

# Summer Reading 2010

## Honors English 12

Sherlock Holmes: *The Sign of Four* and *A Study in Scarlet*

*The Sign of Four* was published in 1890 as a sequel to *A Study in Scarlet* (published first in Beeton's Christmas Annual and then as a novel in 1888). Sherlock Holmes proved to be a popular success instantly, although critics for the most part ignored the novels and subsequent stories. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle continued to create Holmes stories- published in the *Strand* magazine and then periodically collected and published in book form- and two more novels throughout most of his career in spite of his frequent professed intentions to have done with the character. In 1891 he contracted with the new *Strand* magazine to write the first six Holmes stories, beginning with *A Scandal in Bohemia*, and then wanted to stop. The *Strand* agreed to pay him a great deal more for another series of six and so he continued the series. He then decided he would kill Holmes off after the twelfth story, but apparently his mother "forbade" him from doing so. He eventually went so far as to kill Holmes off in 1893 in *The Final Problem*. After Holmes' death, Doyle wrote a play about him- a huge success (and adopted by an American actor, William Gillette who made a fortune off of it and built Gillette's Castle in Connecticut)- and the third Holmes novel, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* set in 1886, five years before Holmes' "death". Eventually, in 1903 Doyle bowed to pressure- and a huge sum of money from an American publisher (\$5000 per story, plus a British publisher offering more than half for the British rights) – to bring Holmes back to life. The result was *The Adventures of the Empty House*, set in 1894, three years after Holmes' disappearance at the Reichenbach Falls.

The novels and stories constitute a series, based on the same protagonist, as well as the most influential texts in the development of the modern detective genre. The Holmes stories open up aspects of late Victorian society- the urban landscape, the world of crime, the effects of Empire (including the opium dens of East London)- that readers found fascinating. The sensationalized aspects of the stories- and of Holmes himself- combined with hyper-rationalism of Holmes' method and Doyle's use of Watson as narrator proved to be a powerful formula.

**Study Questions: To be collected on Day One of Class.**

1. Holmes is introduced in A Study of Scarlet. What is he like? How are his powers and his peculiarities suited to his work as “the world’s first and only consulting detective”?
2. Based on your reading of The Sign of Four and A Study in Scarlet, what is the nature of the dangers that Holmes protects society from? Who or what does he protect- and from what? What are the internal- inside England- threatening forces and what is the external- outside England- threatening forces?
3. Holmes is essentially an urban creature with a profound knowledge of the city, even though the crimes he tackles sometimes reach into the countryside, threatening quintessentially traditional English institutions such as the country estate. There are many powerful passages describing the city, especially at night. What images are used and what is their significance?
4. What function does Watson serve both within the stories (as a character) and as a narrator? Would you agree that he is a fundamental part of the success of the series? If so, why?
5. The detective plot can be understood not only as a narrative structure, but also as an ideological structure- for example in the way it privileges reason, rationality, and solutions. What sorts of cultural narratives do the Holmes stories encode (about race, gender, class, etc.) and what “cultural work” do the stories perform?
6. Read ‘The Whole Art of Detection’ below- how accurately does Sherlock Holmes fit the art? Provide examples from the stories to support your response.

## THE WHOLE ART OF DETECTION

### CHAPTER 1: OBSERVATION

- 1.1 Observation is not simply seeing
- 1.2 Observation requires training
- 1.3 Observation requires a respect for details
- 1.4 Observation of a person can reveal much personal history
- 1.5 Observation can perhaps best be considered as elementary literacy

### CHAPTER 2: DEDUCTION

- 2.1 Deduction involves listing the alternative explanations and eliminating all but one
- 2.2 Metaphors may help understand the process of deduction
- 2.3 Deduction is deduction, regardless of the domain in which it is applied

### CHAPTER 3: INTUITION

- 3.1 Intuition is the subtle balance between observation and deduction
- 3.2 Theory should not advance beyond the facts

3.3 Distinguish between information which is central and information which is peripheral

3.4 The pattern of facts can be changed by taking a different point of view

3.5 Destroy mystique by revealing technique

#### CHAPTER 4: DOCUMENTATION

4.1 It is important to keep accurate records of your cases

4.2 It is important to distinguish between complexity and clutter

#### CHAPTER 5: PREPARATION

5.1 A thorough knowledge of the history of your discipline is important

5.2 Preparation also involves competence in areas related to your discipline

5.3 The best preparation may be relaxation

#### CHAPTER 6: COLLABORATION

6.1 The capacity to collaborate with colleagues is an important aspect of detection

6.2 Collaboration is based on the principle of division of labour

6.3 Collaboration includes collaboration with self and with adversaries

6.4 It is important to balance collaboration with solitude

#### CHAPTER 7: DEDICATION

7.1 Dedication to detection, in whatever domain, is essential

7.2 Dedication requires that you turn yourself into an instrument for detection

7.3 Dedication requires a lack of concern about what other people think of you

#### CHAPTER 8: EXPLANATION

8.1 Explanation may perhaps best be considered as telling a story

8.2 Explanation may be aided by illustration