

## Batman and Sherlock Holmes: The Skills, Morals, and Villains of Fiction's Definitive Heroic Detectives

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The detective archetype is one of the most recognizable paradigms in fiction. Characterized by a dark broodiness, an ability to shift between identities, and mastery over skills uniquely suited to fighting crime, detectives demonstrate a profound commitment to justice. While working to uphold justice, detectives simultaneously grapple with a deep inner turmoil. The ability to rise above this turmoil in the face of moral dilemmas establishes detectives as heroic figures within fiction. Although they work from the shadows, heroic detectives are distinguishable by their moral resilience and ethical resolve. These attributes are thrown into sharp relief by archvillain counterparts. The archvillains of heroic detectives mirror the detective archetype, but fail to rise above their own inner turmoil; consequently, the relationships between heroic detectives and their archvillains are marked by an inherent clash of moral philosophies. Furthermore, to be effective in their roles as heroic detectives, characters must be indispensable to their society's battle against crime. As such, heroic detectives must succeed where traditional law enforcement fails. While they often circumvent the law in order to uphold it, heroic detectives are dedicated to the battle against crime. No fictional characters embody this dedication more effectively than Batman and Sherlock Holmes. By confronting moral dilemmas presented by their archvillains and emerging victorious, Batman and Holmes demonstrate a deep moral resolve and commitment to justice. Moreover, through

their use of skills associated with the detective archetype, Holmes and Batman prove to be far more capable at solving crimes than traditional law enforcement. Their ability to rise above inner turmoil in conjunction with their iconic powers of perception establish Holmes and Batman as quintessential examples of the heroic detective archetype. In their pursuit of justice, Batman and Sherlock Holmes epitomize the heroic detective archetype through their mastery of disguise, proficiency in combat, powers of deduction, and relationships with archvillains.

Both Batman and Sherlock Holmes employ a highly specialized skill set in their fight against crime. This skill set includes a shared affinity for the art of disguise, prowess in physical combat, and nearly supernatural powers of deduction. By applying these skills to their detective work, Holmes and Batman are able to solve crimes that confound conventional law enforcement. In “A Scandal in Bohemia,” Holmes disguises himself as “a dear, kind old clergyman” (Doyle sec. 3) as part of an elaborate plan to discern the location of a photograph. In a similarly cunning fashion, Batman disguises himself as an ordinary civilian in the 2014 animated film *Justice League: War* in order to infiltrate an enemy fortress. In both cases, Holmes and Batman intentionally adopt disguises meant to put their adversaries at ease. This method of manipulation enables Holmes to succeed where the agents of the King of Bohemia fail, and allows Batman to outsmart an enemy that traditional military forces cannot defeat. Where deception and disguise fall short, Batman and Holmes rely instead on their martial expertise to fight crime. In “A Study in Scarlet,” Dr. Watson describes Sherlock Holmes as “an expert singlestick player, boxer, and swordsman” (Doyle ch. 2). These talents provide Holmes with an

edge in physical confrontations, such as his duel with James Moriarty in the final act of the 2011 film *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows*. Meanwhile, Batman is displayed across a wide variety of media as a master of martial arts. Batman's martial skill allows him to contend not only with human villains such as the Joker, but with supernatural beings as well: in the 2005 animated film *Batman vs Dracula*, Batman incapacitates a small army of vampires in hand-to-hand combat. By overcoming physically challenging odds, Batman and Sherlock Holmes demonstrate their value in hostile circumstances. However, the most useful skill employed by both Batman and Holmes in their fight against crime is the power of deduction. Sherlock Holmes frequently deduces not only the cause of a crime, but its implications as well. For example, in an episode of the BBC *Sherlock* television series titled "The Great Game," Holmes examines a drowned body. This examination leads Holmes to the fantastic conclusion that a famous painting in a nearby museum is a forgery. Holmes explains his line of reasoning to Inspector Lestrade—who represents conventional British law enforcement in the investigation—while expressing his frustration that Lestrade can "see" clues, but not truly "observe" the meaning behind them (*Sherlock*, "The Great Game"). In the Warner Bros. animated series *The Batman*, Batman demonstrates deductive capabilities similar to those of Sherlock Holmes by deducing Superman's true identity. This deduction prompts Superman to label Batman "the world's greatest detective" (*The Batman*, "The Batman/Superman Story: Part II"). By using their talents of deduction, deception, and combat to solve problems that no one else can, Batman and Sherlock Holmes

embody an indispensability to society's fight against crime. This indispensability is a fundamental characteristic of the heroic detective archetype.

Batman and Sherlock Holmes require their specialized skill set to combat villains who place them in psychological and ethical dilemmas. These dilemmas highlight the moral resilience and philosophies of the two heroes. In the animated film *Batman: Under the Red Hood*, Batman is given a choice by his former apprentice, Jason Todd: Batman can either kill the Joker, or watch Jason kill the Joker. When faced with this choice, Batman responds that "All [Batman has] ever wanted to do is kill [the Joker]. A day [does not] go by when [Batman does not] think about subjecting [the Joker] to every horrendous torture [the Joker] has dealt out to others... but if [Batman] allows himself to go down into that place, [then Batman will] never come back [to the good side]" (*Batman: Under the Red Hood*). With this response, Batman reveals the extent of his internal struggle to remain an incorruptible force for good. By continually succeeding in this struggle, Batman demonstrates the strength of his ethical resolve. Instead of choosing one of the options presented by Jason, Batman walks away from the situation, prompting Jason to try to kill Batman. By refusing to compromise his principles even in the face of mortal danger, Batman exhibits a profound moral resilience. Batman's sense of morality is further highlighted in Alan Moore's graphic novel *Batman: The Killing Joke*, a story which explores the duality between Batman and the Joker. Moore emphasizes that although Batman and the Joker are both psychologically damaged due to life-altering "bad day[s]" (Moore) in their pasts, Batman attempts to create meaning from his tragedy, whereas the Joker devolves into an emotionally unhinged

agent of chaos. Despite the heinous acts the Joker commits in an attempt to prove that “all it takes is one bad day to reduce the sanest man alive to lunacy” (Moore), Batman maintains that “ordinary people [do not] always crack... [and that] there [is not] any need to crawl under a rock with all the other slimy things when trouble hits.” This juxtaposition of philosophies underlines Batman’s belief in the strength of the human spirit. In the same way that Batman’s core beliefs are challenged and accentuated by the Joker, Sherlock Holmes’s core values are tested by his own mirror opposite: Moriarty. At various points throughout the BBC *Sherlock* series, Moriarty threatens the lives of John Watson, Mrs. Hudson, and Inspector Lestrade. These threats force Holmes to choose between the lives of his friends and victory against Moriarty. This choice is especially challenging for Holmes because of his need to win the ongoing psychological “game” he plays against Moriarty (*Sherlock*, “The Reichenbach Fall”). In this game, each character tries to outwit the other, resulting in a clash of willpower that outlines the intellectual similarities between the two adversaries. By choosing the well-being of his friends over victory against Moriarty, Holmes displays his own innate humanity. This quality of humanity separates Holmes from Moriarty, just as Batman’s morality separates him from the Joker. As mirror opposites of their respective heroes, Moriarty and the Joker serve as effective foils for Sherlock Holmes and Batman. By providing the context in which Holmes and Batman display their moral resilience and integrity, Moriarty and the Joker highlight the virtuous qualities that make Holmes and Batman effective in their roles as heroic detectives.

Heroic detectives overcome challenges that no one else can. Due to their talents in the arts of disguise, deduction, and physical combat, heroic detectives are able to thwart villains who defy the efforts of conventional law enforcement. By thwarting these villains, heroic detectives demonstrate their own indispensability in the fight against crime. This indispensability is part of the reason for the enduring power of the heroic detective archetype within fiction. As the quintessential fictional heroic detectives, Batman and Sherlock Holmes have a profound impact on both the world of fiction and real life. Batman's unwavering sense of morality highlights the strength of the human spirit in the face of tragedy. Similarly, Sherlock Holmes's choice to prioritize the lives of his loved ones over victory in battle illuminates the power of human empathy. These themes speak to the broader struggle of humankind against the forces of darkness. By overcoming both crime and their own internal turmoil, Holmes and Batman provide heroic examples of how to conquer darkness both within fiction and real life.

## Works Cited

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