



What is Holmes saying about life?

A. Holmes says that real life is stranger than fiction. He is determined to persuade Watson of this opinion by continually exposing him to the unusual events of their cases.

Introducing the Story: Historical Background

When introducing the story, review what students have learned so far about the characters of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, the nature of their relationship, and the methods of inference that have made Holmes famous. Remind students that this story, like all Sherlock Holmes mysteries, takes place in Victorian England, a period that was characterized by upheaval and insecurity, largely due to the Industrial Revolution that had begun in the late 18th century. By the time this story was written, thousands of poor people had been driven to the cities to seek employment and food. Tenements and slums had sprung up all over major cities like London, and horrible living conditions, child labor, starvation, disease, and violence were rampant.

On the other hand, not a stone's throw away, in beautiful mansions with staffs of servants, lived the members of the English upper classes: the nobility, the aristocracy, and the gentry — the latter had neither great wealth nor position but were involved in professions or socially accepted forms of commerce. These fortunate British men and women were completely segregated from their less fortunate brethren; tradespeople used separate entrances when delivering their wares, servants dined and slept in different parts of the house, and in general, the rich and idle had no opportunity to encounter the wretched segment of the population. In addition, most women in Victorian society were not allowed even to read newspapers or visit hospitals to do charity work, for fear that they might be exposed to a side of life that was not befitting their eyes. Ironically, because of the emphasis on one's social position and the radical contrast between rich and poor, upper and lower classes, even criminals like John Clay and Dr. Roylott would cling to their aristocratic identities, thereby disassociating themselves from the more common folk.

What is Holmes saying about life?

The Red-Headed League

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

FOCUS: INFERENCE

Grammar Note: Watson's use of the past participle (*had called*) with the verb indicates that he is recounting a story that had already happened in the past; he is not telling it as it happens.

I had called upon my friend, Mr. Sherlock Holmes, one day in the autumn of last year and found him in deep conversation with a very stout,* *florid*-faced, elderly gentleman with fiery red hair. With an apology for my intrusion, I was about to withdraw when Holmes pulled me abruptly into the room and closed the door behind me.

"You could not possibly have come at a better time, my dear Watson," he said cordially.

"I was afraid that you were engaged."

"So I am. Very much so."

"Then I can wait in the next room."

"Not at all. This gentleman, Mr. Wilson, has been my partner and helper in many of my most successful cases, and I have no doubt that he will be of the utmost use to me in yours also."

The stout gentleman half rose from his chair and gave a bob* of greeting, with a quick little questioning glance

from his small, fat-encircled eyes.

"Try the *settee*," said Holmes, relapsing* into his armchair and putting his fingertips together, as was his custom when in judicial moods. "I know, my dear Watson, that you share my love of all that is bizarre and outside the conventions and humdrum* routine of everyday life. You have shown your *relish* for it by the enthusiasm which has prompted you to chronicle,* and, if you will excuse my saying so, somewhat to *embellish* so many of my own little adventures."

"Your cases have indeed been of the greatest interest to me," I observed.

"You will remember that I remarked the other day, just before we went into the very simple problem presented by Miss Mary Sutherland, that for strange effects and extraordinary combinations we must go to life itself, which is always far more daring than any effort of the imagination."

HELPFUL DEFINITIONS

stout — fat; bulky; thickset.

bob — a quick, jerky movement of the head or body.

relapsing — moving back into.

humdrum — monotonous; dull.

chronicle — record events in the order of time.

1 Point of View: Remind students that many of Sherlock Holmes' stories are told by Dr. Watson, his friend, assistant, sidekick, and foil. (See the Teacher's Guide to "The Adventure of the Speckled Band" for the character of Dr. Watson. Holmes alludes to Watson's recording of their adventures in paragraph 8.)

"A proposition which I took the liberty of doubting."

"You did, Doctor, but nonetheless you must come round to my view, for otherwise I shall keep on piling fact upon fact on you until your reason breaks down under them and acknowledges me to be right. Now, Mr. Jabez Wilson here has been good enough to call upon me this morning, and to begin a narrative which promises to be one of the most singular which I have listened to for some time. You have heard me remark that the strangest and most unique things are very often connected not with the larger but with the smaller crimes, and occasionally, indeed, where there is room for doubt whether any positive crime has been committed. As far as I have heard, it is impossible for me to say whether the present case is an instance of crime or not, but the course of events is certainly among the most singular that I have ever listened to. Perhaps, Mr. Wilson, you would have the great kindness to *recommence* your narrative. I ask you not merely because my friend Dr. Watson has not heard the opening part, but also because the peculiar nature of the story makes me anxious to have every possible detail from your lips. As a rule, when I have heard some slight indication of the course of events, I am able to guide myself by the thousands of other similar cases which occur to my memory. In the present instance I am forced to admit that the facts are, to the best of my belief, unique."

The *portly* client puffed out his chest with an appearance of some little pride and pulled a dirty and wrinkled newspaper from the inside pocket of his greatcoat. As

he glanced down the advertisement column, with his head thrust forward and the paper flattened out upon his knee, I took a good look at the man and endeavoured, after the fashion of my companion, to read the indications which might be presented by his dress or appearance.

I did not gain very much, however, by my inspection. Our visitor bore every mark of being an average commonplace British tradesman, obese, *pompous*, and slow. He wore rather baggy gray shepherd's check trousers, a not over-clean black frock-coat,* unbuttoned in the front, and a drab waistcoat* with a heavy brassy Albert chain, and a square pierced bit of metal dangling down as an ornament. A frayed top-hat and a faded brown overcoat with a wrinkled velvet collar lay upon a chair beside him. Altogether, look as I would, there was nothing remarkable about the man save his blazing red head, and the expression of extreme *chagrin* and discontent upon his features.

Sherlock Holmes's quick eye took in my occupation, and he shook his head with a smile as he noticed my questioning glances. "Beyond the obvious facts that he has at some time done manual labour, that he takes snuff,* that he has been in China, and that he has done a considerable amount of writing lately, I can deduce nothing else."

Mr. Jabez Wilson started up in his chair, with his forefinger upon the paper, but his eyes upon my companion.

"How, in the name of good-fortune, did you know all that, Mr. Holmes?" he asked. "How did you know, for example, that I did manual labour? It's true, for I began as a ship's carpenter."

HELPFUL DEFINITIONS

frock-coat — an outer garment worn by men.

waistcoat — vest.

snuff — finely ground tobacco that is sniffed.

2 Understanding irony: Have students catch the irony of Holmes' statement: In a glance he has deduced obscure facts about Wilson. "I can deduce nothing else" is meant to emphasize just how much he has deduced.



In what ways were Watson's and Holmes' inferences about Wilson different?

A. Watson's deductions were superficial and limited. Holmes' broad scope of knowledge and well-honed powers of observation allow him to reach more profound conclusions.

Where does fiction come in?

Writers are generally sensitive, worldly people who strive to reveal the good and bad of society, as realistically as possible. While satirists deliberately expose the hypocrisies and contradictions in society and hold them up to ridicule, humorists use comedy to gently poke fun at and highlight the quirks and eccentricities of people and culture.

What does this have to do with Sherlock Holmes?

Ordinarily, mystery is a serious genre, exposing a motive for evil that reveals human weakness or fault. The plot of mystery is serious as well: A crime has been committed and someone has to stop the criminal and prevent another crime from being committed. During the Victorian Era, crime was rampant, particularly among the lower classes. This was the era of pickpockets and petty thieves. The dark side of the Victorian Era was extensively written about by Charles Dickens and Robert Louis Stevenson, and although Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories are not nearly as graphic and violent as depictions of other real and fictional crimes, their popularity represents the basic human need for catharsis — to discuss and confront one's fears and worries. Perhaps this is why "The Red-headed League" has been so popular among mystery stories: it is a breath of fresh air and a comic relief of sorts in the genre of mystery that is often frightening and too realistic. With its curious, ironic blend of comedy and crime, the story presents the antics of a dangerous criminal, John Clay, but cushions the seriousness of his crime (and, therefore, of all crime) in humor, exaggeration, and fantastic coincidence, making it more palatable, particularly among the literate upper-class readers who were secretly aware of the inequalities of English life, but refused to consciously acknowledge them.

In what ways were Watson's and Holmes' inferences about Wilson different?

Listening: Notice the use of alliteration and consonance in the repeated "p" sounds of *portly, puffed, appearance, pride, pulled, newspaper, pocket*. Stay alert for Conan Doyle's other frequent use of alliteration, assonance, and consonance.