

Study in Scarlet: Discussion Guide

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

“There’s the scarlet thread of murder running through the colourless skein of life, and our duty is to unravel it, and isolate it, and expose every inch of it.”

Author Bio:

Sir Arthur Ignatius Conan Doyle (22 May 1859 – 7 July 1930) was a Scottish physician and writer who is most noted for his fictional stories about the detective Sherlock Holmes, which are generally considered milestones in the field of crime fiction.

Story Background:

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s 1886 novella *A Study in Scarlet*, first published in 1887, introduced his character Sherlock Holmes. Although Conan Doyle wrote 56 short stories featuring Holmes, *A Study in Scarlet* is one of only four full-length novels in the original canon. The novel was followed by *The Sign of the Four*, published in 1890. *A Study in Scarlet* was the first work of fiction to incorporate the magnifying glass as an investigative tool.

In August 2011, the Albemarle County, Virginia School Board removed *A Study in Scarlet* from the district’s sixth-grade reading lists following complaints from students and parents that the book was derogatory toward Mormons. It was therefore moved to the reading lists for the tenth-graders, and remains in use in the school media centres for all grades.

Discussion Questions:

1. What did everyone think? General impressions? Likes/dislikes?
2. Will you read more Sherlock Holmes?
3. Before Conan Doyle creates Holmes, there were few detective stories to use as a template. Is Holmes based on a detective or on a medical student doctor?
4. Why do you think Doyle wrote this so that we see Holmes only as reported through Watson’s eyes? What effect does that have on readers’ view of Holmes? How would this story differ if it were Holmes writing? What if it were told by an anonymous third-person narrator?
5. Did you like the presentation of the Holmes/Watson friendship?
6. What events/circumstances/personal characteristics contribute to the “easy” relationship that quickly develops between Watson and Holmes, especially since, as we quickly learn, Holmes does not get along with many people.
7. Did you find yourself charmed by Holmes’s genius?
8. Since Holmes often shows no interest in cases presented to him, why does this particular case appeal to him?
9. What is the relationship between Holmes and Scotland Yard? In what ways does Holmes need Scotland Yard? Explain what need might mean in reference to this relationship.

10. When introducing Sherlock Holmes, what does this novel establish about his methods of detection? Do you think his approach to detection reasonable?
11. What do you think about his ideas regarding knowledge? (Brain is an attic and only has so much space for information.) Do you agree it is not necessary to know the earth revolves around the sun?
12. Do you agree with Holmes, that without murder, life has no color? Is this maybe why we're so entranced by murder-y TV shows and movies as well as crime novels and daily blotters?
13. In some ways, Holmes is a difficult character to like, especially because of his contempt for others in the story and for us. In your opinion, what makes Sherlock Holmes such an important and enduring figure in British fiction? Why do readers like him?
14. How do you compare the two parts of the story. Did breaking up the story work? Did you feel that the narrative voice of the second half didn't quite match the narrative voice of the first half?
15. Did the story's vilification of Mormons intrude on your reading experience at all? Did you just ignore the caricature depiction as a function of the time in which the book was published?
16. London had recently survived the Jack the Ripper attacks when Conan Doyle wrote this story. Do you think the Holmes stories became so popular as a direct result of the crimes?
17. Traditional detective stories present the "facts" to readers and let them work out the crime. Why do you think Conan Doyle rejected this formula? Why are Conan Doyle's stories so popular if they are a direct contradiction of the traditional detective genre?
18. What do you make of Holmes and Watson and how do they compare to any TV or film adaptations you have seen?

Bibliography:

- <http://www.gradesaver.com/a-study-in-scarlet/study-guide/character-list/>
- http://www.jefflindsay.com/LDSFAQ/FQ_Danites.shtml
- http://redbirdstudio.com/CrimeScenes/study_in_scarlet.html
- <http://sewmakebelieve.co.uk/2011/08/09/book-club-questions-a-study-in-scarlet/>
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- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_Conan_Doyle

Character List:

Sherlock Holmes - A brilliant and eccentric "consulting detective," Holmes is a rather enigmatic figure. His success in solving crimes stems from his ability to observe and deduce. He has a tendency to be moody and he sometimes experiences profound depression; he is also very solitary. He is a talented violin player and chemist, and is well-versed in sensational literature.

Dr. Watson - A military doctor who is wounded during the second Afghan war. He is sent to recover in London, upon which he is introduced to Holmes and becomes his roommate. He is intelligent, rational, calm, and steadfast.

Stamford - An old war friend of Watson's who introduces Watson and Holmes when both mention they are looking for a roommate.

John Ferrier - A traveler heading West who joins the Mormon faith when the Mormons, led by Brigham Young, rescue him from the desert. The adopted father of Lucy Ferrier, he tries to escape Salt Lake City with Lucy and Jefferson Hope.

Lucy Ferrier - The beautiful and charming adopted daughter of John Ferrier, Lucy falls in love with an outsider and a Gentile -Jefferson Hope. She is eventually forced to marry one of the Elders' sons, Enoch Drebber. Unfortunately, she dies within a month of a broken heart.

Enoch Drebber - The son of one of the Mormon Elders, Drebber is awarded Lucy Ferrier's hand in marriage. He is pursued to the death by Jefferson Hope. His body is found in an abandoned home in Lauriston Gardens, thus beginning the mystery.

Joseph Stangerson - A son of one of the Mormon Elders, Stangerson also vied for Lucy Ferrier's hand but lost to Drebber. He eventually became Drebber's private secretary and traveled with him to Europe. He was also murdered by the vengeful Jefferson Hope.

Brigham Young - The charismatic, powerful, and brutal chief of the Mormons. He refused to let Lucy Ferrier marry a Gentile and sent his Avenging Angels after the Ferriers when they escaped from Utah.

Lestrade - A detective of Scotland Yard who consults Holmes on cases. He and Gregson have a bitter rivalry.

Gregson - A Scotland Yard detective who is not particularly fond of Holmes but is considered by him to be the best of the Yard detectives. He and Lestrade have a bitter rivalry.

Jefferson Hope - A young, strong, and capable hunter. He meets Lucy Ferrier, falls in love with her, and tries to help her and her father escape. Hope later hardens into a revenge-obsessed man who tracks Drebber and Stangerson, the two men responsible for the Ferrier's deaths, to London. He eventually murders both of them but dies within a few days of his capture from an aortic aneurism.

John Rance - The constable on duty the night of the murder; he discovered Drebber's dead body within the empty house on Brixton Road.

Madame Charpentier - The proprietress of the boardinghouse where Drebber and Stangerson stay in London.

Arthur Charpentier - The son of the proprietress of the boardinghouse where Drebber and Stangerson stay in London. He is initially suspected of murdering Drebber because he threatened him for speaking lasciviously to Alice Charpentier, his sister.

Basic Information on the Danites and the Mormon War Who Were the Danites?

(http://www.jefflindsay.com/LDSFAQ/FQ_Danites.shtml)

The Danites were a secretive group of Mormons organized and apparently abolished in the same year, 1838. They were founded by a man, Sampson Avard, who was striving to use the Church as a tool for power. Members were bound by oaths of secrecy to support what appeared to be a good cause, the defense of the Church in a time of mob persecution, but ultimately Avard sought to manipulate the Danites into a tool for retribution and violence. While much has been written about the Danites, it appears that they played a relatively minor role and their secret purposes were opposed once they were exposed to Joseph Smith. On the other hand, Joseph supported Avard's group for their openly stated purpose of helping to defend the Saints, and may have erred in not recognizing the dangers inherent in such an organization or the threat posed by the ambitious Avard.

Joseph was not the mastermind behind the Danites, but he gave them at least partial support initially, and his encouragement of militant action to defend the Saints may have made it easier for Avard and his Danites to flourish.

I do not accept the allegations that a violent group of secret Danites persisted for years as an approved tool of the Church - I find such claims to be without merit, though it has been the stuff of numerous movies, novels, and stories - all at least partly fictional. (For an example of rehashed modern allegations, see *Wild Bill Rides Again: The Tanners on the Danites* - an excellent article by Russell C. McGregor.)

Much of what anti-Mormon critics think they know of the Danites and Joseph Smith's association with them comes from testimony of Sampson Avard, who saved his own skin when he was arrested by testifying against Joseph Smith, the one whom the Missourians really wanted. Avard said Joseph was the one behind the Danites, that he was guilty of many great crimes against the Missourians, and that Danites swore to kill any who revealed their secrets or fought against Joseph Smith and the Church. For his traitorous and false testimony, Avard was released and Joseph was imprisoned for the next six months in terrible conditions in the Liberty Jail. If there were any truth to common rumors about the Danites or any truth to Avard's testimony against Joseph Smith, one would think that Avard would have lost his life for telling all. But, of course, Joseph had no such intentions. Avard was merely excommunicated for his apostasy.

Regarding the Danites, Mosiah Hancock, son of Levi Hancock, one of Joseph Smith's body guards, had this to say regarding the Danites:

Some people tried to class the Mormons with the Danites. The Danites were of a different stripe, however. The Danites tried to hold an outward friendship for the Prophet, and for the teachings of the Savior, but it was not skin deep. They tried to get a hog's office among the Saints, which proved their love for 'loaves and fishes'. They usually got a few traps that no decent devil would be justly proud of. Oft times they would locate a dwelling in a neighboring town on the prairie or in the woods. There they would let their bottom door swing in for all sorts of low-down characters to meet; where they could always boast of a deck of cards and a candle; and felt themselves safe from official scrutiny. They usually had plenty of horses when needed; and they were quite able to get up and speak in prayer meeting. They were hale fellows, well met with the black-legs and the apostates of the country. They would pay some tithing in order to pave the way for them to get benefits; and they would say, "Hurrah! for Mormonism" when they were around the Saints, and then some black-leg who belonged to the same gang would bawl out, "I'm a Mormon"! They have always been a clog in the Church and a clog in the country wherever they have been.

--Autobiography of Mosiah Hancock

A Study In Scarlet – Crime Scene Sketches

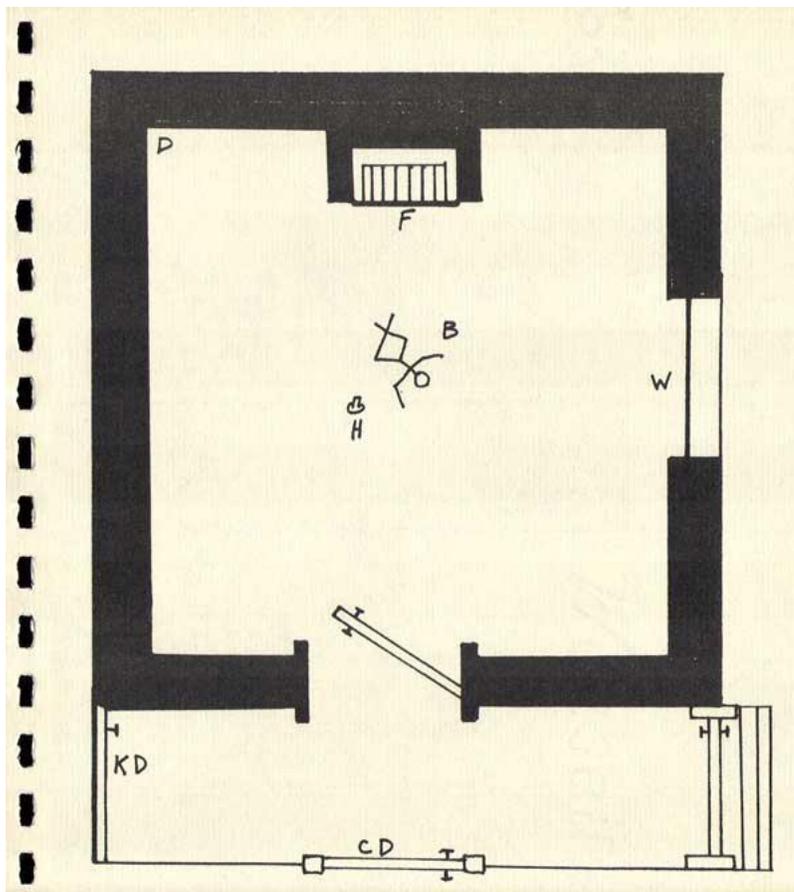
(http://redbirdstudio.com/CrimeScenes/study_in_scarlet.html)

" . . . a most extraordinary case. . . a most incomprehensible affair."

"A short passage, bare-planked and dusty, led to the kitchen and offices. Two doors opened out of it to the left and to the right. One of these had obviously been closed for many weeks. The other belonged to the dining room, which was the apartment in which the mysterious affair had occurred.

It was a large square room, looking all the larger from the absence of all furniture. . . . Opposite the door was a showy fireplace, surmounted by a mantelpiece of imitation white marble. . . . The solitary window was so dirty that the light was hazy and uncertain. . . . At present my attention was centred upon the single grim, motionless figure which lay stretched upon the boards. . . . A top hat, well brushed and trim, was placed upon the floor beside him."

Sketch of Crime Scene at 3, Lauriston Gardens off the Brixton Road Friday, March 4, 1881



Key

CD = Closed door
KD = Kitchen door
B = Body
H = Top hat
W = Window
F = Fireplace
D = 'Rache' scrawled
in blood