



Sherlock Holmes: Character and Canon

As a young medical student, Arthur Conan Doyle worked as a clerk to Dr. Joseph Bell, who inspired the character of Sherlock Holmes both in physical appearance and personality. Dr. Bell, a Scottish surgeon and lecturer at the University of Edinburgh medical school, was described by Doyle as a “wiry dark man, with a high-nosed acute face, penetrating grey eyes, and angular shoulders. He would sit in his receiving room...and diagnose the people as they came in, before they even opened their mouths. He would tell them details of their past life; and hardly would he ever make a mistake.” Bell also spent time helping police with investigations—including analyzing the “Jack the Ripper” case for Scotland Yard—prompting Doyle to dedicate his series to Bell.

The character of Holmes remains essentially consistent throughout the extensive Sherlock Holmes canon. The canon consists of 56 short stories and four novels: *A Study in Scarlet*, *The Sign of the Four*, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, and *The Valley of Fear*. It remains a discussion whether some of Doyle’s other works, in the form of Sherlock Holmes parodies, should be included in the canon.

The lasting popularity of Sherlock Holmes can be attributed to the character’s adaptability across periods. Like forensics pioneer Dr. Bell, Holmes’ investigative techniques were ahead of his time, making it relatively simple to assign him present-day mysteries with little alteration to his character or practices.

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