In *The Sign of Four*, the reader follows the nearly universally recognizable Sherlock Holmes on a Victorian detective adventure. Armed with his seemingly irrefutable “Science of Deduction” the genius detective cracks the case wide open exonerating the crime’s false suspects and bringing justice to an escaped murderer. And yet when we are first introduced to this “heroic” and iconic detective in *The Sign of Four* we come to find that he is a depressed addict who is obsessed with his work. Later we find that he treats his partner Watson as though he is a fool, refuses to trust women, and ultimately despairs of the world and humanity when he is not absorbed in his work. How does this kind of tortured, faulted, existentially destitute character become so iconic? Perhaps it is these very faults that make Sherlock Holmes so universally compelling.

Early in *The Sign of Four* Sherlock Holmes discusses his addiction to his concerned partner Watson. The patient Doctor questions Holmes use of drugs that have serious health consequences and Holmes reveals that the drugs are a form of self-medication for his own tortured genius brand of deep depression. “I abhor the dull routine of existence. I crave mental exaltation”, states Sherlock Holmes in response to Watson’s concerned questioning. The genius detective makes similarly troubling existential statements throughout the short novella revealing a deep depression and a dark view of the world. It quickly becomes obvious that the iconic detective’s obsession with his work is a means of running away from his inability to make peace with his and humanity’s place in the world. “I cannot live without brainwork”, Holmes says
again to Watson later in the text. “‘What else is there to live for? Stand at the window here. Was ever such a dreary, dismal, unprofitable world?’” (Doyle 12).

The detective’s dark and despairing view of the world extends to his view of humanity and along with his singular focus and obsession with his work the detective’s dealings with other human beings become alarmingly cold and disconnected. In the only instance of the novella where the detective shows a degree of kindness and warmth to another character it turns out to simply be a ploy to continue his work unabated. “‘You have no reason to fear, Mr. Sholto,’ said Holmes kindly, putting his hands upon his shoulder; ‘take my advice and drive down to the station to report the matter to the police. Offer to assist them in every way. We shall wait here until your return’” (Doyle 40). It is a touching moment as far as the cold detective is concerned but we find out on the next page that this lone act of human kindness was only a means for continuing the investigation without interruption. “‘Now, Watson,’ said Holmes, rubbing his hands, ‘we have half an hour to ourselves. Let us make good use of it.’” (Doyle 41). Holmes might as well have said good riddance.

We see this same disconnected and slightly cruel pragmatism in Holmes’ dealing with his exceedingly patient partner Watson. The genius detective is constantly talking down to Watson who is a highly educated Doctor in his own right, not to mention Holmes’ loyal assistant. And despite this Holmes is always talking to Watson as though he were some kind of apprentice. “‘My dear Watson, try a little analysis yourself,’ said he with a touch of impatience. ‘You know my methods. Apply them, and it will be instructive to compare results’” (Doyle 43). Even when encouraging Watson to participate in the investigation Holmes insinuates that at best it would be “instructional” for the Doctor, Watson, rather than helpful in the investigation. It is clear in his interactions with Watson that his emotional and mental state is affecting not only his ability to
function normally but also his ability to empathize with and act decently towards other human beings. From their relationship to the detective’s other similarly cold and overly pragmatic interactions we see a character who is deeply out of touch with his own spiritual humanity and who must use drugs and work to escape his existential anguish. The oftentimes comically portrayed and mimicked detective savant is thus an exceedingly dark and troubled character. Perhaps this combination allows his character to safely express deeply painful human emotions behind the guises of a comically eccentric genius, cushioning his dark universal themes.