



# STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON SHERLOCK HOLMES

The 2026 R. Joel Senter  
Memorial Essay Contest  
Prize Winners

*Sponsored by  
Mrs. Carolyn Senter*

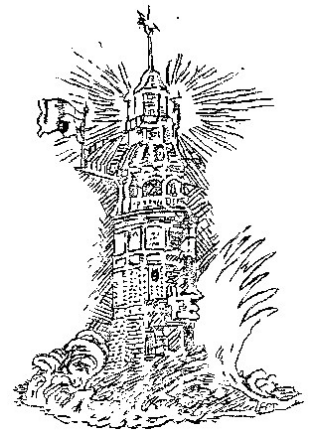
*Administered by  
The Beacon Society, a Scion Society of The Baker Street Irregulars*

# **Student Perspectives on Sherlock Holmes**

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Contest Prize Winners**

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**Compiled by Stephen Mason,  
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With thanks and gratitude to Carolyn Senter and the Joel Senter Memorial Essay Awards readers:

Tim Foley

Peter Eckerich

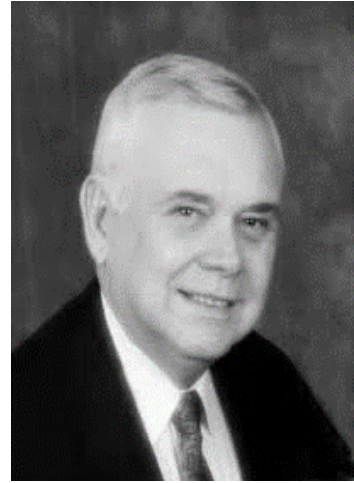
Dan Andriacco

Ann Brauer Andriacco -- Chair, Awards Committee

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## R. Joel Senter

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**T**he R. Joel Senter Sr. Memorial Prize was founded by Joel's wife, Carolyn. Carolyn wanted the legacy of her husband to live on in the Sherlockian world after his death.

R(oderick) Joel Senter, Sr. (1930 - 2018) was a man of many interests and correspondingly numerous accomplishments. He played in bands, he performed magic, he taught mnemonics to Air Force personnel, he hosted a Dixieland jazz radio show, he wrote and produced Old Time Radio re-enactments (one of which won an award), and – probably best known – he and his wife, Carolyn, operated the premier Sherlock Holmes mail order catalogue for almost three decades.

Joel was a professor of psychology at the University of Cincinnati for 32 years. For about 10 of those years, he taught enormous-sized classes – from 300 to 800 students. Decades later, those students still remember his clear teaching and his dry wit. Joel also established and headed an Experimental Psychology Laboratory at the university and received numerous grants from government agencies. But he may have been even better known in the field of statistics.

A textbook he wrote, *Analysis of Data*, is something of a classic on the subject. One student, who himself later became a professor, recalled that he hated and feared math until he studied with Joel. "Astonishingly," he reported, "because of his way of teaching, I loved statistics."



Throughout all those years of professional achievement, Joel retained a passion for a certain consulting detective that he met in a high school English literature class via "The Adventure of the Red-Headed League." So, after he accepted an early retirement package from the University in 1988, Joel and Carolyn embarked on the great adventure of the rest of their life together. It involved the founding of Classic Specialties and eventually the *Sherlockian E-Times* newsletter. Classic Specialties was the Amazon.com of the

Sherlockian world before there was Amazon – a place where one could buy all manner of Holmes-related books and other products. Many of those products were unique, the creation of Joel's fertile imagination.

The Senters traveled widely as members of several Baker Street Irregulars scion societies around the country. Along with the operation of Classic Specialties, that gave them a network of Sherlockian friends far and wide. Doves of them appeared to offer condolences and messages of encouragement to Carolyn when Joel unexpectedly passed beyond the Reichenbach in July 2018.

Carolyn decided to give back to this supportive community, and at the same time keep green Joel's memory, by creating the R. Joel Senter Memorial Prize for essays by young readers about Sherlock Holmes. It brings together two worlds that meant so much to R. Joel Senter Sr. – education and the Great Detective.

Joel was fond of quoting a professor of his who said, “He who toots not his own horn, so shall it not be tooted.” But, as Carolyn pointed out, “he never followed his own advice and, indeed, even eschewed his own accomplishments.”

It is her hope that with this prize Joel’s horn shall be un-tooted no more.

**SOME WIT AND WISDOM FROM R. JOEL SENTER, SR.**

- ❖ *When hearing or reading a statement/proclamation always ask: Who is the speaker and how the heck do they know?*
- ❖ *Always keep in mind when you hear a report such as 40% of some group does something bad or suffers from some disaster that (in this example) 60% didn't. The presentation of this kind of data is meant to shock. Always take note of the inverse.*
- ❖ *Educated does not equal smart.*

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# Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

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**S**ir Arthur Ignatius Conan Doyle, best known today as the creator of Sherlock Holmes, was born on May 22, 1859 in Edinburgh, Scotland. In addition to his stories about the world's most famous detective, Conan Doyle was a prolific writer whose other works include science fiction stories, historical novels, plays, romances, poetry, non-fiction, and writings on spiritualism.

He originally set out to be a doctor. From 1876 to 1881, he studied medicine at the University of Edinburgh. In 1882, Doyle established his own medical practice in the community of Southsea, a suburb of Portsmouth, England.

However, his early medical practice was not very successful, so he wrote fiction to supplement his income. His first Sherlock Holmes story, *A Study in Scarlet*, was published in *Beeton's Christmas Annual* for 1887.

Conan Doyle modeled the character of Holmes in part on one of his former medical school professors, Dr. Joseph Bell. Dr. Bell had the ability to identify a patient's occupation, background, and many other details just by looking at him or her.

The second Sherlock Holmes novel, *The Sign of Four*, followed in 1890. But Holmes really took off when Conan Doyle hit upon the idea of a series of stories about the same character to run each month in a magazine. This had never been done before.

Conan Doyle pitched the idea to a new publication, *The Strand Magazine*, shortly after it began in 1891. *The Strand* initially published the first twelve Sherlock Holmes, which later appeared in book form as *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892). They were an immediate hit with the public. *The Strand* ordered more stories – and then wanted still more.

At the end of the second set of stories, published as *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (1893), Holmes's friend, Dr. John H. Watson, related in "The Final Problem" how the detective appeared to have died at the hands of a criminal mastermind, Professor Moriarty. Holmes came back, however, in perhaps his most famous adventure of all – *The Hound of the Baskervilles* that ran in *The Strand* from 1901-1902. Three more books followed. In all, Conan Doyle wrote fifty-six short stories and four novels featuring Sherlock Holmes over a forty-year period ending in 1927. Conan Doyle wrote nearly 200 novels, short stories, poems, historical books and pamphlets, including *The Lost World* (1912) and *The White Company* (1891). He was knighted by King Edward VII of England in 1902.

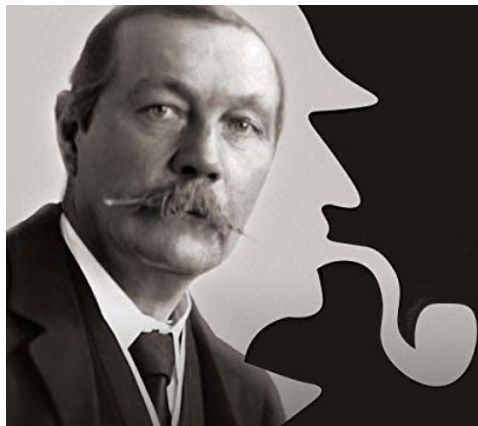
Sir Arthur Conan Doyle died of a heart attack in 1930, at age of 71. He is buried in the churchyard at Minstead in the New Forest, Hampshire, England, beneath a tombstone that reads in part:



***STEEL TRUE  
BLADE STRAIGHT  
ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE  
KNIGHT  
PATRIOT, PHYSICIAN, & MAN OF LETTERS***

A detailed biography of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle can be found on The Sir Arthur Conan Doyle Literary Society's website:

<https://www.arthurconandoyle.com/biography.html>



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# “Intricate Methods”

**Evelyn Mears, 1st Prize (tied)**

**4th – 6th Grade**

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**S**herlock Holmes has different methods to solve his cases than the London police. He is a brilliant detective and his clients trust him. His fashions of solving cases contain attention to detail and thorough investigation.

When Sherlock Holmes was given a new case to solve, he first would pay as much attention to detail as he could. As an example, Helen Stoner had mud on her sleeve when she first came to Holmes. He then observed that “no vehicle except a dogcart throws up mud in that way, and then only when you sit on the left side of the driver.” He was indeed correct in his observation. Normal detectives would not pay that much attention to that insignificant detail. Sherlock Holmes also believed whatever Ms. Stoner confided, even though her story would have sounded insane to the average man. Additionally, he risked danger for his clients, even though he was aware that it wouldn’t be simple. When going to a client’s home, he searched in all of the rooms, not just the client’s. For example, he explored Ms. Stoner’s room while at Stoke Moran; however, he also hunted in Dr. Roylott’s quarters, where he found the final evidence to solve the case. Holmes’s attention to detail was prominent to solving the cases his clients had trusted him with.

Holmes’s remarkable methods have a great contrast with the methods of the London police. Even though the police seldom to never appear in Sherlock Holmes’s stories, we can conjecture what they might have done. The police likely would have been satisfied with an easy explanation as to why strange things were happening to Ms. Stoner, or they would have doubted her. The London police also likely would have asked fewer questions. Unlike Sherlock Holmes, they would not have spent the night at Stoke Moran. The night Holmes and Watson stayed at Stoke Moran was the night Helen Stoner would have been annihilated. The police would have dismissed Ms. Stoner’s dread and would not have treated her problems as urgently. Their searches might not have been so intensive, and they would have easily missed or forgotten details that were little but crucial to the conclusion of the case. The methods of the London police could never complement to those of Sherlock Holmes.

Holmes is keen and quick to notice details, even if they are small. The residents of London have faith in his methods; however, he does not want any sort of reward. He firmly states, “...my profession is my reward.” He recognizes that some of his clients are so desperate to have their cases solved that they might not have any sort of payment. In addition to being shrewd, he is kind and considerate. His methods are credited and are greatly contrasted to that of the London police. If Sherlock Holmes were a reality, he could be trusted with cases or problems in need of assurance and answer.

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# Dissimilar Methods

**Chloe Lu, 1st Prize (tied)**

**4th – 6th Grade**

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**S**herlock Holmes, who is a famous, fictional detective, utilizes various methods to solve many crimes. He uses different, more effective strategies than the London police. Sherlock Holmes has many ways to solve even the most mysterious crimes.

Sherlock Holmes accumulates evidence to prove his theories. In the *Speckled Band*, a book written about Sherlock Holmes by Arthur Conan Doyle, Holmes and his close friend, Watson listened to every word in Helen Stoner's explanation of why she was there to consult with Holmes. He also stayed nearby in an inn with Watson to gather evidence to prove his theory because he wanted to help Miss Stoner though he was putting himself in danger. Holmes paid attention to small details as well such as the fresh mud on Miss Stoner's left arm of her jacket and her return ticket for the train which was in her hand. As Holmes examined the bedrooms in the Stoke Moran Manor House for evidence, he noticed that Miss Stoner's sisters' bed was clamped to the floor, the bell rope was a dummy, and the ventilators don't ventilate. Sherlock Holmes' gathering of evidence, amazing observation skills, and incredible reasoning makes him trustworthy and assists him in solving puzzling crimes.

The London police, who weren't as comprehensive as Holmes, would have been easily satisfied with a brief, incomplete explanation of the current situation. Because they were easily satisfied, they would have asked fewer questions, missed smaller details, and wouldn't have congregated as much evidence as Holmes. After the examination, they wouldn't remain overnight if reasonable as Holmes did. The London police might have disregarded Miss Stoner's fears because they seemed to be unfathomable. The London police didn't have as much knowledge and intellection as Holmes. The London police weren't as thorough as Holmes with solving cases.

They are multiple differences between the techniques of Sherlock Holmes and the London police. One is better at reasoning, observing, risks positioning himself in danger, and is more kind while the other is less complete, might not have treated the given case legitimately, and might have made senseless decisions. There is a great difference between the London police's and Sherlock Holmes's approach to a crime.

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# Rid the World of Crime

## James Slonkosky, 2nd Prize

4th – 6th Grade

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**T**hroughout the history of literature, many detectives have been created through the imagination of an author. However, the one crime-solver, who appears in every child’s brain when contemplating mystery, is Sherlock Holmes in this novel by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. People come from far and near to ask for advice from this great detective. As viewed in *The Adventure of the Speckled Band*, Holmes uses deduction to discover clues that the London police would never even stumble upon. Although Holmes’s methods are different than that of the police, he is always able to serve justice, especially when the police fail during the investigation.

In Sherlock Holmes’s fight against crime, he uses different methods to battle evil. One method that is unique to Holmes is deduction. At the beginning of *The Adventure of the Speckled Band*, Watson declares: “I admired the rapid deductions, always founded on a logical basis, with which he unraveled problems.” Using only deduction, Holmes is able to observe that the young lady that enters his office has traveled a long way. He is able to assert that she has traveled by train and dog cart. The astute detective realizes this by noticing half a return ticket in her glove and mud splattered on her sleeve, which could only have been made by a dog cart. Also, while he is investigating Julia Stoner’s bedroom, he comes upon a ventilator that connects to Dr. Roylott’s room and a bell rope that is attached to a hook underneath it that no one had discovered. Although London’s investigators used their methods to discover the cause of young Miss Stoner’s mysterious death, they failed. They had not discovered the vital information that Holmes had now collected.

As Sherlock Holmes travels through England, he ensures justice where the police are unable to ensure it. Throughout the novel, Holmes slowly unveils his secret methods, which the police cannot seem to figure out. One such method is simply not staying at home; he enters the world, seeking the truth, always with the expectancy of danger and the possibility of death. As witnessed in *The Adventure of the Speckled Band*, Holmes journeys to the crime scene as soon as he hears about it. He enters the mansion, Stroke Moran, knowing that at any moment, another murder could occur, but this time, he could be the victim. He enters not because he enjoys watching criminals get dragged off in chains, but because he knows that he and no other investigator is needed to solve the crime.

Sherlock Holmes steps into every crime scene to use his own methods after the London police have failed. These take criminals by surprise since they have not planned to escape his methods, but they had only prepared to slip through the police’s clutches. If he did use the same methods as the police, criminals would be prepared and London would still be full of crime. It is risking one’s own life to put oneself amidst the most wicked men. Sherlock Holmes does it anyway because he senses that it is his duty to rid the world of crime.

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# The Adventure of the Red-Headed League

Davis Lyndon, 3rd Prize

4th – 6th Grade

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**H**ave you ever read a Sherlock Holmes story? If not, I highly recommend reading a few. Sherlock Holmes was a fictional detective created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Mr. Holmes used many interesting and creative methods the police would never use. He was one of the best fictional and most effective detectives in the world.

Sherlock Holmes used many interesting and creative methods to solve *The Adventure of the Red-Headed League*. Just by looking at Mr. Wilson, Sherlock figured out his client had been to China, practiced freemasonry, and also finished a lot of writing recently. Then he asked Mr. Wilson to tell him the story of why he was there. He asked him about his life, which the police would not do because they would think it was irrelevant. From that interview, he gathered valuable information that would help him solve the mystery later.

One of the especially interesting methods was when he tapped on the pavement with his walking stick to see if the ground out front of the house was hollow. It was not. He wanted to do this because he figured that the assistant was vanishing into the cellar to dig a tunnel to the bank behind the house. Mr. Wilson was away at a mysterious job with high wages. Sherlock deduced that this job was a ruse to get Mr. Wilson away from the house.

Another unusual method was when he knocked on the door hoping that this mysterious assistant would answer. He did, but Sherlock actually just wanted to see his knees. As Sherlock figured, the assistant's knees on his pants were worn and wrinkled from hours of tunneling. After that, he made inquiries and found out that he was dealing with one of the coolest and most daring criminals in London. Henceforth, Mr. Holmes predicted when this notorious criminal would strike and designed an ambush. He carried it through and stopped the robber. These unusual methods Sherlock used helped him solve the mystery faster and more efficiently than the police ever could.

The methods that Sherlock Holmes used had better results than that of the police. Mr. Holmes usually tried to figure out how and why it happened and what to do next, whereas the police were just concerned about how it happened and who committed the crime. He also asked more about their lives than just the story of the crime. Sherlock noticed more unusual details than the police. This helped him solve the mysteries. Sherlock Holmes behaved differently than the police, and he was better for it.

Sherlock Holmes was one of the best fictional and most effective detectives in the world. He acted differently than the police and used many interesting and creative methods, which made him an excellent detective.

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# Sherlock Holmes: Good vs. Evil

Juliana Foley, 1st Prize

7th – 9th Grade

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**S**herlock Holmes is an intellectual character who dazzles audiences with his quick perceptiveness and raw wit. He has unique charm and uses his exceptional smarts to triumph over villains. In Conan Doyle's genius mysteries, he often uses the theme good vs. evil. This is illustrated in many, if not *all*, of these charismatic tales. In "The Adventure of the Red-Headed League," this is represented strongly all throughout, especially when Holmes uses his sharp intelligence to realize that Jabez Wilson's assistant, Vincent Spaulding, is actually John Clay. While most people would ignore a slight smudge of dirt on one's knee, Holmes uses this as a way to tie this case into the right conclusion. It is also illustrated in Holmes's genius way of making Clay pay for his crimes by alerting the police of Clay's crimes. With the right clues, Holmes conquers over people who hurt society. This, ladies and gentlemen, is how the classic Sherlock Holmes portrays good vs. evil, right vs. wrong.

Arthur Conan Doyle is so unique. He subtly hints little clues throughout all of his stories, and that nudges the reader in the direction of figuring out the mystery along with Holmes and Watson. You may think, "Gosh, how does this relate anything to the story?" Yet, it has *everything* to do with these masterful narratives, especially in "The Adventure of the Red-Headed League." Simply put, because of Holmes' deductive super powers, he figured out who Spaulding really was - John Clay! The unjust criminal! And put together with the theme of good vs. evil, you can even better understand it. Holmes is a detective, sure, but he is also delivering people righteousness. He stopped Clay from robbing the bank by sitting in the vault, saving the town's money and, honestly, reputation. The little hints I mentioned not too long ago don't just help the reader, but they help Holmes as well. Take the dirt on Spaulding's knee. It suggests he had been digging, or doing some sort of dirty work. This is a huge clue in who Spaulding really is, and it ties back to the theme of good vs. evil. Also, Spaulding was lying about being Wilson's loyal secretary, while secretly he was just in for the money. "Your experience has been a most entertaining one," remarked Holmes, as his client paused and refreshed his memory with a huge pinch of snuff. "Pray continue your very interesting statement". This helps us better understand how good vs. evil is tied in with Sherlock Holmes, and shows us that there was definitely something more sinister happening under the surface, and that the Red-Headed League was too good to be true. These clues that Doyle provides help Holmes actually figure out who committed the crime, and the all-important question, why. Because of these clues, it supplies just enough for Holmes to identify the evil and serve them their just desserts!

Once Holmes actually figures out the purpose of the League, this theme just plunges deeper. He understands that the League is actually just a cover to distract Wilson for long enough to get him out of the shop. So Holmes, the police, and Watson sit in the vault until they hear Clay coming. And then they make him pay! This is back with the /theme of good vs. evil pretty obviously. The greedy money-stealing

villain is put to jail because of the hero's diligence and wits. A classic, moral work of literature!

These reasons, which include Doyle's subtle clues, Holmes's perceptiveness, and the ending for Clay are why "The Adventure of the Red-Headed League" is such a good example of Doyle's good vs. evil. Doyle's quintessential Holmes stories are such a divine thing to read. With this short little essay, I hope you learned about heroes and villains in "The Adventure of the Red-Headed League."

*"Sherlock Holmes and I surveyed this curt announcement and the rueful face behind it, until the comical side of the affair so completely topped every other consideration that we both burst out into a roar of laughter." - "The Adventure of the Red-Headed League"*

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# The Biased Methods of Sherlock Holmes

**Bailey Piatt, 1st Prize**

**10th – 12th Grade**

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**T**he *Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton* is sure to leave quite the impression on any reader. Themes of shocking murder, revenge, and moral ambiguity run rampant. The fast pace of the story leaves certain ethical dilemmas that demand to be addressed, including the extreme methods Sherlock Holmes used to gain freedom for the Lady Eva Brackwell, at the expense of the naive housemaid Agatha. This deceit led to the possible moral destruction of a lowly housemaid, letting the high-ranking and beautiful Eva Brackwell escape the mistakes of her past without her deserved comeuppance.

Lady Eva Brackwell makes quite the impression on the reader for never having actually appeared in the story. We hear snippets of conversation about her and her well-being, as she is a client of Mr. Holmes. She needs our protagonist to keep Mr. Milverton from sending certain letters to her fiancé. What we need to remember, however, is the fact that this woman is not being framed. She is guilty of writing these sensitive letters, which Sherlock describes as “several imprudent letters — imprudent, Watson, nothing worse — which were written to an impecunious young squire in the country.” Mr. Holmes, who devotes his life to distributing justice among all guilty parties, seems to really have dropped the ball on this particular case. Our hearts may go out Miss Brackwell, but we all can tell that if these letters were worthy of the calling off of her marriage, she should never have written them in the first place.

Another character we never meet is Agatha the housemaid. This young woman, foolish and ignorant as she may be, is completely innocent of the whole ordeal. She is easily swept off her feet by the charming plumber, Mr. Escott, but who could blame the poor girl? As far as she knows, this lovely man is madly in love with her, and the next night her employer is found shot dead in his own home. Foolish as she may be, she likely connected the dots soon after the murder and thinks herself responsible for his death. After all, her fiancé has disappeared, the intruders knew the house well enough to get in, all signs point to the guilt of Mr. Escott. This young woman will now, for the rest of her life, have to deal with extreme guilt, a fate she does not deserve in the slightest.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle did not only entertain with an exciting story, he provides us with a chance for a deep dive into classism and sexism in the early twentieth century. We are given two young women, and asked to choose who to side with. While most people would struggle with this decision, Sherlock Holmes doesn't hesitate. His client is a noblewoman. His victim is a maid. He sides with Eva, and manipulates Agatha without thinking twice about her well-being. This shows us a side of Holmes we never thought we would see. A biased man, defending the guilty instead of protecting innocence? Holmes himself says “You can't help it, my dear Watson. You must play your cards as best you can when such a stake is on the table.” But did he really try his hardest to obtain justice for all? It doesn't seem so.

The blunt nature of our protagonist allows him to only see the very clearly evil in the story, Mr. Charles Augustus Milverton. While he is to blame for the entire ordeal, Sherlock should have stayed within the law and trusted the process, even if it meant Lady Brackwell lost her engagement. If he had chosen this course of action, both women would have received their justice.

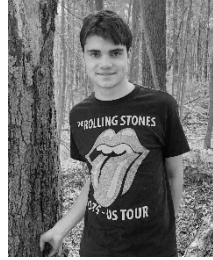
Morality is rarely a clear line. Miss Brackwell is not an evil woman, just a human being that made a mistake in her past she wishes to hide. Agatha is not a perfect girl, as she was foolish to divulge so much to Mr. Escott. But Sherlock Holmes did not respond well to the circumstances that were thrust upon him, and made a biased choice that not only affected the lives of all involved, but put him in risk of arrest or legal trouble. His immediate decision reflected the views and beliefs of English culture at the time of the story, however. Classism and Sexism were not uncommon during those times, but that does not make them right. *The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton* is the perfect example of the complex nature of law, personal bias, and the disregard for the hidden victims in every moral enigma life presents us with.

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# Poetic Justice

Ryan Foley, 2nd Prize  
10th – 12th Grade

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The most sophisticated works of literature often explore the forces of good and evil are constantly at work – from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne navigating the dissonance between her Puritan values and raising a child independently to Raskolnikov of *Crime and Punishment* contemplating how his choices and ideals diverge. In the Sherlockian canon, Holmes himself is a complex character in his pursuit of justice, often making initially rash, irrational decisions in challenging circumstances – decisions that emphasize the indisputable human nature of Holmes. In “The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton,” Sherlock Holmes is portrayed as a complex figure and makes decisions in light of his own perceptions and subjective judgement.

“The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton” is a fascinating introduction to a Holmes story because, notably, it deals with a preconceived notion Holmes has about a specific person. Holmes says, in response to Watson’s inquiry: “I’ll tell you, Watson. He is the king of all the blackmailers.” Rarely in the canon does Holmes make quick judgements about a person, allowing the reader themselves to note the immorality of the mysterious man. And, in this case, reputation is important; the illustrious client Lady Eva Brackwell’s was blackmailed by Milverton, and her reputation (as well as life in general) was on the line. This is where the first key judgement of Holmes comes into play. Holmes knows that in order for Milverton to have letters against Lady Brackwell to extort her with, she must have been disloyal to her fiancé in the first place. In the age of Sherlockian literature, this was a serious social and moral offense that, in the judgment of many at the time, warranted the ruin of Lady Brackwell. As a man of notoriety (and especially a man of the law, and presumably, morality) Holmes may have felt a social obligation to not help Lady Brackwell dodge the consequences of her actions. Holmes, however, does.

Such a choice reflects a broader theme, both in “Milverton” and the canon at large: Holmes takes a largely independent, neutral approach to serving clients and uses his own judgement to determine the best course of action, not society’s expectations. In the initially personal conflict of the story, Holmes recognizes that although his client’s needs are unorthodox, he still has an obligation to passionately fight for her.

In the story’s turning point, Holmes makes a fascinating choice: deception. Rarely does he resort to trickery or breaking and entering to solve a case or serve a client. Not only this, but he “gets engaged” with the house maid in attempts to gain entry to Milverton’s home (although, famously, he is not the marrying type). Later that night, Milverton dies at the hands of a grieving, angry wife who died as a result of Milverton’s blackmail, whom Holmes doesn’t report. The question of justifiability, however must be answered in the context of Holmes’s judgement and understanding of the situation at the time.

Labelling Milverton as an “evil man” does not do justice the degrading, cyclical, and jeopardizing nature of his conduct, which Holmes highlighted to Watson at the beginning of the story. Milverton actively and repeatedly blackmailed upper-class women and was paid for it, as Holmes discussed: “What

would it profit a woman, for example, to get him a few months' imprisonment if her own ruin must immediately follow? His victims dare not hit back. If ever he blackmailed an innocent person, then, indeed, we should have him; but he is as cunning as the Evil One." Holmes' comparison to Milverton as the "evil one" is indeed fitting: he traps his victims in a cycle and knows they'll never rebel. Since the law has no interest or ability to involve themselves, Milverton is untouchable.

The reader can't help but squirm as Holmes "put his finger to his lips as we turned away from the window," signaling Holmes's absolution of Milverton's killer. The reader also knows, however, that Milverton was a bad man. Although not deserving of death over a personal conflict, his choices resulted in the slander of many victims who had made a singular bad choice when they were vulnerable, culminating in driving a woman's beloved husband to death. Upon further contemplation of Holmes witnessing the woman's anger and passion of her husband's death, he must have felt sympathy for her.

In "The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton," Holmes's choice to not report Milverton's killer to the law was not a condemnation of Milverton, but rather allowing a distressed, grieving woman a second chance at life. The choices that Sherlock Holmes made also reflect his independence and deviation from social norms, a character trait developed throughout the canon. Holmes is not a perfect picture of justice, the law, or England: he is a product of the drive for truth and is willing to do anything to satisfy that goal.

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# The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton

Greta King, 3rd Prize

10th – 12th Grade

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*In “A Scandal in Bohemia,” Holmes and Watson believe it is okay to break the law if “the cause is excellent.” They also break the law in “The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton.” In “The Adventure of the Devil’s Foot,” Sherlock Holmes persuades Dr. Watson to participate in a daring experiment, which endangers their lives. Choose one of the stories and explain how Holmes and Watson either break the law or endanger their own lives, and whether “the cause is excellent” for the actions they take.*

**S**ir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, the famous, cynical, brilliant detective, with his faithful friend and biographer, Dr. Watson, was the original hero of detective fiction. Doyle’s works were the original inspiration for the myriads of mystery stories that now entertain the world, and they are still deservedly beloved and admired today. Millions of readers have crept with Holmes through passages, crouched by his side as he waited to pounce on his foes, solved enigmatic messages over his shoulder, and wrestled as Watson did with the ethics of detection. The last particular is an especially intriguing concept that Doyle introduces in his detective’s adventures. When a criminal has used the law to guard himself—when he is doing wrong and actually employs the law to protect himself from arrest and punishment—is it permissible to take justice into one’s own hands, breaking the law to give the criminal his just deserts?

The answer to this question may not be a simple yes or no until attributed to a particular case. Let us examine, then, one of Doyle’s short stories, *The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton*. In this short story, Charles Augustus Milverton is a blackmailer, and, in Holmes’ own words, “the worst man in London.” He buys letters that compromise rich and noble men and women, and then, Holmes tells Watson, “[w]ith a smiling face and a heart of marble, he will squeeze and squeeze until he has drained them dry.” He ruins noble families by blackmail. Attention centers around his practice of breaking women’s hearts by sending compromising tokens of their past to their husbands or fiancés, causing scandal and separation. One woman, gripped with anger and heartbreak, accuses Milverton,

“[Y]ou sent the letters to my husband, and he—the noblest gentleman that ever lived, whose boots I was never worthy to lace—he broke his gallant heart and died. You remember...I begged and prayed you for mercy, and you laughed in my face.”

Milverton is a monster of greed and cruelty, treading on people’s hearts, feelings and past regrets to add to his “already swollen money-bags,” as Holmes says.

When the reader is introduced to Milverton, Holmes has already taken up arms to battle with him on behalf of one of the ladies Milverton blackmails. A certain Lady Eva Blackwell’s compromising letters are in Milverton’s possession, and Milverton has issued a disastrous ultimatum—to pay an impossible sum, or lose her fiancé. The letters, Holmes says, are “imprudent...nothing worse,” but both Holmes and Milverton are certain that Lady Eva’s fiancé would not tolerate them. To go to the law is impossible, for that would also disclose the letters’ secret. Holmes’ solution to the problem is to break the law by

burgling Milverton's house—taking nothing but the letters—snatching them from Milverton's grasp to save Lady Eva. Is this decision ethical and right?

Doyle says yes. To burgle a man's house to obtain letters to save a lady from blackmail, while leaving the man's other possessions entirely alone, harming no one, respecting all other property—such an action, Doyle says, is right, chivalrous, and entirely excusable. The man's purpose for the letters is wrong, but the law cannot touch him while his victims are forced to keep silence. Therefore, if the law cannot touch him, it is necessary and perfectly permissible to extract his victim from his hands. Such is the ethical thesis Doyle argues in this short story. Is he right in his assertion?

Before answering the question, there is another circumstance that deserves examination. Even with the absence of Milverton, there is a problem concerning Lady Eva's proposed marriage. She would have foolishly married a man who, had her past been known to him, would not have proceeded with the marriage. For a marriage to be healthy, the husband and wife must have each other's confidence. Concealment from one's spouse sets a weak foundation on which to build a marriage. Consider the following scenario: If Lady Eva married her fiancé without telling him about her past, even considering that Milverton was not in possession of the letters, there would be no guarantee that her husband would not find out later in life. If he did, the situation would be worse than before: he would discover not only her past, but the fact that she had deceived him and kept it secret. If she told him before the marriage and he broke off the engagement, she would have only lost a man that she would do better not to marry. If she told him and he still married her, they would have a better, more trustful marriage. One might object that this seems cruel. Shall one be forced to leave a loved one just because of a trifling past indiscretion? However, the truth is that sins and errors do have consequences, and sometimes inescapable, lifelong consequences, unless there is someone who is generous enough to forgive them.

Taking this into account complicates the issue of the ethics of Holmes's action. In the first place, Holmes would have done better to counsel Lady Eva to confess everything to her fiancé whether it meant losing him or not, reasoning with her on the evil of her deception. Her confession would render Milverton's weapon useless; Holmes would not even need to break the law. Yet if she refused to confess, should he have left her to her fate? Such an action may seem cruel at first, but to rescue the letters would assist Lady Eva in her deception of her fiancé and result in an unstable marriage. Holmes should not have taken her case.

