

# Extended essay cover

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Diploma Programme subject in which this extended essay is registered: Literature and Performance  (For an extended essay in the area of languages, state the language and whether it is group 1 or group 2.)							
Title of the extended essay: A Study of Partrayals of Ivene Adler in the Media in Companison to the Original Literary Characterization							
Candidate's declaration							
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The extended essay I am submitting is my own work (apart from guidance allowed by the International Baccalaureate).							
I have acknowledged each use of the words, graphics or ideas of another person, whether written, oral or visual.							
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Name of supervisor (CAPITAL letters)

Please comment, as appropriate, on the candidate's performance, the context in which the candidate undertook the research for the extended essay, any difficulties encountered and how these were overcome (see page 13 of the extended essay guide). The concluding interview (viva voce) may provide useful information. These comments can help the examiner award a level for criterion K (holistic judgment). Do not comment on any adverse personal circumstances that may have affected the candidate. If the amount of time spent with the candidate was zero, you must explain this, in particular how it was then possible to authenticate the essay as the candidate's own work. You may attach an additional sheet if there is insufficient space here.

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I have read the final version of the extended essay that will be submitted to the examiner.

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I spent hours with the candidate discussing the progress of the extended essay.

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# Assessment form (for examiner use only)

## Achievement level

Criteria	Examiner 1	maximum	Examiner 2	maximum	Examiner 3
A research question	2	2		2	
B introduction	a de la companya de l	2		2	
C investigation	Swelling	4		4	
<b>D</b> knowledge and understanding	2	4		4	
E reasoned argument	James -	4		4	
F analysis and evaluation	2	4	~	4	
<b>G</b> use of subject language	4	4		4	
H conclusion	d de	2		2	
I formal presentation	3	4		4	-
J abstract	2	2		2	
K holistic judgment	2	4		4	
Total out of 36	22				

A Study of Portrayals of Irene Adler in the Media in Comparison to the Original Literary Characterization

Research Question: How well have the portrayals of Irene Adler in the 2009 film *Sherlock Holmes*, directed by Guy Ritchie, and in the BBC series *Sherlock* episode "A Scandal in Belgravia," honored the original Sherlock Holmes story "A Scandal in Bohemia" by Arthur Conan Doyle?

Candidate #

Extended Essay in Literature and Performance

November 2012

Word Count: 3807

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**Abstract** 

This essay examines three portrayals of the fictional character Irene Adler originally from

the Sherlock Holmes story "A Scandal in Bohemia," written by Arthur Conan Doyle; the goal of

this examination will be to answer the following question:

How well have the portrayals of Irene Adler in the 2009 film Sherlock Holmes, directed by

Guy Ritchie, and in the BBC series Sherlock, episode "A Scandal in Belgravia," honored the

original Sherlock Holmes story "A Scandal in Bohemia" by Arthur Conan Doyle?

The scope of the investigation will be threefold: "A Scandal in Bohemia," the scenes where

Irene Adler is featured or mentioned in Sherlock Holmes, and "A Scandal in Belgravia." The full

text will be analyzed, along with the costuming, acting, and the scripts of the media selections.

Other Sherlock Holmes stories will not be examined. The lighting, camera angles, and other

aspects of cinematography will also not be examined.

While the original Conan Doyle story portrays Adler as an intelligent woman who beats

Sherlock Holmes using her own devices, it can be concluded that the other two portrayals do not

completely honor how Adler was originally written. In the film Sherlock Holmes, Rachel

McAdams portrays Adler as a seductive femme fatale, but also as a damsel in distress. In the

Sherlock episode "A Scandal in Belgravia," Lara Pulver portrays Adler as an over-sexualized

dominatrix who only beats Sherlock Holmes with the help of Professor Moriarty, and is saved

from certain death only by Sherlock Holmes himself. Instead of being portrayed as a woman of

great intellect, as in the original Conan Doyle story, in both media portrayals, she is weak and

dependent on others.

Word Count: 275

# **Table of Contents**

Abstracti	
Introductionp.	1
Irene Adler in "A Scandal in Bohemia"	3
Irene Adler in Sherlock Holmesp.	7
Irene Adler in "A Scandal in Belgravia"p.	10
Conclusionp.	12
Works Cited	14

#### Introduction

Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories have forever cemented the visions of detectives into the minds of people worldwide. Written in the Victorian times, Sherlock Holmes was first introduced in a series of novels and then featured in short stories in *The Strand Magazine*. The first of these short stories was "A Scandal in Bohemia" (Willis). In this first short story, Conan Doyle introduces the character of Irene Adler, a retired American opera singer turned "adventuress" who Sherlock Holmes refers to as "The Woman," the woman who beat him (Conan Doyle 25, 18). In this story, Sherlock Holmes is hired by the King of Bohemia to retrieve a photo from Irene Adler that shows Adler and the king together, because the king is engaged to a princess whose parents will not let him marry the princess if evidence of his brief liaison with Adler is ever made public. Following Adler in disguise, Holmes discovers that Adler herself is soon to be married and attends her wedding as a witness. He then sets up a situation where Adler lets him into his home and there, he tricks Adler into revealing where the photo is kept. When Holmes comes back later to steal the photo, it is revealed that Adler is gone, her photo and her husband with her. In the place of the photo is a letter to Holmes, detailing how she outwitted him.

Two recent portrayals of Irene Adler have been in the 2009 film *Sherlock Holmes*, directed by Guy Ritchie, and in the BBC television series *Sherlock*, in the episode "A Scandal in Belgravia." In these two adaptations, Irene Adler is portrayed by actresses Rachel McAdams and Lara Pulver, respectively. Both actresses bring different interpretations to the character. These interpretations can be compared to the characterization of Irene Adler in the original text written by Arthur Conan Doyle. This can be done by answering the following question:

How well have the portrayals of Irene Adler in the 2009 film *Sherlock Holmes*, directed by Guy Ritchie, and in the BBC series *Sherlock* episode "A Scandal in Belgravia," honored the original Sherlock Holmes story "A Scandal in Bohemia" by Arthur Conan Doyle?

Throughout the process of adapting a literary work to film or television, some aspects of characterization can be lost or changed, especially when one must consider time constraints, acting skills, and costuming choices. The presentation of the character of Irene Adler should be examined, because she is a monumental character in the Sherlock Holmes universe. She is one of the few people to ever beat Sherlock Holmes and the only woman to do so, and therefore should be adapted according to how Conan Doyle originally portrayed her character. This topic will be approached by focusing on the transformation of the character Irene Adler from the original text of the short story "A Scandal in Bohemia" by Conan Doyle to the film portrayal of Adler in the film Sherlock Holmes, directed by Guy Ritchie, and the portrayal of Adler in the BBC series Sherlock, episode "A Scandal in Belgravia," created by Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss. The text will be analyzed to show how Conan Doyle originally portrayed Adler. The sections where Adler is featured in the film and television episode will then be compared to the text and the conclusions drawn from the text. The investigation will focus firstly on the original text of "A Scandal in Bohemia." This short story will be central to the essay since it is what has been transformed. Once analysis has been thoroughly completed and the text compared to the two media selections, a conclusion about whether or not the selections have honored the original Conan Doyle story will be made.

#### Irene Adler in "A Scandal in Bohemia"

In the original short story "A Scandal in Bohemia," Conan Doyle portrays Irene Adler as an incredibly clever woman of great wit and a "soul of steel" (Conan Doyle 26). Although she only ever crosses paths with Sherlock Holmes once, John Watson, Holmes's chronicler and constant companion, takes care to point out that she is viewed very highly in Holmes's mind and that she is a significant character in Holmes's history. "To Sherlock Holmes, she is always the woman," Watson writes, going on to say that Holmes considered Adler to be superior to the rest of the female gender (Conan Doyle 18).

Conan Doyle characterizes Adler as scandalous, given her chosen occupation -- an opera singer and a well-known adventuress -- which, at the time of writing, were scandalous professions. In Victorian times, "adventuress" was a euphemism for a high-class prostitute, who attracted aristocrats or wealthy men and might marry them (McCutcheon 46). As an "adventuress," Adler would have seduced rich and powerful men for their money. However, Adler adds another layer to her profession. She did not just take money from the men she "adventured" with, she also took documentation and evidence of the liaisons and blackmailed the men that she seduced afterwards, as evidenced by her collections of letters from the King of Bohemia and the photo of herself and the king that she keeps hidden. That she is a "well-known" and "familiar" adventuress shows that she has seduced many men before (Conan Doyle 25).

Conan Doyle also portrays Adler as strong-willed and clever. The King of Bohemia tries to forcibly retrieve the photo in Adler's possession multiple times, through hired burglars who break into her home, by rerouting her luggage, and by ambushing her, all to no avail (Conan Doyle 26). Adler endures all of this, and though the attempts at stealing the photo are admirable and would have worked on just about anyone else, Adler, with her determination and her

cleverness, is able to hide the photo even from the professionals hired to retrieve the photo. She is also determined enough -- and clever enough -- to make sure that Sherlock Holmes himself cannot take the photo away from her. When Holmes disguises himself to spy on Adler and then later to get into Adler's home, not even Watson, his closest friend, can recognize him and has to "look three times" before he is "certain that it was indeed he" (Conan Doyle 28). But Adler, after she realizes she has unwillingly revealed where she has hidden the photo, deduces that the kindly clergyman in her home is in fact Sherlock Holmes in disguise, and acts quickly to ensure that the photo stays secure and safe. Holmes thinks he has beaten her, that she does not know that she has revealed herself to him, but later, when he goes to her home to retrieve the photo, Holmes finds all evidence of Adler's relations with the King of Bohemia gone, and in its place a letter detailing how Adler managed to outwit Holmes (Conan Doyle 39). Given that Holmes "never spoke of the softer passions, save with a gibe and a sneer," the "softer passions" being women, it can be assumed that, before meeting Adler, he never thought that a woman could be his intellectual equal (Conan Doyle 18). Adler, however, proves him wrong on this point, showing her great intelligence.

Conan Doyle writes Irene Adler as a daring woman, one who is quick on her feet and always ready to spring into action, as demonstrated by the fact that right after Holmes has forced her to reveal where she has hidden the photo, she quickly gets into her disguise of a male "slim youth in an ulster" and follows Holmes to make sure he really was pursuing her. In doing so, she puts herself in danger of being recognized, and even wishes Holmes a "Good-night, Mister Sherlock Holmes" before returning home to leave the country forever, all without the great detective Holmes recognizing either her voice or that she was aware of his scheme (Conan Doyle 37). Adler is clearly not afraid to go to great lengths to defend herself and what she believes is

rightfully hers. This is even further evidenced by the fact that when Holmes sets up the false fire alarm so that she will reveal where she has hidden the photo, she rushes to keep it safe, without hesitation, instead of leaving the home instantly to save herself or sitting in shock and fear at the thought of a fire in her home.

In the original short story, Adler is also very independent. Everything she does, she does on her own, with her own mind. She is unlike other women who lived during the Victorian Era. She does not rely on anyone else's advice -- especially not the advice of men. It is her idea to keep records of her past liaisons with wealthy men for her own protection, well-being, and also for personal advancement; for example, she keeps evidence of her relations to the King of Bohemia to ensure that he does not try to make any move against her. She is the one to suggest to her husband that they leave, and instead of sending her husband or a man that Sherlock Holmes might not recognize to follow him, she dons a disguise herself. Adler also is the sole person who knows where she keeps her photo. She does not tell anyone and she does not reveal to anyone where the photo is hidden until she believes that it is in immediate danger. Adler trusts herself and only herself. She makes her own judgments and acts upon them independently. Adler was the only woman to ever defeat Sherlock Holmes, and she did so all by herself (Conan Doyle).

The Adler of the story is also very beautiful, with a "face of the most beautiful of women," one "that a man might die for" (Conan Doyle 26, 30). She is described as a "beautiful creature" who treats an injured stranger with grace and kindness (Conan Doyle 35). However, she is also "the daintiest thing under a bonnet," implying that she is delicate, not in any way a woman of action, and "lives quietly" (Conan Doyle 29). Though Adler is a clever blackmailer, she is also beautiful and delicate.

The original Irene Adler is also happily married and harbors no feelings towards Holmes other than respect for him being so "formidable an antagonist" (Conan Doyle 39). In Adler's letter to Holmes, she writes, "I love and am loved," saying that the man that she loves is an even better man than the royal and rich King of Bohemia (Conan Doyle 40). This is evidenced by the fact that instead of leaving England on her own, and taking only the evidence of her relations with the king, she decides to tell her new husband about Holmes and his scheme to retrieve the king's photo from her, and they, together, leave the country. She left the country with the things that she cares about -- her power over others -- the evidence of her relations with powerful men -- and what she loves -- her husband. This does not, however, mean that Adler was dependent on her husband, or that her husband was the one who made the decisions in the relationship. In the short story, it is made very clear that Adler is the one that suggests that she and her husband leave the country, and it is clear that Adler is taking her husband with her, not the other way around.

#### Irene Adler in Sherlock Holmes

The characterization of Irene Adler in the original short story is a stark contrast to how Adler is portrayed by Rachel McAdams in the *Sherlock Holmes* film released in 2009 and directed by Guy Ritchie. Though some aspects of Adler's personality remain the same in the transition from text to screen, many aspects of Adler's personality are lost.

One thing that stays the same about Irene Adler in this film adaptation is her ethnicity. In the original story by Conan Doyle, Holmes mentions that Adler was born in New Jersey and is an American who has moved to England. The script honors Adler's roots, making it clear that she is American, when she says, "Not that I'm pining for New Jersey" (Sherlock Holmes). This is further supported by the way that McAdams plays Adler through her acting, giving her a clear American accent. Another characteristic about Adler that remains after the transition from text to film is her knowledge of men's costumes and disguises. In the text, Adler remarks in her letter to Holmes that "male costume is nothing new" to her, and that she often takes "advantage of the freedom that it gives" (Conan Doyle 39). This was a strange mindset in Victorian times, that a woman might ever wish to don male's clothing. That different mindset is clearly in McAdam's portrayal of Adler, as she wears part of a man's pinstripe suit when Holmes rescues her from certain death. McAdam's Adler also wears a tweed suit for the film's finale, in which she shoots a gun and runs and is generally very active (Laverty, "Sherlock Holmes Costume Guide Part 2"). This characterization of Adler honors the Adler of the original text in that she is not afraid to be different and wear men's clothing because it makes her feel more comfortable and free.

In the film, Irene Adler is still just as scandalous as she is portrayed in the text. She is not an adventuress, but instead, she is an equally shocking divorcee, and she does have a scandal involving royalty in her past (*Sherlock Holmes*). The film goes further, however, than her simply

being a woman with a disgraceful sexual history -- in the film, she is a professional thief, having stolen a "Velasquez portrait from the King of Spain," "Naval documents, leading to resignation of Bulgarian Prime Minister," and the Maharajah's diamond (Sherlock Holmes). This is a large leap for the movie to take. In the text, she is portrayed as delicate, living quietly and not often leaving her home. The Adler of the film is portrayed as more of a dangerous femme fatale. The costume choices for her character are one way that this is conveyed. Instead of wearing a simplecolored dress, like most of the other women in the film, Adler, for her first meeting with Holmes, wears a flashy and ornate "visiting dress," the colors "riotous," making her out to be a lady unlike the other Victorian ladies of the time (Laverty, "Sherlock Holmes Costume Guide Part 1). McAdam's Adler also wears a satin coat that is specifically meant for housing a pocket knife, showing that she is dangerous and always armed, used to not living quietly (Laverty, "Sherlock Holmes Costume Guide Part 1). McAdam's Adler is a femme fatale, a woman who "molds then subverts the male construction of femininity," as shown in the scene where she wears a kimono, a deliberate costuming choice to show her soft side, and then turns that soft side on its head when she poisons Holmes and handcuffs him to the bed (Laverty, "Sherlock Holmes Costume Guide Part 1). In the finale of the film, Adler is also seen physically fighting and shooting a gun. McAdam's active Adler is very much different from the delicate Adler that Conan Doyle wrote about.

The Adler portrayed in the *Sherlock Holmes* film is a divorcee, which strays from the Adler in the Conan Doyle story. As earlier discussed, the original Adler is happily married and loves her husband. The Adler in the movie says she leaves her husband because he is "boring" and "snored," something that the original Adler would not have done—in fact, the original Adler goes out of her way to take the man that she loves with her, out of the country, to safety

(Sherlock Holmes). The Adler in the Conan Doyle story would not have left someone that she put so much effort into keeping in the first place. In the film, Adler is a love interest for Holmes, which does not honor the original story at all, in that in the original story, to Holmes, Adler is merely a woman who manages to beat him and that he respects greatly.

The Irene Adler of the film is also not as independent as her literary counterpart. In the original story, Adler succeeds through her own devices. However, the Adler portrayed by McAdams is a damsel in distress, one who needs to be saved by someone else. In the film, Adler is captured by the antagonist, Blackwood, and secured to a meat hook. Blackwood then activates a band saw that will cut Adler in half if she does not escape. Instead of trying to escape on her own, she relies on Holmes and Watson to cut her loose and save her. The Adler of the film is also working for Holmes's arch-nemesis, Professor Moriarty, who tells her what to do and where to go (*Sherlock Holmes*). The Adler of Conan Doyle's story would not have let a man tell her what to do, and in fact did not let any man tell her what to do, but the Adler in the movie agrees to do the will of Professor Moriarty. This shows that she is weak and not self-sufficient.

#### Irene Adler in "A Scandal in Belgravia"

Irene Adler has also been recently portrayed in the BBC television series *Sherlock*, in the episode "A Scandal in Belgravia." In this adaptation, Adler is played by actress Lara Pulver. This adaptation is set in modern times. Like the *Sherlock Holmes* film, in the transition from text to television episode, some aspects of Adler's character are maintained, but some are changed or lost.

In *Sherlock*, Adler is turned from a Victorian adventuress to a dominatrix, or, as the script puts it, a provider of "recreational scolding for those who enjoy that sort of thing and are prepared to pay for it" ("A Scandal in Belgravia"). This is a valid modernization -- the Adler of the original story is a provider of sex for payment and demonstrates a risk-taking edge. The Adler of *Sherlock* harbors the same disgraceful past as the Adler of the Conan Doyle stories. She has many different scandals in her past, two concerning politicians and one concerning a young lady in the royal palace ("A Scandal in Belgravia").

Pulver plays Adler as overtly seductive and not dainty at all, as the costume she wears for her first meeting with Holmes reveals. At this meeting, she is stark naked, except for a pair of high-heeled shoes. Pulver also purposefully makes Adler's speech seem very sexual -- she pitches her voice lower and speaks with a seductive tone ("A Scandal in Belgravia"). Many times, she communicates using sexual innuendo, such as when she tells Holmes that she would "have him right here on this desk" until he "begged for mercy twice" ("A Scandal in Belgravia"). In the show, Pulver's Adler speaks with a British accent, implying that she, like Holmes, is British, while in the original text, she is American ("A Scandal in Belgravia"). Sherlock's Adler is also not delicate -- when prompted, she can easily fight and incapacitate armed men. This is a

contrast to how Adler is portrayed in the Conan Doyle story, where she lives quietly and sedately.

The *Sherlock* version of Adler is very clever and strong-willed. When Holmes presents her with a case that he has recently solved, after some thinking, she can solve it easily, without even having to see the crime scene where the death occurred. She is also clever enough to blackmail those whom she has had relations with, keeping her many photos safe on her camera phone, which is hidden away. Even when Holmes is able to obtain Adler's camera phone, Adler is able to get it back by drugging him ("A Scandal in Belgravia"). This is the modernization of the moment where Adler outwits Holmes, just as she does in the original story. Afterwards, though, Holmes outwits her -- he deduces the password to her camera phone, and defeats her, which is in contrast to the original story. However, *Sherlock*'s Adler is just as strong-willed as the original Adler. She refuses to show anyone her camera phone, and says that she would "die before she lets anyone take it" ("A Scandal in Belgravia").

The Adler played by Pulver, however, is not married to a man with whom she is in love. Instead, she tells Watson that she "is gay," but then her camera phone password reflects what is inside her heart, that she is "Sherlocked" ("A Scandal in Belgravia"). This scripting choice does not honor the original story. Instead, it completely turns the character of Irene Adler around. The Adler of the story would not have fallen in love with Holmes, and she would not have been a lesbian. In transitioning the character of Adler from the text to the episode, the fact that Adler had a husband that she loves, enough to take with her when leaving the country, was lost and then replaced with her sexual attraction to women.

The choices made in the script for "A Scandal in Belgravia" also demonstrate that Sherlock's Adler is not independent. Her clever plan to get Holmes to reveal government secrets is not her plan at all -- instead, it is Moriarty's plan ("A Scandal in Belgravia"). Instead of being a woman of great intellect and agency with a "soul of steel" (Conan Doyle 26), in the transition from text to the show, she has been transformed into a woman who simply "knows what men like and how to give it to them" ("A Scandal in Belgravia"). Instead of going her own way, Adler is dependent on the advice and plans of Moriarty. When her plan is complemented, Adler says that she "can't take all the credit" and that she "had a bit of help" from Moriarty, even saying that she "never knew what to do" with her photos until Moriarty gave her "a lot of advice about how to play the Holmes boys" ("A Scandal in Belgravia"). Adler is also dependent on Holmes -- when her camera phone is discovered and she no longer has the protection that comes with it, she is captured by a terrorist cell and sentenced to death. She is saved, however, not by her own devices, but by Holmes, who intercedes, in disguise, fighting off the terrorists and telling her to "run" ("A Scandal in Belgravia"). This plot point does not honor the original story, where Adler is mistress of her own fate, and where she gets herself out of trouble.

#### Conclusion

Irene Adler is an important character in the Sherlock Holmes stories, despite being in only one of Conan Doyle's adventures with Holmes. She is the only woman to ever defeat Holmes in terms of cleverness, and he looks upon her with respect, a respect that he does not give to the rest of her gender. In "A Scandal in Bohemia," Conan Doyle portrays Adler as a daring woman with a scandalous past, a strong will, great determination, wit, and beauty, and incredible independence. She loves a man who loves her, and she is powerful and strong. The recent portrayals of Adler in *Sherlock Holmes* and *Sherlock*, by Rachel McAdams and Lara Pulver respectively, however, have not honored this vision of her. While many aspects of her character remained the same in both adaptations, including Adler's wit, her scandalous past and occupation, and her daring nature, both versions of Adler are not delicate. Instead, they are fighters, trained in action. Neither version is married -- instead, they fall in love with Holmes, in direct contrast to the original Adler. Most jarring, however, is that neither Adler is independent -- instead, both portrayals rely on Moriarty to plan for them and Holmes to save them from death. The Irene Adler of Conan Doyle's story is strong and self-sufficient, but both of the media adaptations portray her as powerless and reliant on others.

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