

Game Playing in  
Sherlock Holmes  
Stories

Victorian  
Society (Late  
19<sup>th</sup> Century

### Life Is Not a Game

\*\*Cases are puzzles—man-made, not natural: superficial problems—artificial state of society (“TFP,” p 501)

\*\*Culture of play in Victorian society: role of games (competition)/organization & regulation of sports—meaning and order. But also value of play(fullness)

### Macrocosmic view:

\*\*Larger contest against Professor Moriarty to rid London of evil; collapses Prof Moriarty’s criminal network/competes against Prof Moriarty (“TFP” & “TEH”). No outside to this contest

\*\*Holmes cannot rid the human mind/heart & Victorian society of evil (“It’s a wicked, wicked world”/Violence begets violence—“TSB”)

\*\*Consequences for breaking/bending law—ambiguity & uncertainty at stories’ conclusions (“TBVM”; “TSB”). Life’s ambiguities and uncertainties cannot all be accounted for, predicted.

\*\*Games create the illusion that order and meaning are possible, achievable (ending of “TFP”?)

\*\*Does SH reject competitive games for more playful ones—those “interesting little problems” (“THE”)?) Does he understand the illusion of game playing?

### Sport (Games) As an Artificial Construction

\*\*Games are an artificial construct designed to promote competition based on merit, fairness, and equal opportunity. **How life could/should be**

\*\*Play continuum: children’s play--- simple games---sports

\*\*Clear purpose—solving cases— winning & losing (measurable outcome, meaning)

\*\*Competition with opponents based on skill (sometimes chance), merit, equal opportunity (Master antagonist: Prof Moriarty)

\*\*Rules: create structure—tension between freedom and structure; breaking or bending rules as part of play (game within the game)

\*\*Boundaries: London (urban environment) and its suburbs

\*\*Fair play—sportsmanship

Cases=Puzzles  
(Games)

### Sport As a Microcosm of Life

\*\*Puzzles (cases) structure Holmes’s (and Watson’s) lives: how SH views himself & his relationship to society

\*\*There is an outside to his play: provides moral and ethical perspective—ending of “TBC”; “TMTL”; “ACI”

\*\*Holmes plays alone with some help/support from Watson and official police (team); contest against Prof Moriarty— competitors who define/respect each other (doubles)

\*\*Restores domestic disorder through cases  
\*\*Tracks those who commit crimes or create disorder as game (hunter, “TBCor”): double meaning of *game* (the game is afoot)/Watson—military man

\*\*Holmes as amateur (amore—love)—not a member of official police, not a professional who solves cases for money but for the *love* of solving cases: upper-class, middle-class value (“TSB”)

\*\*Game/sports references in stories: Gambling (“TBC”); Horseracing (“SB”/gambling); Hunting (“TEH”); Boxing (“TYF”): general references to contests (“TFP”)