Arthur Conan Doyle's Art of Fiction

Arthur Conan Doyle's Art of Fiction:

A Revaluation

By

Nils Clausson

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

Arthur Conan Doyle's Art of Fiction: A Revaluation

By Nils Clausson

This book first published 2018

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-1157-X
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-1157-6

In memory of
my mother and father

Einar and Melba Clausson

“Now art should never try to be popular.
The public should try to make itself artistic.”
—Oscar Wilde, “The Soul of Man under Socialism” (1890)

“If there is anything pleasant in criticism, it is
finding out what we are not meant to find out.”
—Ronald A. Knox, “Studies in the Literature of Sherlock Holmes” (1912)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE

In his "Author's Note" to *Conan Doyle: Portrait of an Artist* (1979), Julian Symons records that he finished writing his book "with more admiration for its subject" than when he began it. That has been my experience in writing my book. Although Symons—winner of both the Edgar and Golden Dagger Award for crime fiction and the author of a history of crime fiction—unapologetically treated Conan Doyle as an artist, recent academic studies of him use epithets such as colonialist, imperialist, racist and sexist far more often than artist. Symons' 'portrait' was written before academic criticism of literature took an abrupt turn to history, race, ethnicity, gender, politics and class, often in conjunction with the claim (most famously by Terry Eagleton) that there is no such thing as literature. After four decades of approaches that look through 'literature' to the cultural or political 'work' it allegedly performs, it may seem naïve and *passé* to consider fiction as an art form (or even as a craft, as the ancient Greeks did) that can be done poorly, competently, or, in rare cases, exceptionally well. When students of what once was literature (without the inverted commas) began to doubt whether there was any there, evaluation of it became equally problematic. How could you evaluate something that you assumed did not exist?

Any attempt to evaluate Conan Doyle's fiction must overcome two obstacles: its status as popular (or genre) fiction and the myth of Sherlock Holmes. The fact that Conan Doyle is almost universally regarded as a popular writer has meant that his fiction, like most popular fiction, has been studied not as literature but as a manifestation of popular culture. "Much of the academic interest in genre fiction," James Harrold observes, "is not focused on the question of what makes particular works good or bad, but on what such works can show us about the societies in which they were created and consumed" (Harold). As an example, Harold points to Stephen Knight's study of the "social function and meaning" of crime fiction, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (1980), which shows little interest in the genre from an artistic point of view. Knight argues that crime stories "create an idea (or a hope, or a dream) about controlling crime" and in doing so they "realize and validate a whole view of the world, one shared by the people who become the central audience to buy,

read and find comfort in a particular variety of crime fiction" (2). In keeping with his emphasis on the ideological work performed by the form of crime fiction, Knight claims that the "embarrassing success" of the Holmes stories "depended on the hero's power to assuage the anxieties of a respectable, London-based, middle-class audience. The captivated readers had faith in modern systems of scientific and rational enquiry to order an uncertain and troubling world, but feeling that they lacked these powers themselves they, like many audiences before them, need a suitably equipped hero to mediate psychic protection" (67). Two questions occur to me in response to this claim. Do the Holmes stories continue today to "mediate psychic protection" through their hero to respectable, London-based (or New York- or Toronto-, or Tokyo- or Bombay-based) middle-class audiences today? And do they also provide psychic mediation today for working-class people in third-world countries? If not, why do readers continue to read them when most detective stories by Conan Doyle's contemporaries are (deservedly, I would say) forgotten, read only by historians of the genre? Just as music lovers continue to listen to Bach, Beethoven and Brahms today for pleasure, irrespective of any "psychic protection" from modern anxieties their music might "mediate," perhaps the reason the Holmes stories are still read today by far more readers than read them in the early 1890s is that they are good.

The approach that Knight took to the Holmes stories in 1980 foreshadowed the dominant approach to them for the last two or three decades. In his Introduction, Knight states that a "main feature" of his study "is to establish the social ideologies of the works discussed" (3). This has been the dominant approach to the Holmes stories in the wake of new historicism, cultural studies, and postcolonial studies. As Lawrence Frank reminded us a few years ago, "It has become something of an orthodoxy among academic critics to read Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes tales through a Foucauldian prism" (324). Viewing Conan Doyle through a Foucauldian (or a postcolonial or a new historicist) prism, recent criticism has, not surprisingly, found little to admire and much to condemn in his work. Thus, according to Jon Thompson, Conan Doyle's "reworking of an ideology of empiricism in a popular form helped *produce* a comforting and reassuring image of society untroubled by sexual, economic, or social pressures" (75; Thompson's italics). (Apparently, what they don't produce is pleasure.) Ernest Mandel similarly asserts that detective fiction is "soothing, socially integrating literature, despite its concern with crime, violence and murder" (46). According to this view, the Holmes stories are comfort food in print form. Echoing Knight and enlisting the support of Antonio Gramsci, Thompson argues that the image

of late-Victorian society in the Holmes tales "is itself ideological, and ultimately functions to produce consent to the existing socioeconomic order. Antonio Gramsci has argued that the production of consent among those governed in Western democracies is the most crucial element in maintaining and reproducing existing social relations" (75). When one reads the Holmes stories to reveal how they maintain and reproduce the existing social order, one is not reading as a literary critic and consequently not likely to find anything to value in them. What is for me the most conspicuous shortcoming of this approach is that it has not changed Conan Doyle's reputation as a writer. To bring about such a change we need to change the kind of reading we give to his fiction. That will necessitate a shift from cultural to literary criticism, or, to borrow a contrasting set of terms from Mark Edmundson, from giving a literary work a 'reading' to interpreting and evaluating it. To initiate that change is the primary aim of this book.

In his essay "Against Readings" Edmundson makes a case for abandoning the current practice of giving literary texts what he calls 'readings':

> If I could make one wish for the members of my profession—college and university professors of literature—I would wish that for one year, two, three, or five, we give up readings. By a reading, I mean the application of an analytical vocabulary—Marx's, Freud's, Foucault's, Derrida's, or whoever's—to describe and (usually) judge a work of literary art. I wish that we'd declare a moratorium on readings. I wish that we'd give readings a rest. (158)

To perform a reading "means to submit one text to the terms of another; to allow one text to interrogate another—then often to try, sentence, and summarily execute it" (166). For example, a Marxist reading of Blake, says Edmundson, "use[s] Marx as a tool of analysis and judgment. To the degree that Blake anticipates Marx, Blake is prescient and to be praised." However, Blake, "admirable as he may be, needs to be read with skepticism; he requires a corrective, and the name of that corrective is Karl Marx. Just so, the corrective could also be called Jacques Derrida (who would illuminate Blake the logocentrist); Foucault (who would demonstrate Blake's immersion in and implicit endorsement of an imprisoning society); Kristeva (who would be attuned to Blake's imperfections on the score of gender politics); and so on down the line" (166). Edmundson's riposte to 'readings' is right on target: "There are in fact any number of Marxist readings of Blake out there; I know of no Blakean readings of Marx. But the student who has heard the teacher unfold a Marxist reading of a work

probably doesn't get to study Marx per se. He never gets to have a potential moment of revelation reading *The Manifesto* or *The Grundrisse*. Marx too disappears from the scene, becoming part of a technological apparatus for processing other works" (166-67). According to Edmundson, "Criticism is getting into skeptical dialogue with the text. Mounting a conventional academic reading—applying an alternative set of terms—means closing off the dialogue [between text and reader] before it has a chance to begin" (170). This is what has happened to Conan Doyle.

The major academic commentaries on Conan Doyle for the last two or three decades have not attempted a dialogue with his works. They have been 'readings.' They tie him to a chair, shine a light—Foucauldian, postcolonialist, new historicist, orientalist—on him and beat a confession out of him. That he has been spared execution is probably owing to the fact that, as an immensely popular writer who reached—and still reaches—a wide audience, he offers a convenient target for exposing whatever is under fire: imperialism, racism, patriarchy, the demonization of foreigners and colonials. In *The Sign of the Four*, according to such a reading, "Holmes is able to domesticate the fear of the Orient as represented by the Indian Mutiny at the same time that he is able to justify English imperialism in India" (Jon Thompson 72). A translation of Conan Doyle into any of the fashionable theorists invariably ends up confirming the Truth according to the chosen theorist, and the reader loses any truth or value or pleasure that Conan Doyle might have to offer. There are any number of Foucauldian readings of Conan Doyle out there; in the course of writing this book I found no Doylean readings of Foucault (or of Marx, or of Derrida). One disappointing outcome of recent 'readings' of Conan Doyle is that they would rarely, if ever, inspire anyone to read the interrogated text for intellectual insight, or moral awareness—or, most importantly, for pleasure.

As an alternative to 'readings,' Edmundson offers interpretation, which, he says, "entails the work, often difficult, often pleasurable, of parsing the complexities of meaning a given text offers. It means being alert to connotation; it means reading for tone; it means being able to make what is implicit in a piece of writing clearly explicit. Interpretation is necessary if we are to decide what vision of the world the text endorses" (169-70). Interpretation for Edmundson is an attempt to give a Dickensian reading of Dickens, or a Blakean reading of Blake (as Northrop Fry did in *Fearful Symmetry* and changed both the way we read Blake and his place in the canon of Romanticism and of English literature). For Edmundson, interpretation is inseparable from careful reading, which includes attention

to complexity, connotation, and tone. This is how I propose to read Conan Doyle's fiction. To propose close reading as a critical methodology today will no doubt strike some readers as comparable to a latter-day disciple of Cardinal Newman trying to revive the Oxford Movement, or a one-nation Tory forlornly proposing to resuscitate the Primrose League. Close reading, however, knows no political allegiances, and I am confident that a close reading of Conan Doyle's fiction will not only reveal its neglected artistry but also expose the errors of current (mis)readings of his works. A close reading of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, for example, will enable us to see it as a critique of Holmesian rationalism from the perspective of *fin-de-siècle* Gothic. A close reading of *The Lost World* will enable us to see it not as an antecedent of Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* but as an anti-imperialist fable in which humans, not dinosaurs, run amok, waging a genocidal war on an anthropoid species that Professor Challenger believes to be the missing link between humans and apes. A close reading of *The Sign of the Four* will reveal it to be a moral fable about obsession, justice and revenge, rather than an imperial romance endorsing British imperialism. A close reading of "The Six Napoleons" and "The Blue Carbuncle" will reveal these stories to be subtle and artful interventions in the debate over the fate of literary fiction in an age of mass consumption of formula fiction. Close reading, in short, has the power to change what we find in Conan Doyle's fiction and what value we place on it.

Close reading will also change the way we view Sherlock Holmes. As well as rescuing Conan Doyle from the sub-literary category of genre fiction, this book also attempts to rescue him from the myth of Sherlock Holmes, which is, through its endless incarnations and avatars in popular media, more familiar than the character who appears in the original Holmes stories—a cultural phenomenon admirably and thoroughly studied by Mattias Bostrom is his recent study *From Holmes to Sherlock: A Study of the Men and Women Who Created an Icon* (2017), which I recommend as an illuminating and fascinating piece of cultural history. At the centre of the myth of Holmes is the iconic image of the man with a magnifying glass, the brilliant detective who uses reason, science, logic and acute observation to solve mysteries that appear to everyone else, especially the amiable and admiring Watson and obtuse and bureaucratic Scotland Yard inspectors, to be unsolvable. This is the supercilious Homes who confidently intones, "Elementary, my dear Watson" in countless stage and film adaptations (though never in the stories). This iconic image is at the centre of countless academic commentaries, most influentially by Catherine Belsey, who says, "The stories are a plea for science . . . . They reflect the widespread optimism characteristic of their period concerning

the comprehensive power of positivist science" (112). No, the *stories* do not reflect the power of positivist science. Holmes does. This is the view Holmes takes of himself, frequently endorsed by Watson, who in the first Holmes tale, *A Study in Scarlet*, proclaims that Holmes has "brought detection as near an exact science as it ever will be brought in the world" (*SiS* 36). A close reading of the stories reveals that all the science in them, as opposed to scientific posturing, can be written on both sides of one of Holmes's index cards. Through a bifurcated narrative structure that combines a solvable puzzle with an insoluble mystery, the best Holmes stories critique Holmes's science of deduction and analysis.

A disclaimer is perhaps in order. Given its purpose, this book does not attempt to cover all of Conan Doyle's fiction. It is not a survey, nor a study of the man and his works. I confine myself to his best works, those that reveal his art of fiction. I pay scant attention to his fascinating life. Conan Doyle has attracted no shortage of biographies. I highly recommend Andrew Lycett's *Conan Doyle: The Man Who Created Sherlock Holmes* (2007), to which I am much indebted for facts surrounding the composition and publication of his works. As my title announces, I have written a book of literary criticism, unfashionable as that may be today. My focus is on interpreting (or, more accurately, reinterpreting) his fiction and, arising from that, revealing its art and craftsmanship, which have been little recognized and even less appreciated.

In a 1975 review article in the *New York Review of Books*, Clive James perceptively remarked that Conan Doyle "was the man who made cheap fiction a field for creative work . . . . What he didn't guess before it was too late to change his mind was that the cheapness would last" (119,125). My counter-argument is that if cheapness lasts it's not cheapness but literature. While I do not expect this book miraculously to change the way Conan Doyle is read, I hope that it will stimulate readers, both within and outside the academy, to return to his novels, stories and tales and discover what they have long failed to notice in them. Freed from the ideological overdeterminations that have replaced literary criticism, readers, I hope, will be able to recreate the experience of Herbert Greenbough Smith, editor of the *Strand*, when he joyfully read the first group of Holmes stories that Conan Doyle had sent him: "Here was a new and gifted story-writer; there was no mistaking the ingenuity of plot, the limpid clearness of style, the perfect art of telling a story" (qtd in Christopher Roden xi).

Holmes may be able to solve mysteries with little or no help from others (the Baker Street Irregulars are only rarely recruited into service,

and Watson only occasionally brings along his army service revolver just in case the pair get into a tight spot), but writing a book, though for the most part a solitary labour, cannot be accomplished without accumulating a long list of debts. Although I did not fully appreciate it at the time, the impetus to write this book arose from two widely separated events: Reading "The Adventure of the Speckled Band" in my grade 10 high-school English class, which spurred a lifelong love of the Holmes stories (Thank-you, Mrs Klemovitch!); and, some three decades later, serendipitously discovering Vladimir Nabokov's *Lectures on Literature*, specifically his lecture on *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Rereading that lecture a decade or so later, when I began teaching a course on detective fiction, was a kind of eureka moment in which I suddenly realized that the Holmes stories could be read the same way that Nabokov read Stevenson's shilling shocker (Thank-you, Vladimir!). I wish to thank the Faculty of Arts at the University of Regina for the sabbatical during which this book was begun. I also wish to thank Richard G. Harvey and Aydon Charlton, whose sharp eyes removed many blemishes from the MS (those that remain I am solely responsible for); Professor Nicholas Ruddick, who read early drafts of many chapters and offered helpful suggestions for revision and raised questions that had not occurred to me; the interlibrary-loan staff at the Archer Library, University of Regina for their prompt and courteous service; and, certainly not least, the students in my detective fiction class, who over the years endured early try-outs of some of the interpretations that eventually made it into this book. This book confirms what I have long believed: The best way to learn about an author is to teach him.

Reprint Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge the following journals for granting permission to reprint material that originally appeared in them.

An earlier version of material in Chapter 4 was published in *The Victorian Newsletter* (now *Victorians Journal*), Vol. 107, Spring 2005, pp. 5 – 10. Chapter 5 includes material originally published *The Journal of Popular Culture* (Vol. 33.1, Fall 2008, pp. 39-54).

An earlier version of material in Chapter 7 appeared in the *Journal of Narrative Theory*, Vol. 35.1 (Winter 2005), pp. 60-89; and in *English Literature in Transition, 1880 – 1920*, Vol. 52.1 (2009), pp. 35-48.

List of Abbreviations

The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes	*ASH*
The Hound of the Baskervilles	*HB*
His Last Bow	*HLS*
The Captain of the 'Pole-Star' and Other Tales	*CPS*
The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes	*CSH*
Crime of the Congo	*CC*
The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes	*MSH*
A Life in Letter	*LL*
The Lost World	*LW*
Memoirs and Adventures	*MA*
The Mystery of Cloomber	*MC*
The Return of Sherlock Holmes	*RSH*
The Sign of the Four	*SF*
A Study in Scarlet	*SiS*
Through the Magic Door	*MD*

"The Abbey Grange"	AG
"Black Peter"	BP
"The Blanched Soldier"	BS
"The Blue Carbuncle"	BC
"The Boscombe Valley Mystery"	BVM
"The Captain of the 'Pole-Star'"	CPS
"The Cardboard Box"	CB
"A Case of Identity"	CI
"The Case of Lady Sannox"	CLS
"The Copper Beeches"	CpB
"The Dancing Men"	DM
"The Devil's Foot"	DF
"Five Orange Pips"	FOP
"The 'Gloria Scott'"	GS
"The Greek Interpreter"	GI
"J. Habakuk Jephson's Statement"	JHJS
"The Leather Funnel"	LF
"Lot No. 249"	L249
"The Man from Archangel"	MA

“The Man with the Twisted Lip”	MTL
“The Musgrave Ritual”	MR
“The Noble Bachelor”	NB
“The Ring of Thoth”	RT
“A Scandal in Bohemia”	SB
“The Six Napoleons”	SN
“The Speckled Band”	SB
“The Sussex Vampire”	SV

CHAPTER ONE

THE CONAN DOYLE PROBLEM: POPULAR FICTION, LITERATURE, EVALUATION

> "There must be something wrong in me or I would not be so popular."
> —R. L Stevenson, letter to Edmund Gosse (1886)

> "Many people do not realize that there is such a thing as a good detective story; it is to them like speaking of a good devil."
> —G. K. Chesterton (1901)

> "Popular literature itself is obviously still in the doghouse."
> —Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture* (1976)

The status of Arthur Conan Doyle in the canon of English fiction is epitomized by an anecdote recounted by Daniel Stashower in the Preface to *Teller of Tales: The Life of Conan Doyle*. Stashower, an American, was examining a first edition of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* in the showroom of an up-scale London dealer in rare books. When it was obvious to the clerk that Stashower could not afford to add a rare and hence expensive first edition of Conan Doyle's most famous novel to his collection, she informed him that "there might be some other Conan Doyle material in the back room." She left, and Stashower overheard her tell the manager that there was a customer out front who was interested in Conan Doyle. "Oh, God," exclaimed the manager. "It must be an American." Stashower speculates that there are probably only two reasons why an interest in Conan Doyle should reveal one's suspect American origins to a British rare-book dealer: Either only a wealthy American could afford the prices he was asking, or, more likely, "only an American, with an American's suspect tastes in literature would be interested in a second-rater like Conan Doyle" (Stashower xi-xii). In December 2017, I found on the Internet a signed first edition of *The Hound* selling for $US 12,500.00. I could pick up an unsigned 3-volume first edition of Henry James's *The Princess Casamassima* for $US 7,500.00. Which, I wonder, is the better novel and which the better investment?

I know from my own suspect interest in Conan Doyle over the last two decades what Stashower felt like in that exclusive London bookshop, which, with the exception of the high-priced *Hound*, kept the Conan Doyle "material" in the back room. It's unlikely the dealer kept Jane Austen "material," discreetly out of sight in the back room. High-end rare-book dealers, it seems, share the same patrician tastes as elitist literary critics, for Conan Doyle has also been relegated to the "back room" of British literature, and only those, like me, with "suspect tastes" would be so middle-brow as to claim that he deserves slightly better literary company than Edgar Rice Burroughs, Bram Stoker and Ouida. Conan Doyle continues to occupy the wrong side of the great divide between literary and popular fiction. "Arthur Conan Doyle," Jacqueline Jaffe pointed out in 1987, "is one of the few remaining Victorian writers who has not been 'rediscovered' by contemporary critics" (127). Not much has changed in the last thirty years. What little attention he has recently received has come as a result of the turn from literary criticism to history and cultural studies, proponents of the latter having found the Holmes stories useful for exposing imperialism, racism and colonialism in Victorian authors, as well as for documenting the emergence of criminology as a science in the late nineteenth century. Despite this specialized interest, Joseph McLaughlin's observation in *Writing the Urban Jungle: Reading Empire in London from Doyle to Eliot* (2000) remains true: "in academic discourse, the Holmes tales have been . . . ignored because they lack the stylistic complexity, moral ambiguity, and intricate psychology that are the commonplaces of modernism" (27). *Heart of Darkness*'s complexity, moral ambiguity and intricate psychology guarantee its permanent canonicity, whatever doubts may be raised about its alleged racism or complicity with colonialism. It's debatable what contributes more to keeping Conan Doyle out of the canon—his politics or his popularity.

His continuing popular reputation rests almost entirely on the Holmes stories and *The Lost World*, his only works still widely read today (and mined for movie and TV scripts). The anomaly of the Holmes stories is that at the same time they have enjoyed the enduring and deserved admiration of generations of readers, they have suffered the enduring but undeserved neglect of literary critics. "Conan Doyle was not able to legitimize detective fiction as 'serious,'" Jon Thompson (1993) has observed; "he could give it new popularity, but he could not give it full literary respectability" (75). The reason he could not do so is that the detective story has, as my epigraph from Frye shows, continued to be relegated to the status of a sub-literary genre. The title of Stashower's biography, *Teller of Tales*, confirms his subject's status as a popular story

teller, and thus excluded from Henry James's House of Fiction. The works of a story-teller (those of William Somerset Maugham, for example) do not really qualify as literature, however useful they may prove as historical documents.

Therein lies what I am calling the Conan Doyle problem. It is perfectly illustrated by the opening sentence of Darryl Jones's Introduction to his anthology of Conan Doyle's Gothic tales: "Arthur Conan Doyle is the greatest genre writer Britain has ever produced" (ix). Within the dominant paradigm of literary studies one cannot be both a writer of genre fiction and a great (*i.e.*, canonical) writer. To call someone a great genre writer is to damn him with faint praise. That the academy, despite the Theory revolution of recent decades, continues to draw a firm line between literary and popular (genre) fiction was made forcefully by Richard Bradford in a recent essay in *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, confirming Northrop Frye's 1976 pronouncement that popular fiction is still in the doghouse. Bradford nicely exposes the paradoxical place of crime fiction within the academy:

> So why haven't academics revised their classification of crime writing as a separate subgenre [of fiction] and accorded the likes of [Patricia] Highsmith a status similar to Dostoevsky? The answer exposes a paradox that informs all aspects of literary studies. On the one hand, literary theory has crushed attempts to "define" literature as an art form and, as a consequence, abolished evaluation as an element of critical analysis. Academics now feel that it is intellectually naive and ideologically unsound to grade writers and books in terms of their intrinsic qualities. But at the same time, the effect of 'theory' on the old-fashioned canon, the 'Greats' around which [university course] modules are organised, has been negligible. Any lecturer who proposes that Conan Doyle should enjoy equal status with Henry James and Thomas Hardy on a core module covering 19th-century fiction would be treated as suspect, irrespective of the innovative image promoted by their departments. (Bradford, "The Criminal Neglect of Detective Fiction")

Of course, crime fiction (along with other types of genre fiction) may occasionally be taught in the academy, but it is not taught in the same way as canonical fiction is. A survey course on the Victorian novel is unlikely to include *A Study in Scarlet* (or even Collins' *The Moonstone*). If Conan Doyle appears at all, he is much more likely to appear in the syllabus of a course on popular culture, or, as Bradford acknowledges, "in specialised, elective modules that reflect its ghettoised status on separate shelves in bookshops and in the segregated columns of review pages. We write about it similarly, yet rarely question its status as not quite acceptable among the

'literary' aristocracy" (Bradford, "Criminal Neglect"). In a confirmatory response to Bradford's article, the managing editor of *Clues*, the only American academic journal devoted to mystery, detective, and crime fiction, remarked that in academia "mystery fiction often is regarded, in my phrase, as 'the Rodney Dangerfield of literature' (i.e., getting no respect)."

This attitude to genre fiction is to a large extent attributable to the cultural divide between high and popular culture that emerged in the early twentieth century and coincided with the rise of the avant-garde and the triumph of Modernism, a divide explored by Andreas Huyssen in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (1986). "Ever since the failure of the 1848 revolution," Huyssen argues, the culture of modernity has been characterized by the contentious relationship between high art and mass culture." Modernism fears what Huyssen calls "anxiety of contamination":

> Ever since the mid-19th century, the culture of modernity has been characterized by a volatile relationship between high art and mass culture. Indeed, the emergence of early modernism in writers such as Flaubert and Baudelaire cannot be adequately understood on the basis of an assumed logic of "high" literary evolution alone. Modernism constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture. (vii)

He contends that "[t]his opposition—usually described in terms of modernism vs. mass culture or avantgarde vs. culture industry—has proven to be amazingly resilient" and he attributes this resilience to a mutual interdependence:

> . . . their much-heralded mutual exclusiveness is a sign of their secret interdependence. Seen in this light, mass culture indeed seems to be the repressed other of modernism, the family ghost rumbling in the cellar. Modernism, on the other hand, often chided by the left as the elitist, arrogant and mystifying master-code of bourgeois culture while demonized by the right as the Agent Orange of natural social cohesion, is the strawman desperately needed by the system to provide an aura of popular legitimation for the blessings of the culture industry. (16-17)

While Conan Doyle was aware of an expanding culture of mass consumption (see Chapter 5), at the same time the major achievements of his literary career antedate this cultural divide. At the end of the nineteenth century, as Nicholas Daly has convincingly shown, writers such as Conan Doyle did

not see themselves as camped on the undesirable side of an unbridgeable gulf:

> For what we see now as a chasm between two distinct literary cultures, the great divide, was scarcely more than a crack in 1899. In many respects this was still a homogeneous literary culture. We can scarcely imagine Virginia Woolf and Edgar Wallace taking up the cudgels over the proper vocation of the novel twenty years later, but in the late nineteenth century it was possible for a champion of realism like Henry James and a defender of romance like R. L. Stevenson to do just that. (4)

Moreover, it was not T. S. Eliot and his fellow modernists who created the great divide between the literary and the popular but the critics, most notably Edmund Wilson who wanted to canonize them and who wrote the most famous attack on detective fiction. Eliot, in fact, was a founding member of a Holmes fan club, purloined several lines from "The Musgrave Ritual" to include in *Murder in the Cathedral*, and even reviewed detective fiction in his high-brow journal *The Criterion*. These reviews reveal Eliot's attempt to formulate a 'poetics' of the genre, with Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* (popularly serialized in Dickens' *All the Year Round* in 1868) as a model, claiming that Collins, not Poe, invented the form.[1] (Eliot was not a fan of Poe.)

Yet even Eliot could not save Conan Doyle from the middle-brow reputation that had already descended on him, a reputation that was abetted by the fact that the Holmes short stories appeared in that monument to middle- and lower-middle-class taste, *The Strand Magazine*, in which formula fiction competed with fawning portraits of members of the royal family and interviews with famous actresses for the attention of its largely male readership. That great advocate of literary Modernism, Edmund Wilson, couldn't care less who killed Roger Ackroyd and claimed that later examples of the detective story merely "reproduced . . . the old Sherlock Holmes formula" ("Why Do People Read Detective Stories?" 232). (As I will show in the next chapter, this claim of descent from Conan Doyle's "formula" is misleading; the detective stories that Wilson—whose 1931 book *Axel's Castle* was one of the first defences of literary Modernism—condescendingly dismissed are structurally very different from the Holmes stories.)

The most common strategy for defending popular fiction from the modernist relegation of it to the regions of the non-literary or sub-literary has been to try to question this binary opposition. This is what Jon Thompson, for example, does in *Fiction, Crime, and Empire: Clues to*

Modernity and Postmodernism (1993), in which he argues that, since there is no acceptable way to define literature, the binary opposition literary/non-literary necessarily collapses:

> There is no universally acceptable, coherent set of criteria that allow readers to make [the literature/non-literature] distinction. There is, as Terry Eagleton [in *Literary Theory: An Introduction*] puts it, no ontological basis for deciding what literature is and what it is not; there are only functional reasons for doing so. Using a term like "literature" does not describe the "fixed being" of a complex range of writing practices so much as it signifies in a casual and informal way a kind of writing that someone values for one reason or another . . ." (31)

I agree that there is no ontological basis for defining literature; nevertheless, literary critics and literary historians do not need such a definition to pursue their goals. A working definition of literature may not meet the rigors of analytical philosophy, but it is certainly not casual; it is institutionally sanctioned and demonstrably useful to critics. The only required definition is a flexible pragmatic one. One does not need a water-tight definition of the Gothic novel in order to write a study of the genre. Many illuminating books have been written on tragedy without their authors sharing a single definition of the term. If one had to wait until such definitions are arrived at, one would never write the book. Nor does one need a universally acceptably definition of the novel in order to decide whether one novel is better than another. The judgment whether Stephen King (pleasurable as he is for some to read) is as good as novelist as Dostoevsky does not depend on our having a universally acceptable definition of the novel—and certainly not of literature. It depends on acquiring the knowledge, experience, taste, powers of analysis and discernment that enable one to make comparative judgments of value. Abandoning the belief that such judgments can, within margins of error, be made correctly most of the time will not rescue Conan Doyle from the category of the sub-literary. Thompson, for all his learning and impressive knowledge of Raymond Williams, Tony Bennett and Foucault, does not succeed in changing the current valuation of Conan Doyle's fiction. His critical methodology leaves Conan Doyle in the same position he was in before Thompson's commentary on him. His final judgment of his fiction could not possibly provide the basis for a revaluation:

> Conan Doyle's fiction fails because it . . . is constrained by his narrow ideological outlook. Ultimately these limitations on ways of seeing translate into severe formal constraints. . . . Conan Doyle's work stands as one of the most extreme examples of the narrowed social vision of English

> writers in the late-Victorian period, a narrowness that . . . is attributable to the increasing cultural divide between an immensely strong and sophisticated bourgeois order and working-class culture. (74)

If this is true, how could there be any justification for wasting one's time reading such a historical relic today? Thompson's negative judgment of the value of Conan Doyle's fiction is pretty much guaranteed by the critical approach he adopts. To find the value in Conan Doyle that I believe is there, we must turn to a different way of reading him.

The primary methodology underpinning my revaluation and reinterpretation of Conan Doyle's fiction is polemically illustrated, though not theoretically elaborated, by Vladimir Nabokov's lecture on Robert Louis Stevenson's 1886 'shilling shocker' *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (published the year before Conan Doyle's first Holmes story, *A Study in Scarlet*). Before he became famous and wealthy with the publication of *Lolita* in 1955 (the film version, directed by Stanley Kubrick, appeared in 1962), Nabokov earned his living lecturing on the Russian and European novel, first at Wellesley College (from 1941 to 1948), and then at Cornell University, where he was Associate Professor of Slavic Literature. His syllabus included, eccentrically for the time, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. (In an irony that would not be lost on Nabokov, I suspect that even today—especially today—many English instructors in America would be reluctant to teach *Lolita*, particularly those without tenure.) Anticipating that his students might be a little perplexed by the professor's unorthodox choice, Nabokov prefaced his lecture with a stern and somewhat hyperbolical exordium, imploring his students to obliterate from their Eisenhower-era minds any preconceptions that they might have about the work, or any film versions of it they may have seen:

> First of all, if you have the Pocket Books edition I have, you will veil the monstrous, abominable, atrocious, criminal, foul, vile, youth-depraving jacket—or better say straitjacket. You will ignore the fact that ham actors under the direction of pork packers have acted in a parody of the book, which parody was then photographed on a film and showed in places called theatres; it seems to me that to call a movie house a theatre is the same as to call an undertaker a mortician.
>
> And now comes my main injunction. Please completely forget, disremember, obliterate, unlearn, consign to oblivion any notion you may have that "Jekyll and Hyde" is some kind of mystery story, a detective story, or movie. It is of course true that Stevenson's short novel, written in 1885, is one of the ancestors of the modern mystery story. But today's mystery story is the very negation of style, being at best, conventional literature. Frankly, I am not one of those college professors who coyly

> boasts of enjoying detective stories—they are too badly written for my taste and bore me to tears. Whereas Stevenson's story—God bless his pure soul—is lame as a detective story. It has, however, its own special enchantment if we regard it as a phenomenon of style. (179-80)

Following Nabokov's critical precedent, I propose an experiment in criticism: that, provisionally, while reading this book, you cease reading Conan Doyle's stories as genre or popular fiction and instead read them the same way that Nabokov read *Jekyll and Hyde*, Flaubert and Jane Austen, and then evaluate the results.

Readers, Nabokov knew only too well, tend to come to what they take to be genre fiction with very different expectations from those they bring to what they take to be literary fiction. "We come to every book," says Thomas Roberts in *An Aesthetic of Junk Fiction*, "trailing clouds of expectation: some part of our mind has already stamped a label on any new book before we have started reading the first page" (69). This is true not only of a new book, but also of ones that we, like Nabokov's students, are already familiar with and might even have read before. This is true of most readers of Conan Doyle's fiction. These expectations are often created and confirmed by the alluring covers of paperback editions. The cover of the Pocket Books edition of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, for example, would no doubt have provoked the same intense reaction that Nabokov had to the ghastly cover of *Jekyll and Hyde*. It shows a savage hound leaping at Sir Henry Baskerville, with Holmes (or perhaps Watson) in the background. The Gothic cover of The Oxford Children's Classics edition depicts the hound atop a tor on the moor, howling at a full moon. Few paperback editions of it fail to depict a sinister and ferocious hound. Perhaps the most graphically sensational cover is that of the Penguin Classics edition (2001), edited by Christopher Frayling. It is, I acknowledge, hard for readers of 'serious' fiction to take seriously novels marketed with such covers. There was a time in my academic career when I did not. (For an extensive sample of covers of Holmes stories, visit https://www.pinterest.ca/zem3264/sherlock-book-covers/. I invite readers to compare these images with those on paperback editions of such canonical literary novels as *Pride and Prejudice*, *Middlemarch*, the *Mayor of Casterbridge*, or any Henry James novel, though I concede covers of editions of Austen novels capitalizing on movie adaptations, especially the BBC version of *Pride and Prejudice* with Colin Firth as Darcy, may be a little more risqué.)

A major obstacle to a revaluation of Conan Doyle, then, is the assumptions about genre or popular fiction readers, especially academically trained readers, bring to them. Just how determining are the assumptions and preconceptions that readers bring to novels, both popular and literary, is the subject of Peter Rabinowitz's illuminating study *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation* (1987). His claim, convincingly argued, is that "readers' prior knowledge of conventions of reading shape their experience and evaluations of the narratives they confront" (3). The premise on which he bases his argument is that

> Readers need to stand somewhere before they pick up a book, and the nature of that 'somewhere' . . . significantly influences the ways in which they interpret (and consequently evaluate) texts. Thus, while I will often need . . . to describe what readers do both while they read and after they finish reading, my fundamental concern will be with the ways in which those activities are already limited by decisions made before the book is even begun. (2)

A major decision readers make is identifying the genre they assume a work conforms to, particularly the distinction between literary and popular genres. As Rabinowitz points out,

> . . . what we attend to in a text is also influenced by the other works in our minds against which we read it. Particular details stand out as surprising, significant, climactic, or strange in part because they are seen in the context of a particular textual grid—a particular set of other works of art. And we tend to hold popular and elite fiction up against different backgrounds. Thus, for instance, when Leon Howard asserts that "few detective novels invite comparison with specific works of 'serious' fiction," he is not so much stating a "fact" about the properties of detective stories as making a claim about the "proper" intertextual grid on which to map them. (186-87)

To read a Holmes story as a detective story or *The Lost World* as an adventure story is not so much to find particular properties in them as to make a claim about the "intertextual grid" against which to read them. Reading against a different intertextual grid will enable us to interpret and evaluate them differently. Reading them as literary fiction will, I argue, bring into focus a set of properties we did not expect to find.

Conan Doyle's critics, no matter what their approach—new historicist, cultural materialist, postcolonial, gender studies—are all predisposed to classify his works as genre or popular fiction, and therefore they are also predisposed to find in them only what we expect to find in a work of that

kind, and to ignore whatever is not part of the contextual effect we anticipate. Today we read the Holmes stories in the context of an "intertextual grid," more than a century in the making, consisting of all those detective stories that came *after* them, just as today we are predisposed to read Petrarch's sonnets backwards through the intertextual grid of the thousands, probably tens of thousands, of sonnets written after, and in some instances in response to, his. This reading practice can lead to thoughtful and sometimes provocative readings of earlier texts, but reading a text exclusively as an example of a genre, the detective story, whose conventions were shaped and largely defined *after* that text's appearance can lead to distorted interpretation and skewed judgments of it. Take, for example, Jon Thompson's reading of *The Sign of the Four*. Thompson takes for granted that it is a work of popular fiction, or, more precisely, a combination of several popular genres: "If it is true, as Mikhail Bakhtin suggests, that every new genre is a synthesis of older ones, then Conan Doyle's detective fiction may be defined as a complex reworking of three genres: the genre of sensation . . . the detective genre, and the adventure genre" (64). But for Thompson this blending of genres is not evidence of the novel's artistic value, as might be the case if a canonical writer combined pre-existing genres, as Browning does to create the dramatic lyric, or Wordsworth does to create the lyrical ballad. For Thompson, Conan Doyle's recourse to popular genres is closely related to his (conservative) politics. After pointing out that *The Sign of the Four* is "a hybrid of the adventure novel, sensational literature, and the ratiocinative detective formula refined by Poe" (4), Thompson then proceeds to perform a new historicist reading, influenced by Edward Said's *Orientalism*, in order to uncover the novel's "orientalist subtext" (Thompson 73), in support of the view that it is complicit in English imperialism: "By adopting conventions from adventure fiction, Conan Doyle is able to create a form that naturalizes and hence supports English domination over India" (72). Thompson's preconception about the adventure story is that, *as a popular genre*, it is inherently conducive to naturalizing English imperialism: this is taken to be the natural political work that adventure and detective stories perform.

Moreover, if the novel does covertly support English imperialism, revealing such a fact would not convince most readers of its *literary* value; indeed, it would be odd to argue that *The Sign of the Four* "supports English domination over India" and is for that reason a good novel. (Of course, Thompson is not concerned with its value, only with exposing the dirty work it covertly performs.) Few critics, however, would argue that *Heart of Darkness* is both racist (or imperialist) and artistically successful;

those who want to affirm its artistic merit do so by refuting (or simply ignoring) the charge of racism. And those who attack it for its alleged racism single it out largely because it is in the canon of literary fiction. If it were an obscure work that was not widely valued and taught, it would never have drawn their fire. So exposing the "orientalist subtext" of *The Sign of the Four* is not likely to enhance its literary value, especially if it is already considered an example of a sub-literary form.

The problem presented by preconceptions about genre fiction is conveniently illustrated by Poe's Gothic tales. In his reassessment of Edgar Allan Poe*, Poe's Fiction: Romantic Irony in the Gothic Tales* (1973), G. R. Thompson calls attention to the inability of Poe's critics "to transcend their own preconceptions of genre":

> Although few would dispute the claim that *Moby-Dick* (1851) is the masterwork of the Gothic tradition in America, it is clearly Edgar Allan Poe, rather than Melville or Hawthorne, who is the acknowledged master of American Gothic fiction. But whereas *Moby-Dick* has won its place in the canon of the classic American works supposedly by transcending its surface genre of the Gothic, no work of Poe has fully won a place in the lists of classic American writers supposedly because Poe was unable to transcend the Gothic. Thus it is by a curious irony of literary history that Poe's intricate manipulation of the genre has resulted in the critical judgment that he was "merely" a Gothic artist: the art of the carney fun house: cheap, obvious, tawdry. And thus Poe's highly complex use of a Romantic genre has become simplified by reductive critics unable to transcend their own preconceptions of genre. (3)

The same point can be made about readers' and especially critics' preconceptions about the genre(s) of Conan Doyle's fiction. The inability of critics, when discussing his fiction, to free them themselves from the straightjacket (to borrow Nabokov's metaphor) imposed by such popular genres as the Gothic tale, the detective story and the adventure romance (such as *The Lost World*) remains a major barrier to recognizing Conan Doyle's intricate manipulations of popular genres.

Recent Trends in Conan Doyle Criticism

> "It has become something of an orthodoxy among academic critics to read Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes tales through a Foucauldian prism."
> —Lawrence Frank

Frank's remark is something of an understatement.[2] (In an early draft of this section the title was The Great Foucauldian Mire.) The majority of those who, like Thompson, have written about Conan Doyle in the last two or three decades have been new historicists, cultural historians, or postcolonialists interested in exploring and—perhaps even more—in exposing Conan Doyle's sympathy with British imperialism in the late nineteenth century, or in documenting the relation of the Holmes stories to the emergence of the various discourses of criminology as a science in the 1890s, or, like Joseph Kestner, in demonstrating how the stories participate in what Regenia Gagnier calls "a crisis in the 1890s of the male on all levels—economic, political, social, psychological, as producer, as power, as role, as lover" (Gagnier 98; qtd in Kestner 5).[3] None of these approaches *evaluate* the fiction, or even think the question of its value ever needs to be raised. Kestner's book *Sherlock's Men: Masculinity, Conan Doyle, and Cultural History* (1997) is a representative example of the dominant trend of recent Conan Doyle criticism. (I'll discuss Thompson's anti-imperialist reading of Conan Doyle in his *Fiction, Crime, and Empire* in my analysis of *The Sign of the Four* in Chapter 8.) In his opening chapter, "Theorizing Holmes/Theorizing Masculinity," Kestner calls attention to the striking fact that Robert Baden-Powell's *Scouting for Boys* (1908) recommends that scoutmasters use the Holmes stories, which at the time were enormously popular with boys, in order to inculcate in English youth "qualities which were radically gendered as masculine in Victorian culture: observation, rationalism, factuality, logic, comradeship, daring and pluck" (2). Kestner concludes his introductory chapter with a rather bold generalization: "With *A Study in Scarlet* [the first Homes story, published in 1887], Conan Doyle was to effect the construction of a model of manliness as well as to investigate the process of constructing masculinity over a period of four decades. Doyle's 'masculine novel' was to have vast repercussions" (39). It's the repercussions, not the novels, that primarily interest Kestner.

As the sub-title, *Masculinity, Conan Doyle, and Cultural History*, signals, Kestner sees his book, and invites readers to see it, as a contribution to cultural history rather than to literary criticism. "A *cultural historian* must inquire about the circumstances in society which would prompt a writer like Robert Baden-Powell to advise that young men read Sherlock Holmes to learn about manliness" (Kestner 5). Kestner leaves unanswered the question of what a *literary critic* must inquire about. (As a literary critic, I am happy to leave Baden-Powell and his ilk to the cultural historians.) My reservation about such approaches, I must emphasize, is not that "constructing masculinity" is not a topic worth investigating—it