

## LIBERAL ARTS

### **Sherlock Holmes and the Irish Revolutionaries**

Student researcher: Alexis Ulrich, Junior

Criticism of Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Valley of Fear* (1915) has largely focused on its treatment of Irish nationalist groups. Taken at face value, the story seems to make a hero of a character based on Pinkerton detective James McParlan as he defeats the dastardly group which figures for the Molly Maguires. However, because of contemporary evidence of Doyle's pro-Irish home rule and pro-trade union sympathies, it does not make sense that he would write a story that so thoroughly demonizes the Molly Maguires, who shared those sympathies. To accept that interpretation is also to ignore large portions of the plot. For example, the narrative suggests that the McParlan character is being treated as a traitor by going out of its way to ensure that he is murdered by an agent of Professor Moriarty. The murder functions as a plot device that throws the message of the story into conflict for one simple reason: in the Sherlock Holmes series,

only unrighteous characters tend to die unavenged. If the Pinkerton detective is a figure for British imperialism, and Moriarty and the Molly Maguires are figures for Irish nationalism, the story as a whole demonstrates the inevitability of an Irish victory, even if that victory comes at the hands of a villain. While *The Valley of Fear* undeniably questions and condemns violence as a vehicle for political change, it sympathizes with the motives behind that violence and ultimately supports the Irish nationalist ideas expressed just beyond its surface.

*Research advisor Heather Fielding writes, "Alexis significantly revises the standard account of the politics of Doyle's The Valley of Fear. Questioning the explicit political allegory of the novel's plot, Alexis offers a textual analysis that uncovers latent, unexpected ideas about Irish nationalism and trade unionism. The result offers new directions for studies of Doyle's imperial politics."*