

Sherlock holmes and cocaine

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Sherlock Holmes has always been a fascinating character fueled and driven by many things. While, reading *A Scandal in Bohemia* I noticed that Sherlock Holmes used cocaine. It was shocking to me as I had not remembered him using the substance in any other stories I had read. It is mentioned by Watson when describing how he has been away from Holmes when he says "... while Holmes, who loathed every form of society with his whole Bohemian soul, remained in our lodgings in Baker Street, buried among his old books, and alternating from week to week between cocaine and ambition, the drowsiness of the drug, and the fierce energy of his own keen nature" ("*Scandal*", 161). I did some research to discover this was not only story where Doyle described Holmes taking the drug. From these stories this one touches on it the least, leading me to believe that it means something to his being. Sherlock Holmes addiction leads him to be a great, but tortured detective through the many advantages and disadvantages the drug offers. Why don't people, when they hear the name Sherlock Holmes think of the drugs? Is the use insignificant or a key part of the man Doyle created? The following essay will exam how cocaine and its properties are a part of the character that shapes Sherlock Holmes and how it adapted over the course of Doyle's stories.

Sherlock's cocaine use, and perception of his use can be traced back to how the drug was used during the time these stories were written. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was not only an author but also a physician, so he knew about the drug in detail as he had experience working with it. Around the time when the first few stories (*The Sign of Four* and *A Scandal in Bohemia*) chronicling his drug were being created, much of the negative effects of

cocaine had just started to be discovered. Cocaine was originally thought of as a wonder drug that could reduce pain among other things. Major figures such as Sigmund Freud were users and wrote papers about how amazing it was. This positive view of cocaine reflects on how Doyle portrays Holmes's early use of it. (Small, 341-342) (Hellerman, 2011)

In *The Sign of Four*, Doyle does not describe Sherlock's cocaine use as bad at all, he almost describes him as conquering the drug. In the story Holmes uses a 7% solution of cocaine to suggest that he has found the perfect balance of the drug as to not cause harm to himself. However, in real life some negative effects had started to come up at the time such as fatigue and wear on the body. Doyle was sure to give hints of that through the thoughts and words of Watson. Watson in this story does not particularly like that Holmes is using this drug and that is shown when Holmes responds to Watson's rejection to using the drug. Holmes says " I suppose that its influence is physically a bad one. I find it, however, so transcendently stimulating and clarifying to the mind that its secondary action is a matter of small moment" (" *Four*", 3). Watson also suggests the same worry of a physical toll on Holmes body in *A Scandal in Bohemia*. As shown in the first paragraph of this paper he describes Holmes as " alternating from week to week between cocaine and ambition, the drowsiness of the drug" (" *Scandal*", 161). Again, this shows that Watson does not like this drug as the physical effects are not good. However, he isn't that concerned as there is no significant effort in these stories that show Watson trying to convince Holmes to stop. Cocaine in the early stories is described more of a bad habit rather

than anything life threatening. No mention of addiction was included in these early stories. (Small, 341-342)

In Doyle's later stories that is when the tone of Holmes cocaine use changes. It is shown as more of an evil entity rather than a bad habit. Around the time these stories came out cocaine had been linked with addiction and harmful effects we know it has today. Sigmund Freud, the one who spoke so highly of the drug came out and wrote about his fight with addiction. Coca-Cola also removed it from its soda as it created addictive and medical issues for its drinkers. This change in tone were shown by Doyle through the thoughts of Watson in the story *The Adventure of the Missing Three-Quarter*. In this story Watson talks about Holmes fight with drug use by saying " years I had gradually weaned him from that drug mania which had threatened once to check his remarkable career...I was well aware that the fiend was not dead but sleeping" ("*Three Quarter*", 1). This is a drastic change for Watson from originally just disagreeing with the use too actually acting to stop the it. (Small, 343-347) (Hellerman, 2011)

Doyle probably gave Holmes his cocaine habits originally because of how popular in the culture it was at the time. However, as more was discovered about the effects of drugs in real life Doyle adapted his stories to reflect what the public knew was true. It was a simple example of an author changing his main character to relate more to the people of that time. Now that we have a background on why Holmes was given this attribute in these stories, lets investigate the main reason why Holmes might have started using the drugs

as it relates to the stories rather than the events that were going on in real life.

The popular theory on why Holmes started using cocaine is to help him forget and clear his mind (self-induced memory loss). Sherlock's quest to keep things out of his memory do not just start and stop at cocaine. He has always been a man of good memory; however, his goal is to remember the parts of every case that seem important to him not all of them. That is one of the reason's that Holmes employs Watson. Watson is the note taker and having them is a straightforward way for a person to forget things. If you know that all details are in writing it allows a person to remember the things which they feel are important, because the rest will be easily accessible if needed. This is the method Holmes uses to get rid of minor details from his memory. Cocaine comes into play when trying to get rid of the major facts from his previous cases and moral issues he faces from his past actions. (Cook, 841-850) (Labianca and Reeves, 50-52)

For Holmes it is imperative for him to have a clear and fresh mind when taking on a new case. Having knowledge from past cases is important if needed however, past conclusions can ruin the way you think about new mysteries. This is evident when he says in *The Hounds of Baskerville* when explaining to Sir Henry about how he really does not remember all his cases " Intense mental concentration has a curious way of blotting out what has passed...So each of my cases displaces the last" (Doyle, *The Hounds of Baskerville*).

Cocaine allows Holmes to keep his mind occupied while he is between cases. It allows his mind to roam and avoid thinking about old cases that could ruin his focus. When a new case comes along his mind is refreshed and ready to go with no thoughts of what happened previously clouding his judgement. Music (specifically his violin) is another method he uses to distract his mind. He is always playing it whether to distract himself from a case or avoid the dreary weather. However, music can only distract and preoccupy his mind it cannot make him forget. That is where the cocaine comes into play, it allows Holmes to take that next step and forget what happened in previous cases. This way when his new work starts there is no way certain past decisions/outcomes can come back and haunt his judgement. This forgetfulness is good for Holmes as his deductions are from the current situations of his cases not based on past experiences.

That could also be another reason why in early stories Watson did not like Holmes using drugs but was okay with it. It was good for Holmes in terms of keeping sane that Watson was okay with the side effects and degradation on his body. The end results of the original cocaine stories *The Sign of Four*, and *A Scandal in Bohemia* back up this claim. In *The Sign of Four* the villain was captured, and although most of the treasure was lost we find out what happened to it by way of it being thrown overboard. In *A Scandal in Bohemia*, although Irene Adler herself was not captured the issue involving the letter was put to rest. Results will make people turn a blind eye to terrible things surrounding them and that is exactly what Watson was doing in the early cases. Cocaine allowed Holmes to get results, and if the repercussions were not too great Watson did not intervene.

Sherlock did not just use cocaine to forget and take his mind off cases to better himself for future ones, he also took it to relieve some of the guilt he took on. His methods allow him to figure out so much more than others because he is willing to go the farthest for the answers. Sometimes to get those answers require him to break laws, commit indecent acts, almost making him as bad as some of the people he is trying to catch. Throughout his many cases Sherlock has broke into houses, kidnapped, assaulted, stole, and those are just a few of the criminal acts committed to get his man. These acts build up guilt and can eventually take its toll on a man. (Cook, 853-857) (Labianca and Reeves, 50-52)

Sherlock forgives himself for most of the crimes he commits and expects others to do the same because it was done for a worthy cause. However, there are even some crimes that cloud his own conscious. You cannot devote one hundred percent of your effort to a cause if you have guilt occupying your mind. Cocaine allows Holmes to shed that guilt allowing him to free his mind. This is exhibited in the story *The Adventure of the Devil's Foot*, a story in which Holmes lets the culprit escape because in his mind he would have done the same thing if put in that situation. The story starts out with Holmes needing a vacation due to information overload. Watson had been slowly weening Holmes off drugs in previous stories which is probably why Holmes is suffering at the beginning of this one. He has no way of forgetting without the drugs. On vacation they get sucked into a case where they learn that a burning powder has been around each death. Holmes, with his constant curiosity of drugs tries it and almost dies. The murderer is found to have committed the crimes as revenge for the murder of his loved one. At the end

of the story Holmes wants to shed himself of this guilt of letting the man go when he says, " I think we may dismiss the matter from our mind and go back with a clear conscience" (" Devil" 12). Cocaine and its memory loss properties allows him to dismiss these matters, it is the ultimate drug for a profession that requires a clear head. (Cook, 853-857)

Sherlock Holmes has many defining characteristics, but one that is not talked about as much within the public is his use of cocaine. It is mentioned in many scholarly studies to highlight the medical effects the drug can have. There are even some studies done about the cocaine use to analyze his character, however many focus on just The Sign of Four which is only a small part of Sherlock Holmes. I feel as though it isn't spoken of a lot is due to the negative image cocaine has in our current society. It would be wrong to show a character held in such high regard as having such an addiction, especially since for Holmes the drug is so beneficial to him.

From looking at the timeline of Holmes stories I believe that it is important to see how his use evolved with his character as his actions and relationship with his best friend Watson change along with his use. Cocaine sheds light on how a character whose mind is always working needs release from the stress of his profession. Holmes ability to look at everything with a fresh perspective is due to the drugs ability to make him forget the past. While some of the forgetfulness is for the current case and its success it also gives us a further look into his guilt. He believed he was doing the right thing all the time those choices still weighed on him. His cocaine use gave his character a connection to the audience, it made him more human. This

human connection was not only through his use, but also the perception of his use and how it perfectly tied into what was going on in the world as that time.