

## **TRAVERSING THE BOUNDARIES OF TIME: EVOLUTION OF THE CHARACTER OF SHERLOCK HOLMES FROM DOYLE TO BBC**

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### *Abstract*

This Research tries to map the evolution of the character of Sherlock Holmes. He has evolved from a quiet, not so social, slightly arrogant person in Arthur Canon Doyle's book *The Original Illustrated Sherlock Holmes* to a very boastful, condescending character in the recent Television Series *BBC Sherlock Holmes*. There seems to be a gap between the Sherlock Holmes portrayed in the book and the character of Sherlock Holmes shown in the series. This research tries to explore what caused this disconnect. The study is done by comparing the primary texts and trying to understand the choices made. The research has tried to look how shifting from third person narrative to the first person has helped in constructing a contemporary Sherlock Holmes and it also tries to understand how the shift to visual medium has affected the characterization of the character of Sherlock Holmes.

**Keywords:** Sherlock Holmes, Evolution, Adaptation, Narrative Technique, Visual Medium.

Sherlock Holmes is a counseling criminologist, called upon both by the police and private substances to settle apparently unsolvable cases. He's an expert in disguise and forensic science, however, he is best known for his deductive thinking. People have looked at his intelligence with awe and many researchers have tried to explain and understand the science of deduction. This research tries to map the evolution of the character of Sherlock Holmes. He has evolved as a character from a quiet, not so social, slightly arrogant person in Arthur Canon Doyle's book *The Original Illustrated Sherlock Holmes* to a very boastful condescending character in the recent television series based on Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* detective stories. Created by Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss, it stars Benedict Cumberbatch as Sherlock Holmes and Martin Freeman as Doctor John Watson. There seems to be a gap between the characters, that is portrayed in the book and the character of Sherlock Holmes shown in the television series. This research tries to explore what caused the gap between the primary text (*The Original Illustrated Sherlock Holmes*) and its adaptation.

The rationale behind choosing this particular topic is to find out why this Sherlock-like figure is so intriguing? Author Canon Doyle stories used to be published in The Strand Magazine and it was hit with the readers. Sherlock Holmes is still a phenomenon many films have been made on this particular character and the audience seems to be ever increasing. The research aims to explore the issues raised above in detail.

Arthur Canon Doyle's character Sherlock Holmes is a character that had captured public's imagination when it was published in the Strand magazine initially. Doyle had played on public's fascination and fear of the unknown. Back then in the Victorian times, the crime rates had increased significantly and many detective novels got published at that time. Doyle had brought in the Victorian Ideas, mindset, and the various practices. Doyle through Sherlock Holmes tried to address how twisted notions of Ideal that were practiced in Victorian Age were highly talked about but was rarely put into practice by the public.

Sherlock Holmes and his friend Dr. Watson were the Victorian heroes. They assured the public that no matter what there was nothing called as the 'perfect crimes'. They assured the public that the justice will be served. Doyle had established a strong connection between the Victorian public and Sherlock Holmes. Dr. Watson served as a bridge that helped readers connect to the eccentric hero, Sherlock Holmes. Sherlock embodied the 'fascination and the fear'.

The adventures of Sherlock Holmes became so popular that the readership of the Strand Magazine grew. In between Doyle tried to kill Sherlock Holmes, this was meet with a lot of criticism. Many people canceled their subscription to the magazine. Then the magazine suffered a huge loss. With popular demand, Doyle brought the character, Sherlock Holmes back to life. Thus, give us another message that even intelligent people like Sherlock Holmes can also hit rock bottom.

For this quantitative research, the researcher will be following the comparative research methodology. This research will compare Arthur Canon Doyle's book The Original Illustrated Sherlock Holmes and the recent Television series BBC Sherlock Holmes created by Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss. The research aims to map the evolution of the character of Sherlock Holmes and also tries to understand what caused the research problem.

In the book, written by Author Canon Doyle readers do not have a good impression of Sherlock Holmes because before Dr. Watson gets acquainted with Sherlock Holmes, Stamford through his affirmations had already partly described Sherlock Holmes and he does not describe him in a positive light and the reader get to perceive Sherlock through another character right from the start. In the book, The Original Illustration of Sherlock Holmes, we come to know about Sherlock Holmes through Dr. Watson. "After having met Holmes and living with him for a couple of days Watson then gives us his own perception of the character - still very biased because of the information filtered through the narrator." (Carli 13) But when Watson presents to the readers the physical description of Sherlock Holmes he tries to be objective. But while describing Sherlock's physical features which ideally should create an exterior impression in the reader's minds he ends up helping the reader from a psychological characterization of Sherlock Holmes. The readers have to keep in mind that Dr. Watson is a character bound narrator, it means that the narrator says only what the given character knows. Therefore Dr. Watson cannot be completely trusted, even if he tries to disguise his opinions in objective remarks.

Watson sometimes takes a judgemental attitude. For instance, "... he is perplexed that Sherlock doesn't know about certain things that are not really relevant to his frame of work. Watson makes a list, and instead of naming it Sherlock Holmes – his knowledge" or something similar, he names it "Sherlock Holmes - his limits", and seems to be proud of it." (Carli 15)

Sherlock is an expert in subjects that are relevant to his detective work. He investigates this work with such rigor that Watson compares him to a foxhound which is on a hunt. After reading this, we, the readers draw conclusions that like foxhound that is set to find its prey, and Sherlock is also dedicated on a criminal chase.

But in the television series, BBC Sherlock Holmes the character of the Sherlock Holmes is played by the actor Benedict Cumberbatch. The crew worked very extensively on the characterization and the different aspects such as the construction of the image of the character, its qualification by speech or different kinds of function that the particular character carries out etc. “[...] the life of the character depends on the economy of the book, on its situation facing the other elements that constitute it: other characters, setting, a temporal duration, ideas.”(Candido 75) therefore people working on the series had to make the character whole within the current context in which it would be shown in. Therefore the different aspect of the character, like his characterization, qualification etc will be worked according to the current context. In the series, the idea of this character is conveyed through a first person point of view. Therefore, for the series, they had to create a narrative structure which would move the focalization from third person narrative to first person narrative.

Sherlock Holmes in the book and the series share a lot of similarities even though the narrative techniques are different. The setting and the time period in the book written by Arthur Canon Doyle and the same in the television series are also different. Holmes from the Victorian Era in the book, and Holmes from the Modern Era in the series have issues with drugs, lacks interpersonal skills, and do not know anything about human nature. They are excellent at deducing. They are experts on the subject that are relevant to their work and are dedicated to their work.

The original illustrated Sherlock Holmes by Arthur Canon Doyle successfully made a character which became one of the most important figures in literature over the years. Sherlock Holmes has been successfully able to capture public’s imagination. He is carefully created based on public’s fascination and fear of something that is beyond their understanding. This book is created during the Victorian era and therefore it has a lot of Victorian practices and morals reflecting from it. This was the time when everything that was not British was considered as ‘other’. Under such circumstance the book was written, therefore, many of his habits and actions are classified as eccentric. But in the book, Sherlock comes across to us through the narrator Dr. Watson, who thinks he has a tendency to withdraw from the society if he did not have a case. It is true because there is an instance in which Holmes goes to the Diogenes Club with Dr. Watson to meet his brother Mycroft. He seemed very comfortable in this club which does not allow verbal communication “under any circumstance” (Doyle 518). Holmes seems very comfortable in this environment where people are not allowed to talk to each other “a very soothing experience” (Doyle 519) from this we know about his desire to be isolated. Holmes does not function like regular human beings do because he finds the normal routine ‘boring’. Therefore, he is able to successfully invent a new kind of job for himself, that is, a ‘consulting detective’. An interesting factor about him is that he does not wish for ‘fame and recognition’. He is considered a Victorian hero even though he has the limited interpersonal skill, secluded and does not adhere to the social norm. He addresses different kind of social evil that was found in the Victorian era, for example, blackmailing of the rich families in “The Scandal in Bohemia”, attempt to inherit property illegal or illicitly in “The Hounds of the Baskervilles” etc. To avoid putting him on a pedestal he is shown as a drug addict and a highly unstable person, who might sleep on his sofa from morning till night not even moving a muscle. Sometimes he might stay in

his room playing his violin for days, we know also this, through the narration of Dr. Watson but in the television series the main focus is on Sherlock Holmes therefore the way he interacts, walks and dresses everything is scripted. Therefore, he is shown as a condescending man, and as someone who is disliked by his colleagues at the Scotland Yard, for example, he tells Anderson, a forensic expert, “he shouldn’t talk out loud or he might lower the IQ of the whole town.” Sherlock considers himself superior to other people because, in *The Hound of Baskervilles*, he tells Watson “I wanted to see how the drug works on average minds.” Just so that people don’t think about him as an infallible superhero, he is portrayed as a big fan of cocaine, prone to bouts of depression and a heavy smoker. In the BBC *Sherlock Holmes*, the character is created significantly flawed so that the audience can relate to it and also put across a message for the audience even with sharp intelligence like Sherlock’s it does not guarantee happiness or success. Sherlock because of his arrogance has no friends at all other than Dr. Watson. Lestrade is considered more like a colleague than a friend. Mrs. Hudson and Irene Adler even though are not close to him they have played a significant role in Sherlock’s life.

Dr. Watson an “Army doctor” had returned to London from warfare in Afghanistan. He got acquainted with Sherlock Holmes through a mutual friend when he was looking for a place to stay in London. Watson and Sherlock both have played important roles in each other’s lives. Watson is a very important character because many of the adventures of Sherlock Holmes are written through his perspective and another important function that he plays is that he helps to strike a balance. Sherlock needs someone to ask him the right kinds of questions so that he can explain his deductions in detail so that the audience can also follow how he reached to certain conclusions. Approaching a character like Sherlock who lacks interpersonal skills is not an easy task. Therefore, he acts like an access point for ‘normal’ people - clients so that they can avail his services. But in the series Watson acts like a companion for Sherlock, he tries to keep Sherlock of his drug habits. Sherlock, even though he confesses to being able to keep himself distant from his emotions but in *The Hound of Baskervilles* he acknowledges Dr. Watson as his only friend and in another episode, he counts Watson as one of his dear ones and a person he loves.

Mrs. Hudson was Dr. Watsons and Sherlock Holmes housekeeper. In the book, she is the only woman who has some kind of contact with Sherlock Holmes. She makes breakfast and dusts the house for him. But she constantly reminded him that she wasn’t his housemaid. Mrs. Hudson is a very soft-spoken, old lady in his late 60s who likes to bake things and sell them but this lamb-like character had a violent past and Sherlock helped her out of it. But he still keeps in contact with her, this tells us that he cares about her, this becomes further clearer, when Sherlock almost tries to kill the intruder because he had harmed Mrs. Hudson. This tells us that he has some kind of emotional connect with the old lady and he considers her mother-like. In an episode, he acknowledges her as one of his loved ones.

Everybody except Lestrade, inspector at Scotland Yard finds it very difficult to work with Sherlock, he is known to his colleagues as ‘freak’ in the series, and because of his arrogance and rude remarks, and it’s difficult for anyone to work with him. For example, he asks Anderson, a forensic expert working with Scotland Yard, “Anderson, Don’t talk out loud. You lower the IQ of the whole town.” In another instance, he asks Anderson to face the other side because his face puts him off. Lestrade, one might consider him as a friend of Sherlock but he clearly tries to maintain a very professional relation with him. Lestrade gets the credits for solving the cases even though it was Sherlock who worked on and solved the cases. Sherlock is not a person who is interested in achieving ‘fame and recognition’ all he cares about is the case or ‘the game’ as he calls it.

In the book, Irene Adler is the only woman who was known for outwitting Sherlock Holmes. The King of Bohemia described her saying that “She has the face of the most beautiful women and the mind of the most resolute of men.” Sherlock Holmes comes in contact with her in the story, Scandal of Bohemia. The King approaches Sherlock because she has a picture of herself and the King that could ruin his wedding to the Scandinavian princess. But in the series, Sherlock successfully outwits her in the end even though in many instances, she had fooled him. Therefore, he used to refer to her as ‘the woman’. He constantly keeps track of her movement because he did not trust her and he knew that she could outsmart him.

The book, *The Original Illustrated Sherlock Holmes* has the setting of a Victorian era. Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson are knights who help defend the ideals and practices of the Victorian age. “Sherlock Holmes and Dr. John Watson form and protect the ideals of the Victorian middle classes. Where one may fail, the other succeeds in maintaining values and stability. Holmes uses middle-class Victorian ideology to formulate his deductions and Watson creates a vital link between Holmes’ eccentricities and the middle-class reader” (Smith 1) Sherlock Holmes even though he claims to be not part of the society but he embodies the Victorian ideas, in *A Scandal of Bohemia*, Holmes is characterized as a Victorian gentlemen rather than an outsider, when King of Bohemia comes to talk about his problems. In “*The Adventure of the Speckled Band*,” Dr. Roylott and Sherlock Holmes both stand at the opposite ends of the spectrum when we talk about their crazed and enraged nature but both of them have the same ‘otherness’ in them which was one of the practices of the Victorian society. Victorians fascinated and feared the other’, Indians, gypsies were the people who were considered as the ‘other’. The series is set more in the modern, contemporary times, we know this because in the series many times Dr. Watson and Sherlock Holmes are mistaken as a gay couple by many people and they are very comfortable with them. This would not have been the case if it was set in the Victorian Era, they considered homosexuality to be sinful and nobody would have been comfortable talking about this idea ‘out in the open’.

The character of Sherlock Holmes has evolved because, in the book, *The Original Illustrations of Sherlock Holmes*, the characterisation is based on the description and it has to be provided by the author. But, in the case of television series *BBC Sherlock Holmes*, the type of storytelling is different, it’s fast paced, based on solid story structure and it emphasizes on creative visuals. The book has more “telling” aspect as compared to the “showing” or the visual nature of the series. The author gets to share his characters thought with the readers, as a result, the opportunity for characterization is much deeper in the book. But in series, the character has to “show” his thoughts, motivation and machinations occurring within him. All these details have to come across to the reader in a very short time because the series has a running time is less than two hours, therefore, the pacing is much tighter, because of this, the Television series makers have to learn to cut the fluff. But in the case of the book the author had the opportunity to spend his time in narrating subplots because there is no time restriction. “each act of visualization narrowed down the open-ended characters, objects or landscapes, created by the book and reconstructed in the reader’s imagination, to concrete and definite images. The verbally transmitted characteristics of the heroes, places and the spatial relations between them, open to various decoding possibilities in the process of imagining, were in the grip of flattening pictures.”(Marciniak 60)

In the book, *The Original Illustrated Sherlock Holmes*, the author has to create a strong, faster hook, because the readers are not patient which means the author needs to get the readers to the heart of the conflict and character as quickly as possible. Therefore, Arthur Canon Doyle

characterized Sherlock Holmes and his adventures as foreign and fascinating, to keep the readers intrigued about him and he used the third person narrative to keep him distant from the audience this way the audience could not identify with him or put him on the pedestal. In series, makers can manage a dedicated audience by crafting a leisurely and artistic opening. But they also needed something to make the viewer committed to the story. So they focalised their stories around the famous character named Sherlock Holmes who already has a wide fan following. The series was the visual adaptation of the book they brought in adequate changes to fit the modern and contemporary audience.

At this point, the debate on visual adaptations of literary works can be brought in, there is always a tendency to prioritize the literary originals over their film versions. “Adaptations were seen by most critics as inferior to the adapted texts, as “minor”, “subsidiary”, “derivative” or “secondary” products, lacking the symbolic richness of the books and missing their “spirit”. Critics could not forgive what was seen as the major fault of adaptations: the impoverishment of the book’s content due to necessary omissions in the plot and the inability of the filmmakers to read out and represent the deeper meanings of the text.” (Marciniak 62)

The conflict mentioned above does not come under this research. Many of these aspects can be taken up for further research.

Sherlock Holmes has been appropriated and adapted into many different forms of visual media, like films, series, and dramas. BBC Sherlock Holmes has released a few years ago. It is very recent and ongoing. It is impossible to affirm if the series will maintain its status as an adaptation or it can bring change in the story line or bring changes to some other decisive factor. That can affect series in a significant way.

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