



## Sherlock Holmes

Sophie Lister

### Light and Shadow

Author: **Sophie Lister**

Keywords: **Evil, chaos, order, morality, investigation, truth, logic, reason**

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**Title:** Sherlock

**Writer:** Mark Gatiss, Steven Moffat, Steve Thompson

**Director:** Toby Haynes, Euros Lyn, Paul McGuigan

**Starring:** Benedict Cumberbatch, Martin Freeman, Rupert Graves, Andrew Scott, Mark Gatiss, Una Stubbs

**Broadcaster:** BBC1 (UK)

**First broadcast:** Series 1: 30 August 2010 (UK); Series 2: 1 January 2012 (UK)

**DVD classification:** 12 (UK) Contains moderate sex references, violence and threat.

**Film title:** Sherlock Holmes

**Director:** Guy Ritchie

**Screenplay:** Michael Robert Johnson, Anthony Peckham, Simon Kinberg

**Starring:** Robert Downey Jr., Jude Law, Rachel McAdams, Mark Strong

**Distributor:** Warner Bros.

**Cinema Release Date:** 25 December 2009 (USA); 26 December 2009 (UK)

**Certificate:** PG-13 (USA); 12A (UK) Contains moderate violence

**Film title:** Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows

**Director:** Guy Ritchie

**Screenplay:** Kieran Mulroney, Michele Mulroney

**Starring:** Robert Downey Jr., Jude Law, Noomi Rapace, Jared Harris

**Distributor:** Warner Bros. (USA/UK)

**Cinema Release Date:** 16 December 2011 (USA/UK)

**Certificate:** PG-13 (USA); 12A (UK) Contains moderate violence

[Image]

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[Image]

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The world's most famous detective needs no introduction. He has featured in four novels and 46 short stories, not to mention numerous spin-offs and adaptations. Having been played by 75 different actors in more than 200 films, he holds the record for being the most frequently portrayed fictional character of all time. Recently he has once more invaded our television screens in a new, contemporary incarnation. And in December 2011, he returned to cinemas in yet another action-packed adventure, *Sherlock Holmes: Game of Shadows*, followed almost immediately by a second season of the BBC series *Sherlock*.

[Image]

**Benedict Cumberbatch in *Sherlock*. Image © BBC Pictures.**

Sherlock Holmes, as Arthur Conan Doyle famously learnt when he attempted to kill off his creation in *The Final Problem*, just won't die. He is constantly being reinvented and re-imagined, finding new things to say to audiences down the years. Guy Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) brought us Robert Downey Jr. as a slovenly, antisocial version of the sleuth, ably assisted by Jude Law's debonair Watson. Handy in a fight and always ready with a quick retort, the two used logic to overcome a supernatural menace.

In *Sherlock Holmes: Game of Shadows*, they face a far more daunting challenge. Holmes's nemesis, Professor Moriarty (Jared Harris), having lurked in the background of the previous film, has stepped out of the shadows. With an intellect to match Holmes's own, but entirely devoid of morality, he sits at the centre of a criminal empire. To bring him down will be to strike a significant

blow for the cause of law and order. But in the quest to defeat the villainous mastermind, can Holmes keep his own head above water?

The common thread through Sherlock Holmes's adventures, both in Conan Doyle's stories and in the many incarnations that have followed, is the sense of an ongoing war between order and chaos. As Martin Freeman's Watson was told in the first series of the BBC's *Sherlock* (2010), "*Most people blunder around this city, and all they see are streets and shops and cars. When you walk with Sherlock Holmes, you see the battlefield.*" The battle in question is a secret one, being waged beneath the radar of most ordinary people, but it is real, nonetheless. Sherlock Holmes stands on the front line, attempting to hold back a tide of anarchy. His opponents are the criminals who threaten civilised society, and his weapon of choice is cool-headed logic.

#### [Image]

**Benedict Cumberbatch in *Sherlock*. Image © BBC Pictures.**

In some incarnations, it's made clear that the war between light and shadow is being fought not only on the murky London streets, but within Holmes himself. Richie's films are relatively breezy affairs, in which Holmes is portrayed as rebellious and eccentric, but essentially a good man. The behaviour of Benedict Cumberbatch's 21st century Holmes in *Sherlock*, however, borders on the sociopathic. He is motivated, not by a concern for others, but rather by selfish intellectual curiosity, clearly just a whisker away from being a master criminal himself. The Holmes of Conan Doyle's original stories can be a morally ambiguous figure, too. "*My horror at his crimes*", he confesses, whilst investigating the Moriarty case in *The Final Problem*, "*was lost in my admiration at his skill*".

Holmes's discovery of an intellectual equal in Moriarty raises a frightening challenge to the detective's rationalistic worldview. As far as Holmes is concerned, logic and reason are the highest good, qualities worthy of the utmost admiration. And yet here is a man who prizes them just as he does, but has chosen to use them in the service of evil rather than good. Moriarty is proof that being intellectually enlightened does not necessarily equate with being moral. Neither can Holmes's brand of logic, in and of itself, give

any imperative towards moral behaviour.

In a world without God, reason can have no real relationship with ideas about right and wrong. It's an unnerving proposition for our culture, which so prides itself on prizing logic. However much we allow reason to reign, and however much knowledge we attain, we cannot force anybody to live a good life. And so we cannot have any confidence that knowledge alone will lead to the making of a better world. Why live a life dedicated to fighting villains, when villainy itself pays better? Sherlock Holmes, so adept at solving complex crimes from the smallest clue, would be unable to answer.

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