



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
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Sherlock Holmes: Teaching English Through Detective Fiction

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Detective and mystery fiction is exciting, thought provoking, and escapist. These three components make teaching English through detective fiction educationally productive as well as fun for students. Most students, particularly those who have minimal reading skills, need highly motivating material to seduce them into reading. The short stories of Arthur Conan Doyle provide this motivation.

I have chosen a multi-dimensional approach for this curriculum unit that offers information and strategies for teaching English to low level students through the study of Arthur Conan Doyle's short stories featuring the famous detective, Sherlock Holmes.

My objective is to incorporate the study of many of the essential reading and language arts skills that low level readers need to work on into a unit of material that is highly motivating and productive for these students.

The students will read Conan Doyle's short stories and from them study vocabulary, reading comprehension, drawing conclusions, remembering details and inferential thinking skills. They will write creatively during a project in which they will be required to create a fictional detective with character traits and a crime to solve. We will view PBS Mystery! Series films of some of the Sherlock Holmes stories we read in order to add a third dimension to the unit. During the viewing process I will emphasize "active viewing" and we will spend some time discussing life in London in the late 1800's and early 1900's. A discussion of active viewing techniques will follow as well as information about the life and career of Arthur Conan Doyle.

This curriculum unit is targeted for students in grade nine but could easily be adapted to older students and higher level readers by using the original Sherlock Holmes stories rather than the adapted versions that I have used for this unit. The ninth grade students who will use this unit are in classes that have been designated as basic and developmental English classes. A basic English class contains students whose reading levels range from grade level 4.5 to 9.9, the average reading level falling between 7.0 and 8.0. The students in a basic English class can be fairly easily motivated if the lesson is made interesting by using reading selections they can relate to their own experiences or by high adventure stories. Reading aloud is sometimes warranted in these classes because special education students are included in a basic English class.

A developmental English class is made up of a maximum of fifteen students whose reading levels range from 2.5 to 6.0. These students are remedial in all areas of reading and writing and are often emotionally disturbed, learning disabled and mainstreamed special education students. They are extremely difficult to motivate. Their family and other problems seem to completely overtake their ability to concentrate on academic work. A

lesson plan for these students must motivate them to struggle beyond their deficiencies toward a chance at a successful educational experience. The lessons must be interesting and short term with an opportunity for each student to be successful at their particular level.

At the beginning of this unit, students will be introduced to pertinent information about Arthur Conan Doyle's life and the history behind his writing. During this introduction the students will be given author information to study and note taking skills will be emphasized. It is important for low level students to be able to read a page of information and extract essential facts. Many students, when asked to take notes, will rewrite the entire page. A lesson plan will follow that includes information about Doyle and note taking skills.

Quizzes should be given every other day to ensure that each student understands the information given the previous day. The low level student remembers small groups of similar information given in a concise manner better than a large amount of information on different topics given over a long period of time. Thus it is essential to disseminate the information you want the students to learn and remember in a clearly understood pattern over a short period of time. An example would be that each lesson always begins with the class looking at the lesson written on the board in an abbreviated form, followed by oral directions from the teacher, concluding with a written piece of material (book or worksheet) at the students' desk that they read and complete independently. This should be accomplished within a fifty minute period. Before the class leaves, papers should be collected and the teacher should briefly tell the students what is planned for the following day, whether it is a follow-up of today's lesson, a quiz, or a new lesson.

The low level student has a limited attention span as well as limited skills and needs to see closure and experience a sense of successful accomplishment at the end of each lesson. If a teacher follows the same format each day, the students will know what to expect and will feel prepared to go along with the teacher at each step of the learning process.

The six short stories we will study are: "The Adventure of the Speckled Band", "The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle", "The Adventure of the Final Problem", "The Return of Sherlock Holmes", and "The Adventure of the Man with the Twisted Lip". We will also read a dramatic adaptation of "The Adventure of the Second Stain". As we read each story a particular literary device will be discussed. Plot, setting, theme, and characterization will be emphasized. The students will read the stories together taking turns reading aloud. Reading aloud helps many poor readers because they need the opportunity to hear the correct pronunciation of words by the teacher and it allows them a chance to practice their oral reading.

I use the Directed Reading Lesson to introduce stories and to motivate students to want to read them. The premise of a Directed Reading Lesson is to prepare students for the story they will read and its' general content and to give them a purpose for their reading rather than giving them a book and telling them to turn to page 63 and begin reading. In a DRL you might put a key word on the board behind a map so the students cannot see it. For example, if you wanted the students to understand theme you might put the word 'revenge' hidden behind the map. You begin the lesson by asking leading questions that would elicit a discussion about revenge, the ways people get revenge and why people want revenge. Your goal would be to facilitate a discussion about the subject the students will read. Then you pull up the map and look at the word together and tell them that they will be reading an interesting and exciting story about just what they have been discussing. Throughout the discussion prior to looking at the word on the board you do not mention the word but use other language with which the students are familiar. Then you ask them to turn to page 63 and begin reading. At this point your students should be prepared and excited about the story they are about to read.

The creative writing project that the students will work on at the end of the unit will bring together their

knowledge and understanding of characterization with practice in the writing process. Sherlock Holmes' character traits have been discussed as we read each story. We will also have discussed the different actors who have portrayed Holmes in films. By this time the students should have a feel for the Holmes that Arthur Conan Doyle intended us to know.

The writing project will involve small groups of three to four students. Each group will begin by creating a personality for a fictional detective that will be the central character in a short mystery that they will write together. The students will decide on a name, character traits, and a past life for their detective. Each detective must have a special method or talent that he uses to facilitate his or her crime solving. Through the process of outlining, drafting and revising, the group will have their detective solve a crime using whatever special deductive or other powers he has been given. The students will be given a list of famous detectives with a description of how their individual personalities help them solve crimes. For example, Simon Brett's Charles Paris' involvement in the British theater as well as his drunken irresponsibility often lead him to clues about a crime that he usually simply stumbles (sometimes literally) upon. John Sherwood's mysteries feature Celia Grant, a well known botanist, as his detective and use Grant's knowledge of flowers to help her solve crimes.

We will view two films featuring Sherlock Holmes. After reading the dramatic adaptation of "The Adventure of the Second Stain" we will watch the PBS Mystery! Series film of this Arthur Conan Doyle short story. The play follows the script of the film almost exactly and the Holmes character that Jeremy Brett portrays will give the students an understanding of the character that Doyle created. When the students view "The Adventure of the Second Stain" they will be given instructions in basic character analysis and will be asked to note in writing the character traits of Sherlock Holmes, Dr. Watson and Lady Hilda. I will speak briefly at the beginning of the unit of life in England in the late 1800's and early 1900's and discuss the role of women at this time period. A study of Lady Hilda's character and interaction with her husband and his associates should give students an idea of the role women played.

The students will write the plot of the film as they are watching. The third element I will stress in the active viewing process is a study of Sherlock Holmes' compassionate nature combined with the factual, unemotional and disciplined manner he uses as he solves crimes. The students will learn at the beginning of this unit how Holmes' compassion and sympathy for his fellow human beings leads him to allow some criminals to go free without police intervention when he feels in his heart that the criminal will never commit a crime again and is truly remorseful for his anti-social actions. The students will write about Holmes' interactions with Lady Hilda in regard to this aspect of his personality.

At the end of this unit we will watch the film "Young Sherlock Holmes". The film is a good adventure and detective story that takes an imaginary look back in time to when Holmes and Watson first met and entered into a friendship that would eventually lead to their later partnership in criminal detection. The screenplay shows the beginnings of the character, habits, and eccentricities that created the type of person that Jeremy Brett plays in the PBS Mystery! Series. My students are close in age to Holmes and Watson in "Young Sherlock Holmes" and should be able to identify with their search for adventure as well as with the common fears and problems of adolescence.

"Young Sherlock Holmes" is an excellent example of foreshadowing and symbolism used in film, particularly in regard to the hallucinations of the people who have been hit with poisoned thorns by the assassin of a fanatical Egyptian religious cult. Each person's hallucinations, similar to our nightmares, deal with a subject that has been alluded to as part of the character's persona earlier in the film. For instance, Watson's

hallucinations reflect his fear of becoming out of control with food. Elizabeth, who recently lost both her parents and her beloved uncle, experiences her own death and burial during her hallucination.

The plot of “Young Sherlock Holmes” is complicated. With careful preparation and a viewing objective, the students should be able to identify the steps of the plot and climax.

Following are detailed plans for the above mentioned lessons. With minor changes, these plans can easily be adapted to a variety of students with diverse reading abilities.

As the introduction to this unit, the students will read about Arthur Conan Doyle’s life and writing career. From this written information they will take pertinent notes about Doyle. It is important to emphasize the difference between pertinent and extraneous information. The students should memorize important dates in Doyle’s life. They should also know who Doyle’s favorite authors were and how they influenced his writing.

The notes the students take need to be discussed and they should study for a quiz during the first week of the unit. At this point we will begin reading the first story, “The Adventure of the Speckled Band.” This is a good story to teach plot. The students are given the definition of plot and write the plot of the story as they read. For a basic English class I begin by reading the first two pages of the story aloud to them and when I see that their interest is piqued I have them finish the story silently. In a developmental class I begin by reading aloud and then members of the class take turns reading aloud. We stop at intervals to discuss the plot and write it down.

After we finish reading the story and before we actually discuss it as a group, the students answer questions in writing in order to determine their understanding of the story. When the students have completed this exercise, we discuss the answers and complete in writing a few short questions that require the students to think about the story and form sentences to relate their ideas. Writing in complete sentences appears to be a skill that these students have not developed and any opportunity to write is worthwhile for them.

The next short story under discussion is “The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle.” In this story Sherlock Holmes shows compassion for his fellow man as well as his keen detective skills. This story is good to use to discuss some of the differences in Conan Doyle’s time as compared with the 1980’s Holmes has a keen insight into the motivation of the criminal mind and he usually uses his judgment wisely when he decides to allow a person to go free instead of turning him over to the police. Holmes has little faith in some of the police force, particularly Detective Lestrade. Holmes usually turns a criminal in to the police when he believes that person is truly devious and will go on to commit more crimes. Holmes has compassion for the individual who commits a crime out of jealousy or greed, but sees the errors of his ways and vows never to do anything criminal again. After reading the story the students will answer reading comprehension questions. Any of Conan Doyle’s stories can be taught using this lesson plan.

I would have the students read the two stories above as well as “The Adventure of the Final Problem”, “The Return of Sherlock Holmes”, and “The Adventure of the Man with the Twisted Lip.” The students are given the definitions and information about plot, setting, and characterization and discuss these terms as they pertain to each story.

After reading the short stories and getting an understanding of the type of person Sherlock Holmes is, we will read a dramatic adaptation of “The Adventure of the Second Stain.” During the reading of the play we will concentrate on noting the character traits of Sherlock Holmes, Doctor Watson and Lady Hilda Trelawny Hope. In the nineteenth century women acted and were treated differently than they are today. After the students

write about Lady Hilda we will discuss the similarities and differences in the female role as seen in this play as compared to the role of a woman in similar circumstances in the 1980's.

After we read the play we will view the PBS Mystery Series film of "The Adventure of the Second Stain." This particular production follows almost exactly the dialogue of the play and captures the essence of Sherlock Holmes' eccentricities and unusual detection powers.

Before watching the film we discuss the benefits of active viewing of television and movies—viewing with a predetermined goal in mind. In this case the students will be given written information concerning the character's names and their part in the film. Then they will write the character traits of the people listed on the paper. They will also write the steps of the plot. The film will be viewed on two days and a discussion will take place before the second half is viewed.

At the end of the unit the students will complete a creative writing project. They will work in groups of three to four. Their assignment is to create a fictional detective and a crime for him or her to solve. They must give the detective a personality and a particular way of solving crimes. Following is a list of criteria they must complete for their detective: physical traits, emotional traits, peculiar habits, family background and career history. They must think of a crime and outline the manner in which their detective will solve the crime. The process of clustering ideas, eliminating unnecessary elements, writing a rough draft, proofreading and writing a final draft will be followed. Because this project will be worked on in a group I think that the low level students can work together toward a successful learning experience.

When teaching low level readers it is important to keep in mind their motivational needs and their ability to have success with short, interesting lessons. Following are a few mini-lessons that can be used with a variety of reading levels.

Minute Mysteries by Austin Ripley are one minute mysteries featuring Professor Fordney, a master detective the police call upon with their most puzzling cases. The mysteries challenge the reader's powers to detect exactly where and how the criminal made his or her mistake. Each mystery is complete with plot and clues. When the reader thinks he knows the solution he turns to the following page and discovers the clue that Professor Fordney found. These stories aid in inferential thinking and reading for details. It would be fun and productive to start each day of a Sherlock Holmes unit with a minute mystery that the class tries to solve.

Another short lesson that can be used with the Sherlock Holmes unit are three verbal puzzles to which the students must write a solution. This aids in listening skills, paying attention to details and writing answers in a concise manner.

This curriculum unit could be used over the course of a marking period as a complete unit in and of itself or it can be utilized over the course of a year, interspersed with vocabulary development, grammar, and any other elements of a basic English curriculum. I think that low level students enjoy having a large unit broken up over the course of a year. This eliminates boredom and also gives them an opportunity to remember and review the information they have learned in the previous lessons. I find that my students become very excited when they can pull together a sequence of lessons on a similar topic, such as Sherlock Holmes mysteries, and remember information about the author, the historical period in which he lived, and the vocabulary we learned. Small successes are important to low level students who have often met with failure in academic as well as other areas of their lives. Any lesson, however small it seems to the teacher, is educationally productive if it provides these students with an opportunity for academic success and a chance to feel good about themselves.

This information is to be used at the beginning of the Sherlock Holmes unit. It is useful during the note taking part of the lesson.

About the Author

Arthur Conan Doyle was born in Scotland in 1859. He was interested in medicine and after finishing medical training set up his own practice. Among his favorite authors were Edgar Allan Poe, the first detective story writer, and Wilkie Collins. Collins was the father of the English horror story.

To please his wife, Doyle began to think about writing a detective story. He remembered the writings of Poe and Collins and set himself to follow in their footsteps. Doyle wanted his master detective to be striking in appearance. The detective would have to be absolutely fearless and have an unusual manner. Above all, he must be a man with a special charm of his own. But Doyle felt he also needed someone to tell the stories. And he decided it should be a doctor, like himself. And so Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson were born.

When Arthur Conan Doyle's first short stories appeared in the *Strand Magazine*, there were no great books on criminology. Doyle had to depend on his own powers of deduction and observation to solve the problems he created for Holmes.

By 1890, Doyle had given up medicine to devote himself to writing. Soon he was famous. The tall lean figure with the peaked cap and pipe, answering to the name of Sherlock Holmes, was known almost everywhere. Doyle had intended to write only six stories, but the public would not let him drop Holmes and Watson. But drop Holmes he did. When people read of the supposed death of Holmes and his enemy at the foot of Reichenbach Falls, they were stunned. But Doyle remained firm. Later Doyle wrote a play called *Sherlock Holmes*. The play was a huge success both in England and America.

In 1899, England was at war in South Africa. Doyle decided to enlist. He got an appointment as an army doctor. The king wanted to reward Conan Doyle by making him a knight. At first Doyle refused. But eventually he became Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. At the age of 43 he was the world's most popular writer. Still he refused to bring Holmes back to life.

Finally, in the spring of 1903, he gave in. Doyle wrote "The Adventure of the Empty House" and Holmes returned.

In 1907, Doyle married again. To please his new wife, he wrote several more Holmes stories. When World War I broke out Doyle again volunteered. After the war, Arthur Conan Doyle began to study spiritualism. He continued to write and went on several speaking tours. In July, 1930, Arthur Conan Doyle died. His memory will live forever in the immortal characters of Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson. ¹

These questions are to be used with the lesson for "The Adventure of the Speckled Band."

Finding the Main Idea

1. This story is mostly about
(A) a gypsy band

- (B) a young woman's strange death
- (C) the theft of a necklace
- (D) a railroad accident

Remembering Detail

2. What did Julia Stoner hear several nights before she died?
 - (A) Animal cries
 - (B) A song
 - (C) A whistle
 - (D) Laughter
3. Julia was killed in
 - (A) her bedroom
 - (B) the yard
 - (C) the village
 - (D) her aunt's house
4. What was suspicious about Julia's bedroom?
 - (A) It had strange fingerprints.
 - (B) It had no fireplace.
 - (C) The door had no lock.
 - (D) The bed was nailed to the floor.
5. Julia Stoner was killed by a
 - (A) snake
 - (B) baboon
 - (C) cheetah
 - (D) spider
6. Holmes trapped Doctor Roylott by
 - (A) following him to London
 - (B) waiting for his next attack
 - (C) opening his safe
 - (D) sending him a fake message
7. How did Doctor Roylott die?
 - (A) Holmes shot him.
 - (B) The cheetah attacked him.
 - (C) His snake bit him.
 - (D) A gypsy killed him.

Drawing Conclusions

8. Doctor Roylott didn't want his stepdaughters to get married because he
 - (A) didn't like their boyfriends
 - (B) didn't want to live alone
 - (C) was not told of their engagements
 - (D) would have to give them large sums of money
9. Helen herself was in danger when she finally went to Holmes because she
 - (A) was going to be married
 - (B) knew what killed Julia
 - (C) threatened her stepfather
 - (D) moved out of the house
10. What clues made Holmes think that Doctor Roylott had a snake?
 - (A) Hissing noises in the safe
 - (B) Marks in the soil
 - (C) A dish of milk and a dog leash
 - (D) Dead mice on the bed

Using Your Reason

11. Holmes says that he is probably responsible for the death of the doctor, "but I cannot say that it is likely to weigh very heavily upon my conscience." He would have meant the same thing if he had said that he
 - (A) feels very guilty
 - (B) is not going to worry about it
 - (C) should have tried to stop it
 - (D) planned it that way

12. If Julia struck a match before she died, you can figure out that she might have seen
- (A) a “speckled band”
 - (B) Doctor Roylott
 - (C) a ghost
 - (D) the gypsies
13. When Helen told Holmes that she heard a whistle while staying in her sisters bedroom, it seemed likely that
- (A) she had been dreaming
 - (B) the gypsy band had been breaking in
 - (C) the snake had been in the bedroom
 - (D) she had been lying

Thinking It Over

1. Explain Holmes’ statement that “doctors make the greatest criminals.” Why do you think he came to that conclusion? Do you agree or disagree?
2. What was Doctor Roylott’s biggest mistake as a murderer? Do you think he was careless? Why or why not?
3. Do you think the Stoner sisters were foolish to live with their stepfather for so long? Was there anything else they could have done? Explain your answers.

Notes

1. Reprinted by permission from *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* , 1950 by Globe Book Company, Inc.

Teacher and Student Bibliography

Eckerson, Olive, and Wallace R. Murray, eds. *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. New York: Globe Book Company, 1950.

A selection of some of Arthur Conan Doyle's most famous Sherlock Holmes short stories. These are adapted versions suitable for students with low reading levels.

Goodman, Roger B., and Robert R. Potter, eds. *The World Anthology*. New York: Globe Book Company, 1987.

A ninth grade literature anthology that includes an excellent dramatic adaptation of "The Adventure of the Second Stain. "

Gorman, Edward, ed. *The Black Lizard Anthology of Crime Fiction*. Berkely: Creative Arts Book Company, 1987.

A collection of stories by contemporary writers of suspense fiction. Excellent selections for the more advanced high school reader.

Ripley, Austin. *Minute Mysteries*. New York: Harper and Row, 1949.

103 Minute Mysteries challenge the deductive powers of students to detect exactly where and how the criminal made his mistake. Good for teaching attention to detail and reasoning.

Winks, Robin W. *Modus Operandi* . Boston: David R. Godine, 1982.

An interesting and insightful essay into the art of the detective story. Excellent for advanced readers who who are followers of the genre.

Films

Eaton, Rebecca, executive producer. *The Adventure of the Second Stain* . London, PBS Mystery! Series, 1987.

Paramount Pictures Corporation. *Young Sherlock Holmes*. California: Paramount Pictures, 1985.

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