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Sherlock Holmes and His Creator: A Case of Mistaken Identity

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The controversy over whether Sherlock Holmes is the mirror image of his creator, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, is now more than a century old. Those interested in tracing resemblances between the Great Detective and Conan Doyle found enough material in the biographical data available to readers of the early years of this century to justify several full-length magazine articles. Conan Doyle, though increasingly irritated by pontifical statements made about his personal habits, felt obliged to acknowledge the persistence of the supposed resemblance in his autobiography, *Memories and Adventures* (1942), which he prepared toward the very end of his life. More than thirty years later, in 1960, his son, Adrian, argued that Conan Doyle was indeed the original of Holmes.

It is not an easy issue to settle, though the “evidence” presented by Adrian was intended to end all speculation on this score. Conan Doyle’s generous acknowledgement of his debt to Dr. Joseph Bell of Edinburgh, whose shrewd diagnoses of ailments had deeply impressed him during his student days, and his full awareness of the contributions made by earlier practitioners of the detective story, should have nipped in the bud all theorizing about the origins of Sherlock Holmes; but of course it didn’t. The elevation of the sixty Holmes stories to the status of a “Sacred Canon” gave free rein to the Sherlockians—Christopher Morley, Elmer Davis, Ronald Knox, and Dorothy Sayers, among many others—who maintained that, to give Conan Doyle maximum credit, he had arranged to deposit Dr. John H. Watson’s reminiscences at *The Strand Magazine*, where they were subsequently published one story at a time.

Tempers have flared, perhaps most notably that of Conan Doyle himself. Arthur Guiterman, a minor poet and essayist at the beginning of this century, addressed a letter in “clever doggerel” to Conan Doyle as one of a series entitled “Letters to the Literati.” (It was printed in the weekly penny paper *London Opinion*, December 14, 1912.) The poem accused Doyle of being conceited and complacent, just like Sherlock Holmes.

Conan Doyle, as one might expect, took umbrage at its appearance. Guiterman was claiming that Conan Doyle had borrowed his inspiration for Holmes from Edgar Allan Poe’s Monsieur Dupin, and that he had then spoken contemptuously about Poe, disowning him as an influence.

In response, Conan Doyle wrote a doggerel poem of his own (printed in *London Opinion*, December 28, 1912). It began with the lines,
Sure, there are times when one cries with acidity,  
'Where are the limits of human stupidity?'

and it ended,

Pray master this, my esteemed commentator,  
That the created is not the creator.  
So please grip this fact with your cerebral tentacle,  
The doll and its maker are never identical.

Even so, a number of points of contact between Sherlock Holmes and Conan Doyle are certainly striking. Brief sketches of their respective lives will prove useful at this point. Holmes was born in 1854 to a family of English country-squires. His grandmother was the sister of Carle Vernet, a famous French painter. His brilliant brother, Mycroft, was seven years older than he and involved in government service at the highest level; he dealt with national security problems. Praise from Victor Trevor's father—mentioned in “The Gloria Scott”—helped to determine Sherlock Holmes’s choice of career as a consulting expert in criminology. Holmes had a highly developed knowledge of chemistry; indeed, at his first meeting with Dr. Watson, he described vividly his test for haemoglobin; and the canon contains several references to his test-tube experiments. He knew a great deal more than the average Englishman about the intricacies of the law. His range of interests was extraordinarily wide. In *The Sign of Four*, he indulged at a dinner party in comments on miracle plays, medieval pottery, Stradivarius violins, the Buddhism of Ceylon, and warships of the future. He loved to travel; surely that was made evident by his journeys to Florence, Tibet, Persia, Khartoum, and France, during his years of self-imposed exile after his supposed death at the Reichenbach Falls, when he traveled—at least part of the time—disguised as Sigerson, a Norwegian explorer.

In all these respects he may remind some readers of Conan Doyle. Even his distrust of women was accompanied by an unfailingly courteous behavior toward them, as for example Maud Bellamy (“a most remarkable woman,” Holmes said in “The Adventure of the Lion’s Mane”) and Irene Adler, an American operatic diva retired in London (“the woman” forever in Holmes’s mind, and perhaps his heart as well). Add to these aspects of his personality a love of amateur sports, a love of gardens and serious music, and a hope that one day men and women would all become “citizens of the same world-wide country”—an opinion expressed in “The Adventure of the Noble Bachelor”—and the case for a mirror image seems fairly strong.

The first thirty years of Arthur Conan Doyle’s life (1859-1930) were not as clearly blessed by a benevolent fortune. At the time, as well as in the autumn years of his career, it seemed rather ordinary and even dispiriting to the man who was destined to create the most universal and enduring character of Victorian fiction. Born into an artistically talented Catholic family, he could take pride in his grandfather, John Doyle, who emigrated from Ireland to England and secured a high reputation as a caricaturist and artist specializing in political subject matter, as well as in his uncles: Henry Doyle, also an artist and director of the National Gallery, Dublin; James Doyle, a creator of colour-prints and a well-
respected historian; and Richard Doyle, the artist who drew for *Punch* (indeed, he designed its cover) and a man about town who dined regularly with such notables as the Prince of Wales.

His father, Charles Altamont Doyle, also drew illustrations for magazines and children’s books, while working as a clerk for the Board of Works in Edinburgh; he ran a genteel, if somewhat shabby, home. His wife, Mary Doyle, loved French culture and taught her son the fine points of heraldry—which he would put to use in his later, very popular historical romances, such as *The White Company*.

Conan Doyle was an athlete who played hard at various sports, including cricket and football. (In later years he would write a novel, a play, and several short stories about the manly art of boxing.) His education at Hodder and Stonyhurst schools in Lancashire, England, and at Feldkirch, Austria (all Jesuit establishments), did little to confirm his Roman Catholic faith, and probably led, by labyrinthine ways, to the agnosticism he found so congenial during his years as a student at Edinburgh University. His home had been genteel, but it turned increasingly shabby as his father’s fortunes deteriorated (the inevitable result of alcoholism and mental illness).

In 1880, while still a student, Conan Doyle went to sea. He signed on as ship’s surgeon, first aboard a Greenland whaler and then a West African freighter. Returning to England in January 1882, he became a junior partner in a newly established practice at Plymouth. George Turnavine Budd, the former fellow-upperclassman with whom he practiced, turned out to be a hustler and a man of dubious ethics. Conan Doyle, in disgust, moved to Southsea, near Brighton, and established his own office. Budd was reincarnated as Dr. Cullingworth in *The Stark Munro Letters*, a largely autobiographical novel that Doyle would later publish (1895).

Eight years of an undistinguished career—from 1882 to 1890—promised nothing but small pay and continuing obscurity in a small town. Though he tried to specialize in ophthalmology, and even moved to London to set up a practice there, commercial success eluded him. The high points of these years included completion of his dissertation on the syphilis-related condition of *tabes dorsalis* (July 1885); his marriage to Louisa “Touie” Hawkins; and his first (rather modest) successes as a writer of adventure stories, printed in *All the Year Round*, *London Society*, *Chambers’s Journal*, *Lippincott’s Magazine*, and *Boys’ Own Paper*.

But he was finding his way. The art of storytelling was deeply imbedded in his genes. *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) and *Sign of the Four* (the original title of *The Sign of Four*) (1890), though not widely noticed when originally published, led the way to a long sequence of short stories printed in *The Strand Magazine*, the fortunes of which were to remain intimately tied to those of Conan Doyle for a full quarter-century. These were phenomenally successful. He decided not to wait any longer for patients to show up in his consulting room. From then on he seldom looked back.

He worked as a volunteer senior civil physician in South Africa during the Boer War, helping to run a privately funded hospital near Bloemfontaine, and he
used his medical knowledge in a large proportion of his stories. Holmes, after all, always respected Dr. Watson for his medical skills, and as a fellow professional.

Conan Doyle's life became increasingly crowded. He ran two unsuccessful campaigns as a Liberal Unionist for a seat in the House of Commons. Then followed the death from consumption of “Touie” in 1906; his marriage to Jean Leckie in 1907; his military history of the Great War; his lecture tours in Canada, the United States, and several other countries; and his impassioned defence of spiritualism, about which he wrote and lectured from 1918 on.

Conan Doyle will not be remembered for his historical romances as often as for his Sherlock Holmes stories, though the former were hugely successful at the turn of the century. *Vox populi* has spoken unequivocally on this matter.

Perhaps it is not surprising that Conan Doyle fancied himself, on occasion, to be a better sleuth than the detectives of Scotland Yard and the men who served in various local constabularies. His most notable success came in 1906, when he began an investigation of a series of livestock mutilations in Staffordshire. For these crimes George Edalji, a young former solicitor of Indian descent, had been sentenced to seven years imprisonment. Doyle proved that Edalji, who suffered from uncorrectable astigmatic myopia, could not possibly have wandered around a field in the middle of the night and a severe rainstorm, evading police patrols, in order to slash a pony. Edalji, Conan Doyle demonstrated, had been a victim of biased testimony and racial hatred. He went further and identified the man who lived in the area and was almost certainly the real criminal. The Home Office finally granted Edalji a pardon; he was readmitted to legal practice, and the fallout from his case included the establishment of an English court of criminal appeal (1907).

Other cases intrigued Conan Doyle, and to these he contributed time, energy, his writing talent, and considerable sums of money: that of Adolph Beck, accused of swindling women and convicted on the basis of faulty identifications and the testimony of supposed handwriting experts; that of Oscar Slater, who was accused of having murdered a wealthy elderly lady of eighty-three (Doyle fought this case for sixteen years and was largely responsible for Slater’s release in 1927); and that of the gentleman who, together with some forty pounds that he had withdrawn from the bank, disappeared from a London hotel room (the process of reasoning whereby Doyle identified what had happened to him is amusingly recounted in *Memories and Adventures*).

Conan Doyle once tried his hand at solving the murders committed by Jack the Ripper. In an interview that he gave a reporter for the *Cincinnati Commercial Gazette*, published on June 10, 1894, he told of going to the Scotland Yard Museum to look at a letter written by someone who claimed to be Jack the Ripper. (Many experts believe to this day that the letter was authentic.) Conan Doyle, noting that the language of the letter contained several American expressions, and that the handwriting was “round, easy, clerky,” and that the paper stock was better than average, imagined what Sherlock Holmes might have suggested as a plan to the police. Holmes would have reproduced the letters in facsimile; on
each plate he would have appended a note, indicating “the peculiarities of the handwriting.” Then the facsimiles would be published in the leading newspapers of Great Britain and America, and in connection with them a reward would be offered “to any one who could show a letter or any specimen of the same handwriting. Such a course would have enlisted millions of people as detectives in the case.”

But, unfortunately, the police did not act on Holmes’s plan as outlined by Conan Doyle. Even though this suggested way to proceed might have produced a useful result, it was never followed, and the case of Jack the Ripper—for various reasons—was never solved to everyone’s satisfaction.

The differences between Sherlock Holmes and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle are equally striking and should be reviewed as well.

In “The Adventure of the Noble Bachelor” Sherlock Holmes said that he read nothing but the criminal news and the agony column. “The latter,” he added, “is always instructive.” That statement is all the more remarkable because of Holmes’s knowledge of the daily press. In one story he identified the London newspapers which would print a personal advertisement: the Globe, Star, Pall Mall, St. James’s, Evening News Standard, and Echo.

But Conan Doyle read more than newspapers and took an avid interest in countless issues that would scarcely have interested Holmes. This should be remembered despite the bold assertion of Lady Conan Doyle in her essay written for Pearson’s Magazine (December 1934), entitled “Conan Doyle was Sherlock Holmes.” Her husband, she wrote, “had the Sherlock Holmes brain,” and “sometimes he privately solved mysteries that had nonplussed the police.” Thus, she agreed with her son Adrian. But she did not deal effectively with the counter-argument that, despite the fact that many people in different lines of work have “remarkable powers of deduction and inference,” they do not deserve to be called Sherlock Holmeses.

More to the point, one relevant subject warrants more investigation than it has received: Conan Doyle’s sense of what constituted fair play—in other words, his sense of justice.

Holmes had a special concept of what needed to be done to bring to account someone who had transgressed the law. One story tells us that he watched from behind a curtain as a woman whose life had been ruined fired “barrel after barrel” into the body of her betrayer, “the king of all the blackmailers,” Charles Augustus Milverton. Holmes did nothing to prevent her from grinding her heel into Milverton’s upturned face or from escaping into “the night air.” Even more remarkable, he refused to help Inspector Lestrade: “The fact is,” he told his visitor from Scotland Yard, “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 vengeance. 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.”

“The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton” is only one of five cases in
which Holmes allowed the killer to escape: "The Adventure of the Abbey Grange," "The Boscombe Valley Mystery," "The Adventure of the Devil's Foot," and "The Adventure of the Veiled Lodger." Holmes, unlike Conan Doyle, decided in his own mind whether or not the murderer had ethical justification for what he had done. Though he did not impede an official investigation, he more than once decided not to make known to the police the identity of the person they were seeking. Indeed, such decisions are recorded in a surprising number of stories scattered throughout the canon. Orlando Park, in his valuable reference work, *Sherlock Holmes, Esq., and John H. Watson, M.D.: An Encyclopaedia of Their Affairs* (Evansville, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1962), notes that Holmes's attitude is found "often enough in these sixty cases to suggest that it was basic. The reader must read such cases and form an independent opinion as to the correctness of Holmes's attitude" (p. 78).

And there are other special moments in the canon. In "The Blue Carbuncle," a story that took place during the Christmas season, Holmes announced that he was not retained by the police to supply their deficiencies. "I suppose that I am commuting a felony," he mused for Watson's benefit (he had just allowed the criminal Ryder to escape); "but it is just possible that I am saving a soul. This fellow will not go wrong again; he is too terribly frightened. Send him to jail now, and you make him a jail-bird for life. Besides, it is the season of forgiveness. Chance has put in our way a most singular and whimsical problem, and its solution is its own reward."

In "The Abbey Grange," Holmes told Watson that "once or twice" in his career he had felt that he had done more real harm by his discovery of the criminal than ever he had done by his crime. "I have learned caution now," he added, "and I had rather play tricks with the law of England than with my own conscience." This is the story, by the way, in which Holmes told Captain Crocker, a confessed murderer of a wife beater, that he acquitted the Captain of his crime, and that "So long as the law does not find some other victim, you are safe from me." He urged Captain Crocker to "disappear in the next twenty-four hours."

The number of stories in which the issues are ambiguously presented is surprisingly large. *A Study in Scarlet*, "The Devil's Foot," and "The Crooked Man" are only three of the stories in question. It is not easy to predict, on a first reading of several such cases, how Holmes will judge the issue and whether a private individual's mercy will interfere with the strict judgments of the law.

"What is the meaning of it, Watson?" Holmes asks (at the conclusion of "The Cardboard Box"). "What object is served by this circle of misery and violence and fear? It must tend to some end, or else our universe is ruled by chance, which is unthinkable. But what end? There is the great standing perennial problem to which human reason is as far from an answer as ever."

Holmes feared the east wind that was coming, "such a wind as never blew on England yet. It will be cold and bitter, Watson, and a good many of us may wither before its blast." So he thought in "His Last Bow." He seemed to recognize increasingly often, as the years wore on, the impossibility of settling all problems by use of reason.
Compare that growing grimness, the gathering in of shadows, these inhibitions affecting Holmes's willingness to act even as he acknowledged that not all his options were clear—a change that we may associate with the aging process—to the indomitable spirit of Conan Doyle, the author behind the stories. Even in his fiercest polemics against those who refused to recognize the value of the Spiritualist movement, Conan Doyle never thought that the east wind of a changing age could frost his determination to speak the truth as he saw it and to defend the right.

In some ways he gave freer scope to his imagination than Holmes did; he increasingly often thought of Holmes as "merely a mechanical creature, not a man of flesh and blood,—and easy to create because he was soulless." (This is not a reference to Holmes's ignorance of astronomy, the theories of Copernicus and the composition of the solar system, or of literature, philosophy, and politics—a list of intellectual limits as recorded by Watson in the second chapter of A Study in Scarlet. As the canon grew, Holmes's knowledge of the sciences and the arts correspondingly improved. Holmes was not ever as two-dimensional as Conan Doyle pretended.)

Nevertheless, there is something freer and larger about Conan Doyle's sympathies with the oppressed, the unjustly persecuted, the underprivileged, than we can claim for Holmes's character.

This is not the same as making a case for viewing Conan Doyle as a real-life incarnation of Kipling's Kim, a friend of all the world. There were moments in his life when even his friends were startled by an Old Testament ferocity in what he said or did. Desmond Hawkins, a distinguished literary critic who has specialized in this period of English history, once wrote that Doyle was not a man he could warm to. "There seems to be a repressed violence in him that he manages to control with an effort that might fail at any moment. In that particular breed of Englishman there is a hint of the vigilante when self-righteousness is frustrated."

Many readers familiar with Conan Doyle's life may recall how surprised they were at a statement made by Conan Doyle during his visit to Sing Sing at Ossining in New York State, and after he had sat in the electric chair to see how it felt. (He wanted to imagine the current crashing through his body.) He was astonishingly grim about what needed to be done to punish those who in time of war fought unfairly and were responsible for the deaths of women and children. In 1901, citing as his precedent the fact that the Germans during the Franco-Prussian War had continually carried French hostages in the trains, he recommended putting a truck full of "Boer irreconcilables" behind every engine which passed through a dangerous part of South Africa. The first duty, Conan Doyle argued, was to English soldiers. The Boer attacks on railway trains had killed noncombatants indiscriminately, and these were outrages that invited—nay, demanded—reprisals.

His anger at the Germans during the Great War may be traced in Letters to the Press, edited by John Michael Gibson and Richard Lancelyn Green. He had a clear notion of what the rules of war were. When the German Navy laid mines
in open waters and caused the death of neutrals, this was “murder.” It was immoral to bombard unfortified towns by sea or by air. The Germans treated prisoners with shocking disregard for what was right, for what was necessary in a world that respected civilized values. Zeppelin raids on helpless civilians enraged him. He urged retaliatory raids upon German towns, and he did not flinch at the thought that German civilians might be killed. “The Hun is only formidable when he thinks that he can be frightful with impunity,” he told his countrymen. “‘Blood and Iron’ is his doctrine so long as it is his iron and some one else’s blood.”

He hated lukewarm feelings, at least so far as the Germans were concerned. Hatred—a righteous wrath—was the means whereby the English could attain an invincible (and, from his point of view, a necessary) resolve. “When Miss Cavell was shot,” he wrote in 1918, “we should at once have shot our three leading prisoners. When Captain Fryatt was murdered we should have executed two submarine captains. These are the arguments which the German mentality can understand. . . . We have law and justice on our side. If they attempt a reprisal, then our own counter-reprisals must be sharp, stern, and relentless. If we are to have war to the knife, then let it at least be equal for both parties.”

That was written in wartime, during a period of emotional excess. When peace prevailed in the land, did Conan Doyle speak as stridently about the issues he was interested in? The answer is Yes.

His hatred of Establishment influence used to create injustices in court, his contempt for lawyers who behaved abominably while covering up legal scandals and for the inexcusable behavior of police officials who assisted them in doing so, were not limited to the cases of George Edalji and Oscar Slater.

Some court sentences struck him as entirely inappropriate, such as the three months judgment against an American lady who had stolen some small articles of silver from a hotel room. “It is to a consulting-room, and not a cell, that she should be sent,” he argued. He stood up for women workers in a Brighton hotel whose pay was being reduced. As he told the voters in 1900, he felt pledged to oppose all narrow or reactionary legislation. Indeed, his concerns ranged from the relatively minor—as when he denounced the officials who set speed traps in the Guildford district during the summer to catch motorists, or the Sunday laws which prevented rifle shooting while allowing cycling, motoring, and boating as legitimate activities on the Sabbath—to more important issues. The latter included the stupidity of the Lord Chamberlain in his capacity as censor of plays; the unforgivable intolerance of the divorce laws (which Conan Doyle thought were based largely upon theological considerations); the color prejudices which prevented full Empire representation at the Olympic Games; the outrageous murdering of wild birds for their skins and plumes (he was a prime mover in the Importation of Plumage Prohibition Bill of 1914); wartime profiteering; and the release (for whatever reason) of criminals who had been convicted three or four times of a penal offence.

“We segregate our lunatics and we segregate our infectious cases,” he wrote The Times in 1929, “and the hardened criminal is a mixture of both. He is a man
with a dangerous idée fixe, and he is a man who is likely to infect others by exerting his influence upon those who are younger or weaker than himself. The world has no use for him. He is the enemy of society. It is folly, therefore, to give him successive sentences, which mean intervals when we have to pay the penalty for our own weak and illogical leniency. The true method of guarding ourselves is to eliminate him altogether. From the time that his true character is established the prison doors should never open again."

Even those who agree with the sentiment will concede its harshness of tone. But if Conan Doyle is occasionally described as one of the few Great Victorians who speak directly to our own age, it is because he had an uncanny knack for interesting himself in issues that remain timely.

Some of Conan Doyle’s positions are certainly cranky, such as in 1926—the year of the General Strike in England, the year of widespread unrest among a disillusioned populace—his denunciation of the habit vacationers had developed of going to the Riviera for hotel accommodations rather than to the southern coast of England. He proposed a heavy poll tax to penalize those who made money in England and preferred to spend it abroad. He believed that only good reasons of health or of business could excuse their absence from England. He was in favor of blacklisting tax evaders in the Channel Islands and other places abroad; if they remained recalcitrant, he went on, they should be deprived of all rights of citizenship. “The times are serious,” he declared, “and drastic methods are needed.” In brief, he believed that he was delivering a just verdict on those who merited punishment for shirking their duties to home and country, and he did not flinch from the charge that he might be more extreme than circumstances warranted. At such moments he reminds us of Sir Nigel Loring in The White Company, who preferred to return two blows for every one that he received, and the other great historical figures of that romance: John Chandros, Pedro of Castile, the Black Prince and his father, the noble Edward III, and the semi-mythical Bertrand du Guesclin, warriors all, men determined not to be defeated in the continuing battles of life.

What, then, did Conan Doyle’s sense of justice amount to? He demanded a fair hearing for all sides of a question. (When he wrote The War in South Africa: Its Cause and Conduct, he was incensed that the foreign press had presented only one side of the issue; he wanted to explain the British view.) He urged that tariff proposals, and other Government bills, should be judged “in a judicial and impartial spirit,” because such judgments would perform “an important national service.” He urged greater equity in taxes, pointing to the disparity between what the poor paid for their necessities and what the rich did not have to pay for the import of diamonds, motor cars, velvets, and silks. He wanted reforms in the system of income-tax assessment, and elimination of the assessor’s right to impose “peculiarly outrageous” judgments on helpless citizens. His was one of the angriest voices raised against the villainous behavior of the representatives of King Leopold of Belgium in central Africa, behavior that remains appalling and unforgivable to this day. In similar fashion he condemned Portugal, in 1910, for its barbarous treatment of prisoners: “We have before us,” he wrote, “cruelty,
injustice, want of chivalry, everything which is alien to the real Portuguese
nature. . . ."

Unlike Sherlock Holmes, who had little or no interest in opinions and leading
articles, Conan Doyle was a man who held strong opinions and wanted a free play
of opinions in an open forum; and he was capable of changing his mind, too, as
when he became a convert, in 1911, to the cause of Home Rule for Ireland. He
did not want to be ignored, or his proposals for remedying social wrongs and
injustice to be taken lightly. He was, taken all in all, a courageous warrior enlisted
in one cause after another. He was on the right side most of the time—the morally
right side, the ethically right side. He deserves to be remembered in our age for
both the passion of his convictions and the eloquence with which he expressed
his views.