

# Line by Line: A Journal of Beginning Student Writing

---

Volume 4 | Issue 1

Article 6

---

September 2017

## Irene Adler, Just another Damsel

Sarah Litteral  
*University of Dayton*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ecommons.udayton.edu/lxl>

 Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Litteral, Sarah (2017) "Irene Adler, Just another Damsel," *Line by Line: A Journal of Beginning Student Writing*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.  
Available at: <http://ecommons.udayton.edu/lxl/vol4/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Line by Line: A Journal of Beginning Student Writing by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact [frice1@udayton.edu](mailto:frice1@udayton.edu), [mschlangen1@udayton.edu](mailto:mschlangen1@udayton.edu).

---

## Irene Adler, Just another Damsel

### **Writing Process**

As someone who identifies as a feminist, I was very excited to discover that my English class, which focused on the topic of Sherlock Holmes, had a whole entire section dedicated to the interactions of women within the series. Once we were able to choose what our final research paper would be on, I knew exactly what I wanted to talk about. My whole life I have love mystery novels, especially the Holmes series, however, I was always a little unsatisfied at the lack of prominent female characters within it. I felt that this paper would be the perfect format for me to vent my frustrations with a series that I had come to know and love.

### **Course**

ENG200

### **Semester**

Spring

### **Instructor**

Prof. Rebekah Sanders

### **Year**

2017

Sarah Litteral

Prof. Sanders

ENG 200 Section 51

Spring 2017

### Irene Adler, Just another Damsel

As one of the most notable characters within Sherlock Holmes' universe, Irene Adler, is famous for her appearance in *A Scandal in Bohemia* by Sir Conan Arthur Doyle. Doyle's short story introduces Adler as "The Woman," who, according to Holmes, eclipses and predominates the whole of her sex. Notoriously known as being one of the only characters to ever have bested Holmes, Adler is thus remembered by more readers than most other characters, even though only having been presented in one short story. It is quite obvious, therefore, why Adler tends to be included in most Sherlock Holmes adaptations. Although the Irene Adler that is found in *A Scandal in Bohemia* is nothing close to a flawless, feminist icon, she is still considered extremely progressive for the time period in which she was written. However, in the 2012 adaptation of the short story, BBC *Sherlock's* "A Scandal in Belgravia", we find that Adler is even less powerful and influential than she was in the original. Many feminist fans of the BBC show had high hopes when they learned that Adler would appear on the new season of *Sherlock*, however, as soon as we see her bright red finger nails spread across the screen, it is obvious that there is nothing liberal about this character. While many argue that the BBC *Sherlock's* Irene Adler is a feminist icon, the show's writer, Steven Moffat, rather created another female character that perpetuates the values of a patriarchal society that are often found in the *Sherlock* universe.

In order to discuss the ways that Moffat creates a patriarchal society within the Sherlock universe, we must determine what a patriarchal society is. Patriarchy is a social system, not simply the people who participate in it. In his book, *The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our*

*Patriarchal Legacy*, Allan Johnson establishes the main characteristics of a patriarchal society. Firstly, a patriarchal society is male dominated. That is to say, men hold the positions of power and authority to determine the rules of that society. Another aspect of a patriarchal society is male centering, which is that men are the primary of attention in many spaces. “Maleness” is rendered invisible and we begin to assume that men are the norm. This standard becomes so dominant that it becomes invisible, allowing men to move with little awareness of male privilege and women who are unable to raise their status. The dominant group, which consists of males, avoid scrutiny because their position enables them to define their own interests as those of society as a whole.

The entire first season of the show maintains many of these aspects, when the only recurring female characters are Mrs. Hudson and Molly, both of which are extremely underdeveloped characters. The other women that we find within the show are usually victims, getting killed off before the episode is over. Men dominate every single aspect of the show, whether it be the main characters, Sherlock Holmes and Watson, or the head detective of the precinct, Lestrade. Men are the only real main characters that we have, they are considered the standard that we can compare to. There are hundreds of reviews across the internet that find Moffat’s work to represent sexist ideals. Foz Meadows, an Australian reviewer, explains that within season one of *Sherlock*, “every single female character is either a villain, a victim, a dupe or a damsel: someone to be arrested, avenged, ridiculed or rescued.”

To comply with his critics, Moffat began the second season with the introduction of Irene Adler. Some fans praised the episode as being forward thinking, finding Adler to be a breath of fresh air from the guest female characters we usually see within the show. She was interesting, she was powerful, and most importantly, she knew how to play Holmes. We are first presented to

Adler after she hangs up the phone from having a conversation with Moriarty, Sherlock's arch nemesis. She is in full view, so to speak, only covered by some well draped lingerie and is sauntering into a bedroom while whispering, "Well, now, have you been wicked, Your Highness?" to a form lying on the bed with their legs strapped together. Adler is brandishing a whip and we are to, thusly, assume that Adler is some sort of dominatrix.

Throughout the show, we discover that Adler is truly represented by her body. In fact, her body eclipses her whole existence, defining every aspect of her life. Within the show, Adler, through the use of her body, uses sexuality to gain power over the men around her, especially with Sherlock. She uses her sexuality through her dominatrix position in order to gain secrets and other information from her clients. In a particular case, she discovers a code from one of her clients that he states, "is meant to save the world," through her job as a dominatrix. In a similar instance, Adler uses her sexuality to get Sherlock to crack the code, which he does in 8 seconds flat. She whispers in his ear, "go on, impress a girl," and kisses him on the cheek. This "control" that Adler is meant to have is truly only the power that her body has over men. The power that she has is desire. Her power comes from flaunting her sexuality. In reality, she is simply acting the way that men want her to, as long as she is continuing to make them feel more powerful than herself. Her power is truly a façade and is used to emphasize that, in the end, the men around her still have the real authority and control (Biting Beaver).

She begins her introduction to Holmes by, technically, defeating him at his own game. While Holmes attempts to disguise himself as a clergymen, Adler is aware of his true identity the entire time and greets him completely naked. Some critics find that her nudity was simply a mind game against Sherlock, however, others disagree. Antonija Primorac, in his work "The Naked Truth," discusses the many ways that current day shows adapt Victorian women through images

of their naked bodies, stating, “When analyzed, these depictions point to a supposedly liberated and highly sexualized depiction of women whose agency, however, becomes increasingly more limited on screen particularly when contrasted with the nineteenth-century text they use as a source.” We find that introducing Adler as completely naked rather introduces Adler’s bodily limitations as a woman, enhancing the ideals established in the Victorian era that women are truly nothing more than their bodies, to be used for sex, to bear children, and to care for the home.

Sherlock’s case against Adler is her possession of compromising and sexually explicit photographs of a British Royal woman. Adler is explained to be “The Woman,” which is the name of her dominatrix company. To many viewers, the fact that Adler is a dominatrix should be extremely empowering to women. Most of these supporters would be looking at this situation in a liberal feminist’s view. That is to say, these women believe that the problem of patriarchy is that women lack equal access to the opportunities that society has to offer, which exists because of prejudice, false beliefs, and are perpetuated through societal traditions. Their goal is to ensure that women can have and do what men have and do and vice versa. Therefore, they believe that if a woman, Irene Adler, is able to become a dominatrix – she is able to control men or women through sexual thoughts and actions – then society has progressed in a way that would be forward-thinking (Johnson).

However, another way to look at this would be through the radical feminist view. This holds the belief that the main focus of patriarchy is the system itself, rather than the individuals participating in it. They find that the problem of a patriarchal system is that it focuses on men and other oppressive hierarchal systems. The problem exists because men benefit from this system and therefore have the power to enforce and sustain it. Their aspiration is to get rid of

patriarchy as a whole and replace it with a different and better system through naming and confronting the power of men in order to reduce their power and change the structure. (Johnson)

The radical feminist view finds that the role of a dominatrix is procured through a patriarchal society. That is to say, the entire concept of domination and submission only exist because of the dominant position that males have within our society and submissive role that women play.

There is a hierarchy within the patriarchal society that we live in where men are the group with the power, rights, and resources while women are the bottom group (Dworkin, “Against the Male Flood”). The power that men have over women is turned into the sexual acts that men do to women. Even though in a dominatrix setting the woman is the dominant one, they are still following the orders of their male counterpart and focusing on the interests, desires, and satisfaction of the male consumer. Having Adler’s role as a dominatrix only relates her back to the limited power she believes she has with her body.

One of Adler’s biggest mistakes within the episode was falling in love with Sherlock Holmes. Even though at the beginning of the episode, Adler tells Watson that she is gay, she becomes infatuated with Holmes. In a moment of what we assume is affection between Adler and Holmes, we find that Holmes is actually checking her pulse and pupil dilation, only to deduce that Adler has feelings towards him. This allows him to determine Irene’s password, while smugly announcing “This is your heart, and you should never let it rule your head” (A Scandal in Belgravia). Because, in the *Sherlock* universe, women are limited by their feminine emotions, rendered weak and unable to act and think logically. We see this time and time again through Sherlock’s relationship with Molly, who is undoubtedly in love with Sherlock and therefore takes all of the rude and extremely disrespectful things he says to her without fail.

Through her role, Adler emphasizes the prostitution paradigm that states that all women are essentially the sexual property of men. Rather than being the inside woman, however, that is the private property of one man, Adler is instead the outside woman. She is the public property of all men in general and her only real use is her sexual function (Dworkin, “Women in the Public Domain”). The main protector of Adler had been Moriarty, who turns out to be the mastermind of all of the plotting we had assumed been created by Adler. Eventually, this protection is lost and reinstated to Holmes, who discovers the code to her phone. “Given the episodes fixation with the limitations of the body, it follows that Irene fears bodily injury. Her phone, the sensitive information stored within it, both protects and endangers Irene’s body...its loss exposing her to physical harm” (Katzir). Whether it be Moriarty or Sherlock, they both possess more power and resources, forcing Adler to be compliant in order to survive.

As it has been mentioned before, the women in *Sherlock* tend to function as “a conduit for male power...as the object of sexual dominance, they are necessary to release that power. But they do not acquire power themselves; it is, instead, passed on to Holmes” (Hall). The only power that Adler has over anyone is the contents of her phone, which are vanquished when Sherlock is finally able to unlock it. This is a significant difference from the canonical Adler’s successful retention of valuable information (Farghaly). Adler has no leverage and therefore no power over the dominant Sherlock Holmes. This is emphasized at the end of the episode where we find Adler dressed in a burka, on her knees about to be executed. That is, until the intervention of Sherlock Holmes. Yet again, the powerful male saves the damsel in distress, the narrative we have all come to know too well within the series.

It seems that with his work, Moffat was hoping to end the negative reviews of his misogynistic show, but he rather emphasized the antifeminist agenda. Antifeminism, according



to Andrea Dworkin in her work, *Right-Wing Women*, is the resistance to the liberation of women from the sex class system. Throughout the episode, Moffat actively makes Adler a subordinate to her male counterparts and reduces her to simply another sex object. He establishes that women are limited to their body, being nothing more than objects that are used by men through sex in return for their protection.

Although Adler is meant to be the new feminist icon in the *Sherlock* series, it is evident that it is simply not the case. Within *Sherlock*, Adler is defined by her femininity and the episode as a whole simply pretends to depict a strong female character, only to be beaten out by those same feminine characteristics. Her body is focused throughout the show, whether it be through the sexual use of it or the protection that she receives from the men around her. Even though Adler is considered to be dominant as a dominatrix, she is ironically dominated by all men around her and eventually has the same fate as all other female characters within *Sherlock*: another damsel in distress.

## Works Cited

- “A Scandal in Belgravia.” *Sherlock*, written by Steven Moffat, directed by Paul McGuigan, produced by Sue Vertue. BBC. Television.
- Biting Beaver. “Sword of Power.” *Archives of the Biting Beaver*, 19 Apr. 2008.
- Dworkin, Andrea. "Against the Male Flood: Censorship, Pornography, and Equality." *Letters from a War Zone*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 1993. 253-75. Print.
- Dworkin, Andrea. "Chapter 6, Antifeminism." *Right - Wing Women*. New York: Coward-McCann, 1982. 195-237. Print.
- Dworkin, Andrea. "Women in the Public Domain: Sexual Harassment and Date Rape." *Life and Death: Unapologetic Writings on the Continuing War against Women*. London: Virago, 1997. 196-216. Print.
- Farghaly, Nadine, and Lindsay Katzir. “I Am Sherlocked: Victorian Gender and Sexuality in “A Scandal in Belgravia.” *Gender and the Modern Sherlock Holmes: Essays on Film and Television Adaptations since 2009*, McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, Jefferson, NC, 2015, pp. 98-117.
- Farghaly, Nadine, and Rhonda Taylor. “Return of ‘the Woman’ Irene Adler in Contemporary Adaptations.” *Gender and the Modern Sherlock Holmes: Essays on Film and Television Adaptations since 2009*, McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, Jefferson, NC, 2015, pp. 40–65.
- Hall, Jasmine Yong. “Ordering the Sensational: Sherlock Holmes and the Female Gothic.” *Studies in Short Fiction* (1991): 295-304. Print.

Johnson, Allan G. *The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2005. Print.

Meadows, Foz. "Sexism in Sherlock." *Shattersnipe: Malcontent and Rainbows*, 12 Dec. 2011, [fozmeadows.wordpress.com/2011/12/12/sexism-in-sherlock/](http://fozmeadows.wordpress.com/2011/12/12/sexism-in-sherlock/).

Primorac, Antonija. "The Naked Truth: The Postfeminist Aferlives of Irene Adler." *Neo-Victorian Studies* 6.2 (2013): 89-101. Print