

The Baker street roommates:

Friendship, romance and sexuality of Sherlock Holmes and John Watson
in the Doyle canon and BBC's *Sherlock*.

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Abstract

In the novel *A Study in Scarlet*, first published in 1887, Sherlock Holmes and John Watson had a chance meeting inside the chemical laboratory of St. Bartholomew's Hospital in the year 1881. This meeting led to a friendship and career that still captures the imaginations of readers around the world over a hundred years after Sir Arthur Conan Doyle first became chronicling the adventures of the world's greatest detective and his trusty companion, the dear doctor. The one adaptation that has possibly gained the most widespread popularity and devoted following is BBC's *Sherlock*, taking place in contemporary, 21st century England instead of the original Victorian setting. Starring Benedict Cumberbatch as Sherlock Holmes and Martin Freeman as Doctor Watson, *Sherlock* has successfully updated Doyle's classic characters in a way that appeals to modern audiences while largely maintaining the spirit of the original stories.

In this thesis I will explore the main characters, Sherlock Holmes and John Watson, and their relationship as is portrayed in both the original Arthur Conan Doyle stories and the modern adaptation. In both the original works and *Sherlock*, the strong friendship shared between the two men is often strained by Holmes eccentric habits, which will be at the forefront of my study into the characters. I will also delve into the intricacies in the friendship that are caused by the late Victorian setting of the original stories: the close friendship shared by two males, which would have been perceived as perfectly normal in the context of the original setting, has later been analysed by "Sherlockians" as having homosexual undertones. The modern adaptation plays with these readings, as the relationship between the main characters is often mistakenly interpreted to be homosexual by other characters inside the show; this has created tension between the showrunners, who insist that the main pair are heterosexual despite the clear queer undertones, and a notable portion of the fanbase who desire representation of sexual minorities. With the sexuality of the main characters being one of the vocal points of the research, the paper will also touch upon the canonical, heteronormative relationships of both leads and the misogynistic views of Sherlock Holmes.

Sherlock Holmesin ja John Watsonin ensikohtaaminen tapahtui St. Bartholemew's-sairaalan kemian laboratoriossa vuonna 1881, joka kuvataan vuonna 1887 julkaistussa romaanissa *Punaisten*

kirjainten arvoitus. Tämä tapaaminen johti ystävyyteen ja uraan, joka edelleen vangitsee lukijansa ympäri maailman, yli sata vuotta sen jälkeen kun Sir Arthur Conan Doyle alkoi kirjoittamaan maailman parhaan etsivän ja hänen luotetun kumppaninsa, rakkaan tohtorin seikkailuista. BBC:n tuottama, moderniin 2000-luvun Englantiin sijoittuva *Uusi Sherlock* on adaptaationa saavuttanut valtavaa suosiota sekä vannoutuneen fanikunnan. Sarja, jota tähdittävät Benedict Cumberbatch Sherlock Holmesina sekä Martin Freeman John Watsonina, on onnistuneesti päivittänyt Doylen klassiset hahmot tavalla joka vetoaa moderniin yleisöön, samalla pitkälti säilyttäen alkuperäisten tarinoiden hengen.

Työssäni tutkin päähahmoja, Sherlock Holmesia ja John Watsonia, sekä heidän välistään suhdetta kuten se on kuvattu Arthur Conan Doylen alkuperäisteoksissa sekä modernissa adaptaatiossa. Tutkielmalle keskeisiä ovat Holmesin omalaatuiset tavat, jotka molemmissa versioissa rasittavat hahmojen välistä vahvaa ystävyyttä. Keskeinen osa tutkimusta on myös tämän ystävyuden tulkittamisen monisyisyys, jonka aiheuttaa alkuperäistöiden viktoriaaninen tapahtumapaikka: kahden miehen välinen läheinen ystävyys, joka oli alkuperäismiljöön kontekstissa täysin normaali, on myöhemmissä analyyseissä tulkittu sisältävän homoseksuaalisia vivahteita. Moderni adaptaatio leikittelee näiden tulkintojen kanssa, sillä Holmesin ja Watsonin välinen suhde tulkitaan usein virheellisesti homoseksuaaliseksi sarjan sisällä. Tämä on luonnut jännitettä sarjan tekijöiden ja seksuaalisten vähemmistöjen representaatiota toivovien fanien välillä, sillä tekijät vakuuttavat päähahmojen olevan heteroseksuaalisia suhteen homoseksuaalisista vivahteista huolimatta. Hahmojen seksuaalisuuden ollessa yksi tutkielman pääkohdista sivuan myös molempien kanonisia heteronormatiivisia suhteita, sekä Sherlock Holmesin misogyniisiä näkemyksiä.

1. The Meeting

Except for three short stories, all of Doyle's original canon are narrated from the perspective of Dr Watson, framing the stories as memoirs written by him about the adventures of Sherlock Holmes throughout his career as a detective. As such, Watson is also the "author" of the adventures of the, while Doyle himself is "relegated" to a literary agent, as aptly put by Christopher Redmond in *A*

Sherlock Holmes Handbook (37). Watson is almost as much a literary device as he is a character in the stories; the almost supernatural deductive skills of Holmes are witnessed through the eyes of a layman, creating a necessary distance for the reader to leave the titular character both distant enough in his cold deductions, but to also show his warmer, friendlier side towards Watson in the relationship between them throughout the canon.

1.1 The doctor and the detective

With Watson the narrator for most of the original canon, he is also the first character readers get acquainted with in the very first Sherlock Holmes novel, *A Study in Scarlet*. Most of the background information for Watson is given in the first few paragraphs of the novel, with him having graduated as a Doctor of Medicine from the University of London in 1878, and afterwards receiving military training as an army surgeon in Netley. The fictional doctor served as an assistant surgeon in the real-life Second Afghan war, before being wounded in the Battle of Maiwand in 1880¹ (Doyle 3). Very little of Watson's life is revealed in the canon prior to his medical studies and army-service. There is a line that can lead the reader to believe that he had no living family left by the time he meets Sherlock in 1881, as is described in *A Study in Scarlet*: "I had neither kith nor kin in England, and was therefore as free as air..."(Doyle 3). Noting the line in *England*, one could assume Watson might have relatives living abroad, but very little is learned about the character's family or childhood throughout the original canon. In *The Sign of Four* we learn that Watson did have an elder brother who had recently perished due to alcoholism and poverty; however, these events take place after Holmes and Watson met, which would have meant that his brother was possibly still alive during the events of *A Study in Scarlet*, when he returned to England (Doyle 7). This could imply that the relationship of the Watson brothers was strained enough that they had not met after John returned from his service in the army.

The first meeting between Sherlock Holmes and John Watson takes place in St. Bartholomew's Hospital; this meeting happens through a mutual acquaintance of theirs, Stamford. Stamford was Watson's understudy in University, and had an acquaintance with Holmes through him using the

¹ Watson's war wound has been a topic of conversation because of its tendency to not stay put in one spot even decades after the war; *A Study in Scarlet* describes the wound as thus: "I was struck on the shoulder by a Jezail bullet, which shattered the bone and grazed the subclavian artery" (Doyle, 3). However, the following novel, *The Sign of Four*, places Watson's war wound in his leg. The only clear mention of the wound after that is in *The Adventure of the Noble Bachelor*, where the wound is ambiguously mentioned as being located in a limb.

4. Politics. →Feeble.

5. Botany. →Variable. Well up in belladonna, opium, and poisons generally. Knows nothing of practical gardening.

6. Geology. →Practical, but limited. Tells at a glance different soils from each other. After walks has shown me splashes upon his trousers, and told me by their colour and consistence in what part of London he had received them.

7. Chemistry. →Profound.

8. Anatomy. →Accurate, but unsystematic.

9. Sensational Literature. →Immense. He appears to know every detail of every horror perpetrated in the century.

10. Plays the violin well.

11. Is an expert singlestick player, boxer, and swordsman.

12. Has a good practical knowledge of British law

(Doyle 12)

Holmes explains his theory of the brain being like an empty attic, where he stores only information relevant to his work, so as for his “attic to not get jumbled up and overcrowded with unnecessary information (Doyle 11). In later stories, however, it is shown that Watson’s list is far from the truth. Sherlock indeed plays the violin well, and enjoys classical music as a way of relaxation, while having at least superficial knowledge of well know composers and pieces. His knowledge of politics might not be as feeble as Watson initially thought, as he recognizes many leading political figures, both domestic and foreign, even when they are in disguise. Holmes also has at least a broad knowledge of classic literature, as he refers great writers such as Hafiz, Horace, and Goethe (Redmond 33). This apparent change in Holmes’s level of common knowledge can likely be attributed to literary reasons; certain stories that required him to have knowledge of, for example, domestic and international politics, would have been harder for Doyle to write without the evolution of the detective.

1.2 The detective’s past

Much like Watson, very little is initially known of Sherlock Holmes’s earlier life and family. However, more is learned of his history throughout the stories; most notably, Sherlock’s elder brother Mycroft Holmes appears in two stories, *The Greek Interpreter* and *The Bruce-Partington Plans*. Mycroft works in an unspecified, high-ranking role in the British government, and is a

founding member of the Diogenes Club, a gathering place for unsociable men where conversation is strictly prohibited. Mycroft is described as having even greater skills of deduction than his younger brother, with his only hindrance being his chronic laziness. Mycroft's first appearance is in *The Greek Interpreter*, and in the same story some details of Holmes's family-history are discovered through a conversation between him and Watson:

It was after tea on a summer evening, and the conversation, which had roamed in a desultory, spasmodic fashion from golf clubs to the causes of the change in the obliquity of the ecliptic, came round at last to the question of atavism and hereditary aptitudes. The point under discussion was, how far any singular gift in an individual was due to his ancestry and how far to his own early training. "In your own case," said I, "from all that you have told me, it seems obvious that your faculty of observation and your peculiar facility for deduction are due to your own systematic training." "To some extent," he answered thoughtfully. "My ancestors were country squires, who appear to have led much the same life as is natural to their class. But, none the less, my turn that way is in my veins, and may have come with my grandmother, who was sister of Vernet, the French artist. Art in the blood is liable to take the strangest forms." "But how do you know that it is hereditary?" "Because my brother Mycroft possesses it in a larger degree than I do. (Doyle 302)

Holmes's ancestors were country squires, or in modern terms, wealthy landowners. It is never mentioned if either of the brothers inherited any land, or if it has passed down to some unknown relatives. It can be assumed that Mycroft is fairly wealthy, due to him working in a high-ranking government position and apparently having a fair amount of leisurely time to indulge himself at the Diogenes club. According to Holmes, the deductive abilities and high-level intelligence of himself and Mycroft are mostly hereditary, having passed down at least from their grandmother's time. Besides this short passage, nothing else is learned about Sherlock and Mycroft's family, and if the "art in the blood" passed down from Vernet² had graced their elusive parents, from whom we never hear. Although very little is learned of Holmes's childhood, the stories *The Gloria Scott* and *The Musgrave Ritual* shed some light on his life as a College student and how he started his career as a consulting detective.

The Gloria Scott is set during a summer holiday in Holmes's College years, describing a case he gets embroiled with when his only friend at the college, Victor Trevor, invites him to spend the summer at his family's estate in Norfolk (Doyle 241). During the events of this story Holmes had not yet envisioned using his deductive skills for a livelihood, having evidently only used them to

² Sherlock never clarifies which Vernet was his granduncle, as there are multiple French artist from the Vernet clan (Altschuler). Cristopher Redmond believes him to be Emile Jean Horace Vernet (1789-1863) (32).

amuse his fellow students. It is during this summer holiday, after Sherlock give a demonstration of his skills, that Victor's father gives the push on the fledgling detective's choice of career:

(...) "'I don't know how you manage this, Mr. Holmes, but it seems to me that all the detectives of fact and fancy would be children in your hands. That's your line of life, sir, and you may take the word of a man who has seen something of the world'" (Doyle 376)

Holmes admits that the work of deduction had merely been a hobby to him up to that point (Doyle 376), so it is evident that Mr. Trevor had great effect on his choice of career. Victor Trevor is also the first mention of Holmes befriending someone; "' You never heard me talk of Victor Trevor?' he asked. 'He was the only friend I made during the two years I was at college. I was never a very sociable fellow, Watson, always rather fond of moping in my rooms and working out my own little methods of thought (Doyle 240). Holmes describes Victor as the opposite of him, full of spirit and energy, but the pair bonded over the union of both of them being friendless (Doyle 240-241). The relationship is unfortunately not explored thoroughly, as Victor leaves England after the events of *The Gloria Scott*. The Musgrave Ritual gives an account of one of the very first cases Holmes engaged in during his detective career; he is hired by Reginald Musgrave³, another College acquaintance of his, although it is clear they were not as close as Holmes was with Trevor.

1.3 The meeting re-envisioned

The first episode of BBC's *Sherlock*, and the counterpart to *A Study in Scarlet*, *A Study in Pink*, introduces the two primary protagonists in a manner very similar to the original stories. John Watson has recently returned back to England from his service in the Afghanistan war. The primary difference is the effects war has caused on him; in the original stories Watson is mainly ailed by his old, physical injuries, while psychological ones are not as clearly pronounced. One of the few signs of psychological trauma in the Doyle canon is noted by Christopher Redmond in his book, *In Bed with Sherlock Holmes*, where he notes that Watson's wounds during the Afghan War of the 19th century instilled him with a fear of injury, amputation and castration (128). In the modern adaptation, however, Watson's wounds are mostly psychological, which is well illustrated in the opening minutes of *A Study in Pink*: Watson wakes up in his bed from a nightmare of his experiences during the war, a clear sign of post-traumatic disorder; in the following scene he is talking with his psychologist, who encourages him to write a blog about his everyday life to cope with the trauma. Even Watson's physical wound in his leg, that forces him to use a walking-stick

³ The Musgraves are a real aristocratic family, that had indeed separated into two clans as described in *The Musgrave Ritual*. There are descendants alive up to this day.

during this first episode, is thought by his psychiatrist—and deduced by Holmes— to be psychosomatic (“A Study in Pink”, *Sherlock*). Otherwise, Watson’s background in *Sherlock* is very similar to his original counterpart; upon their first meeting, Holmes even deduces that he has an estranged brother who is “most likely an alcoholic”. We later learn that the brother is instead a sister, Harriet, who uses the nickname Harry; in the first episode of the second season, *A Scandal in Belgravia*, Harriet is referenced again, as Watson is visiting her for Christmas (“A Scandal in Belgravia”, *Sherlock*).

Holmes himself is introduced in St. Bartholomew’s hospital like in the original, only inside the morgue instead of a chemical laboratory, beating a corpse with a riding crop in order to test how a body bruises (“A Study in Pink”, *Sherlock*). The modern version of the detective initially appears to be perhaps more impulsive, cocky, and eccentric than the original Doyle incarnation, although it could be argued that this is mostly due to the different social norms between the original stories and the adaptation. The original version of Holmes was, at least through the eyes of a modern reader, softened by the general social conduct of Victorian England; Holmes was described in the original stories as eccentric and prone to great alterations of mood, but these flaws were veiled by his outward appearance of a traditional British gentleman, staying courteous in his conduct towards most of his clients and associates. Meanwhile, BBC’s modern-day Holmes has lost these veils of genteel conduct, while his flaws are also emphasized, to the point that he refers to himself as “a high-functioning sociopath” (“A Study in Pink”, *Sherlock*). Sherlock’s brother Mycroft is also introduced in the first episode, and is a fairly close adaptation of the original character: Mycroft is a high-ranking member of the British government, often trying to acquire his younger brother’s help on behalf of his employers. Unlike the original Mycroft who only appeared in two stories, the modern incarnation has a much larger role as one of the main cast members, appearing in all of the episodes.

Family background of the Holmes brothers is explored more thoroughly in the modern adaptation; towards the end of the first episode of series 3, *The Empty Hearse*, viewers are introduced to the parents (who are only referenced to as Mrs. And Mr. Holmes) of the brothers, who are visiting Sherlock at his Baker Street apartment⁴. The viewers are first led to assume that the aged couple are

⁴ There is an interesting meta-connection with the Holmes parents: they are played by Wanda Ventham and Timothy Carlton, the real-life parents of Benedict Cumberbatch.

just Holmes's latest clients, as their normal, quintessential appearance does not lead to the conclusion that they could be the parents of the eccentric and brilliant Holmes brothers ("The Empty Hearse", *Sherlock*). The final episode of series 3, *His Last Vow*, reveals more details of the parents; it is revealed that Mrs. Holmes used to be a brilliant mathematician, having worked at an unnamed University and publishing notable work on her field. Mr. Holmes tells that he considers himself "a bit of a moron", and that he is often referred to as "the sane one" in their family ("His Last Vow", *Sherlock*). In the fourth series of *Sherlock*, it is revealed that Sherlock and Mycroft have a younger sister, Eurus, who has been imprisoned since childhood in a maximum-security prison. Eurus is characterized as a genius of even greater magnitude than her elder siblings, with her intellect being so great that it veers even closer towards a supernatural power than those of her brothers; in her childhood she was able to perceive what Mycroft would look like as an adult, commenting on his funny appearance. At the age of five she was able to drown Victor Trevor without the crime being solved until decades later, and manipulate adults to the point of slavery.

2. Bachelor Life at Baker Street

It is suggested that Holmes and Watson lived together for multiple years and shared many adventures, but it is debatable how close their relationship actually is in the original stories. In the original canon readers do not actually witness the pair living together for very long, as the second novel, *The Sign of Four*, jumps from 1881 to 1887, and by the end of the novel Watson has fallen in love and proposed to Mary Morstan, moving out from 221B by the events of the following story, *A Scandal in Bohemia* (though many stories Doyle wrote later evidently take place before Watson's marriage). Holmes does show signs of protest at Watson marrying, but it is more because of his disapproval of marriage and love in general as something that is emotionally opposed to the true cold reason which he uses in his work (Doyle 199).

2.1 Victorian friendship

In his writing Watson frequently refers to Holmes as his friend or companion, but he also does this with many of their clients whom they have just met. The term "friend" is used by Watson fairly loosely, and him referring to someone as a friend cannot be taken as proof of a very close relationship. Indeed, at the beginning of *A Scandal in Bohemia*, it is made clear that Holmes and

Watson have drifted apart, with the doctor even referring to Holmes as “my former friend” (Doyle 15). Even though the relationship between Holmes and Watson could be described as fairly shallow in the canon, it is most likely due to the format of the stories as detective thrillers, where the interpersonal relationships are rarely, if ever, the main focus. When all of the stories concentrate around a singular case, while often introducing a litany of characters that only appear in that particular story, it is understandable that the development of the main and reoccurring cast is fairly limited. It cannot be said for certain how closely Doyle himself intended to depict Holmes and Watson’s relationship, but because this is not the main focus of the stories there is no real need to actually show it. Arguably the duo’s actions speak louder than words; for example, would Watson follow Holmes to possibly life-threatening situations if there was no more affection than that between roommates? Holmes and Watson, although they age, do not actually develop as characters throughout the canon, staying very close to the personas introduced in *A Study in Scarlet*; Holmes a bohemian, detached detective, and Watson as his strait-laced, trustworthy partner.

Although Doyle never explicitly reveals the ages of Holmes and Watson, the characters clearly age throughout the canon. It can be assumed that the two were fairly young when they first met in 1881, perhaps early to mid-thirties; Watson took his degree in medicine in 1878, so one would assume that he could not much older than thirty in 1881. Presumably Watson and Holmes are around the same age, though it is possible that the doctor is a few years senior: when they first meet in the chemical laboratory Watson describes Holmes as a student (Doyle 7), leaving the implication that the detective is quite youthful in his appearance, and the possibility that Watson assumes him to be younger, with he himself being a graduate. As the stories span multiple decades, Doyle put in clear signs of the two protagonists aging. There are mentions of both of them suffering from rheumatism in the later stories, and the last chronological story, *His Last Bow*, describes Holmes as “a tall, gaunt man of sixty” (Doyle 107), while Watson is “a heavily built, elderly man with a moustache” (107). *His Last Bow* takes place during The Great War, with Holmes retired from active detective work, having taken up bee farming on his spare time. The aging of the two protagonists is also shown in the official artwork of Sidney Paget: most of his early artwork of Holmes and Watson depicts them as what could be interpreted as fairly young in appearance, while art made for some of the later stories show the duo as clearly middle aged, with Holmes’s gaunter appearance and Watson’s slight overweight compared to earlier depictions.

Despite the relationship between Holmes and Watson being fairly superficial, there are multiple moments that show that the pair do care for each other; in *The Sign of Four*, Doyle portrays Watson as being visibly distraught at his roommate's use of drugs, namely morphine and cocaine; in the early stories, Holmes is portrayed as a habitual drug-user when there are no interesting cases to stimulate his brain:

(...) "from day to day I had become more irritable at the sight, and my conscience swelled nightly within me at the thought that I had lacked the courage to protest. Again and again I had registered a vow that I should deliver my soul upon the subject" (...). (Doyle 111)

Watson is portrayed as caring for his friend, wanting to intervene with his habit, but lacks the courage to do so, even when he knows of the dangers as a medical professional:

But consider!" I said earnestly. "Count the cost! Your brain may, as you say, be roused and excited, but it is a pathological and morbid process which involves increased tissue-change and may at least leave a permanent weakness. You know, too, what a black reaction comes upon you. Surely the game is hardly worth the candle. Why should you, for a mere passing pleasure, risk the loss of those great powers with which you have been endowed? Remember that I speak not only as one comrade to another but as a medical man to one for whose constitution he is to some extent answerable". (Doyle 111-112)

As is shown through the knowledge of Watson, the dangers of drug-abuse were, at least to some extent, known in the Victorian era. Redmond mentions that although Holmes's rampant use of narcotics can be seen as horrifying through the eyes of a modern reader, the use of cocaine and many other drugs was not criminalised in 1890's England (34). Watson's disapproval of the detective's drug-use could in modern context be compared to chastising a friend for smoking or drinking; something that is known to be dangerous for one's health, but is legal and could be seen as presumptuous to try and intervene in. Redmond suggests that Doyle's intention with showing the titular character using drugs was to "emphasize Holmes's mercurial personality and his pose of sophisticated eccentricity" (Redmond 34); the use of legal drugs, although condemned by medical professionals like Watson, was perhaps seen by the general public of the time as making a person using them seem interesting and intellectual. Watson's protests against Holmes's habits could at least in part be because of his profession as a doctor, though it is believable that there is also genuine affection in these warnings. Even if his protests fell on deaf ears at first, in later stories mentions of Holmes's drug use dwindle and eventually stop. It could be with the attitudes towards drugs changing in England (the use of cocaine became illegal in 1916) and Doyle writing the quirk out of Holmes's character, or perhaps years of disapproval from the dear doctor made the detective change his habits.

2.2 Watson: the incompetent partner?

While Holmes and Watson are in what should be an equal relationship, the dynamic between the two is very often portrayed clearly in Holmes's favour. In the early stories, Watson had the habit of testing Holmes's skills of deduction with different puzzles, and to try and prove that his friend is not infallible; for example, in *The Sign of Four* Watson tests Holmes by asking him to deduce information about the former owner of an old pocket watch he had recently inherited, believing the task to be impossible and thus teaching a lesson to his impertinent roommate. When Holmes's deductions about Watson's unfortunate elder brother are correct, he gets enraged, assuming the detective had investigated his family before-hand (Doyle 114-116). In later stories, Watson's behaviour towards Holmes is more like the admiration a student has towards his teacher, being able to follow and conduct some of Holmes's simpler methods of deduction, while seeking approval and praise from him:

Mr. Sherlock Holmes listened with attention to the long report which I was able to present to him that evening, but it did not elicit that word of curt praise which I had hoped for and should have valued. On the contrary, his austere face was even more severe than usual as he commented upon the things that I had done and the things that I had not (Doyle 403).

Watson clearly seeks approval from Holmes, whom he admires, which often leads to the detective berating him for his failings; failings which are often not due to the doctor's lack of intelligence, but due to Holmes's skills being so radiant that he often outshines others. As Redmond notes, Watson is also a self-conscious biographer; Holmes often berates the doctor for romanticising their adventures in his writing, and not sticking to cold "detective logic".(37).

The common misconception of Watson as a bumbling fool has not been helped with his depictions in different forms of media; the derogatory nickname for the doctor, "boobus Britannicus", was first coined by Edmund Pearson in 1932 (Redmond,37-38). Pearson blamed an early artist of the Doyle stories, Arthur Keller, for making Watson look "truly stupid", a stigma that stuck with the doctor in many later adaptations, including Nigel Bruce's portrayal as Watson in the Hollywood movie adaptations created between 1939-1946, a role that popularized Pearson's term. However, Watson is never depicted as a fool in the canon; the doctor is however always outshined by Holmes's brilliance, which is possibly the reason for his depictions as a fool in other forms of media. In the Doyle canon Holmes clearly considers Watson to be a trustworthy, stalwart companion who remains calm and cool in dangerous situations. One of the most famous quotes where Holmes gives praise and respect to Watson is from *The Hound of Baskervilles*, when the doctor has, following

Holmes' methods, made some basic deductions about a client who had left his walking stick behind at Baker street:

"Really, Watson, you excel yourself," said Holmes, pushing back his chair and lighting a cigarette. "I am bound to say that in all the accounts which you have been so good as to give of my own small achievements you have habitually underrated your own abilities. It may be that you are not yourself luminous, but you are a conductor of light. Some people without possessing genius have a remarkable power of stimulating it. I confess, my dear fellow, that I am very much in your debt." (Doyle, 203-204).

Holmes, as usual, is a little insincere in his compliments to Watson, soon explaining to the doctor that many of his deductions were erroneous:

When I said that you stimulated me I meant, to be frank, that in noting your fallacies I was occasionally guided towards the truth. Not that you are entirely wrong in this instance. The man is certainly a country practitioner. And he walks a good deal. (Doyle, 204.)

Holmes's words can be interpreted as him saying that Watson, while often making mistakes when trying to use his methods, is still clever enough to be able to follow the great detective's line of thought. This enables Holmes to use him as a "conductor" for his own brilliance, reflecting ideas from Watson and thus leading the detective to correct solutions by demonstrating alternate perspectives to the problem at hand; Holmes considers the dear doctor an invaluable partner in his investigations.

The modern Watson in *Sherlock* is possibly even less of a fool than the Doyle doctor; with the flaws of Holmes being more pronounced in the adaptation, Watson's role is often to act as a voice of reason, or even as a caretaker to the troubled detective. *Sherlock* has a reoccurring theme of Watson saving Holmes from the detective's own troubled mind, the first instance of which happens in the very first episode, *A Study in Pink*; In the confrontation with the episode's villain, a taxi-driver turned serial killer, Holmes is forced to play a game of Russian roulette with poisonous pills; he is able to effortlessly deduce the serial killer's motive for the crimes, as well as recognize his bluff of using a fake gun to force his victims to take the potentially lethal medicine. However, the killer is still able to coerce Holmes into playing the game by feeding into the detective's bored, thrill-seeking mind; Watson arrives in the nick of time and shoots the serial killer ("A Study in Pink", *Sherlock*). The scene demonstrates that the modern Watson is a decisive man of action, willing to take the life of another to protect those close to him. Indeed, although both versions of the doctor have a military background, the modern incarnation displays his combat prowess more readily, being both an expert marksman and efficient in close quarters combat.

Holmes also has a tendency to leave even close partners in the dark pertaining to his plans, partly due to fear of Watson (or one of the Scotland Yard detectives) ruining them, and partly due to his taste for the theatrical, enjoying the astonished reactions of surprise and admiration, often in disregard to the feelings of his friend or clients, as is seen in *The Naval Treaty*: Holmes's client, Mr. Phelps, has had important government papers stolen from him, and when Holmes succeeds in retrieving them, instead of returning them in a conventional matter to the client, who has been bed-ridden for weeks from worry and stress, the detective places the papers inside a covered dish, urging their client to join them for breakfast (Doyle 332-333).

“There! there!” said Holmes soothingly, patting him upon the shoulder. “It was too bad to spring it on you like this, But Watson here will tell you that I never can resist a touch of the dramatic” (Doyle 333).

Another good example of the detective's taste for the dramatic is found at the end of *The Adventure of The Six Napoleons*, where he solves the mystery of the theft of the invaluable Borgia pearl:

Lestrade and I sat silent for a moment, and then, with a spontaneous impulse, we both broke out clapping, as at the well-wrought crisis of a play. A flush of colour sprang to Holmes's pale cheeks, and he bowed to us like the master dramatist who receives the homage of his audience. It was at such moments that for an instant he ceased to be a reasoning machine, and betrayed his human love for admiration and applause (Doyle 470).

This example perfectly demonstrates that, besides the thrill Holmes gets from engaging in and solving a difficult case, he clearly enjoys the admiration he gets from those around him. There are some narcissistic or vain tendencies that can be construed from this behaviour; in *The Naval Treaty* example Holmes does not think of the feelings of his client when he pulls his stunt, though he does apologize for it. The detective often mentions that he does not seek monetary gain or fame from his work, only professional gratification; his actions, however, show that he takes nearly as much pleasure from the surprise and adoration of his friends and peers.

2.3 Conflict at Baker Street

As a consequence of the lead pair staying fairly static throughout the canon, there are no large conflicts that arise between Holmes and Watson, beyond the small ones that have been discussed in

this chapter. The main causes of conflict between the two men are nearly always due to either Holmes's antisocial and eccentric behaviour, which have a tendency to cause Watson anguish, especially in the early stories. Another reason for conflict is Watson's perceived failures when trying to follow the detective's instructions during a case. These "conflicts", if one can even call them that, are largely so inconsequential that the status-quo of the relationship is always back to normal for the next story. This is understandable due to the episodic, self-contained nature of the canon. Even Holmes's return from the dead in *The Empty House*, without disclosing to his closest friend that he is alive, does not seem to anger Watson, even when the detective first disguises himself as an elderly book merchant before revealing himself:

When I turned again Sherlock Holmes was standing smiling at me across my study table I rose to my feet, stared at him for some seconds in utter amazement, and then it appears that I must have fainted for the first and last time in my life.(...) 'My dear Watson,' said the well-remembered voice, 'I owe you a thousand apologies. I had no idea that you would be so affected.' (Doyle 354)

Holmes's theatrical entrance back into the doctor's life, which causes Watson to faint, does not arouse any feelings of anger in him, only elation to learn that the detective is alive. It is understandable that Watson's foremost reaction is joy, as the last few years of his life must have been dark (first losing Holmes at the Reichenbach falls, and his wife soon after).

Holmes's apparent death in *The Final Problem* happens without Watson (and thus, the reader) personally witnessing the fateful duel between the detective and Professor Moriarty at the Reichenbach falls. The Doctor finds a final letter from Holmes addressed to him, and the police investigation concludes that the two men fell to their death in the struggle (Doyle, 348). However, the fact that no bodies were recovered might have left Watson with a small sliver of hope that his dear friend had survived; indeed, in *The Empty House* Watson refers to "his disappearance" (Doyle, 351), which could be interpreted as the doctor not having yet lost hope that Holmes could still be alive; it can be argued that Watson had not yet fully moved on from Holmes's apparent death, with no decisive proof of his demise.

Sherlock Holmes's death and return play out very differently in *Sherlock* when compared to the original canon. In the final episode of series 2, *The Reichenbach Fall*, Holmes's archenemy, Jim Moriarty, manages to drive the detective into a corner, convincing the public that Holmes is a psychopath who has staged all the cases he has solved. The archenemies meet each other on the roof

of the St. Bartholomew's Hospital, where Moriarty reveals that hired assassins are at his command ready to kill everyone close to Holmes, including Watson; the only way to save them would be for Holmes to commit suicide. Holmes realizes that Moriarty has a fail-safe to cancel the killings, telling Moriarty that he is prepared to do anything for him to activate it. Moriarty acknowledges that there is a commonality between the two, but decides to kill himself with his gun. Holmes, who receives a call from Watson who is rushing to his aid, realizes that the only way to save those dear to him is to commit suicide, leaves his final "note" to Watson through the call, before throwing himself off the roof before the eyes of his dear doctor ("The Reichenbach Fall", *Sherlock*). Watson tries to reach his friend's lifeless body, but is held back by both bystanders and paramedics who have arrived at the scene, eventually fainting next to Holmes's corpse. The detective's apparent death hits Watson hard, as he is seen attending a therapy session both at the beginning of the episode in a flash-forward and at the end; Watson is however unable to open up about his feelings following Holmes' demise. The final scene of the episode, where Watson is visiting Holmes' grave, reveals that the detective is alive and well, watching his friend from afar ("The Reichenbach Fall", *Sherlock*).

Holmes, however, does not return into Watson's life until two years later; in this timespan Watson has gotten over his friend's demise, and is preparing to propose to the love of his life, Mary Morstan. Holmes announces his return in an insensitive manner by disguising himself as a waiter at the restaurant Watson and Mary are having dinner at, inadvertently getting in the way of Watson's proposal and greatly angering the doctor ("The Empty Hearse", *Sherlock*). The different reactions between the Doyle and *Sherlock* Watson can be attributed to circumstances surrounding Holmes' death and return; as mentioned before, Holmes' body was never discovered at The Reichenbach Fall, and when writing his farewell note to Watson, before his duel with Moriarty, Holmes had truthfully believed that he would not survive (Doyle 354). Meanwhile in *Sherlock*, Holmes intentionally deceives Watson, faking his own death in front of the doctor's eyes, even if his intentions were to protect him. They both return in a theatrical manner, aiming to shock and surprise Watson. However, the Doyle Holmes had a good reason for his disguise, with the late Moriarty's assassin after his life. In *Sherlock* the detective dons the costume merely for his own vanity and amusement, aiming to purely shock Watson. Another reason for the different reactions is Watson's life situation: in the original canon, Watson had lost both Holmes and his wife Mary, leaving him to lead a lonely life where Holmes' return was a welcome surprise. In *Sherlock* Watson had moved on from the detective's demise, preparing to start a new life together with Mary, wherein Holmes' dramatic return is initially more of a nuisance than a happy occasion.

3. Romance at Baker Street

Although the relationship between Holmes and Watson in the original novels and short stories is clearly meant to be that of a normal 19th century friendship between two males, over the years many fans have interpreted there to be sexual undertones in their relationship. Moreover, some adaptations, which include *Sherlock*, have played around with this reading into the nature and level of intimacy in the companionship of the two Baker Street roommates. As the sexual undertones in the relationship between the duo are more clearly evident in *Sherlock*, I will mostly concentrate in analysing the television series in this section, while comparing it to both the original stories and other interpretations of the characters. Because this section concentrates on the sexuality of the two protagonists, it will also briefly look at the canonical relationships of Watson and Holmes, and how they affect the reading of a possible romantic relationship between them.

3.1 Romance and misogyny

While Holmes of the original canon is never in a genuine romantic relationship, Watson's love-life is fairly active and, as Cristopher Redmond asserts, there is a clear difference in the sexuality in the stories depending on the character. When the focus is on Holmes, the sexual elements tend to be criminal in nature, even violent, and the detective himself is rarely involved in the activity; with Watson, however, there is a chance for the sexuality to be gentle and loving, even leading to married life, most evidently seen in *The Sign of Four* (Redmond, 39). Redmond further argues that Holmes's sexual ambiguity allows him to rise above the normal masses, often represented by both Watson and the criminals:

Holmes the asexual is that rare human being who can rise above the ambiguity, the obsession with violence and with sex. In the tales of Holmes there seems to be a sharp contrast between logic and emotion, with Holmes representing the former and everyone else, from Watson to the criminals, the latter. To use Rosenberg's conception, then, the form of the story is the development of a "forbidden" act, either literally or symbolically sexual, and its suppression by Sherlock Holmes. Perhaps, however, the reader will concede that the sharp difference now seems blurred, that the emotional side of Holmes has been allowed to appear as well as the contradictions that make Watson and other characters come alive. The

reader will no doubt agree, too, that when Holmes does appear as cold and loveless, he pays a terrible price for it: sex is not renounced easily by a real human being. (154)

Noting how Watson is described in the beginning of *The Sign of Four*, he could be considered experienced with women, or even something of a ladies' man (or he considers himself one), as is shown in this paragraph:

In an experience of women which extends over many nations and three separate continents, I have never looked upon a face which gave a clearer promise of a refined and sensitive nature.

(Doyle 117)

From this sentence, if the character's self-description is to be believed, we can ascertain that the doctor is both a travelled man and experienced in matters of love. It is likely that he was sexually active in his youth and during his years in the army, before meeting Holmes. In the canonical stories Watson is never seen in a relationship with anyone other than his wife, Mary; it could be that he has calmed down on his womanizing ways, or his old war injuries got in the way of a more active love-life. This reading of his character could be likely, as upon their first meeting Watson admits to Holmes that he has "another set of vices when I'm well" (Doyle 9), which could refer to sexual relationships.

However, it is possible that the reading of Watson as a man with vast experience with women is incorrect womanizer is completely off, and the sentence detailing his proficiency is boasting from a man lacking in confidence; as Redmond mentions, the Watson seen starting his budding relationship with Mary Morstan seems to be anything but a man with a plethora of experience with women (40). During a cab drive, he attempts to amuse her by telling how he drove off a prowling musket with a double-barrelled tiger cub in Afghanistan (Doyle 123). Left alone together in the yard of Pondicherry Lodge, they "stood hand-in-hand, like two children," (Doyle 133). Watson's interactions with Mary paint a picture of a man experiencing his first serious romance. It could be that this is the first time he has seriously fallen in love; it is also likely that his prior experiences with women across "many nations and three separate continents" have either been brief affairs or with prostitutes. Had Watson plenty of experience with women or not, it is very apparent reading the stories that he appreciates feminine beauty: as Redmond notes, this is in clear contrast to the near asexuality of Holmes (43). In stories taking place both before and after Mary's death, Watson often describes female clients and other people associated with Holmes's cases in great detail.

In *Sherlock*, John Watson has a fairly active love-life, dating multiple women throughout the first two series. These relationships, however, are never long-lived or successful, mostly due to Watson's close relationship with Holmes; this relationship is shown to actively get in the way of his dating, or even be dangerous to Watson's companions. He is shown to have a weakness towards attractive women, as is seen in the very first episode, where he immediately tries to (unsuccessfully) flirt with Mycroft's secretary ("A Study in Pink", *Sherlock*). Watson's role as the ladies-man of the duo is fairly directly translated into the modern era, as the original doctor could also have been considered to be highly appreciative of feminine beauty. The fact that the Victorian Watson had only a single (confirmed) relationship has more to do with the fact that something akin to a modern dating culture did not exist. Nevertheless, there is a single constant between the doctors; the love of their lives, Mary Morstan. Both the original incarnation and the *Sherlock* version of the doctor meet and quickly fall in love with and propose to Miss Morstan.

Holmes's attitude towards women, while usually considerate and polite, is in many ways misogynistic, even by late 19th century standards, as is seen with Watson's negative reactions towards Sherlock's remark in *The Sign of Four*: 'Women are never to be entirely trusted—not the best of them.' I did not pause to argue over this atrocious sentiment'' (Doyle 160). Holmes, when he is in good spirits, treats women like any courteous, Victorian gentleman would. When it comes to the world of crime, however, he often sees women, unless they are directly involved in the case, as irrelevant bystanders who do not have the mental capacity or physical fortitude to be of use. Holmes's misogyny is clearly displayed in his belief that not even "good" women are to be trusted; in his mind, they can always hold hidden agendas that could get in his way in solving cases. The only notable exception to this rule is Irene Adler. In the original canon, Irene Adler only appears in one early story, *A Scandal in Bohemia*, but is arguably both the most noteworthy female character and the only woman who Holmes treats as something close to his equal. Referring to her as the woman, there are however no romantic feelings involved, as Watson describes:

In his eyes she eclipses and predominates the whole of her sex. It was not that he felt any emotion akin to love for Irene Adler. All emotions, and that one particularly, were abhorrent to his cold, precise, but admirably balanced mind. (...) for the trained reasoner to admit such intrusions into his own delicate and finely adjusted temperament was to introduce a distracting factor which might throw a doubt upon all his mental results (Doyle 15).

Sherlock is clearly attracted to Irene's sharp and resolute mind; she is one of the very few people who have been able to match or even outsmart Sherlock, thus earning his undying respect. Sherlock's feelings towards Irene are more of respect and admiration for her skills than physical or

romantic attraction; and even if Sherlock, deep in the recesses of his mind, held such feelings towards her they would have been unrequited as she gets married to the lawyer Norton and flees England with him during the events of *A Scandal in Bohemia*.

Although Holmes is clearly not interested in romantic or sexual relationships, it is not that he is incapable of arousing the interest of the opposite sex when it is in his self-interest. In *Charles Augustus Milverton*, for instance, the detective disguises himself as a plumber and charms Agatha, the maid of the titular blackmailer who has ruined the lives of many high-standing members of society, in order to get information required to break into his household:

‘You will be interested to hear that I am engaged.’

‘My dear fellow! I congrat——‘

‘To Milverton’s housemaid.’

‘Good heavens, Holmes!’

‘I wanted information Watson.’

‘Surely you have gone too far?’

‘It was a most necessary step. I am a plumber with a rising business, Escott by name. I have walked out with her each evening, and I have talked with her. (...)

‘But the girl, Holmes?’

He shrugged his shoulders.

‘You can’t help it, my dear Watson. You must play your cards as best as you can when such a stake is on the table. However, I rejoice to say that I have a hated rival who will certainly cut me out the instant that my back is turned. (Doyle 450.)

The action’s Holmes is willing to go to take down Milverton paint him as a cold, callous man; he plays with the feelings of an innocent woman for the goal for what he considers to be for the greater good in bringing Milverton to justice; Holmes does note that he has “ a hated rival who will certainly cut me out the instant that my back is turned” (Doyle, 450). The maid having another man vying for her attention does not absolve Holmes from playing with her heart to further his own agenda, and does not take into consideration if she has any interest in this love rival.

3.2 Queerbaiting in *Sherlock*

The relationship between Holmes and Watson in the BBC series is rife with sexual tension, which has not gone unnoticed by the viewers: a large and active fanbase has gathered around the possible

romantic relationship between Sherlock and John, and even academic research has been done on the queer undertones in *Sherlock*. This interpretation of the relationship between Holmes and Watson has caused tension between the fans and the two showrunners, Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat; the fans have accused the creators of queerbaiting⁵, especially as the pair have come forward multiple times in interviews about there being no intention of Holmes and Watson having a homosexual relationship. Despite the continuous “hints” about the duo’s relationship, the overall authorial intent throughout the series has been to put Watson into heteronormative relationships, eventually marrying, having a child and widowing (though Mary’s death does open up the possibility of Watson exploring a relationship with the dear detective). While Holmes is the more obviously queer of the pair (and possibly asexual), even he has more evidence of being interested in women than in men. This possible queerbaiting also extends to the relationship between Holmes and his archenemy, Moriarty.

The underlying queerness in the relationship between Holmes and Watson is evident from the very first episode, *A Study in Pink*. Many of these moments are clearly meant to be gags, most evidently the following two scenes: when Holmes and Watson move in to Baker Street, Mrs. Hudson assumes them to be a couple, and the same assumption continues with the restaurant proprietor when Holmes and Watson have dinner there (“A Study in Pink”, *Sherlock*). The theme of misrecognition evident in these two scenes runs throughout the series, as most of the queerbaiting scenes between the detective and the doctor come about from the misrecognition on the type of relationship they have. Citing Judith Fathallah, Amandelin Valentine argues that even though the show might attempt to disrupt the normative masculinity of television (and the original Doyle canon) with these scenes, the disruptions to the heteronormative narrative are either played of as jokes or backpedalled quickly, with no lasting impact on the overall story- or character-arcs (qtd. in Valentine). It is quite clear that the authorial intention has never been for either of the two main characters to be gay in *Sherlock*; it is evident from the beginning that Watson is meant to be heterosexual, flirting awkwardly with Mycroft’s secretary in the first episode, having multiple relationships with women throughout the first two series (some of them off-screen during the fairly long stretches of time the show skips over), until eventually settling down with and marrying Mary during the third series. Amandelin Valentine notes that Watson’s heterosexuality is constantly reaffirmed, usually immediately after

⁵ Queerbaiting is the act of hinting at, but without actually depicting, a possible same-sex romantic relationship in a work of fiction. This is often seen as a way to attract a LGBTQ audience without the possible repercussions of actually showing a queer relationship in a mainstream work of art.

someone has misrecognized him and Holmes as romantic partners (Valentine, 2.2). Part of this misrecognition of the lead pairs relationship could be due to the creators transposing the Victorian, homosocial male behaviour into modern day context. The difference arises from the potential homosexual behaviour in the Doyle canon being interpretations from later scholars, while the queer undertones in the relationship are constantly underlined and brought to attention in the television series.

Even with all the evidence pointing towards Watson being heterosexual, his sexuality is continuously questioned by other characters in the show. Perhaps the clearest example of this is in the show's most sexually tinted episode, *A Scandal in Belgravia*. Valentine notes that the questioning of Watson's sexuality is done by two female characters, Irene Adler (who is a queer character) and Jeanette, Watson's girlfriend. Jeanette is introduced in this episode, though it is apparent that she and John have been dating for at least a couple of months (Holmes has a hard time remembering which of Watson's recent companions Jeanette is, pointing to the doctor's active love-life). Jeanette ends up breaking up with Watson in the episode, her reason for it being especially scathing; "my friends are wrong about you. You're a great boyfriend... Sherlock Holmes is a very lucky man" ("A Scandal in Belgravia", *Sherlock*). Jeanette had to compete with Holmes for her boyfriend's attention, and she felt that the detective was winning.

Later in the episode, Irene points out her and Watson's common interest and infatuation with the detective; Valentine points out Irene's authority on the subject, as her job is to know about what people like. Valentine further argues that unlike the usual misrecognitions of the relationship between Holmes and Watson, these two women have actual authority on the subject, in the form of intimacy with them:

—the moments in which the women identify John and Sherlock's relationship as queer are significant—with Jeanette, the moment marks the end of her relationship with John; with Irene, it highlights a point of profound affinity between her and John. Irene Adler is a gay woman and John Watson is a straight man—what they should have in common is an attraction to women, but instead it is an intimate bond with this man. The balance of comic relief and uncomfortable insight may lean a bit self-consciously toward the former, but we're doing the queer possibilities of the show a disservice if we disregard the latter. (Valentine, 3.9)

As Valentine notes, Watson's alleged queerness is only evident when he is together with Holmes; when he is by himself Watson gives a heteronormative reading of his sexuality, as is evident with

his multiple relationships with women (Valentine,3.5). From this we can deduce that the epicentre of the queerness in both *Sherlock* and the original stories is the titular character. But what makes both of these incarnations of Sherlock Holmes so readily interpreted as a queer-icon?

3.3 Sexually problematic Holmes

As I have discussed before, there is a certain degree of queerness that can be interpreted from the original Doyle Sherlock Holmes stories. Some of these readings might come from later scholars, who may mistake ways of speech or male friendships as queer, but that were seen as normal behaviour during the Victorian era. Nevertheless, there were many noted scholars even during Doyle's era in the early 20th century who began to note the peculiarity of Holmes's character. Tom Bragg argues that Holmes always greatly differed from many other masculine literary heroes of the era, both when compared to other authors and to the lesser-known works of Doyle himself:

Sherlock Holmes had not been conceived as a masculine role model or hero, but as a marginal, sexually-problematic figure. (...) Doyle managed to 'rehabilitate' Holmes, recruit him for masculine causes, and distance him from his shadowy original manifestation; but the recovery was never complete. (1-2).

Bragg further argues that one of the reasons for Doyle's distaste towards his most popular creation was due to Holmes's problematic personality; Doyle, who himself was a proponent of the traditional Victorian ideals of masculine values, had a hard time containing his creation who, while having many masculine qualities, came of as a problematic figure (4-5) . Doyle's attempts to "restrain" Holmes and normalize the detective's behaviour are noticeable, as the detective goes from daily cocaine-use of *The Sign of Four* to being fairly clean in the later stories. The main influencer of this change is, of course, Watson, who I have noted as being at least partially Doyle's self-insert. The detective has always had many of the values or skills seen as traditionally masculine (such as observation, rationalism, logic and comradeship), but also an air of mystery in his behaviour and sexuality. Arguably Holmes never completely "recovered", and his sense of otherness and being outside the definitions of normal behaviour always remained. It should be noted that masculinity should not be mixed with heteronormativity; one can be very masculine while existing outside of the heterosexual spectrum. Doyle himself probably never considered Holmes to represent any sexual minority; gay sex was made a criminal offence in 1885 (Marsh), and discussion about sexuality outside of heteronormativity was not common during his time (public discussion about anything to do with sexuality was marginalized in the late Victorian times).

It can be argued that much of the sexual ambiguity of the modern Holmes can be drawn directly from the original incarnation. Sexuality is thematically much more pronounced in *Sherlock*, and as I have discussed earlier, Holmes continues to be sexually ambiguous, but clearly more “sexual” than the Doyle version. But where does he fall on the spectrum? A notable portion of the fanbase considers and wants Holmes to be gay, which many scenes do seemingly support in the series. Arguments can also be made for heterosexuality and asexuality. The most obvious hindrance to readings other than that of a heteronormative one on Holmes’s sexuality, or a relationship between him and Watson, is that of the authorial intent; as Valentine points out, Steve Moffat has insisted on interviews that Sherlock (referring to both the original and his version) is neither gay or straight:

It’s a funny thing when a character for over 100 years has been saying, ‘I don’t do that at all.’ He’s been saying it over 100 years! He’s not interested in [sex]. He’s willfully staying away from that to keep his brain pure—a Victorian belief, that. But everyone wants to believe he’s gay. He’s not gay. He’s not straight. And Doctor Watson is very clear that he prefers women. People want to fantasize about it. It’s fine. But it’s not in the show. (Hibbert)

Moffat’s view on the matter is that Holmes simply has no interest in sex, ergo he is asexual. But why would Moffat and his writing partner, Gatiss, place the detective into situations that make his sexual preferences so ambiguous? Part of it could be a desire to play around with the old tropes of two men living together, which causes the misinterpretations about the relationship. Another reason could be wanting to pander to and pull in a growing modern audience of viewers craving for representation of sexual minorities in mainstream television programs. I would argue that in the case of *Sherlock* the intention of authors does not truly matter that much. The characters were originally created nearly 130 years ago, and have since then taken on a life of their own through many different formats from authors with different backgrounds and notions of what the stories and characters should be like. With the amount of fan-interaction the series has, no opinion on the characters inner workings or sexuality is necessarily more or less relevant than that of the authors if they intent on keeping these elements as ambiguous as they have been so far. Although the team of Moffat and Gatiss has attained something of an auteur status over the time they have been working in the industry, the show is not made just by them and interpretations of other crew members should be taken into account; for example, Benedict Cumberbatch has commented multiple times on his characters possible sexual interests. On an interview with Indiewire in 2012, he commented that “the man’s too busy to have sex”, and that it is possible that Holmes is gay. Later, in an interview with *Vulture*, when asked about Holmes’s sexuality, he stated this:

“He’s asexual. He doesn’t want any, and it’s very purposeful on his part. I think he’s been burnt in the past. I think he also realizes he can’t beat female intuition; he can’t. So to

embroil himself where he might be enslaved through adoration or sexual desire or any kind of power or chemistry to do with love is too big a risk for him. That doesn't make him gay, and it doesn't make him asexual. It means he's purposely abstaining for the sake of his craft. Not something I do." (Yuan)

In the above paragraph Cumberbatch contradicts himself, first stating that in his opinion Holmes is asexual, but then saying that the qualities he believes the character to have make him neither gay nor asexual. It seems like Cumberbatch himself does not have a clear opinion on the sexuality of the character that he plays, as the show leaves Holmes's sexuality so ambiguous. This ambiguity opens the possibility to differing interpretations on the character, which is arguably part of the reason why Holmes has remained as an interesting, nuanced character through multiple incarnations and interpretations for over a century.

Conclusion

The relationship between Holmes and Watson has endured as the quintessential example of the archetypal pairing of a brilliant detective and a more modest, practical companion that is often seen in crime fiction; it can be argued that the characters created by Doyle over 130 years ago are still the most well recognized pair in the genre, as can be seen with the high popularity and dedicated fanbase of *Sherlock*. Although the relationship was often strained (especially in the early stories) by Holmes' eccentric habits, Watson remained as the detective's stalwart, trusted companion throughout the canon. The modern adaptation has bolstered the fairly thin (although genuine) friendship between Holmes and Watson of the original canon into a deep friendship, where both parties fully trust and rely on each other. The strength of this relationship is at the forefront in series 3 and 4, where genuine conflict arises between the two main characters that serves to deepen the bond between the lead pair.

The sexual undertones in the relationship that have been interpreted to exist between Holmes and Watson in the Doyle stories are at the forefront of the relationship in *Sherlock*. Holmes' eccentric, 'problematic' nature apparently troubled Doyle himself, having created a character that was the polar opposite of a typical hero in literature; though he attempted to rehabilitate the detective, the sense of 'otherness' always remained with the character, leading to the varied interpretations on Holmes' sexuality. Romantic relationships in the original canon were largely left to the side

characters and Watson, with Sherlock's arguably misogynistic attitude leading him to largely treat women as irrelevant. With the friendship between Holmes and Watson playing a more important role in the overall plot in *Sherlock*, it was inevitable that the readings of possible homosexual undertones in the relationship and on the sexuality of both the detective and doctor would play a large part. With notable portion of the series fanbase desiring for the relationship between Holmes and Watson to be more than a friendship, it is understandable that tension has risen between them and the showrunners, who insist that the relationship between the lead characters is purely platonic; the queer elements in *Sherlock* are largely used for comic relief, with no clear intent to depict a genuine relationship representing sexual minorities.

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