

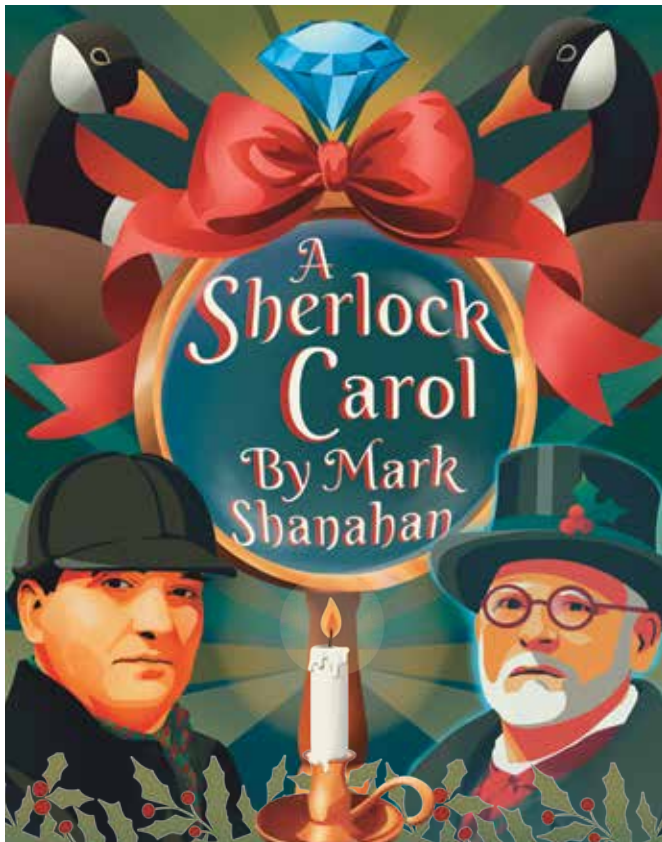
# Study Guide

November 2025

Prepared by Jeremy Ehrlich  
and Stevie VanBronkhorst

# A Sherlock Carol

BY MARK SHANAHAN



Poster art by Brigid Slinger Bowers

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## Looking for the program?



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and access a pdf of the print  
publication.

# About the Play

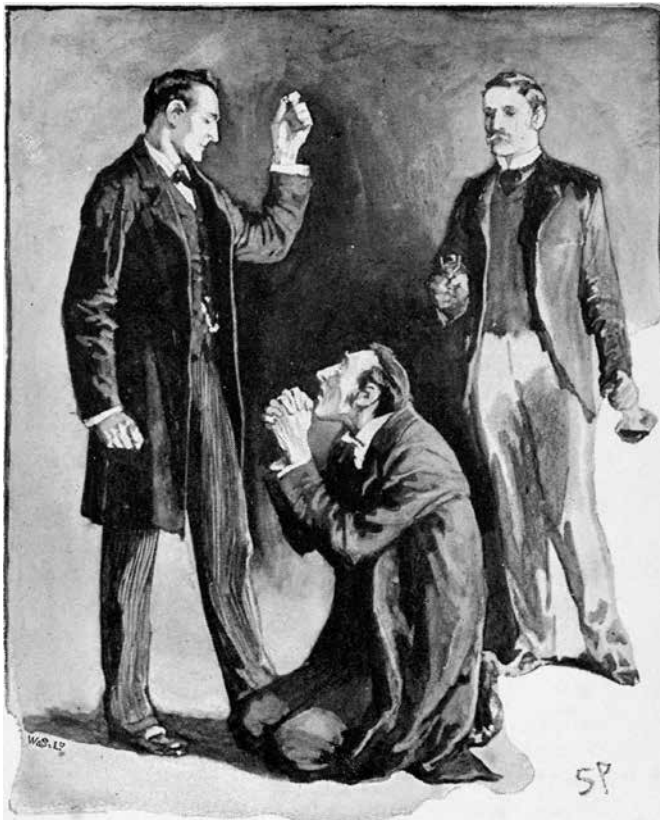
*A Sherlock Carol* by Mark Shanahan takes place in two literary worlds: that of *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens and that of the Sherlock Holmes stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Both worlds take place in Victorian London in 1894.

Two Sherlock Holmes stories are particularly relevant to this play: *The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle* (1892) and *The Final Problem* (1893). *The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle* introduces the missing gem and much of the plot of the play. *The Final Problem* then acts as a precursor with *A Sherlock Carol* taking place after Holmes and Professor James Moriarty plunge to their presumed deaths over the Reichenbach Falls in the Swiss Alps.

While *A Sherlock Carol* is formatted as a Sherlock Holmes mystery and is set in the world of Sherlock Holmes, the moral message of the play, and therefore its tone, is drawn directly from Dickens. Holmes' stories focus on solving a puzzle and do not contain moral messages like most of Dickens' works. Mark Shanahan's script combines both the (Dickensian) moral investigation of one's own life choices with the literal investigation of a crime. Both Scrooge and Holmes have character arcs that hinge on the idea that people can change, and



Mark Shanahan, Playwright



not just through logic, but through heart and human connection. The (Doylean) mystery structure itself becomes a metaphor for uncovering buried emotional truths in a Dickensian way.

By blending these two literary worlds, Shanahan highlights how stories themselves can redeem, heal, and connect us. Holmes, Scrooge, and even the audience are reminded that stories hold moral power—and that revisiting them can illuminate new truths.

*A Sherlock Carol* is ultimately about the reawakening of the human heart through memory, belief, and compassion. Shanahan uses the language of mystery to rediscover Dickens' moral lesson: even the most brilliant or cynical among us can be redeemed by empathy and generosity.

◀ "Have mercy! He shrieked." Ink wash illustration by Sidney Paget for *The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, originally published in 1892 in *The Strand Magazine*.

# Characters in the Play

## AS PLAYED BY AARON LAMB:



AARON LAMB  
Sherlock Holmes



JEFF ALLEN  
PIERCE  
Sherlock Holmes  
Understudy

### Sherlock Holmes

Sherlock Holmes is a fictional detective from a series of famous short stories written by British author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle between 1887 and 1927. Holmes uses his astonishing powers of observation, logic, and deduction to solve a series of crimes.

## AS PLAYED BY ANDREW LITZKY:



ANDREW LITZKY  
Ebenezer Scrooge



JONATHAN  
SWINDLE  
Ebenezer Scrooge  
Understudy

### Ebenezer Scrooge

Ebenezer Scrooge begins *A Christmas Carol* as a cold-hearted miser who is cruel, nearly friendless, and a hater of Christmas. After being visited by four spirits (the ghosts of Jacob Marley, Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Future), he transforms into a kind and generous man. After many years of post-*Christmas Carol* generosity, *A Sherlock Carol* begins just after Scrooge dies.

## AS PLAYED BY ACTOR ONE:



WILLIAM EAMES  
Actor One



JEFF ALLEN  
PIERCE  
Actor One  
Understudy

### Dr. Timothy Cratchett

In *A Christmas Carol*, Tiny Tim is the young, ailing son of Bob Cratchit, Scrooge's underpaid clerk. After Scrooge's transformation, Scrooge gets close to Tim and becomes like a second father to him. Now grown-up, he is a doctor at St. Bernard's Hospital for Children.

### Mr. Topper

Shanahan: "The manager of the Cosmopolitan Hotel. A bit older, a bit pompous. Easily irritated. Supposedly a friend of Fred, Scrooge's nephew." A very minor character in *A Christmas Carol*.

### Ralph Fezziwig

Shanahan: "A nervous, wiry young man. The misfit member of a proud family. Engaged to Fannie." Old Fezziwig in *A Christmas Carol* is a businessman but is notably kinder and more generous than Scrooge.

### Constable Bradstreet

Shanahan: "A seemingly upstanding member of Scotland Yard." He is based on a recurring character in the Holmes stories, including *The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle*.

## Characters, continued

### AS PLAYED BY ACTOR TWO:



ARIKA MATOBA  
Actor Two

#### Emma Wiggins

In the Sherlock Holmes stories, Wiggins is a boy. He leads the Baker Street Irregulars, the unofficial cadre of street children that help Holmes on some of the more baffling cases, acting as his eyes, ears, and information gathering service. Shanahan: "A good-spirited and brave 13-year-old."



AYS GARCIA  
Actor Two  
Understudy

#### Fan "Fannie" Gardner

Shanahan: "Scrooge's grandniece. A refined young woman, she works backstage at the theatre in the Cosmopolitan Hotel. Engaged to Ralph Fezziwig." The daughter of Scrooge's nephew Fred and his wife Lily.

#### Mrs. Windigate

Shanahan: "A Scottish tavern-keeper and member of the Goose Club. Giggly, a whirlwind." Mr. Windigate is briefly referenced in *The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle*.

#### Abigail "Abby" Fezziwig

Shanahan: "Runs a business fattening geese for market. She is no-nonsense and direct—a proud member of the hardworking Fezziwig family."

#### Elderly Woman

### AS PLAYED BY ACTOR THREE:



TYLER CAMPBELL  
Actor Three

#### Dr. Watson

A medical doctor and Holmes' best friend and confidant in Doyle's stories. Smart but lacking Holmes' insight, the two have complementary skills in crime-fighting.

#### Mrs. Dilber

Shanahan: "Mr. Scrooge's housekeeper of over 30 years. An emotional creature with a connection to the spiritual realm." A laundress in *A Christmas Carol*.



JONATHAN  
SWINDLE  
Actor Three  
Understudy

#### Henry Burke

An Irish candlemaker and an old friend of Scrooge. Inspired by the character Henry Baker in *The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle*.

#### Old Joe Brackenridge

Shanahan: "The owner of Old Joe's in Covent Garden. Gruff, a born salesman." He is a composite of the salesman Mr. Brackenridge in *The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle* and the character Old Joe, a shifty pawnbroker in *A Christmas Carol*.



AS PLAYED BY ACTOR FOUR:



HELEN  
HARVESTER  
Actor Four

**Caroler**

**The Countess of Morcar**

A composite of two characters from Doyle's stories: The Countess of Morcar, a British noblewoman and rightful owner of the Blue Carbuncle, and Irene Adler, the antagonist in *A Scandal of Bohemia* who outsmarts Holmes and escapes with a photo Holmes was seeking. In Doyle's stories her relationship with Holmes was not romantic, but many adaptations have portrayed it as such.



LLYSA HOLLAND  
Actor Four  
Understudy

**Martha Cratchit**

Shanahan: "Tough and a bit lower-class than her brother. She is as smart and observant as any detective she might happen to meet." The oldest daughter of Bob Cratchit in *A Christmas Carol* (and Tim's sister).

**Mary Morstan**

Mary Morstan marries Dr. Watson to become Mary Watson. The client in *The Sign of the Four* (1890), Mary dies after the events of *The Final Problem*.

**Inspector Lestrade**

Lestrade is the most frequently recurring police character in the Sherlock Holmes stories. He has been portrayed as everything from a bumbling fool mostly present for comic relief to a serious professional who actively collaborates with Holmes on his investigations.



**ALSO: Professor James Moriarty**

Moriarty is not portrayed by an actor in *A Sherlock Carol*, but still has a notable presence. A math professor turned mastermind criminal, he is Holmes's archenemy and their genius is on par with each other's. He is presumed dead. ■

◀ "He turned his rounded back upon me." Sherlock Holmes and professor James Moriarty, illustration by Sidney Paget from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Adventure of the Final Problem," *The Strand Magazine*, December 1893.

# *Spoiler-free Synopsis*

As the play begins, Sherlock Holmes has survived the plunge that killed Moriarty in *The Final Problem*. He is back in London but his lack of Christmas cheer and intention to stop solving mysteries and fighting crime feel like personal rejection to Watson. Emma Wiggins approaches Holmes for help to free her father from an unfair arrest, but he rejects her. Timothy Cratchit seeks out Holmes because Cratchit's benefactor, Ebenezer Scrooge, has died under suspicious circumstances. Holmes is haunted by his past—and possibly spirits—and something in Scrooge's redemption story convinces Holmes to take up Cratchit's request to investigate the death. Holmes goes to investigate the murder scene and discovers Lestrade there. When a man is attacked in the street, Cratchit tries to help. In the melee, he ends up with the hat and Christmas goose of the man who was attacked. They then decide to send the goose to Cratchit's hospital for the children's Christmas dinner.

Holmes goes to the theatre to hear the Countess of Morcar sing and visits her dressing room after the performance.

She has lost a stunning jewel called the Blue Carbuncle, which she had intended as a gift for her benefactor, Ebenezer Scrooge. A worker at her hotel, Bill Wiggins, is the suspect. Meanwhile, we meet Scrooge's niece Fanny, who is the Countess' dresser at the theatre and is engaged to Ralph Fezziwig.

Emma seeks out Holmes again and he brings her to Cratchit's hospital for a Christmas meal. Cratchit and Holmes observe the hat they've found for clues to find its owner. Cratchit's sister Martha arrives and reveals an impressive blue jewel hidden in the goose she's been prepping for the hospital meal. Martha also deduces that the hat belongs to Henry Burke, a candle-shop owner. Holmes then visits Burke to trace the origin of the goose and its jewel.

Holmes is visited by a spirit that shows him visions of his past, present, and a grim possible future. Back in the present, he continues his search for the goose. But hot on the trail is the jewel's real thief...

## *Sources and Exploration*

### **Full text of *The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle* (1892):**

<https://www.eastoftheweb.com/short-stories/UBooks/AdveBlue.shtml>

### **Full text of *The Final Problem*:**

<https://www.eastoftheweb.com/short-stories/UBooks/FinaProb.shtml>

### **Full text of *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens:**

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/46/46-h/46-h.htm>

### ***A Christmas Carol* Sparknotes study guide:**

<https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/christmascarol/characters/>

### **Article about Victorian London fog/smog:**

<https://www.statesman.com/story/news/2016/09/04/investigating-londons-fog-and-its-effect-on-life-and-literature/9992090007/>

### **Article about Holmes' investigative methods:**

<https://sherlockholmes.com/blogs/news/the-art-of-deduction-how-sherlock-holmes-mastered-the-science-of-crime-solving>

### **Crime in Victorian London:**

<https://www.walks.com/blog/crime-victorian-london/>

# Context, Terms, and Cultural References

**Baker Street Irregulars:** The Baker Street Irregulars are a group of street children who assisted Holmes with several notable cases. Holmes often sends them to run errands or gather information, paying them in return. Wiggins (who is a male and has no first name in Doyle's stories) is described as the leader of the group. Holmes has a friendly, professional relationship with the children, and thinks highly of their abilities.

**Blue Carbuncle:** The Blue Carbuncle is a stone of Doyle's invention. The descriptor is nonsensical to someone who specializes in gems, as a carbuncle is definitionally a red stone, typically a garnet, that has been cabochon cut (shaped and polished but not faceted).

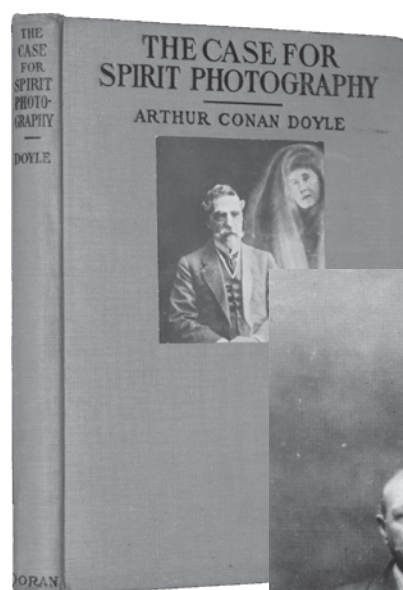
**Covent Garden:** Covent Garden refers to both a district in London and the actual central square of the district. In the Victorian era, the square was known for its bustling marketplace where individuals would sell various wares.

**Goose Club:** Some Victorians joined a "goose club" to pay for their Christmas goose in installments throughout the fall or even the whole year. These were often run out of pubs by landlords who hoped patrons coming in to pay their installments would also stop for drinks.

**Spiritualism:** The belief that a person's spirit persists in some form after death and can communicate with the living. This communication was believed to happen through "mediums," people who possessed an ability to reach between the living world and the afterlife through séances. Notable English spiritualists of the Victorian era included Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Queen Victoria herself. Many believe that the high infant mortality rate and the rising importance of science in society may have played a role in the popularity of spiritualism. ►

**Temperance Society:** The Temperance Movement was extremely popular in 19th-century Britain. Alcohol was seen by those in the movement as a cause of poverty and immorality. The British Women's Temperance Association was formed in 1876 with the stated aim of convincing others to abstain from alcohol.

**7% solution:** Holmes was written as a cocaine addict, injecting himself with a solution of 7% cocaine in water to provide stimulation for his "overactive" brain. This was legal at the time and occasionally prescribed by Victorian doctors.



◀ Doyle's copiously illustrated 1923 first edition of *The Case for Spirit Photography*.

► A 1922 portrait of Doyle created by "spirit photographer" Ada Emma Deane.



◀ A 1930 image of Doyle from a séance by his wife Jean Conan Doyle, created by "photographic medium" William Hope.





# *What's a Pastiche?*

A pastiche is a mashup of two or more works of art: a separate work of art that incorporates elements from another to create something new. The worlds of Sherlock Holmes and of *A Christmas Carol* have both been fodder for many different types of pastiche over the years. In music, pastiche can be created by sampling other pieces. In theatre, plays can incorporate characters or situations found in other works of drama or literature. For example, Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966) is a pastiche that imagines two minor characters from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as characters in a world much like that of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

## *Ghost Light*

Mark Shanahan's opening stage direction for the play directs, "An old-fashioned lamppost sits center, adorned with a Christmas wreath. It might almost seem to be... a Ghost Light." A ghost light is a light left on in a theatre when all other lights are off. They're left on for multiple reasons including safety, superstition, and symbolism—during the pandemic, for instance, ghost lights were left on in theatres to symbolize the ongoing hope of reopening. Before the text of the play even begins, Shanahan is already playing with concepts of theatricality and ghosts.

◀ Servante de théâtre [Ghost Light] © Rémi Jouan, CC-BY-SA, GNU Free Documentation License, Wikimedia Commons



## *Did You Know?*

Telling ghost stories in winter is an old tradition in many cultures. It became an English Christmas tradition around the time that Dickens and Doyle were writing.

◀ *Christmas Story-Telling*  
by John Everett Millais.



# *Did You Know?*

A *Sherlock Carol* is not the first pastiche of Sherlock Holmes stories and *A Christmas Carol* produced at Taproot Theatre! In 2012, Taproot presented *Sherlock Holmes and the Case of the Christmas Carol* by John Longenbaugh. It similarly begins with a declaration that “Moriarty was dead, to begin with” and ends with the same lines from *A Christmas Carol*. In it, Dr. Watson visits his old friend Sherlock Holmes on Christmas Eve, finding him in a dark and misanthropic mood; Holmes is planning to retire from the dull work of solving crimes. Holmes is soon visited by the ghost of his great enemy, Professor Moriarty, who warns Holmes that he is heading toward his own damnation and tells him of an upcoming visit by three spirits. The play is more focused on Holmes’ trips with the spirits, and less focused on solving the mysteries at hand.

Photos © 2012 Erik Stuhauug



## *Discussion questions before seeing the show*

1. What kinds of plot expectations do you have for stories about Sherlock Holmes?
  - Which of those elements do you expect to see in this play?
  - What kinds of thematic expectations do you have for those stories? Which of them do you expect to see in this play?
2. What kinds of plot expectations do you have for a story incorporating the world of *A Christmas Carol*?
  - Which of those elements do you expect to see in this play?
  - What kinds of thematic expectations do you have for that kind of story?
  - Which of them do you expect to see in this play?
3. Are there any similarities that stand out to you about the worlds of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Charles Dickens?
4. Are there any differences that stand out to you? How would you imagine a playwright could bridge those in a story set in both of these worlds?
5. Think about a work of art that you know, in any genre, that is a pastiche of two or more different works of art. **In what ways does the new artwork rehash the older works of art, and in what ways does it create something new?**

## *Activities before seeing the show*

1. Read some Sherlock Holmes stories—try *The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle* and/or *The Final Problem*.
2. Read (or watch a video of) *A Christmas Carol*.
3. Pick an area of theatre design (ex. costumes, sets/props, lighting, sound, etc.) Think about design choices you would make in that area for a Sherlock Holmes story, then about choices you would make for *A Christmas Carol*.  
**How could you merge those? Would they clash? Illuminate each other? Something in between?**
4. Pick a character from Dickens and a character from Doyle and imagine that they meet. Improvise the scene that would come from their meeting. (If you're having trouble getting started, add some backstory details: pick a setting and/or motivation/objective for each character).  
**Do you learn anything about the texts, or about pastiche, from this exercise?**

## *Things to think about when watching the show*

1. Think about the use of hats in the play. Director Bretteney Beverly says, "Each hat represents a "mask" or public identity—the businessman and the detective—both defined by intellect and control. Removing/adding these symbols (literally or figuratively) in the play signals vulnerability and transformation." **How does the production show us that?**
2. **How does the production use light?** Beverly suggests that "light is a recurring Dickensian symbol for enlightenment and redemption. Holmes becomes illuminated – literally and figuratively – by compassion and belief." **Are there moments in the play that make this clear?**
3. Do you hear a difference in Dickensian and Doylean language? Or do they become a single language of the play?

## *Discussion questions after the show*

1. In what ways were your expectations for this show met? In what ways did the play give you something other than you expected?
2. Did you feel like you were watching a story that took place in two different worlds, or in a single, unified world? What did you notice happening in the play that led to that result?
3. Both of the source authors for this play are well known. **Did this play give you any new ways to think about either of them?**
4. How would you sum up the message and/or theme of this production?

## *Activities after the show*

1. Pick two pieces of art that mean something to you and create a pastiche of the two of them. You will probably want to work with something smaller or more specific like two songs, paintings, poems, short stories, etc. If you want to use larger pieces like the world of Harry Potter or Star Wars, pick a small aspect to focus on (like if Hermione and Padme were to meet). **Does the process of turning two pieces of art into something new give you any new insight into *A Sherlock Carol*?**
2. Now that you have seen the play, revisit Activity #4 under "Activities before seeing the show." Is it easier or harder to create something new between these characters now that you've seen something similar on stage?
3. Look up the location of Sherlock Holmes' lodgings (221b Baker St) and Scrooge's office (near Cornhill St) on a map of London. Do you see anything on the map that gives you any clues to their two characters?



# *Education Programs*



## *In-School Residencies & Workshops*

From drama games to acting classes to putting on a production, Taproot Theatre's residencies can range from several weeks to months, or an entire school year. Whether during the school day or after school as an enrichment program, let Taproot's trained teaching artists introduce a whole new world to your students.

Our theatre arts professional will visit your classroom for a workshop that will inspire and excite your students. They will develop basic acting skills and explore non-theatre curriculum using theater as a medium.

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Our Road Company performs plays for elementary and secondary schools, focusing on bullying prevention and social responsibility.

Taproot also provides touring Christmas productions during the holidays and Improv comedy year-round for churches, clubs, office parties, and other groups.



## *Camps & Classes*

Taproot Theatre Company's Acting Studio is a year-round instructional program for theatre artists of all ages and experience levels. We are devoted to the wholeness of the artist with the goal of creating a nurturing environment to help each student develop his or her unique gifts.

### **Learn more about Touring Productions**

at [taproottheatre.org/school](http://taproottheatre.org/school) or contact the Road Company via phone at **206.529.3669** or email at [touring@taproottheatre.org](mailto:touring@taproottheatre.org)

### **Learn more about In-School Residencies and Workshops, and Camps and Classes**

at [taproottheatre.org/acting-studio](http://taproottheatre.org/acting-studio) or contact the Acting Studio via phone at **206.529.2668** or email at [studio@taproottheatre.org](mailto:studio@taproottheatre.org).