Sir Arthur Conan Doyle: Writer and ophthalmologist

Early life and medical career

“I think every one of us read some of Sherlock’s stories when we were children,” said James Ravin, MD, Toledo, Ohio, an ophthalmologist and leading Doyle historian. “They’re not difficult to read, they’re short, their plots are concise, and they’re classics in literature.”

While masterful detective Sherlock Holmes remains a fascinating character today, he would not exist had Doyle not been a physician. Born in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1859 to a family with a long line of artists, Doyle clearly had a talent for writing, but medical questions also piqued his curiosity, Dr. Ravin said. With encouragement from those around him, Doyle entered the University of Edinburgh Medical School in 1876 at age 17.

Although Doyle was an average student, he had a clear thirst for scientific knowledge. Following the long-standing medical tradition

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The author combined his love of art and science in composing Sherlock Holmes stories and other works

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was much more than the man who created legendary detective Sherlock Holmes. Before becoming a prolific writer and social activist, he was a physician—and an ophthalmologist.

Although he is remembered for his literary genius, medicine played a crucial role in Doyle’s life, and his time as a physician was critical to the development of his most famous and enduring character. Doyle’s passion for medicine and ophthalmology were guiding forces throughout his life even after he gave up practicing medicine, influencing not only his literary works but also calling him to action in the face of social injustice.

The creation of an icon

Sherlock Holmes is considered to be the most portrayed fictional character of all time. More than 70 actors have played Holmes in more than 200 films, in addition to numerous plays and radio and television shows. Surprisingly, many of the iconic details associated with Holmes’ character were never included in Doyle’s original writings.

Illustrator Sidney Paget drew images of Holmes for the original publication in the Strand Magazine, and his illustrations have served as the basis for Holmes’ iconic image. Paget is credited with attiring Holmes in the deerstalker cap and Inverness cape, wardrobe details Doyle never mentioned in his writing.

American actor and playwright William Gillette played Holmes in more than 1,300 stage appearances over 30 years. Gillette added the legendary curved calabash pipe to Holmes’ image in 1916, most likely because it was large and easy to recognize onstage. In Doyle’s writing, Holmes is depicted as preferring a straight, long-stemmed churchwarden or clay pipe.

Gillette was also the first person to speak the phrase “Oh, this is elementary, my dear fellow,” while explaining his deductive process, which was later changed to “Elementary, my dear Watson,” by English actor Clive Brook. Although this is Holmes’ most famous line and a popular expression in the English language, the complete phrase never appeared in any of Doyle’s original works, although Holmes does describe his reasoning as elementary. EW
of self-experimentation, while in school Doyle experimented with the poison gelsemium, nearly dying in the process. He eventually recovered and recorded the toxic plant’s effects, and would later explore the subject of poisons and toxins in many of the Sherlock Holmes stories.

Doyle also began exploring his creative side while in medical school, writing several short stories. The 2 that were published reflected the influence of Edgar Allan Poe and Bret Harte, 2 of his favorite writers. Due to his family’s financial struggles, Doyle compressed his classes and found work as a medical assistant. During his third year of school, Doyle took a job as a surgeon aboard an Arctic whaling ship, sparking his sense of adventure and earning him extra income. Writing letters to his friends back home detailing the adventures of the ship, Doyle began to consider a career in literature.

“It was in this year that I first learned that shillings might be earned in other ways than by filling phials,” Doyle wrote in his autobiography. “Some friend remarked to me that my letters were very vivid and surely I could write some things to sell. I may say that the general aspiration towards literature was tremendously strong upon me.”

After graduating in 1881, Doyle set up a practice in Southsea, a suburb of Portsmouth, England. Although he was a general practitioner, Doyle worked at the Portsmouth Eye and Ear Hospital under ophthalmologist Vernon Ford. There he learned refraction and other ophthalmic techniques, sparking his interest in ophthalmology.

In his spare time Doyle continued to write, publishing stories in several magazines but earning little money from them. With a meager writing income, “The idea of real success was still far from my mind,” Doyle wrote in his autobiography.

Doyle’s medical expertise and fascination with the eye grew throughout the 1880s. He earned his doctor of medicine in 1885, and was married the same year, an event he described as a turning point in his life and career.

“Up to now the main interest of my life lay in my medical career,” Doyle wrote in his autobiography. “But with the more regular life and the greater sense of responsibility … the literary side of me began slowly to spread until it was destined to push the other entirely aside.”

From medicine to literature

As the literary part of him grew, Doyle began to develop the character of Sherlock Holmes and wrote his first Holmes story, A Study in Scarlet, in 1886. Doyle modeled the character of Holmes after his medical school mentor, Joseph Bell, a remarkably astute physician and skillful diagnostican. Using Bell as a model, Doyle introduced Holmes as the first “scientific detective.”

“Poe’s masterful detective, M. Dupin, had from boyhood been one of my heroes,” Doyle wrote in his autobiography. “I thought of my old teacher Joe Bell, of his eagle face, of his curious ways, of his eerie trick of spotting details. If he were a detective he would surely reduce this fascinating but unorganized business to something nearer to an exact science … It was surely possible in real life, so why should I not make it plausible in fiction?”

A Study in Scarlet was published in 1887, but the Holmes fame would not take off for several more years. Doyle wrote more Holmes stories in his spare time and continued practicing medicine but began to think about shifting his focus to ophthalmology. On a train ride to Berlin in 1890, Doyle met Sir Malcolm Morris, a London dermatologist, who encouraged him to study ophthalmology in Vienna and set up a practice in London.

Recognizing that this was a relatively easy way for him to combine his writing and medical career, Doyle took Morris’ advice. After a brief 2-month stay in Vienna and a few days studying in Paris, Doyle returned to London as a practicing ophthalmologist in the spring of 1891.

Doyle’s ophthalmological career was short-lived, however—that same spring, The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes, a collection of 6 Holmes stories, was published in the Strand Magazine. The stories earned Doyle more money in April of that year than 6 months of income in Portsmouth, and after only a month, he decided to leave ophthalmology entirely and focus solely on writing. When the stories were published in book form a year later, they were an instant success.

“It didn’t take long before the public was absolutely entranced by this character,” Dr. Ravin said.

Even though he abandoned his medical practice, Doyle’s passion for medicine and ophthalmology continued to influence his life and literary work. Doyle’s own medical knowledge and experience imparted authenticity to the scientific aspects of the Holmes stories, possibly contributing to their success.

In The Adventure of the Devil’s Foot, Holmes and Watson test a poison on themselves. Watson’s description of the effects are similar to those of the Calabar bean, a poisonous plant from West Africa that Doyle had studied in medical school, and the experience itself may be a reference to the gelsemium Doyle experimented with during the same time.

Medicine continued to be a driving force in Doyle’s life outside of his literary career. He served as a physician during the second Boer War in South Africa and became involved with 2 legal cases where he felt there had been a miscarriage of justice, using his ophthalmological background to provide evidence that the alleged perpetrators did not commit the crimes for which they were accused (see sidebar).

By the end of his career, Doyle had written 60 Sherlock Holmes stories, as well as various plays, romances, poetry, non-fiction, historical novels, and several fantasy and science fiction books. Doyle’s medical background and writing talent helped him to create captivating stories held together by an intriguing character that remains a fixture in literature, film, and television even today. EW

Editors’ note: Dr. Ravin has no financial interests related to his comments.

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