Imagine that a bank has just been robbed. The police come quickly, finding the front window shattered by a large rock. The police secure the crime scene, and the first thing detectives look for is evidence. This may seem like an obvious train of events, but methods of investigation and forensic science have come a long way. There was a time when crime scenes were not regarded as important, fingerprints were not a form of identification, and there was no such thing as forensic science. Investigators and scientists throughout the 20th century helped create what is known as “detective work.” One of the most influential of those people isn’t a real person. Told through the eyes Dr. John Watson, the stories of Sherlock Holmes have fascinated audiences for over a century. The classic tales of Sherlock Holmes influenced the modern creation of forensic science. Inspiration for Sherlock Holmes came from the circumstances of its creator, Conan Doyle, and his stories shaped detective literature and supported the creation of forensic science.

Doyle was born in 1859 in Edinburgh, Scotland. Before becoming a writer, Conan Doyle chose a career in medicine. Doyle started his own practice in Portsmouth, England. It wasn’t long after that he started pursuing a career in writing. He published the first Sherlock Holmes book, *A Study in Scarlet* in 1887. The book didn’t sell well, and became a “Christmas giveaway” in a magazine. It was years before Doyle published a second novel, *The Sign of Four* (1890), which helped launch Sherlock Holmes as one of the most famous British literary characters (Sutherland).

During the Victorian era, England began to flourish in many areas, such as business and
technology. Resources were being gained from English colonies around the world, and this led to an increase in population. It wasn’t long after the start of this new era that the city of London became overpopulated. This led to poverty, homelessness, and crime. It was because of the sudden increase in criminal activity that the Metropolitan Police were founded in 1829. Thirty years later, over 200 constabulary units had been established throughout England and Wales. The increase in need for police officers led to an increase in need for forensic science because it would help provide foundational evidence for cases. This social change helped inspire the creation of Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes (“Discovering”).

Conan Doyle found inspiration for his characters from people that influenced him throughout his life. He met a man named Dr. Joseph Bell while he was a medical student at Edinburgh University. Dr. Bell could diagnose a patient’s illness by using deductive reasoning, before they told their symptoms to him. Conan Doyle was intrigued by Dr. Bell. It was Dr. Bell’s intellect that became the foundation of Sherlock Holmes’ character. Sherlock Holmes’ friend, Dr. John Watson, was named after a physician colleague that Doyle knew well. Authors such as Edgar Allen Poe, who were known for their crime stories, also had an influence on Doyle’s writing. Stories such as *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* shaped the mysteries and crimes that Doyle created in his stories (Sutherland). The inspiration that came from Doyle’s own life helped him to create advancement in literature.

According to John Sutherland, author of “Sherlock Holmes, the World’s Most Famous Literary Detective,” Doyle introduced three different literary tools that changed how detective fiction was written. The first innovation is something that Sutherland calls the “idiot friend”. This is the idea that an author creates a character that has to have everything explained to them. By having everything explained to the character, the author is also informing the reader through
dialogue. Dr. John Watson is Doyle’s “idiot character,” who must ask continuing questions to Holmes, thus informing the reader of what is going on in the detective’s mind. The second literary innovation is the idea of creating an “arch criminal.” This is a criminal mastermind that goes beyond normal motives and possibilities. This character is too smart for average, everyday police officers and detectives. Professor Moriarty is the arch criminal of Doyle’s stories. In The Final Problem (1893), Holmes talks about Moriarty. He says, “A criminal strain ran in his blood, which instead of being modified, was increased and rendered infinitely more dangerous by his extraordinary mental powers” (Doyle Only the protagonist is able to stop him, in this case Sherlock Holmes. The third innovation that Doyle developed in literature was the simple idea of forensic science. Before Sherlock Holmes, investigators, although growing in population, lacked an understanding of science and deductive reasoning (Sutherland).

Not only did Doyle influence the way that crime fiction was written, he helped create some of the key elements of forensic science today.

Many of the strange and bizarre tactics that Sherlock Holmes uses during his investigations were adopted by real-life detectives and scientists. One of the most important elements is the idea of using deductive reasoning to solve a case. This method gives Holmes an intuitive sense of his surroundings (Sutherland). Conan Doyle best explains deductive reasoning through the dialogue of Sherlock Holmes. At the beginning of A Study in Scarlet (1887), Holmes says to Dr. Watson, “There are few people, however, who, if you told them a result, would be able to evolve from their own inner consciousness what the steps were which led up to that result” (Doyle. The idea of deductive reasoning is that the culprit of a crime can be found by the analysis of the evidence that is given. If a detective can find out how a crime happened, then he is more likely to find the criminal. Today, this same type of thinking is applied to forensic science.
Another method of detective work that helped inspire forensic science was the use of fingerprints in finding a culprit. According to James O’Brien, the Bertillonage system, also known as anthropometry, was the system of identification that was used during the Victorian Age. The system identified a criminal by twelve specific measurements of their body. In contrast, Doyle had Holmes use a method of identification that would have a sound scientific future. Doyle first had Sherlock Holmes examine fingerprints in his second novel A Sign of Four (O’Brien). It wasn’t until almost eleven years later that Scotland Yard, or the Metropolitan Police, started using fingerprints as a means of identification. Before that time, using fingerprints as a method of identification was rare. The study and recovery of footprints, similar to the recovery of fingerprints, was also made popular by Sherlock Holmes. Doyle wrote about Holmes’ study of footprints throughout the majority of his stories, ranging from A Study in Scarlet (1886) to The Adventure of the Lion’s Mane (1926). The Boscombe Valley Mystery, published in 1891, was a case that Holmes solved almost completely from the analysis of footprints. By examining the consistencies of each step, Holmes was able to deduce the gender and the class of the culprit. Sherlock Holmes even “writes” a discourse on how to preserve footprints. Police departments worldwide now use the techniques that Doyle described to preserve the prints of shoes, tires, and other depressions. (Filter).

Analysis of biological evidence, although important, was not the only way that Holmes solved cases. In fact, Sherlock Holmes was one of the first innovators of handwritten and typewriter analysis. In The Sign of Four (1890), Sherlock Holmes evaluates a man’s handwriting. He says, “Men of character always differentiate their long letters, however illegibly they may write” (Doyle). Like he did with the footprints, Holmes could analyze handwriting to determine gender, and even make assumptions about the character and motives of the writer. Today, the analysis of
handwriting helps determine duress, altercations, forgeries, and the use of drugs (Filter). Sherlock Holmes could also study a typewritten message and use it to determine the idiosyncrasies of the typewriter that the message was written with. Doyle was far ahead of his time, especially when considering typewriter analysis. It wasn’t until 1932 that the Federal Bureau of Security started analyzing documents (O’Brien).

One of the most impressive ways that Sherlock Holmes could solve cases was by deciphering different codes and enigmas. In *The Valley of Fear* (1915), Sherlock Holmes must solve an encoded message from his nemesis, Professor Moriarty. Holmes “creates” a study that can solve over 160 different types of ciphers (O’Brien). Some of the deciphering procedures that Conan Doyle describes were used during both World Wars to decipher messages sent by the enemy (Filter). Inspired by the era, life, and circumstances of Doyle, the character of Sherlock Holmes had a surprisingly large impact on our modern society. Doyle’s creativity in his writing changed how detective fiction would be written for decades to come. Conan Doyle described investigative techniques, such as the recovery of fingerprints and footprints, analyzing handwritten and typewritten documents, and deciphering codes. These methods of investigation were far beyond his time, and thus the author helped create forensic science as it is known it today. Holmes’ profession as a “consulting detective” though very odd during the Victorian Era, gave way to advances in both literature and investigation. The impact of Sherlock Holmes can be seen throughout the criminal justice systems of both the United Kingdom and the United States. Whether the case is a bank robbery or a murder, detectives are better off because of the influence of Sherlock Holmes.
Works Cited


