

God's Own Wind: Sherlock Holmes as Conan Doyle's, and Modernity's Post-Christian Search for Meaning

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Abstract

Still popular after well over a century, the Sherlock Holmes stories of Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930) continue to fascinate and communicate with each new generation. The first of the Holmes stories, *A Study in Scarlet*, was accepted for publication in 1886 and published a year later. Since then, Doyle wrote numerous other adventures about the scientific detective. As intriguing as the detective is the author, who studied medicine, was a gifted athlete, and had a deep interest in spiritual issues, including Spiritualism and life after death. "God's Own Wind" takes up Doyle's fascination with spiritual matters and how they relate to society today in its post-Christian search for meaning.

The last few years have seen a spike in popularity of the character of Sherlock Holmes, who currently headlines blockbuster films set in his original era, television series like *Sherlock* and *Elementary* which set him in modern day, and even comic books like *Watson and Holmes* which depict him as contemporary African-American operating out of the ghetto. These diverse settings for this timeless character reveal how attractive and relevant he is to many different demographics.

Not coincidentally, these years have also seen a surge in popularity of what might be called "popular devotion to science," with a kind of fetishism for scientific inquiry—particularly as a supposedly more reliable alternative to religion—sweeping the culture. This phenomenon is particularly widespread on the Internet and amongst enthusiasts of popular secular spokespeople like Neil deGrasse Tyson or Bill Nye. The Sherlockian craze is almost certainly, at least in many cases, an expression of this scientism and skepticism.

The culturally alert Christian, however, should notice analogy between the culture that rediscovered the Holmes character and the individual who created him. Both, it can be argued, sought in the scientific method he signifies a source of truth and stability as a replacement for a never-fully-forsaken Christianity. Both equally experienced the limitations of the Baconian project and ultimately must strain to look beyond it, and specifically into the existential abyss of death. This paper will not only consider this historical parallel, but will also argue that the Holmes mythology provides material for the Christian to use in communicating with such a culture.

The Use of Literature in Christian Apologetics

C.S. Lewis famously held that art had a great value for Christian apologetics. His own imagination had been "baptized," in part, by the fantasy fiction of his youth. The works of George MacDonald, J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, and even his own Narnia stories aim to evoke a sense of the "truth" that myth pointed to, namely the truth of Christianity.

Normally, it is fairy tales and fantasy stories that play this role: in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, poor Eustace Scrubb, with his modern books of science, is hopelessly unprepared for the magic hovering around a dragon's treasure hoard. But there is also the suggestion that detective stories are the sort of literature that equip one for magical worlds, which, to Lewis' thinking, means

they are the sort of literature that prepares one for the Gospel. Edmund, “the only one of the party who had read several detective stories,” is the first to deduce what magic is afoot on Goldwater Island.¹ In another genre, Lewis’ Space Trilogy depicts a character whose conversion to Christianity is signified by his re-discovery of the stories he loved as a child, whereas “grown-up stories...now seemed to him, except for *Sherlock Holmes*, to be rubbish”² (italics in original). Here, Lewis pays the Holmes stories the ultimate tribute of lumping them together with children’s fairy tales.

Nor is Lewis the only scholar to link the stories to fantasy and even to Scripture. The scholarship of the Holmes stories—often dubbed the “canon” in a deliberate religious allusion—was largely pioneered either by Christians such as Dorothy Sayers and Fr. Ronald Knox or by the offspring of myth scholars: William S. Baring-Gould was the grandson of clergyman and folklore scholar Sabine Baring-Gould, and Richard Lancelyn Green was the son of Robert Lancelyn Green, another scholar of mythology and fellow-traveler with the Inklings.

The Lutheran theologian and apologist John Warwick Montgomery suggests that Holmes is a “mythopoeic” figure in the vein of Tolkien’s subcreation, a kind of Jungian embodiment of the hope for a mythic triumph of reason over epistemological darkness.³ W.H. Auden, a friend and encourager of J.R.R. Tolkien, goes further in suggesting that there is something mythic about the genre of mystery fiction, posting that the detective story indulges in “the phantasy of being restored to the Garden of Eden, to a state of innocence, where he may know love as love and not as the law,” a “daydream” he sees as fuelled by our own sense of “guilt.”⁴ In this reading, detective stories tap into the same intuitions of greater worlds that fairy tales do, and we may take this as our warrant for treating the Holmes stories as *preparatio evangelica*.

Doyle’s friend and amiable rival, G.K. Chesterton, saw much of Doyle’s literary output, particularly in defense of his belief in ghosts, as being less an attack on materialism and more of an attempt to replace the Church in which he was raised: “By a deep and true ancestral instinct with him, he knows that this is ultimately the one Thing to be either attacked or defended...”⁵ The mythic universe of the Holmes stories, as will be shown, also reflect this effort to come to terms with Doyle’s religious struggles. The modern post-Christian world is similarly struggling with this attempt to find a satisfactory replacement for the Church, and the philosophical arc of the Holmes canon which our contemporaries have recently re-discovered is therefore a useful guide to both the aesthetic power of this worldview and the existential dissatisfaction with it that its adherents experience.

Doyle and the Hound of Heaven

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 124.

² C.S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1965), 359.

³ John Warwick Montgomery, *The Transcendent Holmes* (Ashcroft: Calabash Press, 2000), 110-4.

⁴ P.D. James cites this insight and notes in this connection that the detective story largely had its origins in Protestant countries, with the often-celibate detective serving as a priestly figure who extracts confessions. *Talking About Detective Fiction* (New York: Random House, 2009), 170-1, 180.

⁵ *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton, Volume 3* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 274.

“In a recent contribution to Nash’s Magazine, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle remarks very truly that the modern world is weary and wicked and in need of a religion.” –G.K. Chesterton⁶

Arthur Conan Doyle came from an Irish Catholic family of artists, and it seems like this Catholicism was more than nominal. For example, his uncle Richard Doyle was an illustrator for *Punch* magazine who quit that publication because of its jokes at the expense of the Pope.⁷ Young Arthur himself received his early education from the Jesuits at Stonyhurst, where he studied under figures like the Reverend Thomas Kay, whose mannerisms and erudition may have served as an influence for Holmes’ personality.⁸

However, his father was not a shining role model to Doyle. Charles Altamont Doyle was also an artist, but was not as successful as some of his family members, and consequently fell into depression and alcoholism and ended up in a series of mental institutions, finally dying in one of them. With this figure at the head of his Catholic upbringing, it is perhaps unsurprising that Arthur left the Church as a young man, though he never became an atheist.⁹

Michael Coren, perhaps recognizing some of his own trans-denominational pilgrimage in Doyle’s story, notes that while Doyle rejected Catholicism and even persuaded his mother to also renounce her faith¹⁰, he continued to long for something to believe in, “in both a secular and temporal way. Country, flag, empire, family, honour, religion... if the Church was to be abandoned he had to look to an alternative.”¹¹ In fact, there is evidence that Christ and the Church continued to haunt him, like one of the ghosts in which he would come to believe. Coren notes that, while Doyle briefly described himself as a Unitarian, this was “no more than a convenient halfway house. The charm, beauty and seductive ritual of Catholicism had not quite let him go. He had abandoned the substantial but not the cosmetic aspects of his baptismal faith.”¹²

It is important at this stage to see the parallel with modern secular society. In America as of 2016, although belief in God’s existence and traditional religion was declining, fascinatingly, belief in an afterlife was rising, especially among millennials.¹³ The trend is away from religious orthodoxy but in the direction of new forms of spirituality which are seen as more practical and

⁶ *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton, Volume 20* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001), 159.

⁷ Marion Henry Spielmann, *The History of “Punch,” Volume 1* (London: Cassell and Company Ltd., 1895), 456.

⁸ Owen Dudley Edwards, *The Quest for Sherlock Holmes: A Biographical Study of Arthur Conan Doyle* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing Company, 1983), 66.

⁹ “[My] agnosticism never for an instant degenerated into atheism, for I had a very keen perception of the wonderful poise of the universe and the tremendous power of conception and sustenance which it implied. I was reverent in all my doubts...” *Memories and Adventures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 32.

¹⁰ Michael Coren, *Conan Doyle* (London: Bloomsbury, 1995), 31.

¹¹ Coren, *Conan Doyle*, 27.

¹² Coren, *ibid.*

¹³ These were the results of a study done by San Diego State University, Florida Atlantic University and Case Western Reserve University. Maggie Fox, “Fewer Americans Believe in God — Yet They Still Believe in Afterlife” (NBC News, March 21, 2016). Available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/better/wellness/fewer-americans-believe-god-yet-they-still-believe-afterlife-n542966> (as of November 15, 2017).

relevant to life in the modern age, which New York Times columnist Ross Douthat has identified as a national turn to what would traditionally be identified as “heresy.”¹⁴

Doyle’s particular search for a new faith can be divided into two stages: his worldly hope in science and empire in this life, and his otherworldly hope in the existence of the afterlife. Although Holmes was created primarily as a representative of the first stage, he also came to serve as an expression of the dissatisfactions with it that led him to look to another world.

Doyle famously based Holmes primarily on his medical instructor at Edinburgh, Dr. Joseph Bell, a famous pioneer of what would today be called forensic science. Dr. Bell, it should be noted, was a devout Christian who unfailingly attended St. George’s Free Church each Sunday, sometimes attending both services, and who expressed admiration for several Catholic priests, who “are Saints on earth, and shame our ministers with their self-sacrificing lives.”¹⁵ Bell’s Christianity is arguably always “behind” the Holmes character.

The presence of an analogue of Joseph Bell is not the only note of autobiography in the stories. At the beginning of *The Sign of Four*, Holmes correctly deduces that Watson’s older brother once had great prospects but squandered them and ended up dying a drunkard. Here Doyle is being painfully honest about his own father, albeit altering the relationship for the novel. But Holmes’ deductions also suggest another function of the stories: Holmes represents an orderly, rational situation in contrast to the instability Doyle would have experienced growing up in a home led by a mentally unstable alcoholic. There is an almost religious comfort in Holmes’ methodical cosmos. In this connection, it is interesting that his sidekick, Dr. John H. Watson, shares his name with the Canadian philosopher John Watson, whose “speculative realism” asserted that the universe is rationally accessible and humans as rational beings are therefore capable of mastering the world and of devising a morality and a faith which is identical to reason.

This may provide a hint as to why Holmes, and the scientific triumphalism he symbolizes, is so appealing to our contemporary society, where depression, widespread family breakdown, and existential angst are becoming more and more commonplace. Citing Maslow’s psychology, E.F. Schumacher suggests that “the pursuit of science is often a defence...a security system, a complicated way of avoiding anxiety and upsetting problems.”¹⁶ In this sense, scientific certitude often serves as a surrogate for the consolations of religion in an uncertain and agnostic era. This sort of religious undercurrent runs through *A Study in Scarlet*. The title of Holmes’ monograph arguing that the whole universe is internally organized by a network of logical connections is “The Book of Life,” a phrase which recalls the Apocalypse of St. John and the image of God sitting in judgment over all humanity.¹⁷ This eschatological hope has been translated into an immanent goal of scientifically-accomplished justice in history.

The Holmes stories must therefore be read in the light of what Butterfield famously called the Whiggish interpretation of history¹⁸, which saw history as a gradual progression forwards and upwards out of superstition and ignorance into the enlightened scientific and rational future, represented, in this case, by the British Empire. Often this belief appeared in Deistic language

¹⁴ *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013).

¹⁵ Ely M. Liebow, *Dr. Joe Bell: Model for Sherlock Holmes* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), 57.

¹⁶ E.F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Sphere Books, 1986), 72.

¹⁷ Stephen Kendrick, *Holy Clues: The Gospel According to Sherlock Holmes* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 85.

¹⁸ Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (New York: Norton, 1965).

which presented this progressing as the will of Providence guiding human history towards its civilizational apex. Holmes, the scientist solving problems that baffle the official police, is an embodiment of this Baconian optimism. The general tenor of the stories is that uncultivated nature is dangerous, wild, and in need of humanity to impose technological civilization upon it.¹⁹ Even during the Great War, when society's technology and intellectual advantages seem to be used to wreak violence rather than effect progress, Holmes, in his chronologically final adventure (*His Last Bow*) describes the War as "God's own wind" blowing over the land.²⁰ This attitude—which C.S. Lewis called "chronological snobbery"—is altogether common today. One frequently hears that certain moral attitudes or religious dogmas have no place in the modern world, or that those who oppose certain social trends are "on the wrong side of history." Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau justified his cabinet decisions with the flippant line, "Because it's 2016," as though living at a certain time committed one to certain values that were implicitly superior to those held in the past.

But even if Holmes is a scientist, he does not rely on strict technological and scientific reasoning. Science furnishes the data, but another instinct furnishes the conclusions. For example, in *The Solitary Cyclist*, Holmes notes that a client has "spatulate finger-ends," which is consistent with repeatedly tapping on either a piano or a typewriter. Note how he deduces that she is a musician: "There is a spirituality about the face," he remarks, "which the typewriter does not generate."²¹ "Spirituality" is not the sort of thing that can be detected through a microscope, but it is a legitimate clue all the same.

Importantly, for Holmes, this intuitive and aesthetic instinct is not something that hinders him from accessing the objective truth. In conjunction with his observations, it makes him *more* susceptible to the truth. Having all the facts is necessary, but not sufficient. The communications and technology theorist Marshall McLuhan identified this as the difference between Holmes and Scotland Yard: the latter exemplifies instrumental reason working through bureaucracy, and while "[t]he Yard technology is serial, segmented, and circumstantial," Holmes' "intuitive genius" is that, like an artist, he thinks in totalities.²²

The Jesuit theologian Bernard Lonergan phrased McLuhan's observation differently in the opening lines of the preface to his text on *Insight*:

In the ideal detective story the reader is given all the clues yet fails to spot the criminal...he can remain in the dark for the simple reason that reaching the solution is not the mere apprehension of any clue, not the mere memory of all, but a quite distinct activity

¹⁹ *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is the preeminent example of this: Henry Baskerville, the heroic young heir to his dynasty, wants to modernize Gothic Baskerville Hall with "a row of electric lamps," while the evil characters are regressions: The brutish Selden seems to be almost a literal caveman, and the villainous Stapleton is described by Holmes as "a throwback, which appears to be both physical and spiritual" to a diabolical ancestor of the Baskerville line. See Arthur Conan Doyle, *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Novels and Stories, Volume II* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986), 121.

²⁰ Doyle, *Complete Sherlock Holmes II*, 457.

²¹ Doyle, *Complete Sherlock Holmes I*, 728.

²² Marshall McLuhan, "Sherlock Holmes vs the Bureaucrat," in *The Essential Marshall McLuhan*, ed. Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone (New York: BasicBooks, 1995), 192-3.

of organizing intelligence that places the full set of clues in *a unique explanatory perspective*.²³ (emphasis added)

Lonergan identifies the epistemic and existential procedure of arriving at truth as a method consisting of four admonitions: “Be attentive,” “be intelligent,” “be rational,” and “be responsible.” Having an “insight” is a function of being intelligent, but one must then vet that insight with rationality. The Scotland Yard detectives in the stories are often attentive, and even intelligent, but Holmes’ creativity and rationality enable him to both refute their mistakes and come up with better explanatory hypotheses.²⁴ Lonergan freely confessed his intellectual debt in this matter to Holmes’ contemporary, John Henry Newman. Newman’s defence of religious belief, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, introduced the concept of the “illative sense,” meaning “the intellectual capacity in a particular case (hence sense rather than faculty) to come to a conclusion about complex or disparate evidence.”²⁵ Since Newman holds that the “illative sense” is what leads us to the knowledge of God,²⁶ Holmes is, perhaps, not far from the kingdom of God.

“Now Comes the Mystery”²⁷

“In the end, Holmes is Doyle’s alter-ego (and perhaps also his altar ego), addressing the too-easy thrill of the supernatural along with the necessity to ground one’s faith in a firm reality that we should expect—and wish—to be tested. To apply reason and caution in the realm of mystery may be the most useful religious writing Holmes ever did.” –Stephen Kendrick²⁸

As dismissive as Holmes may be of Watson’s poetic flights and fancies, we see him often waxing philosophic in a way that seems to anticipate the existentialists of the 20th century (and which echoes Hamlet and Macbeth, which is consistent with Holmes’ theatrical proclivities). Based on the evidence of Holmes’ experience *in this world*, all is hopeless: In a “melancholy and philosophic mood” at the beginning of *The Retired Colourman* (the last Holmes story to be published), Holmes wonders aloud: “[I]s not all life pathetic and futile? We reach. We grasp. And

²³ Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), ix. He made a similar analogy when discussing history as a functional specialty of theology: “Like a detective confronted with a set of clues that at first leave him baffled, the historian has to discover in the clues, piece by piece, the evidence that will yield a convincing account of what happened.” *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 186.

²⁴ Terry J. Tekippe dedicated chapter 6 of *What is Lonergan Up to in “Insight”? A Primer* (San Francisco: Liturgical Press, 1996) to the Holmes stories as an explanation of Lonergan’s thought.

²⁵ S.A.M. Adshead, *Philosophy of Religion in Nineteenth-Century England and Beyond*. (Hampshire: Macmillan Press Ltd., 2000), 31.

²⁶ “These fragments of experience and argument then act as signals that points us in the direction of a true conclusion...Newman’s suggestion is that we can defend belief in God by putting together a number of experiential signals and lines of thoughts, which converge on the conclusion that there is a God.” Aidan Nichols, *The Shape of Catholic Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 60.

²⁷ This section takes its title from the last words of Henry Ward Beecher before his death.

²⁸ *Holy Clues*, 106

what is left in our hands at the end? A shadow. Or worse than a shadow—misery.”²⁹ Holmes cannot overcome the sense of futility in this life, made all the worse by its abrupt but inevitable conclusion. There is a similar note struck at the end of *The Cardboard Box*, an especially gruesome and nihilistic case, except that here Holmes’ instincts seem to revolt against the conclusion:

“*What is the meaning of it, Watson? 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**.*”³⁰ (emphasis added)

Holmes’ reason comes up against the mystery of human suffering, and his intuitions rebel against the idea that it is all for naught. Nevertheless, he concedes that the answer must lie somewhere beyond reason, at least reason based on empirical inference. For all this, Holmes, like his creator, cannot seem to quite become a full-fledged unbeliever. Despite recommending Windwood Reade’s aggressively secular text *The Martyrdom of Man* in *The Sign of Four* and even citing it to Watson later in the novel, the quotation is preceded by Holmes describing labourers leaving their gruelling work as “[d]irty-looking rascals, but I suppose every one has some little immortal spark concealed about him...A strange enigma is man!”³¹ It is noteworthy that what fascinates Holmes is the thought that each of these men has something *immortal* about them. He even conscripts an anti-religious author (Reade) in the service of a religious instinct. Between these two quotes, we begin to sense Holmes’ dilemma: This world seems to be full of misery, and the only solution seems to be something beyond this world, and there must be something in humans that survives beyond this world.

We find that Holmes has a complex relationship with death. Running through the stories is the suggestion that there are certain mysteries that can only be solved from the other side of death. There is, of course, the obvious fact that, in solving murders, Holmes allows the dead to speak; like Abel, the victims, being dead, yet speaketh (an image which takes alarmingly literal form in *The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax*). But there is a deeper significance to the role of death in these stories. On one level, this is because of the hope that there must be a resolution in the afterlife. As he muses in *The Veiled Lodger*, “The ways of fate are indeed hard to understand. If there is not some compensation hereafter, then the world is a cruel jest.”³² The language of “jest” reminds us of Albert Camus, who argued that death renders human life meaningless and our broken world “unreasonable.”³³ Holmes’ hope for justice in another world is strong enough for Holmes to act upon: he allows a dying murderer to go free in *The Boscombe Valley Mystery* because the killer will soon face “a court higher than the Assizes.”³⁴ Holmes seems to be moved by the sort of

²⁹ Doyle, *Complete Sherlock Holmes II*, 649.

³⁰ Doyle, *Complete Sherlock Holmes II*, 340.

³¹ Doyle, *Complete Sherlock Holmes I*, 175. This language sounds intriguingly close to Kierkegaard’s description of “something eternal in man” which is related to our experience of anxiety.

³² Doyle, *Complete Sherlock Holmes II*, 632.

³³ Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (New York: Random House, 2004), 154-8. The chapter on “The Victorian Crisis of Faith” is also illuminating about Holmes’ broader milieu.

³⁴ Doyle, *Complete Sherlock Holmes I*, 288.

argument that Immanuel Kant made: Ultimate justice does not exist in this world, but our intuitions insist that ultimate justice *must* exist; therefore, there *must* be another world wherein dwelleth righteousness.³⁵ We must again recall that more Americans today believe in life after death, even as traditional religiosity wanes, and consider whether the rationale for this is not similar to Holmes’.

Related to this, Holmes knows that the solution to the problem of our mortality is not a cure for death. In a fascinating story which slips into science fiction, *The Creeping Man*, a “mad scientist” injects himself with primate glands in an attempt at rejuvenation. Commenting on this scheme, Holmes remarks: “When one tries to rise above Nature one is liable to fall below it. The highest type of man may revert to the animal if he leaves the straight road of destiny.” Here he sounds like Pascal’s ruminations: “Man is neither angel nor brute, and the unfortunate thing is that he who would act the angel acts the brute.”³⁶ And, in musing on what would happen if scientists ever *were* to develop such an elixir, Holmes has premonitions of a dystopian future and an anthropological catastrophe:

*“There is...a very real danger to humanity. Consider, Watson, that the material, the sensual, the worldly would all prolong their worthless lives. The spiritual would not avoid the call to something higher. It would be the survival of the least fit. What sort of cesspool may not our poor world become?”*³⁷

Philosopher and apologist Peter Kreeft, noting legends like the Wandering Jew and the Flying Dutchman, observes: “Mere unending life is not a blessing but a curse...Unending life without God is not heaven; it is hell.”³⁸ Not only does this constitute an argument for an afterlife, since our natural desire for immortality cannot be satisfied by unending life in this world, it also suggests that there are limits to what technology and science have to offer human nature. Today, there is the possibility of medical procedures which can dramatically increase the human lifespan, but Pew Research reveals that over half of Americans think that allowing people to live to 120 would be “bad for society,” in apparent agreement with Holmes.³⁹ The sense is that, while death cannot be the end, unending life in this world is not the solution: we must look to another world.

³⁵ Kant’s argument is found in his *Critique of Practical Reason*. Kant’s argument is close to the structure of Holmes’ thought: Reason itself cannot disclose the ultimate reality (as Kant had already argued in his *Critique of Pure Reason*), and the sole persuasive argument for God’s existence is that it is necessary for ethics.

³⁶ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. W.F. Trotter (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2003), 99.

³⁷ Doyle, *Complete Sherlock Holmes II*, 605.

³⁸ Peter Kreeft, *Fundamentals of the Faith: Essays in Christian Apologetics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 23. Doyle seemed to recognize this, for his fiction often depicts unending life on earth as a curse. His story “The Ring of Thoth” (published the same year as the first Holmes story and featuring a Holmes-like protagonist) depicts a mournful living corpse from ancient Egypt; this tale was one of the influences for the Universal film *The Mummy*.

³⁹“Living to 120 and Beyond: Americans’ Views on Aging, Medical Advances and Radical Life Extension.” Pew Research Center, August 6, 2013. Available at <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/08/06/living-to-120-and-beyond-americans-views-on-aging-medical-advances-and-radical-life-extension> (as of November 15, 2017).

But what is this “something higher” Holmes refers to, which beckons the spiritual upwards? Is there anything in the universe which gives a positive evidence its existence, rather than simply the negative evidence of the world’s futility? There is one piece of evidence Holmes identifies: Beauty.

The Naval Treaty was the last story published before *The Final Problem*, in which Holmes apparently died in his confrontation with Professor Moriarty. It may be that *The Naval Treaty* depicts a Holmes aware that a fatal encounter with his archenemy is immanent and is therefore reflecting on his own mortality,⁴⁰ which is why he stops his investigations abruptly to express his awe over the beauty of a rose:

*“There is nothing in which deduction is so necessary as in religion. It can be built up as an exact science by the reasoner. Our highest assurance of the goodness of Providence seems to me to rest in the flowers. All other things, our powers our desires, our food, are all really necessary for our existence in the first instance. But this rose is an extra. Its smell and its color are an embellishment of life, not a condition of it. It is only goodness which gives extras, and so I say again that we have much to hope from the flowers.”*⁴¹

As we have discussed, Holmes’ method employs the illative sense Newman and Lonergan both said that the illative sense is also a sense of beauty.⁴² Holmes’ comments may be off-putting to some Christians, both because of his suggestion that theology “can be built up as an exact science” (which smacks of baroque theology or neo-Scholasticism) and because he seems to be building a natural theology in the vein of the Metaphysical poets rather than on the revelation of Christ. But it is important to recall that Hans Urs Von Balthasar spends the opening of the first volume of his “theo-aesthetics” arguing that beauty should be recognized as a theological category, governed by the “form” (*Gestalt*) of Christ, Whose Incarnation is the basis for the analogy of being.⁴³ Similarly, Balthasar’s friend, the Reformed theologian Karl Barth, interpreted the beauty of Mozart’s music as a response to “the problem of theodicy” presented by the Lisbon earthquake. “Mozart,” he writes, “had the peace of God which far transcends all the critical or speculative reason that praises and reproves” and his music constitutes “a clear and convincing proof that it is a slander on creation to charge it with a share in chaos...Mozart has created order for those who have ears to hear, and he has done it better than any scientific deduction could.”⁴⁴ Note Barth’s language: The beauty of Mozart’s music constitutes a *proof* of order in spite of the apparent pointlessness of the world, a proof transcending scientific deduction, just as the rose constitutes *proof* for Holmes.

⁴⁰ I owe this insight to Fr. David Hogman.

⁴¹ Doyle, *Complete Sherlock Holmes I*, 624.

⁴² See, for example, William A. Mathews, *Lonergan’s Quest: A Study of Desire in the Authoring of Insight* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2005), 45. For Lonergan, aesthetic judgments deal with responsibility (the fourth stage his method), in which the subject makes decisions with regard to values. This is the stage where conversion occurs. *Method in Theology*, 13.

⁴³ *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, Volume I: Seeing the Form*, translated by Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982).

⁴⁴ Quoted in Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation*, trans. Edward T. Oakes, S.J. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 78.

In our day, people are addicted to both music and the outdoors, and it is as common to hear people speak of their spirituality as being closely related to the beauty of a sunset as to anything they find in church. It would be well advised to consider whether this does not constitute a chink in the armour of materialistic philosophy which the evangelist ought to exploit. This contention is strengthened by the fact that some young people in England are reportedly converting to Christianity because of the beauty of church buildings.⁴⁵

Overall, the impression of Doyle's spiritual journey is that it reflects a desire to be firmly grounded in reason and scientific inquiry while still retaining a sense of transcendence and a metaphysical system that gives life meaning. Kendrick, himself a Unitarian minister, has suggested that this is similar to the ethos of the "spiritual but not religious" phenomenon.⁴⁶

Conclusion: The Importance of the Resurrection

"Revelation therefore introduces into our history a universal and ultimate truth which stirs the human mind to ceaseless effort; indeed, it impels reason continually to extend the range of its knowledge until it senses that it has done all in its power, leaving no stone unturned." –Pope John Paul II⁴⁷

Summarizing Holmes' observations, we find that this world tends towards seeming randomness and hopelessness, but the presence of beauty is strong evidence of a greater goodness and purpose; but this purpose can only be known on the other side of death. The only way to solve the mystery of the universe, therefore, would be to pass over death and come back with your findings. And, in a way, Holmes accomplishes this, triumphing over death and returning three years later in *The Empty House*. Notice that the story is set in springtime, at the beginning of April, implicitly in Eastertide. That there is meant to be something Christological and Cruciform about this is suggested by the fact that the only disguise he dons to elude Moriarty in *The Final Problem*—before he lays down his life to defeat him—is that of an Italian (and thus implicitly Catholic) priest, that is to say, a minister whose life is dedicated to the imitation of Christ.⁴⁸

Another way of putting this is that, for Doyle, since reason alone could not disclose the mystery of reality, this mystery could only be solved by an encounter or an event. To put it another

⁴⁵ Olivia Rudgard, "One in six young people are Christian as visits to church buildings inspire them to convert" (The Telegraph, June 17, 2017). Available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/06/17/one-six-young-people-christian-visits-church-buildings-inspire> (as of November 15, 2017).

⁴⁶ "Most modern spiritual pilgrims, and I count myself among them, possess both a deep hunger for a fresh and creative faith and an equally strong need not to be fooled or manipulated. We want a faith that is not being propped up with rickety tales of miracles and tinsel visions. We want a faith a little closer to the ground, something that seems threaded into the realm of the everyday and the ordinary, not the grand and the glittering." (*Holy Clues*, 106)

⁴⁷ *Fides et Ratio* (September 14, 1998), paragraph 14.

⁴⁸ Today, some of the most popular media are superhero movies, in which the protagonists frequently die and experience some form of resurrection. This has happened so frequently that the phrase "comic book death" has entered the popular lexicon as a reference to a character whose death will certainly be undone. This could reflect a similar instinct, or subconscious attraction to somehow overcoming the spectre of mortality.

way, the only way to access *noumena* (Kant) is through the *numinous* (Otto). This held true in his own life. He moved from agnosticism to Spiritualism, he always explained, because in his own experience of séances he had heard the spirits reveal things that no other mortal could have known. This is a common reason cited for belief in the paranormal: a 2009 Pew survey revealed that one in five Americans believe they have been in the presence of a ghost.⁴⁹ Even Michael Shermer, who for decades has made a career as a debunker and the executive director of the Skeptics Society and editor of *Skeptic* magazine, wrote an article admitting that he and his wife had an apparent experience of her father's ghost that was so inexplicable it "shook my skepticism to its core."⁵⁰ As Kendrick comments, "the picture of Doyle that emerges here is not of a credulous innocent man tumbling into Spiritualism but of a man whose spiritual quest was really a form of the scientific method...when he did [convert to Spiritualism], he insisted he did so as a practical, tough-minded searcher for evidence."⁵¹

But, as Chesterton pointed out, even an indisputably supernatural encounter is not a guarantee that the information one gleaned from that experience reveals the truth about the universe. "A message touching a secret," he explained, "need not come from the dead because it is about the dead...it might be a devil."⁵² In other words, demons may be masquerading as ghosts and using secret knowledge to deceive people; an experience of the supernatural is not necessarily an experience of truth.

Doyle was right that an encounter or event is necessary to reveal the ultimate truth about reality, but, as Barth said, this must be based entirely on an encounter with the revealing Christ. The Word of God is what is reliable, not our experiences which are so vulnerable to idolatry.

It becomes clear how important the Resurrection of Christ is as a response to Holmes' quest to solve the mystery of human existence: Jesus is the One Who has gone over to the realm of death and returned triumphant. Christian apologists, such as Montgomery, often present a sort of legal argument for the Resurrection based on the historical evidence surrounding the Empty Tomb, an argument which persuaded such formidable lawyers as Simon Greenleaf and Lionel Luckhoo to become Christian believers.⁵³ Such a presentation of the evidence for the Resurrection often feels like a kind of murder mystery turned on its head, or a reverse locked-room (or locked-tomb) mystery.⁵⁴ The 2016 movie *Risen*, featuring a Roman soldier investigating the disappearance of Jesus' body, was structured like a police procedural and captured something of this style of apologetic. Montgomery even suggests that Holmes himself would have been persuaded by the

⁴⁹ "18% of Americans Say They've Seen a Ghost." Pew Research Center, October 13, 2015. Available at <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/10/30/18-of-americans-say-theyve-seen-a-ghost> (as of November 15, 2017).

⁵⁰ Michael Shermer, "Anomalous Events That Can Shake One's Skepticism to the Core." (Scientific American, October 1, 2014). Available at <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/anomalous-events-that-can-shake-one-s-skepticism-to-the-core> (as of November 15, 2017).

⁵¹ Kendrick, *Holy Clues*, 104.

⁵² *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton*, Volume 34 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 78.

⁵³ See Ross Clifford, *John Warwick Montgomery's Legal Apologetic: An Apologetic for all Seasons* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016).

⁵⁴ Alister E. McGrath suggests that the evidence for the Resurrection constitutes not so much a "whodunit" as a "Whowasit"; see *Studies in Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 38.

evidence for the Resurrection, which his real-life contemporary, Scotland Yard commissioner Sir Robert Anderson, presented in a book titled *The Coming Prince*.⁵⁵

The question then becomes why Doyle himself never returned to mainstream Christianity. The answer, as for so many other people in his day and ours, seems to boil down to the Church's moral teaching on sexuality. In his case, the specific issue was divorce, a controversy which may have had personal significance to him as someone who fell in love with another woman while his wife was still alive.⁵⁶ Doyle felt so strongly that divorce should be socially and legally permissible that for ten years he was president of the Divorce Law Reform Society.⁵⁷ There is even reason to believe that, while Doyle denounced the Church for her religiously-based opposition to divorce, his own belief in divorce also had a religious colouring. A character in the Sherlock Holmes story *The Abbey Grange* fulminates against divorce laws in prophetic language: "It is a sacrilege, a crime, a villainy to hold that [an abusive] marriage is binding. I say that these monstrous laws of yours will bring a curse upon the land – God will not let such wickedness endure."⁵⁸

Notably, even during his criticism of the Church, Doyle's attraction to the figure of Christ continued unabated. Doyle denounced those who believe that "because Christ protested against the lax marriages of His day therefore two spouses who loathe each other should be forever chained in a life servitude and martyrdom," claiming that this is "to travesty His teaching and to take from it that robust quality of common sense which was its main characteristic" (the capitalization of the pronoun referring to Jesus is in the original text).⁵⁹

Doyle instead reacted with the second major stage in his effort to replace the Catholicism of his youth, Spiritualism. That this belief in the existence of ghosts was prompted, at least in part, by psychological need for some sort of proof of the afterlife can be seen in the fact that, when his friend Harry Houdini debunked the phenomenon of séances, it was their friendship that ended rather than his attachment to Spiritualism. That this attachment to Spiritualism is related to his desire for Christ can be seen in the fact that he saw supernaturalism as a return to the early church, writing that "spirit communion was a familiar idea" to the early Christians based on the references to "the spirits" in the Epistles.⁶⁰ He even attempted to persuade the Spiritualists National Union to adopt a resolution encouraging the imitation of Jesus Christ.⁶¹

The picture that emerges is of someone who could not shake a desire to return to his childhood Christianity, but who rejected its moral strictures, and who found an alternative which could fill that Pascalian "God-shaped hole" and clung to it in the face of evidence to the contrary. Christians ought to be alert to the fact that the contemporary world is much like Doyle in this respect: in many ways profoundly intelligent, and ultimately longing for Christ, but rejecting the moral demands of the Church so fiercely that they will ignore evidence that refutes all their

⁵⁵ Montgomery suggests that Holmes' early attraction to Buddhism was cured after meeting the Dalai Lama during his Great Hiatus (*Transcendent Holmes*, 87-95) and depicts Holmes as an apologist for Christianity in a dialogue with Watson (*ibid.* 119-135).

⁵⁶ Janet B. Pascal, *Arthur Conan Doyle: Beyond Baker Street* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 94-5.

⁵⁷ Lesley A. Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain since 1880* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 62

⁵⁸ Doyle, *Complete Sherlock Holmes I*, 884.

⁵⁹ Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Vital Message* (New York: Sheba Blake Publishing, 2014), 16.

⁶⁰ Doyle, *The Vital Message*, 128.

⁶¹ Geoffrey K. Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 149.

replacements. The answer is encounter, or revelation, though this can be done while using reason and science as a prolegomena.

In the light of that, Christians must not only be willing to present the propositional arguments for the Resurrection (which may be called the arguments to the *modern* mind), but also what may be called the subjective argument for the Resurrection of our own sanctity (arguably, an argument which appeal to the *postmodern* mind). The Catholic storyteller Flannery O'Connor concludes her dramatic story "A Good Man is Hard to Find" by having her murderous character the Misfit declare that he would gladly abandon his criminal lifestyle and follow Jesus, if only he could be sure that Jesus rose from the dead. Unfortunately, because he was not there, the Misfit cannot be sure that the miracles of Jesus really happened—an argument not dissimilar to Lessing's idea that a great historical ditch separates us from the Gospels and prevents us from being certain about their accuracy. "I wisht I had of been there," he snarls, for "if I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn't be like I am now." But right before he kills the story's rather self-righteous protagonist, she suddenly has a moment of clarity and reaches out to him in forgiveness—an experience which startles him and, while the ending is ambiguous, perhaps begins to convert him.⁶²

One way to interpret this is that the woman's utterly unselfish act of love towards the Misfit in a way constitutes a kind of proof of Jesus' Resurrection, just as the unselfish love of Mother Theresa constituted a proof of Christianity to Malcolm Muggeridge, or the sanctity of Father Zosima constitutes a proof of Christianity in Dostoevsky's metaphysical murder mystery, *The Brothers Karamazov*. In that story, it is the innocent monk, Alyosha, rather than the analytical intellectual Ivan, who effectively solves the murder of their father, a suggestion that it is actually sanctity and not mere cleverness that gives one privileged access to reality.⁶³ If there is any takeaway from the Holmes stories for the Christian evangelist, then, it is expressed in the words of the old revivalist hymn: Take time to be holy.

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⁶² Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), 133.

⁶³ G.K. Chesterton's Father Brown character is an obvious model of this, and in a story which seems to be an explicit response to the Holmes stories, "The Man With Two Beards" (which features a beekeeping detective character whom Brown outwits), the sleuthing cleric contrasts criminology with hagiography, "the study of holy things, saints and so on. You see, the Dark Ages tried to make a science about good people. But our own humane and enlightened age is only interested in a science about bad ones." *The Complete Father Brown* (London: Penguin Books, 1963), 482.

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