



# Sherlock Holmes and the Mystery of Boscombe Pool

Arthur Conan Doyle



## About the author

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930) was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, of an artistic Irish Catholic family, attended strict Catholic schools, and went on to train as a doctor at Edinburgh University. It was there that he published his first short story, before serving for seven months in the Arctic as a student doctor on a ship. His life was always to be a mixture of literature and adventure.

After 1882, Conan Doyle published many stories while working as a doctor in Portsmouth, England. However, he did not invent Sherlock Holmes until he wrote *A Study in Scarlet*, his first full-length book, in 1887. *A Study in Scarlet* did not attract a large readership but its reception was good enough for Conan Doyle to publish a second Holmes novel, *The Sign of the Four* (1889). This time the story was published in a magazine. Conan Doyle started writing short stories for magazine publications, and that really made Sherlock Holmes and Conan Doyle famous. Soon Conan Doyle gave up work as a doctor and became a professional writer.

Conan Doyle now began to publish other stories of adventure, and invented many other characters. Conan Doyle tried several times to stop writing Holmes stories, to free himself for new ideas – but each time he tried the public begged him to bring the great detective back.

Conan Doyle was an active man all his life, and was never content simply to write. In 1900 he went to southern Africa to help the British forces in the Boer War (1899–1902). He had a strong belief in justice and fought for many people who were wrongly convicted of crimes. This and the extraordinary success of his books made him a popular public figure in his time.

Conan Doyle died in Sussex, England, at the age of seventy-one. He is recognised now as one of the greatest story-tellers of his age.

## Summary

The story takes the great detective Sherlock Holmes to the west of England, where he and his friend Doctor Watson investigate a murder case.

### Pages 1–10

On the train to the west of England, Holmes asked Watson to listen to all the facts that he knows about the Boscombe Pool mystery. The police are certain that eighteen-year-old James McCarthy has killed his father, Charles. Holmes is not so sure.

### Pages 11–15

They arrive at Ross, near Boscombe Valley, and meet Detective Lestrade. McCarthy's neighbour Miss Turner comes to tell Holmes that James is innocent. Holmes and Lestrade go off to see James in prison. Watson stays at the hotel wondering about the mystery.

### Pages 17–26

Next day, Holmes, Watson and Lestrade go to Boscombe Pool, where Charles was murdered. With his powers of reasoning and observation, Holmes realises who the real murderer is.

### Pages 26–29

Holmes describes the real murderer to Lestrade, but Lestrade simply doesn't believe it. Later, Holmes explains to Watson the things that enabled Holmes to solve the mystery. Watson realises who the murderer is.

### Pages 29–37

Mr Turner, Miss Turner's father, comes to Holmes's hotel to see him as Holmes arranged earlier. He tells the story of his secret past and how it has ended up as a murder case. Holmes decides that the secrets should be kept unless young James's life is in danger.

## About Sherlock Holmes

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle created some of the greatest detective stories and certainly, in Holmes himself, the greatest character. Watson, who narrates all the Holmes stories, describes Holmes as 'the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has seen'. But Holmes was more than just a great detective – he was a genius, with a mysterious, unusual personality. He played the violin to concert standard, he had strange moods, and



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he rarely talked about his personal life. All these details, recorded by Watson with such admiration, made readers think of Holmes almost as a real person. Soon after the first stories appeared, *Strand's* editors began receiving letters from people who wanted to know if Holmes really existed. The editors were clever enough never to say 'yes' or 'no'. Even now, many people are unsure whether Holmes was a real person or not. The fact that he was not, but seems to be, shows the greatness of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's skills as a creator of characters.

Conan Doyle's inspiration for Holmes came from many different sources. The works of the French writer, Emile Gaboriau (1835–1873), were being read in translation in Britain from 1881 onwards. But Conan Doyle, like all detective writers since, also owed a great deal to Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849).

Conan Doyle also modelled some of Holmes's methods of detection on those of a great scientist, Joseph Bell. Conan Doyle studied medicine under Bell at Edinburgh. Bell used to amaze his students with his ability to tell the occupation of any of his patients from the tiniest observations he made of their appearance.

Sherlock Holmes was 'born' at a time when tales of mystery were increasing in popularity. In 1860 Wilkie Collins (1824–1889) had published one of the first great novels of mystery, suspense and crime, *The Woman in White*, and it was immediately successful. Other leading novelists of the day shared the new enthusiasm for mystery. Many of Charles Dickens's (1812–1870) later novels, such as *Bleak House* (1852), *Little Dorrit* (1855) and *Great Expectations* (1861) contain dark secrets at their centre. The late Victorian love of mystery explains some of the enthusiasm with which the Holmes stories were greeted at the time – but it was only part of their success. The stories were popular, and still are, because Holmes was a fascinating character. Over a century after his first appearance, that fascination remains – and, if anything, has grown. Modern readers have found new interest in the atmosphere of the stories, and Conan Doyle's exact descriptions of the times his detective lived in. Holmes's world was late nineteenth-century England, mostly London. It is a world of gas lighting, fog and horse-drawn carriages.

## Background and themes

*The Mystery of Boscombe Pool* is one of over fifty stories that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle wrote about his most famous

character, the detective Sherlock Holmes. It was the sixth Holmes story and first appeared, as *The Boscombe Valley Mystery*, in *Strand*, a London magazine, in 1891. The following year it appeared in the first collection of Holmes stories, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*.

**Astute observation:** Sherlock Holmes is renowned for his reasoning and observation. In this story, Holmes realises that this case is much deeper than anyone thinks. He says, 'I must believe nothing until I have studied all the facts.'

**Consequence of a secret past:** This story shows how a man's secret past leads from one crisis to another. It makes readers think of right and wrong.

**Lestrade vs. Holmes:** The story contrasts their different approaches to this murder case. Also, at the end of the story, Holmes doesn't put the real murderer into the hands of the police, saying that he isn't a policeman. He is just being kind to a dying man and his daughter.

## Discussion activities

### Pages 1–10

#### Before reading

- Discuss:** Talk about Sherlock Holmes. Ask the class whether they have read any Sherlock Holmes books or seen stories about him in films or on TV. If they have, ask them to tell other students in the class as much as they can about him.
- Discuss:** Talk about detective stories. Ask the class what they like about detective stories. Ask them what other famous detectives they know about, for example Hercule Poirot in Agatha Christie books. Which ones do they like best, and why?

#### After reading

- Role play:** Ask students to read pages 9–10 again. Then put them into pairs. One student is the Questioner and the other is James McCarthy. At first, they can look at their books, but later they should act it out without looking at the book. They then change roles.
- Pair work:** On pages 8–10 James McCarthy tells his story of his father's death, and what happened before and after it. There is one important difference between his story and the story Holmes told Watson on the train. What is it? Put students into pairs. Have them discuss the question and try to agree.

### Pages 11–15

#### Before reading

- Describe:** Write on the board the following list of people in the story: Doctor Watson, Charles McCarthy, James McCarthy, John Turner, Miss Turner and Lestrade. Put students into pairs. One



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student says one or two words connected with one of the characters, but doesn't say who it is. The other student guesses which character it is. They take turns to describe the person and to guess.

## After reading

- 6 Discuss:** Talk about Miss Turner's story. Put students into pairs. Ask them to read the conversation between Holmes and Miss Turner on pages 13–14 again. Ask them to discuss: *What does she say that Sherlock Holmes thinks is important?*
- 7 Role play:** Holmes gets a map of Australia. In their pairs, students role play a conversation between Holmes and Watson after he looks at the map. Encourage them to use an imaginary map when miming during the conversation.
- 8 Pair work:** Talk about the following questions:
- *What do you think? Did James kill his father?*
  - *If so, why did he do it? Why do you think that?*
  - *If he didn't kill him, who did? Why did he/she do it?*

## Pages 17–26

- 9 Re-tell:** Have students work in pairs, and ask them to describe what Dr Watson is going to tell Holmes about the wounds.

## After reading

- 10 Discuss:** Put students into small groups, and have them discuss the following questions:
- *On page 24, we read that Holmes 'picked up something small, which looked burned'. What do you think this is?*
  - *Why do you think the stone is interesting to Holmes?*
  - *Now who do you think killed Charles McCarthy? Do you have any new ideas?*

## Pages 26–29

### Before reading

- 11 Discuss:** Talk about the previous event. Have a whole-class discussion using the following questions:
- *What did Holmes find at Boscombe Pool?*
  - *Do you think he knows who the murderer is now?*
  - *Who do you think Holmes is writing a letter to?*

### After reading

- 12 Describe:** Have students work in small groups. Ask them to describe what the guilty person is like. When they are ready, ask each group to share their descriptions with the rest of the class.

## Pages 29–37

### Before reading

- 13 Discuss:** Talk about the murderer. Put students into groups. Assign each group one of the following characters: James McCarthy, Miss Turner, Mr Turner, Patience Moran and Mr Moran. Have them say if they think their character is the real murderer or not. Make sure they explain why they think so.

## After reading

- 14 Role play:** Put students into pairs. Ask them to look at pages 34 and 35 again and act out a scene between John Turner and Charles McCarthy. It is a week before the murder. They talk about James and Alice, and have an argument.

## Extra activities

- 15 Project:** Divide the class into four groups. Give them one of the following questions each, and have them conduct a class survey. They should report the result by making a presentation with visual aids.
- *Did you like this book?*
  - *Was it exciting?*
  - *Was it easy or difficult to guess who the murderer was?*
  - *Would you like to read more Sherlock Homes stories?*
- 16 Discuss:** Have students work in groups to talk about the things that are hard to believe. *Are there any parts of the story that you found hard to believe? List things: for example, John Turner smoked a cigar when he was hiding behind the tree.* When they are ready, ask each group to report their list to the class.
- 17 Pair work:** Put students into pairs. Have them ask each other the following questions. *When in the story did you know that John Turner was the murderer? How?*
- 18 Discuss:** Talk about right or wrong.
- *Was John Turner a bad man? Why do you think he was / he wasn't?*
  - *Was Holmes right not to tell the police the true story?*
- 19 Research:** Sherlock Holmes and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle  
Put students into groups. Have them use the resources outside the classroom, e.g. the Internet, library books, etc., to find some facts about Sherlock Holmes and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. They could make a report in 'questions and answers' style. Example questions are as follows:
- *Who from his own life did Conan Doyle use in his stories for, Sherlock Holmes or Dr Watson?*
  - *When did he write his first Sherlock Holmes book?*
  - *How did he start to have real success with Sherlock Holmes?*
  - *Why did he decide to 'kill' Sherlock Holmes?*
  - *Why did he 'bring Sherlock Holmes back to life'?*
- Ask each group to report their findings to the class.
- 20 Discuss:** Talk about Holmes and modern detectives. Ask students to work in groups and to discuss differences between detectives like Sherlock Holmes and the modern detectives they see on TV or films. Which do they prefer?

## Vocabulary activities

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to [www.penguinreaders.com](http://www.penguinreaders.com).