

Freemasonry and Sherlock Holmes: A Selected Overview of the Literature
Michael L. Moran
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This paper will review selected literature of four aspects of Freemasonry and Sherlock Holmes:

1. Was Arthur Conan Doyle a Freemason?
2. How being a Freemason potentially influenced Doyle when writing the Canon.
3. Examples from the Canon referring to Freemasonry.
4. Was Sherlock Holmes a Freemason?

Introduction

The author has been a Freemason for several years. Freemasonry (also referred to as a fraternity or the Craft) is an international organization emphasizing the principles of brotherly love, truth and relief. Members are encouraged, via various means, to pursue a path of self-improvement as well as making efforts to improve society.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the structure and degrees of the Craft. Interested readers are referred to the following website for additional information:
<https://pagrandlodge.org/aboutfreemasonry/>.

Was Arthur Conan Doyle a Freemason?

Runciman¹ reported: Arthur Conan Doyle was initiated [received his first degree in Freemasonry] on 26 January 1887 at the age of 27, passed [second degree] on 23 February 1887 and raised [third or Master Mason degree] on 23 March 1887 in Phoenix Lodge No. 257, South sea, Hampshire. He resigned in 1889 and rejoined in 1902 but finally withdrew in 1911 without having made further progress in the Craft. The records of the United Grand Lodge of England contain no indication of his having affiliated with any other lodge.

In a 1992 article in a Masonic research journal Runciman wrote of Doyle: Given his masonic history it is not surprising that there is no mention of Freemasonry in his autobiography, *Memories and Adventures*.^{2, p.181}

Beresiner³ added: He attended Lodges as an unattached mason and rejoined his Lodge in 1902. He also received various honors before his final withdrawal from Freemasonry in 1911. It was circumstances of a full and exciting life and the nature of the man that were his manifest in this haphazard involvement with the Craft. Caution should be used with this source, however, as it incorrectly states the number of short stories and novels in the Canon.

How being a Freemason potentially influenced Doyle when writing the Canon

Examples (pro and con) from the literature include the following:

1. A Scandal in Bohemia - Holmes explains to Watson that there is a "freemasonry among horsey men." The reference is not to Masonry as an organization, but employs the name as a common noun meaning fellowship, a recognized characteristic of the fraternity.⁴

This same source also stated: In the Red-Headed League...Wilson is described as being "obese, pompous, and slow," his clothing as frayed, ill-fitting, and "not over clean." He is also identified as a Freemason by a gaudy square and compasses pin. Again writing before his initiation into the craft, Doyle does not leave us with a very high opinion of the fraternity.

2. The Adventure of the Musgrave Ritual - Runciman⁵ wrote: Professor Jay MacPherson of the University of Toronto is of the opinion that this catechism [the ritual] had its origins in Freemasonry. Barrett G. Potter, in his "Sherlock Holmes and the Masonic Connection" also believes that the ritual had its roots in masonic catechisms used for instruction of the brethren.

Examples from the Canon referring to Freemasonry

From two separate sources, examples include:

1. In these stories there are three references to Freemasonry: 1- The Adventure of the Norwood Builder (Masonic watch charm), 2- The Red-Headed League (Arc and Compass breast-pin), 3- The Adventure of the Colourman (Masonic tie pin).⁶
2. A Scandal in Bohemia (There is a wonderful sympathy and freemasonry among the horseymen), A Study in Scarlet (Gold ring, with Masonic device), The Valley of Fear (John McMurdo, said the voice, are you already a member of the Ancient Order of Freeman?)⁷
3. Other interpretations (and controversies) include:
 - A. We learn in The Adventure of the Second Stain, The Adventure of the Lion's Mane, and His Last Bow that Holmes has retired to raise bees on the Sussex Downs. This is more than mere coincidence. The beehive has relevance to the Master Mason ritual in some jurisdictions - most notably in England...⁸
 - B. A Study in Scarlet: wording such as "Well, if a man can stride four and a half feet without the smallest effort, he can't be quite in the sere and yellow" is attributed to Shakespeare's Macbeth rather than the Craft.^{2, p181}
 - C. The Adventure of the Yellow Face: I suggest that one should be cautious in connecting "The Yellow Face" with the Ripper theories and the supposed involvement of the freemasons. Much has been written by Knight and others about the Ripper murders but no one has been able to prove conclusively the identity of the criminal nor has any evidence been produced of a masonic connection.^{2, p.183} [author's note: this reference includes information supporting the contention that The Adventure of the Yellow Face is connected with Jack the Ripper and the Whitechapel murders²]
 - D. Raymond Holly in his article "Hiram Abiff and Hall Pycroft: Freemasonry in "The Stockbroker's Clerk" finds many masonic allusions although he frankly admits he is not himself a freemason...Sherlockians are known to become victims of whimsy and this is a good example of it. Holly is surely reading too much into the story, and especially in view of Conan Doyle's passing interest in Freemasonry.^{2, p.184}

Was Sherlock Holmes a Freemason?

The following evidence was gleaned from selected sources:

1. In "A Study of Masonry" (Sherlock Holmes Journal, 1973) Ryder opines that Holmes was a perfectionist and a member of the Craft and that he was not going to recognize Wilson as a brother mason because he said "your order" and not "our Order." On the wearing of the arc and compasses breastpin Ryder believes that it serves an important need in Freemasonry, that is, to remind a brother when he is overstepping the bounds of the Order.^{2, p.183}
2. There is no better argument for Holmes's Masonic membership than his own actions. As previously mentioned, the tenets of Masonry are brotherly love, relief and truth. Holmes continually demonstrates that he has taken the values of Masonry to heart. For example:

Brotherly Love - What better example of Brotherly Love exists than the scene in The Adventure of the Three Garridebs when Watson is wounded? Holmes cries out, "You're not hurt, Watson? For God's sake, say you are not hurt!" Watson is extremely moved by Holmes's concern for his welfare. Holmes tells Killer Evans that if he had killed Watson he would not have left the room alive.

Relief - We can site numerous references where Holmes has provided relief to his clients, both individuals and governments. In *The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist*, Holmes saves Violet Smith from a terrible fate. In *The Adventure of the Speckled Band*, he saves Helen Stoner from certain death at the hands of her stepfather. He assists the government in *The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans*, *The Naval Treaty*, and *His Last Bow*. In fact, his entire career is based on relieving the problems of his clients.

Truth - Holmes's professional life is dedicated to the pursuit of truth. Although there is the occasional decision not to reveal every fact about a case, he is a zealous advocate in pursuing truth for his clients.⁸

3. Voorhis⁶ wrote: Sherlock Holmes was a Mason - The above statement could only be made if we consider Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the author of the 60 Sherlock Holmes stories AS Sherlock Holmes.

4. Polvere⁹ considers the question of Holmes being a Freemason in extensive detail. He believes Holmes was indeed a Mason. He states, in part: While I am persuaded by arguments I've already stated of Holmes's membership in the Masonic fraternity - his knowledge of rules and customs of the fraternity, his being a seeker of deeper knowledge, and his keeping of the tenets...^{p.47} He concluded: So in sum, we can see that Holmes exemplified his own words "Be one of them and you will know all there is to know."^{p.48}

5. Contrary to the four sources detailed above, Morris¹⁰ contends that Holmes was not a Mason. He wrote: The superficial conclusion is that Sherlock Holmes was a Freemason, given his detailed knowledge of the fraternity. This deduction flies in the face of what we know about Holmes as a social creature. While not lacking in social graces, the great detective did not seek out human companionship or maintain close friendships, except perhaps with Dr. Watson. In contrast a Masonic lodge is a celebration of sociability and friendship, a place where men gather for the purpose of enjoying each other's company...We can understand the Masonic references lodged in the Canon with the simple insight that John H. Watson was a Freemason. [author's note: this reference includes general information about Freemasonry]

The Author's Thoughts

This author has been a Freemason for many years. In addition to the examples above, the following are a few of his own examples of linkage between the Craft and the Canon.

1. Rituals: like the Musgrave ritual, Masonic rituals require study and careful thought to arrive at their true meanings.
2. Confidence: members of the Masonic community are linked by the tenets of brotherly love, truth and relief. At time, confidentiality is required. The Sign of Four (chapter 4) includes "I have complete confidence in his discretion..."In the Canon, the word confidence appears 75 times. In many of those instances, the connotation is positive.
3. Truth: "to tell the truth" is stated 9 times in the Canon, typically in a meaningful way.
4. Service is an important role for Masons. The Canon includes examples of service on a broad scale (*A Scandal in Bohemia* - "Your recent services to one of the royal houses of Europe have shown that you are one who may safely be trusted with matters which are of an importance which can hardly be exaggerated") as well as on a more individual level (*Silver Blaze* - "You have done me a great service by recovering my horse. You would do me a greater still if you could lay your hands on the murderer of John Straker").

Limitations

This paper is based on a small number of sources. There are only three primary (and published) articles listed in the references. In addition, web-based resources were used.

This paper is an attempt to link two interests of the author: Freemasonry and Sherlock Holmes. There is considerable room for expansion and exploration of the various topics and issues in this work. Certainly, controversy exists pertaining to this paper's contents and the opinions/positions offered in the cited sources.

It is anticipated that readers will have benefitted from the paper and, hopefully, offer thoughtful commentary.

References

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