Short Stories in Medicine: A Coping Mechanism

By Heather Kregel
Arthur Conan Doyle extended hope for the way in which the doctor would evolve as the profession progressed. His hopes and fears are displayed in the physicians of his work, imprinting themselves on the literary canon for future generations to see and to analyze in light of the medical advancements in nineteenth century Britain. He is one of many authors who utilized short stories as an autobiographical tool as a coping mechanism. Through these works, he influenced present and future generations, giving readers tangible outlets through which they could grapple with their own feelings on what being a physician really means. His short stories, on a more personal level, also demonstrate the way he grappled with changes in medicine and how his role would change as medicine evolved.
Began with Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson
Progressed with *Around the Red Lamp: Stories of Medical Life as It Used to Be*

“As all of Conan Doyle’s stories in *Around the Red Lamp* demonstrate, medical work creates emotional distance between doctors and society, which Doyle primarily signifies through the romantic failures of his doctors” (Sparks 158).
Best known for his creation of the infamous detective Sherlock Holmes, Arthur Conan Doyle, an ophthalmologist, used his short stories to grapple with his sentiments on the changes in medicine.
“Behind the Times” is the first short story of the collection, of a boy who goes into the medical profession but more importantly, of the elder doctor who inspires this dream.

Mocks elder’s training
“He had learned his medicine under that obsolete and forgotten system by which a youth was apprenticed to a surgeon, in the days when anatomy was often approached through a violated grave” (Conan Doyle 2).

“He has even been known to say vain things about Laennec, and to refer to the stethoscope as ‘a new-fangled French toy.’ He carries one in his hat out of deference to the expectations of his patients, but he is very hard of hearing, so that it makes little difference whether he uses it or not” (Conan Doyle 2).
None of these factors are allowed to detract from the portrait of the hero.

“He has the healing touch—that magnetic thing which defies explanation or analysis, but which is a very evident fact none the less. His mere presence leaves the patient with more hopefulness and vitality” (Conan Doyle 3).

Assertion that a doctor is more than an applicator of science
Works Cited


Original Short Stories

- My First Death
- My First Suicide
Conclusions

- Physicians in literature have used writing as a form of coping in times of tragedy or change.
- These short stories can inspire future physicians to document critical events of their careers.