

# “EVERYTHING WAS ANTICIPATED, EVERY EVENTUALITY ALLOWED FOR”: FAN SERVICE, PAST AND PRESENT, IN “THE EMPTY HEARSE”

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Title character Sherlock Holmes makes an oddly encompassing statement toward the beginning of “The Empty Hearse,” the seventh episode of the BBC’s 2010-present show *Sherlock*: as he prepares to explain a crucial plan to best friend John Watson, Holmes asserts that “Everything was anticipated, every eventuality allowed for” (“The Empty Hearse”). While Holmes is implying that his planning was extensive enough to prepare for every possible outcome, Watson’s reaction of confusion and anger clearly puts the lie to the detective’s assertion of infallibility – much in the same way that fans might put the lie to the show writers’ confidence of fulfilling all audience hopes for *Sherlock*’s heavily-anticipated third season.

According to Christopher Redmond, Sherlock Holmes one of the most prolific characters from literature (232), so often and so widely portrayed that it is nearly impossible to count exactly how many times he has made an appearance in either traditional or contemporary media. In a 2009 estimate, though, Redmond enumerates over 200 films (232-242), over 6,000 scholarly articles (290-1), and multiple additional offerings in media ranging from theatre and television to music, comics, and television. This wealth and variety of Holmes-derived narratives can be attributed to a number of factors, including the “timeless” appeal of the adventure story, Holmes’s pioneering deductive method, and/or Watson’s Everyman-esque insight into the workings of detective procedure – but the consistent demand for and popularity of Sherlock Holmes stories also stems, in large part, from inherent audience participation.

As a genre, detective fiction itself already invites a particular type of audience participation: readers are meant to experience, if not always solve, the mystery alongside the narrative’s protagonist(s). Apologists for the genre often refer to the 1928 oath sworn by the Detection Club, in which writers promised that their detectives “shall well and truly detect the crimes presented to them, using those wits which it may please [the author] to bestow upon them and not placing reliance on nor making use of Divine Revelation, Feminine Intuition, Mumbo-

Jumbo, Jiggery-Pokery, Coincidence or the Act of God” (Brabazon 144). While contemporary detective fiction often ‘solves’ this issue of facilitating audience participation in the mystery’s solution through an immersive, first-person narrative by the detective characters themselves, the majority of Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories instead use the first-person narration of Dr. John Watson, as an Everyman character alongside the detective. With either solution, though, audience participation becomes an integral part of detective fiction.

In addition to this expectation of the overall genre, though, Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories are particularly linked to another specific tradition of audience participation: the Great Game. Pioneered by Roman Catholic priest Ronald Knox in 1911, the Great Game consists of critical yet tongue-in-cheek readings that treat the Sherlock Holmes stories as non-fiction, and posit possible explanations for inconsistencies and vagaries throughout Doyle’s work. In her 1947 foreword to *Unpopular Opinions*, Dorothy Sayers was the first to call this practice “the game” and specify its mock-exegetical intentions, noting that since Knox’s introduction “the thing has become a hobby among a select set of jesters . . . The rule of the game is that it must be played as solemnly as a country cricket match at Lord’s: the slightest touch of extravagance or burlesque ruins the atmosphere” (vi). Despite her own contributions to the Great Game, though – five essays that variously examine Holmes’s college career, Watson’s name, the confusion surrounding Watson’s wife or wives, and the problem of dates in many of the stories – Sayers concludes her foreword with a warning that this type of meta-analysis can also be used seriously and misleadingly (vi).

The BBC’s 2010-present show *Sherlock* makes its own additions to the Holmesian Great Game in a number of ways, some inherently due to its genre and medium but others unique to the show itself. First, *Sherlock*’s additions to the traditional Great Game are due in part to the additional dimensions available in visual story-telling – through film, details can be hinted at in micro-seconds while still being preserved for sharp-eyed viewers to find and understand in later re-viewings. Second, detective fiction as a whole is ordinarily meant to be understood as taking place in the primary or “real” world, rather than in a secondary or “created” world (terms introduced by J.R.R. Tolkien, genius of another genre, in “On Fairy Stories”) as many other types of genre fiction do. Finally, though, the show *Sherlock* also has an additional attribute in its favor: writers Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss are self-pronounced “fanboys” who have

expressed their admiration for and determination to work with Doyle’s canon multiple times (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1**

*Moffat and Gatiss have discussed their own fannish love for Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories in many interviews, for example: [Interview on “Video Q&A”](#)*

**Image:** *Moffat (l) and Gatiss (r) on the set of Sherlock; Image credit: [Charlie Gray, EmpireOnline](#)*

Moffat and Gatiss’s affection for and familiarity with Doyle’s work becomes evident in the way they make use of the two attributes previously discussed – visual story-telling and primary-world setting – to play a pseudo-version of the Great Game, making multiple hidden references to Doyle’s work in a contemporary ‘real’ setting. Most notably, the cliffhanger final episode of the show’s first season was actually titled “The Great Game”: a specific reference to Knox’s and Sayer’s practice while ostensibly named for the way in which antagonist Jim Moriarty plays “this little game of ours” by leaving puzzling potential crimes around London (“The Great Game”). With its third and most recent season, though, *Sherlock* moves beyond playing this version of the Great Game and into something else: fan service.

“The Empty Hearse,” the show’s seventh episode, adapts Doyle’s story “The Empty House” to provide an explanation for protagonist Sherlock Holmes’s continued survival after jumping from a hospital rooftop in front of multiple witnesses. The move from the Great Game to attempted fan service is quickly made apparent: where previous episodes play the Great Game by referencing Doyle’s work in either explanatory story arcs or quick circuitous glimpses, the main narrative and points of “The Empty Hearse” actually use fannish portrayals and fandom references to play to certain viewers and understandings.

Keith Russell coined the term “fan service” in 2008, defining it as “the random and gratuitous display of a series of anticipated gestures [that] include such things as panty shots, leg spreads (spread legs) and glimpses of breasts” (107). According to Russell, such gestures are designed to please or “service” consumers of manga and anime (107) through an elevating, anti-traditional interplay among desire, expectation, and experience(s) to create “Glimpses” into sexuality that mirror target audiences’ own time of life (107): furthermore, fan service is experienced by both characters within the text and audiences beyond it (107-8). However, Russell also asserts an important caveat: “the closer Fanservice comes to reality the less useful it is as Fanservice. . . the mediation of desire is the purpose, not the gratification” (108).

While the device that I am designating fan service in “The Empty Hearse” does differ from Russell’s in some ways, I adopt Russell’s term because the device in “The Empty Hearse” is derived from a remarkable number of the same attributes and supposed purposes that Russell’s work denotes for manga and anime. Where Russell’s fan service derives from a specific culture and age group to offer its audience “Glimpses” into sexual experience through certain character “shots,” fan service in the “The Empty Hearse” derives from a different but also particularly specific culture; more importantly, however, it also offers audiences “glimpses” of realization. What is being glimpsed in “The Empty Hearse,” though, functions in a much more convoluted interplay, as most audiences who can recognize and process its fan service will find portrayals – including ridicules and devaluations – of themselves in their fannish identities.

Fan service in “The Empty Hearse” takes two primary forms: representational and paratextual. Representational fan service includes depictions of fans and fandom practices, and its examples can be further subdivided in terms of curative and transformative approaches. By contrast, paratextual fan service in “The Empty Hearse” involves cultural, often multi-media, practices and events from past and present fannish histories of both Doyle’s works and the show *Sherlock* specifically. In the case of both representational and paratextual references, though, audiences’ understanding of “The Empty Hearse” can easily be changed or limited by their familiarity with the Great Game and culture surrounding Doyle’s work, the show’s filming process, the participants’ social media presence and commentary during the season’s filming, and/or the surrounding fandom community and culture.

The presence and function of representational fan service is immediately visible throughout “The Empty Hearse,” even from the episode title itself. While this title does reference

Doyle's 1903 story "The Empty House," it is also explained from within the show as well, as the name of a fan club that gathers to swap theories about how Sherlock Holmes survived his fall from the hospital rooftop. The Empty Hearse fan club and its members constitute the most persistent instance of representational fan service, as the episode is filmed to show their theories panning out as actual events – before moving, jarringly, back to the "real" narrative.

The treatment of Holmes's rooftop leap and continued survival is one of the episode's clearest and most persistent examples of representational fan service. According to one theory from a fan character, former forensics officer Phillip Anderson, Holmes survived his rooftop jump through the action-movie-style use of a bungee cord, a bouncy castle, multiple accomplices, and a cadaver switch – for viewers, filming switches between recognizable emotional scenes from the second season's finale ("The Reichenbach Fall") interspersed with "behind the scenes"-style examples of Anderson's theory ("The Empty Hearse"). Notably, though, this in-show fannish visualization is actually the opening scene of "The Empty Hearse," and viewers are treated to what is really a fan theory about Sherlock Holmes's survival as a serious explanation, if only for a few moments. Then, according to another fan character later in the episode, a young woman named Laura, Holmes survived by making fun of the spectators below and throwing down a dummy without ever intending to jump at all ("The Empty Hearse"). Again, this fannish visualization of a fan theory is filmed and shown as a serious explanation for a few moments before the show cuts to the Empty Hearse fan club, where Anderson is ridiculing Laura's theory.

In addition, then, these two examples also demonstrate how representational fan service in "The Empty Hearse" can also be understood in subdivisions of curative and transformative portrayals. This division involves the way in which some fans' theories are implied to be more acceptable, serious, and/or palatable than others, and bring to mind a long-standing argument of validity and ownership – who can say what is "right" or "better" in fannish practice? While the characters in the Empty Hearse fan club all invite viewer ridicule, their subtle positions as curative or transformative fans invoke different kinds of ridicule for different reasons.

With his action-movie-sequence explanation, curative fan Phillip Anderson is made to look ridiculous because of his drive to categorize or "fix" his fannish obsession with Holmes's apparent suicide: however, viewers are also shown that he feels guilt for his role in accusing Holmes the previous season ("The Empty Hearse"). With her more tongue-in-cheek explanation,

transformative fan Laura is made to look ridiculous for imagining the possibility that Holmes would have worked with and been attracted to his opponent Moriarty (“The Empty Hearse”). Viewers are expected to realize that neither explanation is at all likely in the primary world of the show, but the characters of Anderson and Laura are at odds because of their positions within even their marginal fannish community. Curative Anderson argues that he is the only one who “takes it seriously” (“The Empty Hearse”) and holds his positions as both the founder of the Empty Hearse fan club and as someone who had actually met and worked with Holmes over the other fans’ heads to explain why his still-unlikely explanation is “better.” Transformative Laura, on the other hand, is asked “Are you out of your mind?” (“The Empty Hearse”) because she envisions a scenario that, while really no less implausible, contradicts and threatens the curative fan’s still-theoretical viewpoint. This differentiation between curative and transformative is especially noteworthy, though, when in the episode’s aftermath real-life *Sherlock* fans immediately began to associate with Anderson as a fellow fan (**Fig. 2**) – despite his being a previously-reviled character, and despite the show’s own subtle positioning against transformative fannishness through the ‘ridiculous’ Laura.



**Fig. 2**

*One of the many fan reactions to “The Empty Hearse” that embraced the character Phillip Anderson is representative of the show’s own fans. Credit: [wasiafooltothink](#) on Tumblr*

Representational fan service, then, becomes an integral narrative device in “The Empty Hearse.” By filming through allegedly fannish points-of-view, the episode offers its viewers glimpses into fan culture – or, more accurately, into *what its writers deem or depict as fan culture*. This distinction between actual fan culture and the *Sherlock* writers’ depictions of fan culture becomes especially crucial when considering how fan characters such as Phillip Anderson and Laura are portrayed as ridiculous, fickle, and/or shallow. Furthermore, it is easy for viewers to miss these implications and the episode’s ultimate impact without a fairly thorough understanding of fannish differences.

In addition to representational fan service, though, “The Empty Hearse” also makes use of paratextual fan service, which functions through two different acknowledgements of real-life *Sherlock* fans. First, paratextual fan service took place beyond the show in late 2013 and early 2014 with the publicity of an actual empty hearse and the show’s use of the hashtag #sherlocklives to drive fan interest and speculation (**Fig. 3**): later, the hashtag was also used within the show itself as the means by which the Empty Hearse fan club learned Holmes was alive. Even more notably, though, paratextual fan service functions by referencing real-life *Sherlock* fans’ own pre-season theories and speculations within “The Empty Hearse” itself, thus making some fannish speculations into show canon.



**Fig. 3**

*This hearse drove around London on November 29, 2013 to advertise the upcoming 2014 season of Sherlock and to help gain traction for the hashtag #sherlocklives. Those who saw the hearse were expected to make the connection between the play on the upcoming episode’s recently-announced title, the hashtag, and the release date.*

**Image credit:** [The Guardian/BBC](#)

With *Sherlock*’s 2012 cliffhanger episode “The Reichenbach Fall,” viewers were left with a few key pieces of knowledge: that Sherlock Holmes had apparently jumped off a rooftop, that John Watson believed him dead, and that Holmes was in fact still alive. Until “The Empty Hearse” aired in January 2014, then, fans were left to speculate about how Holmes had survived

and how Watson would eventually react to learning about whatever the trick had been. Some of the most notable, and also understated, paratextual fan service in “The Empty Hearse” thus involves the writers’ in-show acknowledgement of their own fans.

Through March 2013, fan artist shockingblanket posted a series of distinctive and immediately-popular artworks to Tumblr. These artworks featured chibi gif renderings of Holmes and Watson, in which Watson is completing some everyday task and Holmes pops out from an unexpected place with a blinking #notdead as Watson’s mouth falls open and his eyes pop. With its simple and fun concept, Shockingblanket’s “not dead” quickly became a recognized signal across the *Sherlock* fandom, picked up and echoed by other fan creators and Tumblr users when debates over theories on Holmes’s survival intensified. Then, in a stunning example of paratextual fan service, Holmes’s eventual revelation to Watson in “The Empty Hearse” takes much of its punch from this fanwork. It is arguable whether the actual action of Holmes’s revelation follows shockingblanket’s formula (in the episode, Holmes pulls off glasses and drops a fake French accent in front of Watson in the middle of a restaurant), but Holmes’s lines accompanying this “big reveal” are a definite hint to fans. When the shocked Watson demands an explanation, Holmes’s answer is “Well, short version – not dead” (“The Empty Hearse”). Holmes’s use of the incomplete clause rather than the more natural declarative “I’m not dead” clearly demonstrates the show’s use of a fan idea that audiences beyond the tight-knit *Sherlock* fandom probably would not recognize. The device of filming possible explanations for Holmes’s survival as laughable and rejected fan theories within the show is another, yet more pervasive example of this type of paratextual fan service, but the reference to shockingblanket’s “#notdead” artwork can be easier to overlook.

While some viewers might not have caught all of the fannish positioning within “The Empty Hearse,” the tension surrounding the episode’s portrayals use and portrayals of fan theories led to pointed censure from non-fans, including critics such as *Guardian* reporter Mark Lawson. In a January 3, 2014 article, Lawson wrote about the danger of popular television shows becoming “skewed towards the smallest audience that any programme has: the obsessives” (par. 7). He warned that although “any successful TV drama these days should generate fan fiction, it cannot afford to become entirely fan fiction itself” (par. 7), and for “The Empty Hearse” in particular, argued that in places the narrative “must have been almost incomprehensible to new or casual consumers” (par. 7). Of the many articles that followed the initial showing of ‘The



Empty Hearse,” fans took particular umbrage with Lawson’s for the assumptions he made about their preferences and reactions to the episode – simply because the show writers acknowledged and portrayed fans in a certain light, did not mean that fans themselves either identified with or in fact validated such portrayals.

While the kind of cyclical fannishness that Lawson complains about in terms of the BBC’s *Sherlock* can be credited in part to the potential of newer media – such as film for its storytelling potential and increased reach, and social media for its ability to connect fans and foster communication with show-creators – it would also benefit contemporary audiences to keep in mind that fannish involvement with the Great Detective actually influenced the portrayal of the canonical Holmes. Ten years after Doyle killed off Holmes in his 1893 “The Final Problem,” he resurrected the detective in the 1903 “The Empty House” under considerable pressure from Holmesian fans, some of whom has gone so far as to wear black mourning bands for the character in the Victorian custom. Fannish involvement, then, cannot be written off a simply a vogueish trend starting with the BBC’s *Sherlock*, and instead becomes a matter of what Catherine Coker calls control issues.

Coker asserts that “[a]t the most basic level, the dialogue between creator-authors and fan-authors is primarily a discussion of control” (91) – or, put differently, a question of who has the ‘authority’ to tell a story the ‘right’ way. While “The Empty Hearse” occupies an oddly candid place in this debate, thanks to its undisguised use of representational and paratextual fan service as narrative devices, the episode’s ultimate come-down on the show’s fans seems especially harsh considering the “creator-authors” behind it: on another level, after all, *Sherlock*’s transposition of a beloved literary character into the present day must necessarily make show writers Moffat and Gatiss “fan-authors” themselves.

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