterial things, such as personality, thoughts, and in some cases, spirits, impact the physical world. The traces they leave can be read, in order to reveal meaning and purpose. The seemingly chaos of everyday life normally obscures this meaning, but to the enlightened observer using scientific techniques, the world shows itself to be ordered. The physical traces revealed by forensic technologies, however, cannot simply speak for themselves. In fact, there exists a fundamental gap between a material object, and its history and larger metaphysical significance. In both the *Sherlock Holmes* canon, and the Spiritualist works, Conan Doyle shows that imagination is the key to bridging this gap. In doing so, he questions the narrative of the conjectural sciences, which often claimed they had a direct access to historical fact. Rather, Conan Doyle suggests, imagination underlies the logic of these sciences, and is an epistemologically valid and necessary way to access truth. In the *Sherlock Holmes* novels, Holmes uses this framework to channel the minds of criminals. This allows him to ultimately locate and contain them.

Despite this shared philosophy, the question remains, why has the *Sherlock Holmes* canon become a central part of modern Western popular culture, while Conan Doyle's Spiritualist works have been dismissed as the sad and irrational writings of a once capable author? I do not have a satisfying or conclusive answer. A starting place, however, is the acknowledgement that the beliefs and anxieties that produced Conan Doyle's Spiritualism now

seem, at the very least, slightly dated and foreign. Further, Michael Saler suggests that this is because Holmes does not allow himself to be deluded by his imagination, while Conan Doyle does.¹¹⁵ Though Holmes famously states “When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth,” he never seriously entertains the possibility of the supernatural.¹¹⁶ Because of his avoidance of the supernatural, his claims of hyper-rationality, and the neat way in which almost all of his cases end, Holmes’s logic always seems in the realm of the possible and scientific, rather than the fantastic. I follow Conan Doyle’s lead, however, in ending this paper with the suggestion that the scientific is itself partly in the realm of the imaginary. This does not mean that all interpretations are equally valid. Rather encourages the reader to be simultaneously more skeptical of positivist claims, and more willing to see the world as a meaningful, enchanted place.

¹¹⁵ Michael Saler, *As If*, 104-129.

¹¹⁶ Conan Doyle, *The Sign of Four*, 60.

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