



*Student Perspectives on
Sherlock Holmes*

The 2021 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*

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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 Committee:

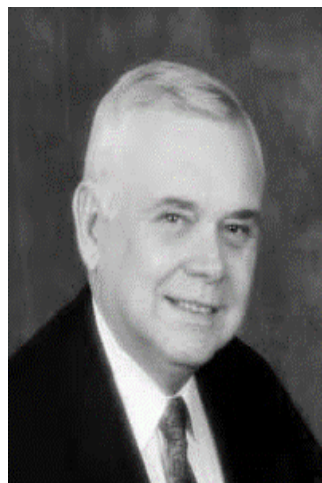
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R. Joel Senter

The 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. Drove 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.*
-



Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Sir 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 Queen Victoria 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>

Thinking Like Sherlock Holmes

Kaitlyn Polchow, 1st Prize
7th – 9th Grade



Ever since I was young, I have been labeled an out of the box thinker. I often see things that others do not, and I can often find more creative and easier solutions to problems than most people. While reading Sherlock Holmes's adventures, I have discovered many things that we do similarly that others probably do not understand or find strange, particularly in the way we think.

Sherlock Holmes is known as a person capable of piecing together fragments of a story and observing different details that can help him arrive at a solution while never actually looking at anything more than what the person beside him might see. One observes this when Holmes is talking to Watson in "The Adventure of the Speckled Band." When Watson asks if Holmes has seen more than visible to others, Holmes replies: "No, but I fancy that I may have deduced a little more. I imagine that you saw all that I did." When talking to Watson, Holmes directly says that he sees what everyone else can but has an ability to deduce more. This skill is most likely very pronounced as Sherlock is a detective and the ability has probably sharpened over the years of use.



However, there is proof that Sherlock indeed does see more than the average person as stated in "The Adventure of the Red-Headed League." Most people view the world like Watson when he says: "Altogether, look as I would, there was nothing remarkable about the man save for his blazing red head, and the expression of extreme chagrin and discontent upon his features." Watson does see this man in front of him and takes in his features. However, Holmes

notices more. Holmes observes that the client: "... is a Freemason, that he has

been to China and that he has done a considerable amount of writing lately ...” These details went unnoticed by Watson until pointed out and were shown to have only taken a few moments for Holmes to find out.

While most of my classmates think like Watson, I tend to think more like Holmes. When I was a child I was diagnosed with dyslexia and autism, and both have their ups and downs. Because of both, I tend to think differently than the people around me – for example, in music. While most people listen to music and hear the band as a whole, I can focus on one certain part and keep track of it no matter how many other instruments get added or how soft it might get. This hearing ability is kind of like Sherlock’s ability to focus on details. While this might not seem as helpful, in my world it is. Because of my abilities, I can keep myself from getting sensory overload by focusing on one thing, instead of multiple.

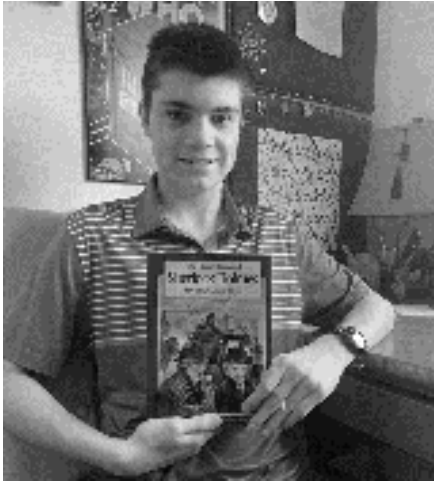
Just as Sherlock Holmes views his world differently than those around him, my dyslexia allows me to see the world differently from my peers. Because dyslexia is a learning disorder, I have had to find different ways to learn and process the same information as my peers. For example, I have to study harder and I find that information sticks better in my brain when it is presented in a multisensory way. My dyslexia also allows me to process the world around me differently. Because of this, I can arrive at the same solution as my peers but in a completely different way.



In conclusion, the world would be boring if everyone thought the same way. Luckily there are people like me and Sherlock Holmes who think differently to keep things interesting.

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A Letter to Watson

Ryan Foley, 2nd Prize
7th – 9th Grade

My dear Watson,

While sitting in front of the fireplace, with my trusted companion, the pipe, I looked at the fire, and was deep in thought of our many times together solving many cases.

As an investigator, I have seen my fair share of strange occurrences and evil characters, and as the fire crackled, my eyes then caught sight of the poker by the hearth, which reminded me of the bizarre case involving Miss Helen Stoner of Stoke Moran. As evil as these actions were that she told us about, I was confident that good would triumph over the wickedness. My dear Watson, always remember that the sun will radiate on the London waters after a heavy, grim fog.

I clearly remember Miss Stoner coming to us in such a distraught manner. She told us all about the questionable death of her sister and the abnormal situation with her stepfather, Dr. Grimesby Roylott. When I saw the five small bruises on her wrist, it was clear we had to help. As you may or may not have realized over the years I've spent working with you, I'm not in this business for the money. I'm here to do what is right. A good man must stand up for what is right and true. Sometimes men become bent and twisted like my poker that Dr. Grimesby mangled. It is necessary at times to try to straighten them out in a light, but firm manner.

Watson, you must recall, we didn't do this for the money, as the love of money was Dr. Roylott's motivation. The love of goodness is the motivation for us. Through simple deduction and logic, it was clear he wanted his stepdaughters either dead or far away. Roylott cared about his baboon, cheetah, and the gypsies on his property more than his stepdaughters. Nothing is more important than goodness and truth.



Dr. Roylott was a suspicious man altogether. It was very concerning that Miss Stoner had to pay to keep people from telling the police, especially throwing someone off the bridge. It takes little investigation to see what this man is. We both could see that when he barged in and bent up the poker and threatened us. We knew what the right thing to do was. We needed to help Miss Stoner.

I could tell something was wrong when we went to the estate. Remember the milk on top of the safe? Knowing Dr. Roylott's work in India, along with the fact that a bowl of milk is a traditional bait for a snake in India, I knew what it had to be. Neither a cheetah nor baboon would fit in a safe, and that strange leash would do nothing for them. I was nearly certain of the serpent's presence. The discovery of the dummy bell pull confirmed my suspicions. Only a truly deranged man would plot to murder someone with a snake.



As I sit here smoking my pipe, I think of, and pity, the victims of violence, Miss Stoner her sister and Dr. Roylott himself, who was a victim of the evil itself. Watson, when really does a man become evil? Is he born with his evil ways? Or does he give it a chance to develop through weakness of character? Perhaps evil doesn't even exist, just an illusion, or perhaps goodness doesn't exist either.

Frankly, I believe no human person will ever know for sure. One thing I believe though, is that the goodness of the human spirit, which I firmly believe exists, will come in to rescue those in distress. We did the right thing, Watson, and I believe Miss Stoner is safe.

The unknown is not bad, Watson. It's just unknown. And we have to accept that. There is one thing that will stay true though: There is hope.

Justice Reigns Victorious in the Cases of Sherlock Holmes

Emily Genter, 3rd Prize (tie)
7th – 9th Grade



That which is good and just always triumphs, and this theme is strong throughout the stories of Sherlock Holmes. The three tales suggested and another I would like to bring up are excellent examples of different but just outcomes, as I will now show.

The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes is a collection including two particularly intriguing narratives with fascinating endings. The first is “The Red-Headed League.” It tells of a crafty and disingenuous assistant’s clever attempt to rob a London bank of £30,000 in gold. Holmes’s intelligence and dexterity in connecting clues guided him to lay a trap and catch the would-be thieves. We see the nature of the criminals Holmes has the pleasure of dealing with in John Clay’s remark, “You seem to have done the thing very completely. I must complement you.” Here is, perhaps, the most commonly appreciated of results: the imprisonment of all malefactors involved. All can agree that this is just, the wrongdoer admitting his guiltiness after being caught red-handed, as the expression goes.



The second tale under this heading is “The Adventure of the Speckled Band,” an account of excitement and danger in dealing with a man who was a bit of a miser, envious of his stepdaughters’ inheritance, and mentally unstable. He used a venomous snake to escape blame for the girls’ deaths and was killed by his own weapon before the second lady could be done away with. Perhaps death was not as fitting an ending for this killer as an asylum, but Holmes can hardly be blamed for the snake’s behavior when he defended himself, and

justice was served for Dr. Roylott as it likely would have been if he were arrested. All is well here.

Third of the recommended examples is found in *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* and is titled “The Adventure of the Abbey Grange.” Here is a fascinating mystery in which the culprits are decided, then proven innocent of this murder. Many people love a good murder mystery, and this is no exception. Holmes’s sharp wit shows him several strange clues: a frayed rope that was also cut, a bound woman who was never attacked, three glasses of which only one was used, and stolen silver that was immediately dropped. He found the answer no other could reveal and summoned the true perpetrator to his rooms. Then comes an intriguing finish: Holmes releases the murderer to do as he will. Justice was served, nonetheless. Captain Crocker killed the husband who was attacking his own wife for holding a conversation in her dining room, as well as in self-defense. True, he loved Mary, but he would do no sin, as she was married. Sir Brackenstall had no reason to attack his lady because of her visitor. When Holmes proved the captain’s loyalty to Mary and willingness to face punishment for a deed he felt was right, the great detective felt it best to acquit the man, as long as no innocent man was arrested for the deed and the captain did no further crime. The matter was even handled in the manner of British law; Holmes the judge, Watson the jury, of whom was said, “I never met a man who was more eminently fitted to represent one.” Granted, this was highly irregular, but what was done was good in the consciences of all involved. This, too, is just.



Finally, we all know of the evil mastermind, smartest criminal who ever lived, rival of that greatest detective, and reoccurring supervillain of our beloved mysteries, Professor Moriarty. You, my readers, knew I must come to him, as Holmes did at last. Holmes was always one step ahead of this Machiavellian criminal unto the very end. Let us take a few steps back on the timeline to “The Final Problem” in *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*. Here we find Holmes fleeing Moriarty, who appears at the last second and dies, only a later book telling us, to our immense relief, that our hero survived and remained a step ahead. Even this worst and wisest of villains had to fall in the end. These examples truly show that Holmes’s deeds were all done justly with a quiet conscience, and that right prevailed over evil to the end. As our great champion once said in response to a threat of revenge, “The old sweet song . . . It was a

favorite ditty of the late lamented Professor Moriarty. Colonel Sebastian Moran has also been known to warble it. And yet I live and keep bees upon the South Downs." Justice shall ever reign supreme because of the courage of heroes such as this. May all strive to be victors over evil, as everyone can be.

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-



Good and Evil in The Adventure of the Abbey Grange

**Sabrina Kim, 3rd Prize (tie)
7th – 9th Grade**

In the Sherlock Holmes canon, “The Adventure of the Abbey Grange” stands out as one of the most fascinating Sherlock Holmes stories because of its subversion of the theme of good triumphing over evil—a maneuver that can make a good story into a great one, as it does here. In this particular case, our idea of what good and evil even are changes with the blowing wind, manipulating our perception of how good does defeat evil. From the outset, the story seems different from the rest of the canon. Though the mystery starts with an eager Holmes and Watson en route to Abbey Grange at the prospect of a murder, it seems to come to an easy resolution. Upon arrival, Inspector Stanley Hopkins informs the detective duo that “[Lady Brackenstall] has given so clear an account of the affair that there is not much left for us to do.” From this alone, it appears the mystery is solved in only the first few paragraphs of the story—an unusual occurrence in Doyle’s mysteries. What’s more, the alleged culprits are the Randall crime family, characters we’ve never heard of, much less met. It seems strange that the apparent murderers are just your average criminals. Holmes’s villains are usually masterminds who hide under our noses throughout the mystery. How can the “big bad” be big or bad when we’ve hardly the chance to get to know them?

The plot twists itself into a narrative knot with the next development. As they travel home, Holmes confesses that “on my life, Watson, I simply *can’t* leave that case in this condition.” They assess the peculiar details of the case and realize that the crime scene doesn’t add up to the witnesses’ stories. It seems that the victims are not as wholly *good* as victims



ought to be and that the criminals the police were so quick to accuse might not be the “big bad” Sherlock and Watson were searching for. As Holmes turns the carriage around, we are already confused as to whom we’re supposed to root for or antagonize in this story. Is it the pair of victims that seems to have fabricated a story based on nearly nothing? Is it the supposed three members of a crime family that we’ve never met? Or is it someone else entirely?

The mystery lives on, and the case is far from finished. News arrives that the Randall family has an airtight alibi, having been arrested in New York on the



date they were allegedly murdering Lord Brackenstall. Our supposed villains—though indeed villainous—were not the criminals in question. Not only that, but when Holmes and Watson revisit the venue, details of the scene don’t add up, and evidence of a skilled knot-tier sends Holmes and Watson down to the port. Their leading suspect, Captain Croker, seems to be a well-mannered man with a good head upon his shoulders, not a conniving wrongdoer with a tendency towards felonies. And, when Sherlock speaks with Inspector Hopkins again, he chooses to

withhold his new information— *protecting* the man he believes to have committed murder and theft.

As Captain Croker reveals Lord Brackenstall’s nature and recounts the origins of Lady Fraser’s and Captain Croker’s relationship, Holmes realizes that he needs to let Croker walk free. “Once or twice in my career,” Holmes says, “I feel that I have done more real harm by my discovery of the criminal than ever he had done by his crime.” Holmes and Watson stage a miniature trial, and Captain Croker is let go without punishment. What does this mean for the good and evil themes? Though it may appear that Holmes has let a legally corrupt man walk free, giving a win to evil, what he has done is let a morally virtuous man live out a long and happy life with the love of his life, proving that good does not always require a bad guy in handcuffs.

Thus, we find that good and evil in the Sherlock Holmes canon are not always as black- and-white as heroes and villains. As is demonstrated cleanly by “The Adventure of the Abbey Grange,” stories—and, by extent, people—are never so simple, and oftentimes, the great ones are the ones that redefine good and evil, and what it means for one to triumph over the other.

Under the Magnifying Glass: Justice, Mercy, and Humanity

**Juliana Scheopner, 1st Prize
10th – 12th Grade**



Sherlock Holmes is typically portrayed with superhuman intelligence and reasoning skills, but in “The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton” and “The Adventure of the Devil’s Foot” we see a more relatable side of Sherlock. In both stories, Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson decide to let the perpetrator walk free without disclosing their findings to the police. As readers, we can relate to the desperation of the anonymous noblewoman and Dr. Sterndale. By showing compassion for the criminals, Sherlock demonstrates human feelings and becomes more relatable. In “The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton,” Sherlock himself agrees that only in specific circumstances is it ethically right to avoid justice through the law: “I think there are certain crimes which the law cannot touch, and which therefore,



to some extent, justify private revenge” (Doyle 582). There are unique situations in these stories, but there are enough similarities that we can determine Sherlock’s guiding principles. While it may not always be ethical to deny justice under the law, Sherlock’s ability to analyze extreme circumstances and take merciful action serves to further endear his character to readers.

In “The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton,” Sherlock expresses his dislike for Milverton from the very beginning. By the time he is murdered we feel no sorrow; instead, it seems that justice has been fulfilled. At the end of the story, Sherlock refuses to help the police find the murderer, saying, “My sympathies are with the criminals rather than the victim” (Doyle 582).

Sherlock sided with the perpetrator in this story because the noblewoman’s actions were taken to prevent other people from experiencing the pain of

Milverton's blackmailing. Sherlock acts with this same intention when he breaks into Milverton's house to steal Lady Eva's letters and ultimately burn all the blackmail material that Milverton had collected. Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson determine that it is morally justifiable to commit theft because the objects were being used for illegal purposes. Sherlock determines that the law was failing to provide justice for Milverton's victims, so it became necessary and perhaps even ethically correct for the noblewoman to take actions to prevent future pain.

Given the common definition of justice demanding a life for a life, Dr. Sterndale's actions in "The Adventure of the Devil's Foot" fulfill the definition. The motive of revenge rarely leads to an ethical outcome. However, in such a personal matter as Dr. Sterndale's actions, Sherlock determines there is no need to involve the police. Sherlock demonstrates a willingness to hear both sides of the story before getting the law involved. When Holmes meets with Dr. Sterndale he expresses that he doesn't want to cause injury "... the clearest proof of it is that, knowing what I know, I have sent for you and not for the police"

(Doyle 967). Sherlock knew who murdered Mortimer Tregennis, but he wanted to know why Dr. Sterndale took such uncharacteristic action. When Sherlock learns of Dr. Sterndale's love for the murdered Brenda Tregennis, he gives the reader a rare look into his own emotions, saying that love would similarly motivate him. Sherlock determines that Dr. Sterndale has suffered enough pain and there is no need for further action. He tells Dr. Watson, "It is not a case in which we are called upon to interfere. Our investigation has been independent and our action shall be so also" (Doyle 970).

While there are different circumstances in these two stories, there are many similarities giving insight into why Sherlock allows some criminals to escape unpunished. Both of these examples address situations that the law doesn't handle. In "The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton," Sherlock tells Dr. Watson that Mr. Milverton's actions technically fall outside the law, but no one could punish him without bringing themselves worse harm, which renders the blackmail victims powerless to stop him. In "The Adventure of the Devil's Foot," Dr. Sterndale says it is highly unlikely that bringing the case before the court would result in justice, leading him to take matters into his own hands. Because Sherlock agrees that the law cannot provide justice in either of these



scenarios, he believes it is appropriate for private citizens to seek justice through revenge. Another similarity between these two stories is that they are both private investigations and one-time occurrences. Based on his other



mysteries we can determine that had Sherlock been working with the police to solve these cases, or in the event of repeated murders, he would not have abetted the criminals. The combination of these factors guides Sherlock Holmes to determine that justice has been satisfied.

These examples pose a question to us as readers. What would we do in Sherlock's position? By allowing the perpetrators to walk free, Sherlock gives us a rare glimpse into his emotions and demonstrates that he is capable of empathy. The perpetrators are the characters we relate to most in these stories—the lady whose reputation was ruined

and the man whose love was murdered. We all understand the human pain of lost opportunity and the feeling of love. Sherlock's actions show that he is fully human, not a lofty, unrelatable, superhero-like character. By highlighting a usually hidden angle of Sherlock's personality, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle shows masterful character development that ultimately makes Sherlock a more relatable character to the average reader. These two stories aren't centered around Sherlock's ability to deduce, but rather on his ability to make the right decision when presented with a conflict of upholding the letter of the law or extending mercy, a true mark of humanity.

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A Female Perspective on Holmes's Strategic Disguises

Eleanor Hébert, 2nd Prize
10th – 12th Grade

Lady Eva Brackwell

“you must play your cards as best you can when such a stake is on the table,” (268) Sherlock Holmes wisely notes. One need not be a broadsman to know that Holmes’s assertion carries truth. In Watson’s captivating account of bravery and blackmail in “Charles Augustus Milverton,” Holmes plays his cards adeptly, employing his masterful use of disguise to gain the information necessary for the triumph of his client. Through his admirable devotion to clients and struggles against destructive rivals, Sherlock Holmes’s misleading charades are vindicated.

Holmes’s fierce loyalty to his clients is consistent throughout the canon. Ranging from royal, to wealthy, to middle class, his clients’ commonality is some unfortunate situation in which they find themselves, most often because of an evil act committed against them. Holmes explains that his female client “has placed her piteous case in [his] hands” (964) and that without carefully calculated

interference Milverton “will bring about her ruin” (968). From a female perspective, when blackmailed by a heartless villain, one has little choice but to enlist the aid of a certain consulting detective; thus, she readily condones him to use whatever means possible to obtain her stolen property. Although Watson’s readers likely sympathize with poor, misled Agatha and may object to Holmes’s questionable methods to hunt Milverton, they accept this shortcoming of his in light of the fact that through Agatha’s short-term misfortune, Holmes was able



to save exponentially more women than the one he briefly deceived. The great detective's renowned loyalty confirms that he would never even consider abandoning his client to her fate, leaving him with only one option—to play his final card. Furthermore, Holmes's decision to employ questionable methods is



not rash, but carefully deliberated and debated, as is his approach to any problem. He recognizes the uniqueness of the dilemma and stresses that he is “never precipitate” in his actions, that he has already given the situation “every consideration,” and that he would not choose the same ploy “if any other were possible” (968). A gentleman, Holmes argues, should not hesitate to act by whatever means possible “when a lady is in most desperate need of his help” (968). Those acquainted with Holmes's character know he is indeed never hasty, but rather reliably methodical, thorough, and logical, assessing each case or situation presented to him justly. His client in this situation being a lady, he

considers carefully how to best serve her interests as a gentleman. While one could argue that Holmes's sly disguises are unfair to another female, in this case Agatha, Holmes makes no distinction between the class or standing of the women he deceives but selects them only because of the valuable information they can provide, extending the same courtesy and respect to them as he does to his clients. Holmes is a man of his word, and a formal commitment to a client guarantees follow-through, which is partly how Holmes justifies his controversial method of obtaining information incognito from an unsuspecting female.

Another of the ways in which Holmes is able to reconcile his deceitful disguises is if a corrupt foe must be vanquished. Milverton, by all accounts, is an immoral, greedy chauvinist who manages time and again to utterly ruin women of upper class, to savor the victory, and to evade punishment. “Heaven help” the doomed woman “whose secret...come[s] into the power of Milverton,” Holmes remarks (963). Milverton is able to evade the law, the detective continues, because none of the criminal's female victims would profit by getting him “a few month's imprisonment if her own ruin must immediately follow” (964). When determining the morality of Holmes's approach, one must consider the motives. Was he taking advantage of one woman's trust cruelly and unjustly, as was Milverton's way, or did he have the general well-being of womankind in mind when he determined to execute such a course of action? Holmes acknowledges the threat Milverton poses to women and the urgency with which the villain must be stopped before more women are exploited. Readers recognize that no

one can serve two masters, and Holmes has chosen to serve the cause of the general well-being of women through ending Milverton's reign of tyranny, at the cost of only one woman's short-term disappointment, certainly the more admirable choice. In that sense, despite being deceived by Holmes's fabricated performance in the short term, Agatha becomes the savior of Milverton's female prey, liberating innumerable women through the information she is able to provide Holmes. Likewise, in another of Watson's narratives, "A Scandal in Bohemia," the doctor recounts the King of Bohemia's narrow escape from a public scandal. The king notes that his blackmailer, Irene Adler, with her threat to publicize an explicit photo, intends, "to ruin [him]" (436). His Majesty continues, remarking that she is a dangerous adversary because "there are no lengths to which she [will] not go" (436). Even though Holmes is outwitted by Miss Adler in the end, without the detective's intervention, it is inevitable that the scandal would have been exposed, at enormous personal expense to the king. As desperate times call for desperate measures, readers applaud Holmes's brilliant attempts to avoid his clients' scandals from being exposed to the public. Despite being fooled by Holmes's façade, both Adler and Agatha ultimately prevail, the former conceiving her own plan to match that of Holmes's efforts, the latter freeing countless women of a villain's cold cruelty through her short-term plight. While the detective's shrewd disguises do delude two unlucky women, he ransoms many more.



Holmes's consuming sense of duty to his afflicted clients dictates the means he deems necessary to accomplish justice. His demanding conflicts against powerful combatants compel him to employ his singular strategy. Principally, the consulting detective is a consummate gentleman; regardless of the gender or class of his client, he bestows the same courtesy and efficiency, consistently considering the best way to help the unfortunate victim, provided that he deems them righteous in their pursuit of the villain.

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Sherlock Holmes and the Case of Justification

Andrew Quiñones, 3rd Prize
10th – 12th Grade

Justified or not? Is it criminal or are there circumstantial allowances? Sir Arthur Conan Doyle wasn't afraid of putting pen to paper on highly debatable topics. Through the characters of Dr. Watson and the famous Sherlock Holmes, he explores themes of justification and what people should or shouldn't be able to "get away" with. One such example of this is "The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton," wherein Holmes chooses to let a culprit of vengeful murder escape. Another example, and one likely to be discussed here in greater detail is "The Adventure of the Devil's Foot," where Holmes once again chooses to let a murderer walk away freely without repercussion. In both cases, questions of the morality of Holmes's decisions are examined. For Holmes and Watson to withhold information from the law was justified in both cases, however, as the law isn't assurance of justice, private citizens don't owe anything to whatever authorities are involved, and to turn in a person for a crime that you would commit would be hypocritical and therefore unjustified.



To begin with, one must separate the ideas of the law and justice. The law is merely a means to an end, but is by no means complete assurance of bringing about justice. One only needs to look at a political or legal body; per example, a court. A court is meant to deliver moral rulings. However, through a deep knowledge of the legal system someone can evade the law, and the court and legal system therefore is rendered powerless in making justified decisions. With that in mind, one must turn to the notion of justice itself. Justice is a subjective notion—one need only ask a jury to decide on a verdict and this will be evident. It could be argued that justice is objective. If that were true, however, it would be impossible to determine who has the right notion of justice, and it leaves one the same as if he or she assumed it to be subjective; so, either way, one must treat justice as subjective. And if this is true, then it's

entirely possible that private citizens, such as Holmes and Watson, were justified in the choices they made. “Well, I’m afraid I can’t help you, Lestrade. The fact is that I knew this fellow Milverton, that I considered him one of the most dangerous men in London, and that I think there are certain crimes which the law cannot touch, and which therefore, to some extent, justify private revenge. No, it’s no use arguing. I have made up my mind. My sympathies are with the criminals rather than with the victim, and I will not handle this case,” says Holmes (“The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton,” Doyle) in response to an inspector’s (similar to a detective) request for help.

With this view of subjective justice in mind, one must then determine not if Holmes and Watson could’ve been justified, but if they were in fact truly justified. The better question, however, isn’t whether they would have been justified, but why they wouldn’t have been justified. The answer to this is simple: they wouldn’t be justified if they owed anything to the authorities (i.e., the law).



Would they, then, owe anything (such as turning in the culprits) to the law? This question is easily answered by another question, namely, why would they? Unless it’s codified in the laws of whatever country (Great Britain, in this case) that one must give any information they have pertaining to legal matters to the authorities, there’s no moral obligation. If there was (and there may be), for the sake of argument a law that said as much, what would be the boundaries or limits to what assistance a citizen must give to the law? There could be no such limits, at least within reason. And if there was such a law or a moral obligation by a given citizen, what if it were to go

against what the individual thought was morally right in the situation? Not only this, but would there be any way for the authorities to make certain citizens complied with such a law? The notion that citizens should for any reason aid the law for any moral obligation is simply nonsensical, for the aforementioned reasons.

To end this argument, one must abandon notions of societal or political justice and look towards personal morality. One last question, then, is asked: Can one turn in someone else to the authorities for a crime that he or she did or would’ve done under the same circumstances, and do so morally? The answer is

a simple, “no.” To do this would be hypocritical, even if the one crime is hypothetical and the other real, as the choice never really changes. “I have never loved, Watson, but if I did and if the woman I loved had met such an end, I might act even as our lawless lion-hunter has done,” says Holmes (“The Adventure of the Devil’s Foot,” Doyle).

With these three arguments firmly established, it’s clear that Holmes’s and Watson’s choices were justifiable. There’s no need for circumstances allowing for their actions, because there are no circumstances that would not justify their actions. Had they been actively denying prosecution, then it could be argued that their allowance of the culprits evading the law would be unethical—but they weren’t. They were simply standing aside, and therefore I reiterate: they were fully and ethically justified.



