

“THERE IS NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN. IT HAS ALL BEEN DONE BEFORE.”: THE RIPPLE EFFECT WITHIN ORIGINAL AND MODERN SHERLOCK HOLMES FAN WORKS

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Introduction

December, 1887: A story is printed in Beeton’s *Christmas Annual*, informing the reader that Part 1 is “Being a Reprint from the Reminiscences of John H. Watson, M.D., Late of the Army Medical Department.” This initial publication of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s *A Study in Scarlet* introduced the public to the fictional detective Sherlock Holmes, whose original storyline spanned 30 years contained within it 56 short stories and 4 longer works (Doyle, 2003). As readers began to gain enthusiasm for the detective’s adventures with Dr. John Watson, media adaptations and spin-offs were created in order to extend Holmes’ canon beyond Doyle’s stories. Ranging from short stories to ballets, these works helped continue the popularity of Holmes into modern-day culture, where television shows such as BBC’s *Sherlock* and films such as director Guy Ritchie’s *Sherlock Holmes* attract millions of viewers.

The aim of this paper is to highlight the “ripple effect” visible within the realm of Sherlock Holmes fan works. This “ripple effect” began with Doyle’s original canon leading to the creation of fan works, which have, in turn, been treated as canon themselves and have led to the creation of additional fan works, and so on. With all fan works sharing a common root at the center of this “ripple,” many elements that were thought to be unique to one era of the fandom can instead be found within both. Since little research has been done regarding this phenomenon, it is hoped that, by highlighting it, members of the fandom will be able to see themselves and their works as part of a continuum that has persisted through time regardless of their source material rather than a subgroup of the overarching Sherlock Holmes fandom.

Working forward, two main eras of the fandom will be analyzed: the “original” fandom, whose source material is primarily Doyle’s original stories and spans from 1887 (when *A Study in Scarlet* was initially published) to 1959 (where the number of Sherlock Holmes-related fan works declined, signaling a possible “end” to this era; it should also be noted, however, that fan works based on additional fan works were present during this time but, due to the nature of this research, will not be highlighted); and the “modern” fandom, whose main source material is from modern fan works such as the BBC television series *Sherlock*, as well as the 2009 and 2011 films *Sherlock Holmes* and *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows*, and spans from 2009 (when the film *Sherlock Holmes* was released and the number of Sherlock Holmes-related fan works began to increase) until the present. It should be acknowledged that these eras were created for the purpose of this paper, and are by no means definitive.

Additionally, for the remainder of this paper, a fan work is defined as any creative product (literature, drama, etc.) whose subject is taken from an original work (referred to as “canon”) that the creator is fond of (Derecho, 2006). According to John Caweti in regards to Doyle’s canon, there are three forms of Sherlock Holmes fan works: imitations, which are adaptations that resemble Doyle’s form of writing; pastiches, which are works that incorporate numerous elements of the original canon, but incorporate an element or perspective that parodies Doyle’s work (these works are also referred to as parodies in general); and re-creations, which are tributes to Doyle’s canon by using his characters in a new work that commentates the context of the original canon (Cawelti, n.d.). Within each era of the fandom, two key disciplines of fan works were present: dramatic and literary. Dramatic fan works are those that were created and shared to members of the fandom by means of performance, whether it is live or recorded. Literary works, on the other hand, are those designed to be read by the members of the fandom.

Dramatic Fan Works

The first play based on the original Holmes canon, simply entitled *Sherlock Holmes*, was penned by Charles Rogers and was produced in Glasgow in May of 1894. Starring John Webb as Holmes, little is known about this production (University of

Malta, n.d.). Although Doyle himself went on to pen numerous plays based on his canon, a larger number of unauthorized plays featuring the detective that could be classified as re-creation fan works were produced in America and Europe during this time as well. Dramatic works based off of the Holmes canon also expanded into the genres of burlesque (*Sheerlock Jones (or Why D'Gillette Him Off?)*) starring Clarence Blakiston; this work also illustrates the representation of parody fan works within the realm of dramatic works) and ballet (*The Great Detective* by Margaret Dale, Richard Arnell and Brian Robb) before entering the film industry. Between 1906 and 1954, over 115 Holmes films were produced across the globe in areas ranging from America to Denmark. Originating with “cheap” pictures such as *Sherlock Holmes in The Great Murder Mystery* (in which Holmes “goes into a trance to pin a murder on an escaped gorilla,” a plot line not documented by Doyle), these films featured producers occasionally manipulating the characters to fit their actors (i.e. John Barrymore’s Sherlock in *Sherlock Holmes* (1922) having a more romantic personality than that portrayed in the original canon) (Howlett and Pointer, 1954).

Since 2009, two dramatic portrayals of Holmes and Doyle’s canon have been highlighted in modern media: the Guy Ritchie-directed films *Sherlock Holmes* and *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* starring Robert Downey Jr. and Jude Law as Holmes and Watson; and BBC television series *Sherlock*, starring Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman in the same roles, respectively.

Sherlock Holmes focuses on Holmes and Watson’s investigation of serial killer and occultist Lord Henry Blackwood after his apparent rise from the grave, while *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* focuses on the men’s pursuit of criminal mastermind Professor Moriarty. While these films do maintain the canonical personalities of the characters as well as the Victorian England setting, many elements cause these films to be defined as fan works (specifically, re-creation works) rather than accurate film adaptations of the original canon. Take, for example, the character of the film’s antagonist, Lord Henry Blackwood. Blackwood does not appear anywhere in the original canon, and would be described in modern literary fan work terms as an “original character”, or OC. In modern written fan works, OCs are typically used to either insert a personification of the author into the story, or to provide a romantic partner to one of the

canonical characters (some authors use the same OC to serve both purposes). However, in this film, Blackwood was developed as possibly a “reference to Conan Doyle’s own occult eccentricity” due to his obsession with spiritualism (“Henry Blackwood,” n.d.). Additionally, certain characters within the films are portrayed in a different capacity than within the original canon. One prime example of this is Irene Adler, or, as she is more commonly called, The Woman. Adler only appears in the canonical story of *A Scandal in Bohemia*, where she possesses a photograph that Holmes is hired to retrieve and the two characters briefly meet twice. However, in the films, she acts as an occasional assistant to Holmes and Watson, and it is hinted that she and Holmes were, to an extent, romantically involved (Ritchie, 2009) (Ritchie, 2011).

Perhaps the adaptation most commonly represented in modern pop culture, the BBC series *Sherlock* places Holmes, Watson, and many other canonical characters in present-day London, where they solve modernized versions of the crimes written by Doyle. The real insight as to how the show serves as a form of fan work (more specifically, a modification of a re-creation) is evident in the audio commentaries to the episodes provided by members of the show’s production team. In the audio commentary of the series’ first episode, “A Study in Pink,” co-creators Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss describe how they both “fell in love with the stories as kids” and, after learning of their shared love of the films starring Nigel Bruce, decided that they wanted to “find a modern equivalence without forcing it.” With the creation “A Study in Pink” (based off of Doyle’s first Holmes story, *A Study in Scarlet*), Moffat and Gatiss strived to keep Holmes as what Doyle described a “man of his age,” so they portrayed him as a “modern man” with traits such as constant access to technology through his smart phone. Among many other modern updates to the show was the adaptation of how John Watson presented his writings on Holmes’ cases. In the original canon, Watson is identified as the narrator, who documents and publishes Holmes’ exploits, while Martin Freeman’s portrayal has him blogging his adventures (an element that recurs frequently throughout the series and has even spawned a real world BBC-run counterpart available online)

While developing the script for this episode in regards to the original story, Moffat and Gatiss wanted to remain as true to the original canon as possible. However, due to the challenges involved with adapting a novel into an hour and a half television

program, many elements had to be modified. For example, the section in “A Study in Scarlet” where the antagonist, Jefferson Hope, describes his motivation for the crimes committed throughout the novel through the use of flashbacks, was eliminated. Even with these modifications, many additional elements of the original canon are included within the series in varying capacities. Consider the opening scene of *A Study in Scarlet*, where John Watson meets with his friend, Mark Stamford, in the Criterion bar and the fact that one of Stamford’s acquaintances is looking for someone to share a flat with is brought up in conversation (this acquaintance is later revealed to be Sherlock Holmes). In “A Study in Pink”, the scene is replicated in a park, where both Watson and Stamford can be seen drinking coffee from a venue named Criterion (Gatiss et al., 2010).

Other references in the series are more directly taken from the original canon, such as the discussion on Holmes’ knowledge of the solar system found within *A Study in Scarlet*. Its television counterpart can be found within the episode “The Great Game”, when they have the same discussion. The quote Cumberbatch says in the show is almost identical to that in the book, except with the addition of the section saying, “...round and round the garden like a teddy bear...”

What solidifies this series as a form of fan fiction, however, is the addition of the character of Molly Hooper. In the BBC series, Hooper, portrayed by Louise Brealey, is a pathologist at St. Bartholomew’s hospital and assists Holmes with many experiments that help him solve his crimes. Originally written in as a minor role in “A Study in Pink,” Hooper’s role was expanded over the run of the series into an essential character. However, unlike the remainder of the characters in the series, Hooper does not have a canonical counterpart and is considered an OC, much like Lord Blackwood in the Robert Downey Jr. films. Because of the inclusion of Hooper, *Sherlock* cements its status as a modified re-creation Sherlock Holmes fan fiction (note that it is not considered a pastiche in this paper due to the fact that the added elements are not intended to parody Doyle’s original canon) (Gatiss et al., 2012).

With the widespread popularity of these two modern fan works (especially that which accompanies the BBC series), the “ripple effect” previously described becomes clearly visible through the creation of additional works based off of these. Consider, for example, the 2013 sketch *Sherlocked* from the Los Angeles performance of the Joe

Moses Showses. While the dramatic works produced during the original era of the fandom as well as those produced by Guy Ritchie and the BBC treated the Sir Arthur Conan Doyle stories as their primary source of canon, this work demonstrates the shift towards the modern fandom treating the BBC series as its primary source of canon. This shift in canon has allowed actors Joey Richter, Brian Rosenthal and Joe Moses to portray not only the characters of Holmes, Watson, and Professor Moriarty as described in Doyle's writings, but to also incorporate the performances of Benedict Cumberbatch, Martin Freeman and Andrew Scott in their respective roles.

Additionally, the shift in canon has allowed elements characteristic of the original canon that were present within the BBC series to continue to be represented within the archive of Sherlock Holmes-related fan works. Perhaps the clearest example of this phenomenon is through Holmes' iconic deductions. Within all three works (the original stories, the BBC series, and the *Sherlocked* sketch), Holmes analyzes the situation he is placed in and, through his observations, is able to determine a solution to the dilemma in which he is placed. Throughout the sketch, this is exemplified by Holmes' ease of determining their captor's identity based off of an ink smudge on his hand in the shape of a "W" or "M," as well as the passcode to disarm a bomb based off of cryptic instructions from Moriarty. As characteristic of other re-creation works, however, the major difference between the sketch and its canon (the BBC series) is the addition of comedic elements within the performance. Quips such as eliminating the possibility of Moriarty smudging ink on his hand while writing a letter because he "has no friends" and having Watson retrieve a permanent marker for Holmes to sniff because it helps him concentrate (a nod towards Holmes' drug use throughout the original canon, which is also referenced within the BBC series) help adapt the work to fit its context within Moses' sketch comedy show (*Sherlocked* (The Joe Moses Showses), 2013).

As seen in the original fandom with production such as *Sheerluck Jones (or Why D'Gilette Him Off)*, dramatic fan works in the modern fandom also extend beyond the classification of re-creation works into pastiches. Perhaps one of the more well-known examples of this is the nrk sketch *Oklahomo*. Once again treating the BBC series as its source of canon, this sketch parodies the popular fictionalized homosexual relationship between Holmes and Watson (referred to as JohnLock and described in more detail

below in regards to literary fan works). While elements of JohnLock are evident throughout the entire sketch, the clearest example of actors Vidar Magnussen and Bjarte Tjøstheim (portraying Cumberbatch and Freeman’s Holmes and Watson, respectively) accomplishing this can be seen within the deduction sequence. Whereas the previous fan works described use Holmes’ deduction abilities in a logical manner to determine the culprit of a crime, Magnussen’s Holmes instead leads the viewer through an illogical series of deductions on a corpse (highlighting such unimportant features as “small shoes indicating small feet” and “hair that reminds me of Christmas”) before ultimately concluding that the man was gay and then kissing Tjøstheim’s Watson (Original Sherlock parody - Oklahomo [HD], 2014).

Literary Fan Works

The first “official” literary Sherlock Holmes fan work was written in 1891 by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s friend, J.M. Barrie. The creation of this “take-off” of the canon was the instigating step in the creation of numerous written parodies of the canon (Lycett, 2009). Many fan-created short stories (hereon referred to as “fan fiction”) were published in Strand Magazine (the original publisher of Doyle’s short stories), with the final story appearing in the February 1947 issue. Written by Ronald A. Knox (also referred to as “Father Knox” and was considered one of the greatest Sherlockian experts), *The Apocryphal Sherlock Holmes: The Adventure of the First Class Carriage* was what Caweti would have considered an imitation (as were many works of fan fiction during this time). As with the majority of the literary fan works produced during this time, John Watson narrates the adventure that ensues after a caretaker reveals to Holmes and Watson two letters retrieved from a trash can written by a couple boarding with her and her husband detailing something “in the reeds by the lake” (this style of writing, as well as the plotline, mimicked that employed by Doyle and leads to these works being considered imitations) (Knox, 1947). During this time, literary fan works also begin to introduce the idea of a relationship between Holmes and Watson (an element that is discussed in more detail in regard to the modern fandom). One such work, *The Many Facets of Dr. Watson*, poses the question to the reader about whether or not Watson should have wed his canonical wife, Mary Morstan, or remained with Holmes (Coltart, n.d.).

In regards to the modern fandom, two of the largest sources of fan fiction are contained on the websites FanFiction.Net and ArchiveOfOurOwn.org. Both websites allow users to publish, read, and comment on works based on books, movies, television shows, etc. Since the websites are free, the works can be much more easily distributed than if they were published in the traditional manner (such as Strand magazine), thus exposing them to a wider audience. Currently, over 3,700 and 2,000 works are categorized as being based on the original canon on each website (as demonstrated by being found under the Books: Sherlock Holmes and Books & Literature: Sherlock Holmes-Arthur Conan Doyle subcategories on FanFiction.Net and Archive of our Own, respectively). Much like the modern dramatic works described above, the majority of Holmes-based fan fiction available on these websites treat *Sherlock* as its source of canon (extending the “ripple effect” illustrated above into literary fan works). Due to this change in source material, authors of this type of fan fiction typically stray from writing in the same manner as Doyle (commonly writing from a third person point of view instead of from Watson’s and leading these works to be considered re-creations rather than imitations). However, because of the shared “root” source material of both the original and modern works (whether it be directly through the original canon or through a secondary source such as Sherlock), the personalities of Holmes and Watson, as well as the plot of Holmes using his skills of deduction to assist law enforcement with solving crimes alongside Watson remain essential components in the majority of modern fan fiction.

Within the over 47,400 and 57,000 entries in the specific *Sherlock* subcategories on FanFiction.Net and Archive of our Own, respectively, a common theme is the romantic pairing of Holmes with an additional character (typically referred to as “shipping”). Although this idea is present in some literary works of the original fandom, its popularity is a defining feature of the modern fandom, especially that associated with Sherlock, as the only key romantic relationship in the original canon as well as both the Guy Ritchie films and the BBC series is that between John Watson and Mary Morstan (originating in *The Sign of Four*). The two most common shippings occur between Holmes and Watson (referred to in the modern era as “JohnLock”) and Holmes and Molly Hooper (referred to as “Sherlolly;” this is especially unique to the Sherlock

fandom as the character of Molly Hooper was created specifically for the show and has no equivalent in the original canon). As with other elements illustrated, the perpetuation of the fictionalized Holmes and Watson relationship can also be attributed to the “ripple effect.” Typically, the fan fiction author works these relationships in with a plot line modeled off of their knowledge of the source material, causing these works to fall into the category of re-creations.

Another common element within modern Holmes fan fiction is the idea of the AU, or Alternate Universe. Typically identifiable in the summaries of fan fiction by an “AU” notation, these stories take the characters of Holmes and Watson from the source material (i.e. the BBC series) with one key aspect of the source material changed, typically indicated in the format (change)!Lock or (change)!John if the change is unique to John Watson. The main identifying factor of an AU (the change) can take the form of alternate roles that the characters take on (i.e. university and medical school students, as described below), the genders of one or more characters being switched (i.e. Sherlock being portrayed as a woman, referred to as Fem!Lock), or the characters being placed into a drastically different scenario than those portrayed in the source material (i.e. Sherlock becoming a parent, referred to as Parent!Lock).

One example of modern AU writing would be FanFiction.Net user YupThatsMySock’s story *Tea Leaves* which features the alternate universe of University!Sherlock and MedSchool!John (in which the characters of Sherlock and John are portrayed as an university student and medical student, respectively). YupThatsMySock’s story, told in 100-word sections that each highlight a color from a pre-written list, uses the BBC series as its primary source material, and tells the story of the progression of Holmes and Watson’s relationship as if they met in a coffee shop where Watson worked. The author portrays the characters with the same personality traits as those portrayed in the BBC series, but, like all AU stories, places the characters themselves in a situation not discussed in the source material (YupThatsMySock, n.d.) (FanFiction.Net, 2013) (“Sherlock (TV)-Works,” n.d.).

Conclusion

Even within the modern era of the fandom itself, the “ripple effect” described above continues to occur, extending beyond works based on the Guy Ritchie films and the BBC series. One of the clearest examples of this can be seen in the soon-to-be released web series *A Finger Slip*. When released, the series will document the development of the Holmes and Watson relationship as if the characters met when a young adult Watson accidentally texts a wrong phone number, which happens to belong to Holmes. Instead of treating the BBC series as its canon like the majority of modern fan works, the web series instead places the fan fiction of the same name by Archive of our Own user Pawtal in the role, which itself treated the BBC series as its canon. This additional shift in canon allows not only the preservation of elements from the original written piece (i.e. the AU of Holmes and Watson meeting via text when they are young adults), but those from the BBC series (i.e. the portrayal of Holmes and Watson by Cumberbatch and Freeman) and, ultimately, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s original storyline (i.e. the personalities of Holmes and Watson) (“A Finger Slip,” n.d.) (“The Story,” n.d.).

As illustrated by the numerous examples above, the “ripple effect” present within the realm of Sherlock Holmes fan works has allowed a variety of aspects to remain present in the ever-increasing archive of dramatic and literary fan works. While the works created during the original fandom treated the Sir Arthur Conan Doyle stories as its main source of canon, those created during the modern era placed the Guy Ritchie films and BBC series in the same role. Since both of these modern sources of canon are fan works themselves, additional fan works created during the modern era have been able to incorporate not only the aspects of the original stories that were present within fan works of the original era, but also the aspects that were created for these new sources of canon. As additional fan works are created, the works that are treated as the canon for other works continues to shift, further extending the “ripple effect.” It is the intention that, by identifying this phenomenon, creators and consumers of Sherlock Holmes-related fan works will see the works themselves as being part of an ever-expanding archive regardless of what source of canon is used.

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