

# 19th Century Literature and Contemporary Culture

Instructor: Dr. Sonja Nikkila

## COURSE DESCRIPTION

This class will be an investigation of how nineteenth-century literature is translated into our contemporary world through various art forms such as music, architecture, film, television, graphic novels, or online and social media. What is it that makes us keep returning to the past, and how does each adaptation re-make the original into something new and relevant? For this semester our focus will be exclusively on one of the most endlessly fascinating and notoriously uncontainable characters in literature — Sherlock Holmes.

## COURSE STRUCTURE & EXPECTATIONS

**Readings:** All of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories will be under scrutiny, but we will pay particular attention to the Victorian entries in the canon: the novellas *A Study in Scarlet*, *The Sign of the Four*, and *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, plus the stories from the collections *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* and *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*. We will be comparing these original texts to their contemporary incarnations in film (Guy Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes*, a.k.a. the Robert Downey Jr. one), television (both BBC's *Sherlock* and CBS's *Elementary*), and fiction (Michael Chabon's novella *The Final Solution*), and we will also dip a cautious toe into the ocean of Holmes texts available on the internet.

### Short Assignments:

**Transmedia Analysis:** This will be a brief blog post (on the course website) in which you will offer a link to and analysis of some element (of your choice) of Sherlock Holmes as he exists in our cultural sphere. You will be assigned a week to post your analysis, and all posts will be public for the class to read and comment on.

**“What Would Sherlock Write?” Exercises:** These will be three short assignments which will demonstrate your efforts to become more Holmesian in your writing and argumentation, and will hopefully build your skills for the term essay. These exercises will be submitted as online Journals on the course website.

**Term Essay:** The primary objective for this course is for you to be able to express your ideas about Sherlock Holmes — in both 19th century and contemporary contexts — in a critical essay that is original (using a specific and unique argument), coherent (with proper structure and format), and concrete (based on textual evidence and supporting research).

## **REQUIRED TEXTS**

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*. Any edition that includes the complete 56 short stories and 4 novellas. Michael Chabon, *The Final Solution* There are two TV shows and one film which are required texts for this course.

**Sherlock (BBC):** Seasons 1-3

**Elementary (CBS):** Season 1

**Sherlock Holmes** (dir. Ritchie, 2009)

I recommend the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* and a good dictionary (such as Oxford or Webster's). COURSE SCHEDULE (For twice-weekly course)

### **Week 1:**

#### **Introduction: You Know My Methods**

Text: Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet* (Ch 1-2), *The Sign of Four* (Ch 1)

#### **Before Holmes: Victorian Detectives**

Texts: Poe, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Purloined Letter"

### **Week 2:**

#### **Before Holmes: Victorian Detectives, cont.**

Texts: Dickens, *Bleak House*; Collins, *The Moonstone*; Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*

#### **Sherlock & Science: The Victorian Brain**

Texts: Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*, *The Sign of Four*, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (Ch 1)

### **Week 3:**

#### **Sherlock & Science: Psychology Today**

Texts: BBC 1.1, CBS 1, 15A

#### **Study in Steampunk**

Text: Ritchie, *Sherlock Holmes* (2009)

**Week 4:**

**A Study in Steampunk**

Text: Ritchie

**Sleuth & The City**

Texts: Conan Doyle, "The Man with the Twisted Lip," "The Red-Headed League" BBC 1.1, 3.1 + CBS 19

**Week 5:**

**The Detective & The Women**

Texts: Conan Doyle, "A Scandal in Bohemia," "The Copper Beeches," "The Abbey Grange," "The Solitary Cyclist"

**The Detective & The Women**

Texts: Ritchie, BBC 2.1, CBS 22-24

**Week 6:**

**A History of Holmes: Passion & Pastiche**

Texts: Guest Speaker

**Mass Media, Multimedia, Transmedia**

Texts: BBC 1.3, 2.3, Online

**Week 7:**

**Adventures in Fandom: Authors & Others**

Texts: Conan Doyle, "The Final Problem," "The Empty House"

**Adventures in Fandom: Authors & Others**

Texts: BBC 2.3 & 3.1

**Week 8:**

**Adventures in Fandom: Authors & Others**

Texts: BBC 3.1 & 3.2

**Holmes on Queer Street: Sex & Sexuality**

Texts: BBC, CBS, Ritchie

**Week 9:**

**Holmes on Queer Street: Sex & Sexuality**

Texts: Conan Doyle, "A Scandal in Bohemia," "The Reigate Squires"

## **Detecting Race: 19th-Century Imperialism**

Texts: Conan Doyle, The Sign of Four, “The Crooked Man,” “The Yellow Face”

### **Week 10:**

#### **Detecting Race: Are We “Post” Colonialism?**

Text: BBC 1.2

#### **Detecting Race: Are We “Post” Colonialism?**

Texts: CBS 9, 10

### **Week 11:**

#### **War & Modernity: Holmes & The Great War**

Text: Conan Doyle, “His Last Bow”

#### **War & Postmodernity: In Search of Solution**

Text: Chabon, The Final Solution: a story of detection

### **Week 12:**

#### **War & Postmodernity: In Search of Solution**

Text: Chabon Conclusion & Review

## **EXTRA CREDIT OPTION: WRITE YOUR OWN HOLMES FANFIC PASTICHE STORY**

**Format:** Your story may be any format, any length. But you must include a one-page (min. 500 words) explanation of why your story is what it is — why did you take that approach, topic, style, form, etc.? How do you see your work relating to the various “canon” Holmeses (ACD, BBC, CBS, RDJ)?

**Scoring:** In awarding points, I am looking for...

1. Evidence of effort. You don’t have to be a skilled crafter of creative prose to score well, but written scribbles on two pages of notebook paper are going to suggest “last minute why not,” when what I’d like to see is “this is my sincere attempt to engage with what pastiche is as a practice and a Sherlockian tradition.”
2. A clear and correct prose style (especially in your explanation portion).
3. Your rationale/explanation needs to show direct and specific engagement with the “originals” (again, here loosely meant both ACD and the TV/films we’ve studied on the course). Avoid broad generalizations like “I felt like Sherlock and John have a wonderful

relationship in the originals and I wanted to explore that” — as with any good critical essay, you need to tie your claims directly to evidence.

### **EXTRA CREDIT OPTION: VICTIMS & VILLAINS**

**Format:** We want data for this assignment — you should present a chart, table, graph or other data-based visualization of the victim(s) and villain(s) in the original ACD stories. Your data should include gender (male or female) and class (upper, middle, lower — and you may use further sub-categories if you are comfortable/confident assigning them) for both the perpetrators (villains) and the clients (victims). It is possible that you will want to include a brief explanatory note about how you assigned class designations, as it’s a bit murkier and more complex than “male or female.” You may choose to do only the Victorian / 19th century stories (26 in total: Scarlet, Sign 4, Hound, Adventures, Memoirs, a.k.a. Volume I of the Barnes & Noble edition) or you can do the whole 60-story run.

**Scoring:** In awarding points, I am looking for (1) completeness/correctness of data, (2) clarity of presentation, and (3) maybe just a dash of ingenuity or originality.