

The Return of Sherlock Holmes

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle



About the author

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was born in Edinburgh in 1859 and died in 1930. He studied medicine at Edinburgh University and started work as a doctor in 1882. His first story about Sherlock Holmes, *A Study in Scarlet*, was printed in a magazine in 1887. In 1890 Conan Doyle became a full-time writer. Many Sherlock Holmes stories followed, the most famous is probably *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Conan Doyle grew tired of writing Holmes stories and killed him off, but his readers demanded more and he had to bring him back.

Summary

The fictional detective Sherlock Holmes was created by Arthur Conan Doyle in 1887, and is one of the most famous detectives in English literature. This collection of three short stories featuring Sherlock Holmes and his friend, Dr Watson, is typical of Conan Doyle's writing of detective fiction. In these stories, what solves each mysterious case is precisely the little things which only Holmes notices and the police have dismissed as unimportant.

A Note from Dr Watson: In this section, Watson tells the reader how he and Holmes leave England to work on a case and Holmes mysteriously disappears from 1891 to 1894. The detective is thought to be dead. Yet he returns and they start working together once again.

The Six Napoleons: In this story, someone apparently madly obsessed with Napoleon is going round breaking busts of the legendary figure. Holmes concentrates on where the busts were made rather than on the person who is breaking them and is able to discover that all were manufactured at the same time, shortly after a famous

jewel robbery. It is a relatively simple matter then, for the great detective to deduce that the jewel was hidden in one of the busts, and, furthermore, to work out where the thief will strike next. As always, the pleasant but intellectually challenged Inspector Lestrade is amazed by Holmes's powers of deduction.

The Norwood Builder: Holmes focuses on the motive for the apparent murder of 'wealthy' builder Mr Oldacre by his own lawyer and recently-appointed inheritor. While Lestrade gathers evidence against the lawyer, Holmes delves into the lawyer's past, and finds that the lawyer's mother jilted the builder just before their planned wedding. He also finds out that the builder is not as wealthy as he seems to be and that he has been transferring most of his money to a Mrs Cornelius. Holmes realizes that Oldacre is not dead and that he wants to take revenge on the very woman that broke his heart by means of framing her own son and having him hanged for murder. The detective guesses how the builder has planted evidence against the lawyer. In fact, Holmes literally smokes Oldacre out of his secret hiding place. This proves that the only criminal is Oldacre himself in trying to frame an innocent man.

The Golden Glasses: Holmes puts together a profile of a murderer from a pair of glasses a woman leaves behind. He also deduces that, being short-sighted, she could not have fled the scene without leaving signs and could easily have taken a wrong turn in an unfamiliar house where several passages look the same. As in *The Norwood Builder*, she hides in the house and Holmes smokes her out, using the ash from cigarettes, which he drops around her hiding place. The murder turns out to be an accident during a robbery in which the woman was trying to recover letters that would reveal the truth about a plot in pre-revolutionary Russia.

Background and themes

The detective story: Nowadays, the detective story is one of the most popular forms of fiction, appearing as novels, plays and films. Yet the detective story is a relatively recent invention. Early novels told the story of adventures, commonly in the life of one person. Then, in the 1840s, the American writer, Edgar Allen Poe, wrote three stories, including *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, which are considered to be the predecessors of the detective story. The genre appeared in England with the

The Return of Sherlock Holmes

detective in the Dickens novel *Bleak House* and more completely in 1868 with the mystery *The Moonstone* by Dickens's friend, Wilkie Collins. But in all these cases the detective was a policeman – a professional. Conan Doyle's detective, created in the 1880s, was an amateur with a stock of knowledge about all manner of arcane subject.

The witless sidekick: The Holmes stories also set the pattern of the witless sidekick – an extremely useful literary device – as it always gives someone who, like the reader in most cases, has not a clue what is going on and needs to be led through the process of deduction. Baroness Orczy, created the nameless Old Man in the Corner who solves crimes without ever leaving his favourite tea shop. R Austin Freeman, introduced the first truly scientific detective, Dr John Thorndyke, and Ernest Bramah invented Max Carrados, the first blind detective. Agatha Christie had two famous detective characters, Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple, who found more evil in a country village than in an inner city area. Conan Doyle had, of course, stated this to be true many years earlier. The genre came to be known as *whodunit* (who has done it) because all the efforts of the detective, and the readers, is to discover the perpetrator.

Recurrent themes: Although the crimes in this selection of short stories are all different, they are connected through several themes. The theme of **appearances versus reality** is present in the stories in which men present themselves as kind and decent while they are actually mean and evil (*The Norwood Builder*, *The Golden Glasses*). The theme of **excessive ambition** or greed is illustrated in stories in which men commit crimes merely to become richer (*Six Napoleons*, *The Norwood Builder*). Marital issues cut across some stories and **revenge** due to unrequited love (*The Norwood Builder*) is even a motive for murder. Yet all stories illustrate **the loss of moral values and social ethics to self-interest and enrichment** as society comes closer to the turn of the century.

Discussion activities

Before reading

1 Discuss: Famous private detectives

Tell students to write down the names of famous detectives and to think of their characteristics: *Work with another student and write down the names of famous detectives you know from books, TV, series and films. Then discuss what they are like.*

Introduction

While reading

- 2 **Discuss and write:** Divide the class into pairs. Give each pair of students one fact about Arthur Conan Doyle from the Introduction to the book. Students have ten minutes to collect as many facts as they can by asking other students questions. Then they return to their seats and write down as many things as they can remember.
- 3 **Predict:** After reading the Introduction, divide the class into three groups. Each one takes one of the three stories in *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* and predicts what will happen in the story using at least five words from the Word List in back of the book.

A Note from Dr Watson

While reading

- 4 **Write:** Tell students to write about the dangerous case Holmes and Watson had to solve in 1891: *Watson finds his secret notes about the dangerous case he and Holmes solved in 1891. Write down what the notes say.*
- 5 **Discuss:** Ask students to work in groups and to discuss these questions: *Why did Holmes disappear? Where was he from 1891 to 1894? Why did Holmes return?*

After reading

- 6 **Guess:** Tell students to look at the picture on page 2 and to imagine who is who: *Look at the picture on page 2. Describe the two men and decide which one is Watson and which one is Holmes.*
- 7 **Write:** Ask students to work in pairs and write about Holmes's secret case: *We know that in 1894 Holmes returned to England to work on a case. Work with another student and write down what you imagine the problem was and how he solved it.*

The Six Napoleons

While reading

- 8 **Predict:** Put students into small groups and ask them to discuss the following questions after reading pages 3 to 5: *Why is the thief stealing the busts of Napoleon? What does he want or need? Why does he throw away the broken busts? Is this man mad?*
- 9 **Write:** After reading page 8, ask your students to write the newspaper article Mr Harker wrote. Guide them with these instructions: *Imagine you are Mr Harker writing about the madman who hated Napoleon. Write a story that will really surprise people.*
- 10 **Role play:** Tell students to work in pairs and dramatize this scene after reading page 12: *You are Lestrade and the thief at Scotland Yard. What does the inspector ask and what does the man answer?*

After reading

- 11 **Discuss:** Put students into small groups and ask them to discuss the following questions: *What three things helped Holmes solve the case? Which steps did he follow?*

The Return of Sherlock Holmes

- 12 Write:** Ask students to imagine they are Holmes writing his diary. Guide them with these instructions: *You are Holmes. Write down on different pages of your diary (a) how you felt when you first heard about the case, (b) how you decided to look for information in the newspapers, (c) how you planned to catch Beppo.*
- 13 Group work:** Tell students to work in groups. Guide their work with the following ideas: *In groups, choose to be one of the characters in the story without telling the others. Imagine you are all called by Holmes, who wants to ask you questions. Have a conversation about what you are doing there and try to find out who the other is.*
- 14 Pair work:** Divide students into pairs. Teach them the word *headline*. Guide them with these instructions: *Imagine you are Harker and think of a nice headline for a story about the Six Napoleons. Then write a good story for your newspaper.*

The Norwood Builder

While reading

- 15 Discuss:** Ask your students to read pages 17 to 19 and to discuss the following: *Why does McFarlane need help from Holmes? Why do you think Oldacre called McFarlane? Do you think McFarlane killed Oldacre? Why/why not?*
- 16 Role play:** Guide your students with these instructions after they read page 21: *You are Oldacre and McFarlane having dinner. McFarlane asks lots of questions and Oldacre tries to be mysterious.*
- 17 Discuss:** Put students into small groups and ask them to discuss the following questions after they read page 25: *Holmes and Lestrade discuss some motives for Mr Oldacre's death. How many more can you think of?*
- 18 Pair work:** Ask students to write a dialogue: *Imagine you are Holmes and Oldacre's servant. Holmes believes she knows something. The woman does not want to tell him her secret. Write down what they say.*

After reading

- 19 Discuss:** Tell students to discuss the following: *Do you think Oldacre had good reasons to do what he did to Mrs McFarlane's son? Did Oldacre really love Mrs McFarlane?*
- 20 Discuss:** Ask students to work in groups and discuss the following: *What did Oldacre do with his money? Was it a good idea?*
- 21 Write:** Ask students to work in pairs and to write the following: *You are Mr Oldacre's servant. Write down in your diary (a) How you feel when you see Holmes (b) Why you help Oldacre (c) How you feel about what Oldacre is doing to Mrs McFarlane and her son.*
- 22 Write:** Tell students to retell the story changing the point of view: *In the story, Watson tells us how Holmes solved the mystery but we never know how Oldacre planned everything. Retell the story from his point of view.*

The Golden Glasses

While reading

- 23 Guess:** Tell students to read up to page 36: *In pairs, discuss who you think killed John Smith and what their motive was.*
- 24 Pair work and write:** Put students into pairs. Ask them to re-read pages 36 to 39 and to do the following: *Imagine you are Watson listening to what Holmes is saying about the killer. Write down notes about the most important information you hear.*
- 25 Predict:** Ask students to work in pairs, to re-read pages 43 to 45 carefully and to discuss the following: *Why do you think Sherlock Holmes is so interested in smoking cigarettes and in talking to the cook? Write down your ideas.*
- 26 Check:** Tell students to continue to work in pairs. Tell them to read pages 45 and 46 and to compare the information about the killer with what they wrote in activity 25.

After reading

- 27 Discuss:** Tell students to work in small groups and to discuss the following: *In what way was the life of Professor Coram and his wife difficult?*
- 28 Pair work:** In pairs, have students retell part of the story changing the point of view: *You are Professor Coram's wife. Retell everything that happened since Holmes arrived at the house until he found you.*
- 29 Pair work and write:** Have students work in pairs and to do the following writing activity: *Work with another student. Each student writes one of the letters that will save Alexis. Read each other's letters.*
- 30 Group work and role play:** Ask students to work in groups and to dramatise the following scene: *Imagine you are Watson and Sherlock at the Russian Embassy with Anna's letters. Act out your conversation.*
- 31 Write:** Tell student to imagine they are Holmes: *Write a letter to Alexis telling him (a) all that has happened (b) what you discussed at the Embassy and (c) what he needs to do now.*

Extra activities

- 32 Group work:** Tell students to work in small groups and imagine they are film directors: *Imagine you are a film director. Which actors, places and music would you choose for a film about The Return of Sherlock Holmes?*
- 33 Group work and guess:** Put students into small groups and ask them to choose one scene from the book. Tell them they have to mime the scene. Give them time to practise and then get them to perform it for the class. The rest of the students have to say what is happening.