

**The Adventure of the Immortal Detective: Adaptation and Audience Investment in the
Cases of Sherlock Holmes**

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Introduction – The Detective Genre and the Origins of Sherlock Holmes

“My name is Sherlock Holmes. It is my business to know what other people don’t know.” – “The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle.”

Of all the thousands of characters that inhabit the world of literature, few have survived into the present with the same level of prominence that accompanied their first appearances. Characters like Samuel Richardson’s Pamela or Charles Dickens’ Fagan, famous (or infamous) at their time of publication, may have retained the recognition of academia, but are not much more than literary trivia to the general public. However, a few characters have managed not only to maintain their original fame, but even to expand it over the years since their original publications. Arguably the most famous of these is Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s detective, Sherlock Holmes. For one hundred and forty years, American and British audiences alike have been fascinated by the exploits of the world’s greatest detective. From his deerstalker hat and pipe to his turn for deduction – deductions always accompanied, of course, by a breezy “Elementary, my dear Watson” – the characteristics and habits of Holmes are instantly familiar around the world. The public fascination with Doyle’s character has been constant since the original stories were published in the 1880s, and as technology and media have advanced, Holmes’ adventures have been spread to new audiences. His cases have been the subject of radio drama, television shows, and hundreds of new stories by authors from G.K. Chesterton to Neil Gaiman. In the last ten years alone, Holmes has been the subject of no less than four full-length films, two television series, and many new print adaptations of his adventures. In fact, Holmes’ on-screen popularity is such that, in 2012, he was awarded a Guinness World Record for “most portrayed literary human character in film & TV,” having appeared on screen 254 times since 1900 (“Sherlock Holmes Awarded”). All of this interest in Holmes naturally raises the question of why the

character has stayed so prominent for so long. Plenty of literary characters have exceptional skills and extraordinary adventures, so these alone are not sufficient to account for Holmes' perpetual popularity. The character's astonishing longevity is surely worthy of critical attention, and the cultural phenomenon that is Sherlock Holmes offers as interesting a puzzle as any that the detective himself ever solved.

Perhaps because of his familiar title, "the world's greatest detective," Holmes is often regarded as unique among literary characters. However, detectives and detective fiction existed well before Sherlock Holmes, and Arthur Conan Doyle openly acknowledged his debt to previous writers for the pattern that most of his stories followed. In its simplest form, otherwise known as classical detective fiction, the genre "presents crime as a puzzle to be solved through a 'who-why-how-when-where' series of questions that the detective poses. Writing and reading this form is supposedly governed by rules that include giving the reader a chance of solving the puzzle before the detective does" (Herman, Jahn, and Ryan 103). As this description implies, detective fiction tends toward the formulaic, a tendency which has led some critics to disparage its literary work. However, as Louise Rosenblatt points out, "[W]ithin the detective novel as a genre, the very breadth of its reading public makes for a rise toward a higher level of literary merit" (159). Millions of readers from the late nineteenth century to the present have devoured detective stories and novels, and the genre contains some of the most well-known characters ever conceived by an author's imagination.

Though Doyle's detective stories are among the most well-known, they were not the first of their kind. In fact, the first detective story was written by a man as different from Doyle the British military man as possible: a thin, nervous, scholarly American editor named Edgar Allan Poe. Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue" is almost universally recognized as the first detective

story proper. Though there are elements of detection in literature going back centuries before Poe, he was the first to produce a work whose whole plot centered on the solution of a crime by a detective. Haycraft lists the several plot devices first devised by Poe that later became standard in detective fiction, largely because of the Sherlock Holmes saga:

The transcendent and eccentric detective; the admiring and slightly stupid foil; the well-intentioned and blundering unimaginativeness of the official guardians of the law; the locked-room convention; the pointing finger of unjust suspicion; the solution by surprise; deduction by putting oneself in another's position (now called psychology); concealment by means of the ultra-obvious; the staged ruse to force the culprit's hand; even the expansive and condescending explanation when the chase is done: all these sprang full-panoplied from the buzzing brain and lofty brow of the Philadelphia editor. (12)

All of these features are typical of the Holmes stories, right down the familiar scene where Holmes reveals his chain of reasoning to his own "admiring and slightly stupid" Watson. Without Poe's earlier creation, there would be no detective fiction, and over a century of readers would have never been surprised and delighted by the satisfying conclusion of an apparently impenetrable literary problem. Certainly there would have been no Sherlock Holmes and no Dr. Watson, and literature and popular culture would have lost one of their greatest and most recognizable partnerships. In fact, Poe's prototypical detective story established a pattern that every mystery writer from Agatha Christie to James Patterson would follow.

Despite his respectable literary pedigree, Sherlock Holmes was not an instant success, as his modern fans might be surprised to learn. The character first appeared in the novella *A Study in Scarlet*, published in *Beeton's Christmas Annual* of 1887 (Starrett 9). The story was actually

put off for a year after Doyle submitted it; the publishers explained the delay by writing that they “could not publish it [in 1886] as the market [was] flooded with cheap fiction” (qtd. in Starrett 9). This dreadful underestimation of the merits of Doyle’s writing, however, was only a minor obstacle to the author’s success. The next appearance of Sherlock Holmes was in *The Sign of Four*, published in an 1890 issue of *Lippincott’s Magazine*;¹ shortly afterward, the series that would become *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* began publication in *The Strand* (Starrett 12). This series cemented the detective’s fame, so much so that, as Bayard writes, the public grew addicted to Holmes and reacted with outrage to his death in “The Final Problem”: “It is difficult today to imagine the violence of the reactions that greeted the death of Sherlock Holmes, in England and abroad. This outcry became the very symbol, in literary history, of the power of imaginary worlds, and of the difficulty we have in separating them from the real world” (122). This issue of distinguishing the real from the fictional arises regularly when discussing Sherlock Holmes, from the public perception of him as a real historical figure to the scholarly convention of writing as if he were a real person.

In his review of a collection of Holmes stories, T.S. Eliot observes, “[P]erhaps the greatest of the Sherlock Holmes mysteries is this: that when we talk of him we invariably fall into the fancy of his existence” (17). Despite the fact that Holmes is undoubtedly a fictional character, even the most scholarly writings on his adventures regularly discuss him without the faintest acknowledgment that those adventures never actually occurred. This pleasant scholarly delusion is not confined to a few eccentric authors; even famous figures like Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Dorothy L. Sayers offer perfectly serious theories on details of the detective’s life

¹ The same issue of *Lippincott’s* served as the first appearance of Oscar Wilde’s novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

like where he was born and where he attended university.² In her essay theorizing that Holmes went to Cambridge, Sayers adds that she searched the Cambridge Honors list for Sherlock Holmes' name, but was unable to find it; she attributes this failure to the fact that "the lists were compiled with a lack of accuracy very far from consonant with the dignity of an academic body" (145). Neither she nor any other Holmes scholar acknowledges that their subject is anything but entirely factual. Indeed, Vincent Starrett writes that Holmes "exists in history more surely than the warriors and statesmen in whose time he lived and had his being" (12). However, the original Holmes stories were not intended as realistic or even artistic literary works; they were simply a way for an impecunious young doctor to make some extra money.

Despite the mercenary motives which catalyzed their writing, the Holmes stories took on a life of their own far beyond what Arthur Conan Doyle expected. As Julian Symons notes, "Sherlock Holmes became a myth so potent that even in his own lifetime Doyle was almost swamped by it, and the myth is no less potent today" (77). Doyle's frustration with his own creation is clear in his letters; after writing five Holmes stories of the collection that would become *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, he writes to his mother, "I think of slaying Holmes in the sixth [story] and winding him up for good and all. He takes my mind from better things" (Doyle et al. 300). Certainly Doyle's non-Holmes works – his historical novels like *The White Company*, his horror and suspense stories like *The Horror of the Heights* or *The Ring of Thoth*, and his adventure tales like *The Lost World* – though perhaps more literary and certainly preferred by their author, are completely overshadowed by the figure in the deerstalker hat with the pipe. The harassed doctor originally intended to write only six Holmes short stories, which he sent to the publisher in 1891 (Carr 64). However, *The Strand* magazine appealed to Doyle for

² Naturally, President Roosevelt suggests that Holmes is American, explaining that his unsociable habits among his British peers are natural enough for an expatriate (199).

more Holmes. In an effort to avoid writing more on the detective's adventures, Doyle implemented a cunning strategy. He described this plan in a letter to his mother: "I will write by this post to say that if [*The Strand* will] offer me £50 each, *irrespective of length*, I may be induced to consider my refusal. Seems rather high-handed, does it not?" (qtd. in Carr 65, emphasis in original). He considered that so high a price would deter further interest in the adventures of Holmes, but to his surprise, a reply came almost immediately, accepting his terms and demanding more stories of the detective's cases (Carr 65). But no matter how Doyle felt about his creation, the response of his readers has been overwhelming, both in his lifetime and in the present. This response has included not only the fervent belief in his existence, but the hundreds of essays, short stories, novels, films, and other adaptations that have poured into the public arena in the decades since the detective's first appearance.

Since the interest of the English-speaking world in the cases of Holmes began in Victorian London, the modern critical detective must start there to account for Holmes' unceasing popularity. While some authors suggest that much of Holmes' popularity was due to his defense of Victorian virtues,³ this explanation does not account for the endurance of the detective's fame into the present. Something in the text itself must be responsible for originating the fame of Sherlock Holmes, and the critic's responsibility is to examine the canonical stories to find it. That examination leads to a familiar character: Dr. John H. Watson. As Holmes' biographer as well as his sidekick and friend, Watson's narratives are the public's only insight into the great detective's cases. Any deficiency in the original text can only have two causes: either Watson deliberately left information out of his accounts, or he really knew as little about Holmes as the stories imply. But whichever reason is the true one (and readers have usually

³ See Rosemary Jann's *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes: Detecting Social Order* and Christopher Clausen's *Sherlock Holmes, Order, and the Late-Victorian Mind*.

taken a rather harsh view of Watson's intelligence), the reader's knowledge of Holmes is necessarily limited by the construction of the canonical stories.

Much of the limitation of the Holmes canon is a matter of the author's focus. The simple fact is that Doyle set out to write entertaining stories with plots that would interest readers; his intention was not produce a detailed biography of a fictional character, which he might reasonably have assumed would try the public's patience. He could hardly have foreseen the rabid interest his character would inspire in readers, so the lack of background information provided about Holmes is perhaps not surprising. However, that dearth of information is no less frustrating for being well-meant on Doyle's part. Because of the shortcomings of the canon, Holmes' origins are entirely unknown, as is the process by which he developed his methods, the possibly traumatic experiences that led to his alternations between "extreme languor and devouring energy" (Doyle 185) which almost amounts to bipolar disorder, and his dislike of mental inactivity which drives him to using cocaine rather than suffering boredom. Equally mysterious are his relationships – apart from his friendship with Watson, of course – his doings during the three years between his "death" in Switzerland and his reappearance in London, and his life after retiring to Sussex. Generations of scholars have hunted through Watson's narratives looking for clues to these mysteries, hidden between the sensational events of Holmes' cases, but the stories themselves simply do not say enough about the mysterious detective who fascinated the reading public of Victorian London. So readers have taken matters into their own hands, and created their own clues: new cases, new stories, versions of the Sherlock Holmes canon where the detective can stand apart from Watson's narrative as a man with his own story.

Despite the literary merits of the Holmes canon, what truly makes these stories remarkable is the degree to which readers have invested their time and energy into them. The

adaptations, scholarly works, and societies devoted to the life and times of Sherlock Holmes constitute an unparalleled response to a literary character, and the cultural saturation the detective has achieved is matched by few real-life historical figures. As John Cawelti writes, “Even Sherlock Holmes, that confirmed bachelor and misogynist, would have been stunned by the enormity and variety of his progeny” (7). Those progeny include dozens of novels, short stories, plays, movies, poems, and even two musicals. The thousands of hours invested by audiences in enjoying the adventures of Sherlock Holmes in every possible medium invite the investigation of modern critics, and amply repay that investigation with a rich offering of literary complexity, historical interest, and, of course, plenty of mysteries still to be solved. From discussion of the narrative construction of the canonical stories, which hold readers in suspense until the last page, to the interaction between those readers and the text that has led to the adaptations, and the variety and scope of the adaptations themselves, the world of Sherlock Holmes has much to offer the modern scholarly detective. As Holmes himself might say at the opening of a case, the game’s afoot!

Chapter One – The Evidence: A Narrative Analysis of Canonical Stories

“Here dwell together still two men of note

Who never lived and so can never die.”

-Vincent Starrett, “221b.”

The word “detective” may bring up a variety of images in the mind of the average person, but one of these will almost inevitably be the familiar silhouette of Sherlock Holmes. Even those rare few who have never read one of Conan Doyle’s stories, never seen one movie or television show featuring that famous detective, know as much as this about him. Those same people consider the name of Sherlock Holmes to be synonymous with intelligence or observational skills, and this universal awareness of the character is remarkable in itself – what other literary personage has reached this level of saturation in modern culture? – but it becomes even more so when one considers the longevity of that saturation. Almost from his first appearance in print, Holmes has been popular, a rapid success so overpowering that his beleaguered author, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, was induced to bring him back from the dead by the demands of his importunate public. But rather than fading into the background of cultural awareness, Holmes’ fame snowballed, gathering momentum with every new story, theory, and adaptation, hundreds of which have been produced since his first appearance in 1887. This incredibly high number of portrayals and the pervasive public awareness of Holmes leads inevitably to the question of why he is so famous. What is it about this lean, grey-eyed detective that has so entrenched him in the public consciousness? Why does he continue to grow in popularity when characters like Pip and Jane Eyre fade with every passing year? These questions are simple enough, but finding their answer necessitates a close examination not only of Doyle’s original stories, but also of the adaptations that continue to promote Holmes’ fame.

Sherlock Holmes' early popularity might be – and has been – attributed to any number of factors, from the increased popularity of serial publication in the late Victorian period to the desire of an unsettled culture approaching the end of an age for the reassuring efficiency of the detective's brain. However, these causes, though certainly interesting and valid objects of study, have less to do with Holmes' remarkable fame in modern popular culture. Though many characters, from Jane Eyre to David Copperfield, became famous in their own time, none of them has persisted in the forefront of the public imagination as Doyle's detective has, long after the culture that produced him has faded away. Sherlock Holmes' popularity today has given rise to literally hundreds of adaptations when other Victorian heroes have sunk into the background of popular culture. Such a phenomenon demands investigation as surely as the great detective's own cases. In order to account for any of Sherlock Holmes' subsequent fame, the investigator is required to return to the scene of the original crimes, so to speak, and examine the canonical Holmes stories to see how their construction produces effects on the reader that have not grown stale in well over a century. These stories, whose author despised them as much as his public loved them, contain the clues that can lead a conscientious observer to an explanation of Holmes' popularity.

Any study of the canonical Holmes must take into account the structural oddities of these stories. Though the plots of these works vary, their basic structure shares certain similarities that help to explain why readers continue to be so interested in them. Naturally, an exhaustive examination of all sixty stories is impracticable here, but the formulaic nature of detective fiction permits a few well-chosen examples to represent the whole. More famous Holmes stories, such as "A Case of Identity" and "The Red-Headed League," stand as prototypes of detective fiction whose basic formulas are repeated in several other Holmes works. Others, like "The Gloria

Scott,” “The Lion’s Mane,” and “The Mazarin Stone,” represent narrative oddities, for Holmes tells most or all of the story in the first two, and a third person omniscient narrator tells the third. However, though the type of narration varies between stories, the basic structure does not, and the closer the reading, the more obvious are the similarities in the accounts of Holmes’ exploits, whether told by his faithful Watson or otherwise.

By their very nature, detective stories, including the Holmes canon, are essentially puzzles to be solved. However, the reader’s solution of the enigma (usually a crime) is not going to be made easy for him. If the reader discovers the correct answer before the story is half over, then the mystery is not a very good one. The game is to keep the reader guessing until the very last chapter, then to present a solution that at once fully resolves the tension of the plot and surprises the reader even though he has been following the case since its beginning. This maintenance of suspense is where Doyle excels, creating plots that seem so complex that his solutions cannot help but be delightful surprises to his readers, and this reaction never fades, even after decades of reading. As T.S. Eliot notes in his rather mixed review of the Sherlock Holmes stories, though at times the “content of the story may be poor [,] the form is nearly always perfect” (18). Plotting rather than setting or character is what really sets Doyle apart as an author from many of his less enduring contemporaries, and the plots of the Holmes stories are what have delighted his readers for so long.

But the true mystery aficionado and scholar cannot be satisfied with merely accepting this unending delight in the story without examining its causes. Still less can the student of narrative theory pass by such a fascinating example of plot structure, one that maintains the reader’s interest by withholding rather than by revealing information as other genres do. In fact, withheld information is the single most important factor in maintaining the reader’s interest in

Holmes' cases, as well as in the detective as a character. Holmes' audience continues to read because they want to know more: they finish the story because they want to know the solution to each individual mystery, and they go back and reread those stories because they want to know more about Holmes as a person. Withheld information is the common element in every Holmes story and the motivating factor that leads readers to read and reread; consequently, this element is present in all aspects of the canonical stories, including their structure, narration, and resolution.

In terms of the structure of the Holmes stories, Stephen Knight writes that the majority of the canonical tales, particularly later ones, follow a "fixed pattern" that includes certain familiar elements:

In that formula, the story opens with Holmes and Watson in Baker Street; a client arrives; Holmes deduces from the client's appearance; the problem is outlined; Holmes discusses the case with Watson after the client leaves; investigation usually follows – usually some is conducted by Holmes alone, but most occurs at the scene of the crime with Watson and the police looking on; Holmes identifies what has happened, normally in action of some kind; Holmes explains all to Watson, back at Baker Street. (75)

This basic structure, with surprisingly few variations, is the foundation of the Holmes stories. The few exceptions – those stories related by Holmes himself rather than Watson, for instance – still rely heavily on this structure for their effect, as narrative analysis shows. The highly formulaic nature of the canonical Holmes tales makes it somewhat surprising that readers should be willing to return to them over and over again, and continue to be charmed and fascinated by them with every rereading. However, the never-fading effect of the Holmes canon

relies at least as much on the intervention of its narrator – usually Watson, but in a few cases Holmes himself – as on its plot structure.

Fifty-six of the original sixty Holmes works are narrated by Dr. John H. Watson. Of the four remaining, two are narrated by Holmes and two by an omniscient third-person narrator. The latter categories will be examined in their turn, but the earliest and most popular of the Holmes canon are those told by Watson, whose voice establishes and maintains the reader's interest in Holmes and in the adventures of the doctor and the detective. In fact, in Doyle's biography, while describing the genesis of the Holmes canon, he candidly writes that his detective "could not tell his own exploits, so he must have a commonplace comrade as a foil – an educated man of action who could both join in the exploits and narrate them" (69). This, of course, is Watson, given "a drab, quiet name for this unostentatious man" (69). But however ordinary he may be, his enthusiasm for what Holmes calls "all that is bizarre and outside the conventions and humdrum routine of everyday life" (Doyle 54) leads him to relate his friend's cases to the general public, giving the reader a glimpse into the strange and convoluted affairs that Holmes is involved in, and, perhaps just as importantly, into Holmes the man. Despite all of the fascination of Holmes' cases, the real draw for his readers is the consulting detective himself. In *The Nature of Narrative*, Scholes and Kellogg write that the "most essential element of characterization is [...] inward life" (171), and that the inward life of characters can be shown either through direct narrative statement, in which the narrator tells the reader about the character, or through interior monologue, which they define as "a direct, immediate presentation of the unspoken thoughts of a character without any intervening narrator" (177). Though the Sherlock Holmes stories are centered on the consulting detective, Watson's perspective necessarily limits the revelation of Holmes' character to direct narrative statement. Because of this limitation, the reader can only

know about Holmes' inner life if Watson describes it directly, which he rarely does. Holmes' inner life is therefore in many ways as mysterious as his own cases. Watson, on the other hand, has both methods of revelation open to reveal his own character, and he makes use of them in many of Holmes' most classic cases. As the narrator of the majority of his friend's escapades, Watson naturally forms a major part of any examination of the structure of the Sherlock Holmes canon. One of the most well-known and typical of those cases is that of "The Red-Headed League."

The structure of "The Red-Headed League" is typical of the shorter Holmes stories, though it has the advantage of being one of the few cases in which Holmes pursues the entire investigation with Watson present. The doctor being there for the entire course of the case both necessitates his intervention in the narrative and gives him the opportunity for some of those tantalizing insights into Holmes' character that keep readers reading. This case, like all of Watson's accounts, is structured as a frame narrative, in which the primary voice is Watson's, with secondary roles being given to the red-headed client, Mr. Jabez Wilson, and, at the end of the story, to Sherlock Holmes, when he offers his solution of the case. But even these secondary stories are reported by Watson, and the narrative as a whole is limited by the bounds of the character-narrator, who is naturally excluded from what any other character is "seeing, hearing, or feeling" (Herman et al. 108). This causes some difficulties for the reader who wants to know more about Sherlock Holmes, since Watson, though a true friend and valuable companion to the detective, never offers his readers the degree of insight into his brilliant friend's character that they want. All he can do, it seems, is recount Holmes' cases and leave readers to extrapolate the details of Holmes' character for themselves.

Watson's stance as narrator is somewhat difficult to identify; he falls somewhere between

Booth's categories of "observer" – a narrator who is a pair of eyes and little else – and "narrator-agent," who "produce[s] some measurable effect on the course of events" (153-54). Though Watson is more than simply a watcher as he follows, questions, and obeys Holmes, he makes little difference in the outcome of the case; Holmes could have solved the mystery in precisely the same way without his friend's presence. But Watson still offers more to his friend than a less intelligent foil for Holmes' genius. As the mediator between Holmes and the reader, Watson necessarily manipulates the narrative to ensure its maximum effect on the audience. Such an arrangement is far from unusual in detective fiction: Ian Ousby points out that Poe's detective Dupin is also portrayed "through the eyes of an admiring friend" (142), while Agatha Christie and Rex Stout both used friends and assistants to narrate the adventures of their detectives. Secondary narrators are friends, helpers, and chroniclers for their brilliant but often difficult counterparts, and Watson's relationship with Holmes is no exception.

One of the cases which most clearly exemplifies the importance of the Holmes-Watson partnership, and the doctor's intervention in the retelling of his friend's cases, is that of "The Red-Headed League." This story opens, like many Holmes cases, with Watson visiting Baker Street and finding Holmes with a client. As Rosemary Jann writes, "Allowing the clients to tell their own stories keeps the reader outside the crime, sharing the clients' confusion and excluded from all of Holmes' insights, except those he deigns to reveal" (23). Already the reader has begun to be excluded from the inner circle of information, cut off from Holmes' knowledge and finding Watson's observations barely sufficient. The doctor looks at the client and notices several details of his appearance, including the cut and pattern of his trousers, the unkempt state of his waistcoat, the "square pierced bit of metal" hanging from his watch chain, and the "faded" and "wrinkled" condition of his hat and coat (55). These details seem fairly comprehensive, and

they lead Watson to the conclusion that Mr. Wilson is “an average commonplace British tradesman” (177). However, Holmes, observing his friend’s efforts, provides his own analysis, which proves that their client is less average than the doctor thought; the man has, in fact, been a sailor, gone to China, and is a member of a secret society (177). Mr. Wilson is as surprised as Watson (and the reader), but when Holmes explains his process, rather than being impressed by the detective’s skill, the red-haired man exclaims, “I thought at first that you had done something clever, but I see that there was nothing in it after all” (177). This reaction should serve as a clue to the technique of this narrative and of many other Holmes cases. In all detective fiction, the mystery of the plot is dependent upon a certain amount of withheld information on the part of the narrator, whether that narrator is the detective himself or someone else. As Reiter points out, “If the signification of each step and each clue is made immediately clear, the reader ... feels as if what at first seemed clever is really nothing at all” (81). If Holmes (or a more Holmes-like Watson) narrated his cases, they would be, as he tells his friend, a “course of lectures” rather than Watson’s “series of tales” (Doyle 282). And while these hypothetical lectures might be quite enlightening, they would be far less captivating than the tales.

The case continues with Mr. Wilson recounting his extraordinary experience with the body known as the “League of the Red-Headed Men” (179). His account begins with him answering an advertisement for members to join this league, which was founded by the will of an eccentric American, and seems to exist entirely to pay red-haired men four pounds per week to sit in an office and copy out the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (181). Mr. Wilson performs his duties and receives his pay for eight weeks, only to arrive at his office one morning to find a sign on the door announcing, “The Red-Headed League is dissolved” (182). He comes to Sherlock Holmes hoping that the detective can make sense of this strange affair. A highly pleased Holmes admits

that this case is “unique” even among his vast professional experience (177). However, Holmes begins even this unusual investigation with a veritable library of knowledge on a wide range of subjects. Over the course of his investigation, he displays a knowledge of tattoos (177), refers to his mental map of London (185), and in fact recognizes from Mr. Wilson’s narrative alone precisely who the criminal is (183). Watson’s medical and military expertise, less focused and less extensive, is of very little use in this case, but he eagerly follows his friend as they bid Mr. Wilson goodbye and set out from Baker Street to investigate.

This investigation makes even clearer what Watson and the reader are not allowed to know about the case. Having followed Holmes to Mr. Wilson’s business premises, Watson watches his friend first strike the pavement outside the house with his walking stick, then knock on the door and ask directions to a main thoroughfare of London which he must know perfectly well (184). When the doctor asks his friend the reason for this odd behavior, Holmes brushes him off, saying, “[T]his is a time for observation, not for talk” (184). Rebuffed by his friend and left alone to ponder the mystery, Watson admits to the reader, “I trust that I am not more dense than my neighbors, but I was always oppressed with a sense of my own stupidity in my dealings with Sherlock Holmes” (185). This statement is important to consider when studying Watson’s place as narrator. The first part – Watson’s confidence that, if not as brilliant as his friend, he is at least not unusually dense – is easy to dismiss in the face of his apparent lack of observational skill. Many Holmes critics have either regarded Watson with pity and condescension for his failings, or considered his narration a necessary evil, as Krasner does when he complains that the reader must deal with “Watson's irritatingly mundane capacities for narrative revelation” (425) in order to learn anything about Holmes. But this is a serious underestimation of the doctor’s abilities, as well as of his contribution to his friend’s cases. In effect, Watson makes his friend’s cases – or at

least, their popularity – possible. He is the everyman who makes the often repellent Holmes more palatable for his audience. He is also the one who sets off Holmes' extraordinary gifts to their best advantage.

To some extent, Holmes' withholding of information from Watson is unavoidable. The detective's expertise may not be broad (it does not, for example, include the fact that the earth revolves around the sun)⁴, but it is certainly comprehensive in those areas pertinent to his profession. His observational skills are almost unnaturally acute, and in his cases he is in his element. Even in Mr. Wilson's case, where Holmes claims to be starting without much guidance from his own knowledge, he quickly reveals that he is in fact already aware of the criminal's identity and needs only to discover the motive of the crime, which he does almost as soon as he arrives at Mr. Wilson's pawn shop. Without the same advantages of prior knowledge, Watson naturally sees this case as "confused and grotesque" (186) where Holmes can see "not only what had happened, but what was about to happen" (186). However, though not as intellectually astonishing as Holmes, Watson is neither mentally nor physically degenerate. As a former soldier who served in Afghanistan, most likely in the Second Afghan War, Watson has certain skills, such as his aim with a revolver, which are regularly put to use in the service of his friend. And though Watson's comparison of his confusion to Holmes' clarity may be a depressing one for him, it serves an essential function in the narrative, giving the reader the chance to stand in Watson's shoes and see Holmes as his friend does.

Dr. Watson's failure to understand the case at this point only sharpens his curiosity to know what Holmes knows, especially after Holmes makes an appointment to meet Watson later that night and requests him to bring his service revolver (184). The reader, looking at events

⁴ See *A Study in Scarlet*.

from Watson's perspective, must be in the same state of confusion, and equally eager to hear Holmes' solution. When the doctor arrives at Baker Street, he finds himself, Holmes, a Scotland Yard detective, and a rather pessimistic bank director (ironically named Mr. Merryweather) on the way to the bank that abuts Mr. Wilson's pawn shop. On the way, Holmes reveals that "[a] considerable crime is in contemplation" (185), and that he already knows the identity of the criminal. Their quarry is Mr. John Clay, a young man of aristocratic descent whose criminal acumen leads Holmes to award him the honor of "one of the coolest and most-daring criminals in London" (190). Watson soon finds that in order to catch this man, he and the other two men will have to sit both literally and figuratively in the dark, waiting in the basement of the bank for something to happen. Holmes alone, as usual, is fully aware of what they are awaiting, and his planning and forethought are the means by which the police apprehend Clay and his accomplice, who have tunneled through the basement of Mr. Wilson's shop to rob the bank.

The placement of Holmes' companions in the dark is a fitting symbol of their mental state. In the majority of the Holmes cases, a moment occurs where his helpers, usually Dr. Watson or Scotland Yard detectives, are forced to wait impatiently in literal or figurative darkness while Holmes anticipates the actions of the criminal. In an extreme instance, during the case of "The Speckled Band" Holmes and Watson both wait in the dark for the approach of a venomous snake that Watson does not know is coming, and for which he is therefore quite unprepared. This circumstance has led Krasner to the conclusion that "Watson's convenience, safety or freedom from anxiety come second to Holmes's control over the unfolding of the case" (428). However, since Watson's perspective guides the reader's, his anxiety and suspense are absolutely essential to the case's final effect, and should therefore be considered narrative techniques rather than the symptoms of a serious imbalance of power between him and his

friend. In fact, there is textual evidence for the belief that, even during his vigil in the bank, Watson is not as completely in the dark as he leads the reader to believe.

However, once the criminals have been caught, both Watson's and the reader's suspense are at an end. When the offenders are in custody, the narrative progresses to the conclusion, that scene beloved of Holmes aficionados where the detective unveils his process to the admiring Watson. In this scene, the doctor learns that Holmes knew the motive and identity of the criminal almost before Mr. Wilson's narrative was over, and that their visit to his premises was merely a confirmation of Holmes' solution. In the midst of his account, Holmes makes one statement that may puzzle careful readers. He claims that he only asked directions of Mr. Wilson's "assistant," John Clay, to get a look at "the knees of his trousers" (184) and confirm his hypothesis that the man had been digging recently. He then says to Watson, "You must yourself have remarked how worn, wrinkled, and stained [his trousers] were" (190). If Watson *had* noticed the state of the man's clothing, it would surely have given him a clue to the solution of the problem, especially when combined with his friend's hints and their vigil in the basement of a bank that backs up to the pawnbroker's shop. In effect, his noticing this detail would probably have lessened his confusion considerably, and the reader's as well. It also seems quite likely that Watson *would* have noticed the man's trousers, as he gave a fairly detailed description of Mr. Wilson's clothing, which included descriptors like "frayed," "faded," and "wrinkled" (177). Dr. Watson himself, characterized by "military neatness" (83), would surely note a man whose clothing was so obviously unfit to be seen. In writing his account, Watson has to choose between three narrative strategies: tell the story just as he experienced it, including his observation of Clay's dirty trousers; include all data relevant to the case, whether he noticed it at the time or not; or strategically omit details that would alert the reader to the solution before Holmes' solution is

revealed. The first two options would give the reader some chance at solving the mystery alongside Holmes, while the third would ensure the reader's continued suspense until the dramatic conclusion of the case. Clearly, Watson chooses the third option.

Some critics, including Howard Haycraft, have objected to the obscurity in which many of the Holmes narratives progress, insisting that a detective story should offer the reader an equal chance at solving the crime by providing him or her with all of the detective's information (54). In the case of "The Red-Headed League," offering the reader an equal chance at solving the crime would require either that Holmes himself be the narrator, or that Watson possess the same advantages as his friend as well as total openness about what he sees, which would amount to virtually the same thing. But an important – even an essential – element of the partnership would be lost, and the narratives could not possibly have the character of mystery and delight that readers have enjoyed for so long.

The effect of the Holmes narratives is founded upon the Holmes-Watson partnership. From the first appearance of *A Study in Scarlet*, Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson are foils for one another, and the contrast between them drives Watson's accounts of Holmes' cases. Despite his physical energy in the pursuit of criminals, Holmes is the quintessential man of thought, while Watson, the former soldier, is a man of action. Holmes is possibly the "most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has seen" (Doyle 161), while Watson, though distinguished by his medical practice and military service, is still normal enough to stand in for the common reader. However, the doctor is no fool; Holmes himself writes in one of his two autobiographical stories that "Watson has some remarkable characteristics of his own to which in his modesty he has given small attention amid his exaggerated estimates of [Holmes'] performances" (1000). However, both Watson's narration and Holmes' "performances"

themselves are necessary to make the narratives of the detective's cases work. Rick Altman explains that the reader's pleasure in the Sherlock Holmes cases is due to "the panache of Sherlock's solutions [...], not the petty fact that he happens to have solved a crime through them" (131). That panache is largely due to Watson's mediation. The stories could not be narrated by Holmes and still offer suspense and satisfaction for the reader; they require a secondary narrator, specifically one who can stand in contrast to the great detective. Like the audience at a magic show, the readers of Holmes' cases would fail to be enchanted if they could see how the trick is done. The underappreciated Dr. Watson, in fact, makes his friend's fame possible.

In addition to highlighting Holmes' good points, Watson also softens and humanizes his friend. As Buchanan explains, "Readers accept Watson's description of his friend because they recognize Watson to be one of them; that is, he is human, with human foibles" (21). As much as readers may admire Sherlock Holmes, they cannot identify with him; he is too alien for the reader to understand him unaided. Watson, on the other hand, is a normal man, and this qualification allows him to stand in for the reader as the (sometimes confused) observer of his brilliant friend. The detective may be extraordinary, but "the intensity of his dedication to science can also make him a suspect and repellent figure" (Ousby 156), and he requires the mediating and softening influence of Watson in order to hold the reader's interest. Watson is the one who sees his friend as "a benefactor of the race" (Doyle 190), and his admiration of Holmes motivates him to shape his narratives so that the reader will feel the same. Watson's intelligence, so long the butt of scholarly jokes, is in reality as effective upon the structure of his narratives as Holmes' is upon the progress of a case.

This narrative manipulation on Watson's part edges him into the category that Scholes

and Kellogg call the “unreliable narrator.” Though they primarily discuss characters that *cannot* narrate reliably, their evaluation of this device applies equally well to those that *will not* do so. They note that “[t]his device lends an especially ironical cast to an entire narrative, laying on the reader a special burden of enjoyable ratiocination, as he seeks to understand what the character telling the story cannot himself comprehend” (Scholes and Kellogg 263). Though Watson, as a careful reader will see, can comprehend perfectly well, his decision not to relate what he knows leads to the same “enjoyable ratiocination” (263) for the reader. For anyone who enjoys detective stories, this is surely a pleasant obligation – not only to find the clues that are present in the narrative, but to seek out the spaces where evidence has been removed.

The majority of Holmes’ cases are structured very similarly to “The Red-Headed League.” The most classic Holmes stories, such as “A Case of Identity,” “A Scandal in Bohemia,” and “The Man with the Twisted Lip” all follow the same progression from the client’s narrative through Holmes’ investigation (conducted with or without Watson), to the dramatic conclusion to the affair and the detective’s contented explanation of his rational processes. In all of these, Watson’s narrative voice is essential in prolonging the reader’s suspense until Holmes is ready to reveal his completed solution and bring the case to its ultimately satisfying finish. But although most of the Holmes stories are narrated entirely from Watson’s perspective, a few of them are told by the detective himself. But if Dr. Watson’s narration is the essential factor in maintaining the reader’s interest, Holmes’ accounts of his own cases may damage their effect, turning them into lectures upon deduction instead of entertaining accounts. Unless, of course, the structure of withheld information that drives the story can be maintained in some other way. Examining one of these exceptional stories, “The Gloria Scott,” reveals that its narrative structure is strikingly similar to the more typical stories narrated by

Watson.

“The Gloria Scott” is especially notable in the Holmes canon because it was the detective’s very first case and offers the only information in the canonical stories about his life before his arrival in Baker Street. As with “The Red-Headed League,” “The Gloria Scott” is a frame narrative, made up of the voices of Watson and Holmes, with the addition of a lengthy account written by Holmes’ deceased client. This case is still technically narrated by Watson, since he relates Holmes’ narration to the reader, but Holmes’ is the primary voice in this story. In fact, Watson’s narrative responsibility in this story is extremely small, limited to the narration of the circumstances leading up to his friend’s relation of the case. Holmes’ is the only voice relating the circumstances of his investigation, making Watson’s capacity for withholding information negligible. So if the foundation of a successful detective story is maintaining the reader’s suspense, that suspense must be kept up without the doctor’s influence.

Like “The Red-Headed League” and many other canonical stories, “The Gloria Scott” opens in Baker Street. Unlike other classic Holmes cases, however, this one enters into the actual case almost immediately, without any philosophical musings by Holmes or contextual information by Watson. Holmes simply invites his friend to examine a strange document connected with his very first case, and the doctor, naturally eager, reads this odd message: “The supply of game for London is going steadily up. Head-keeper Hudson, we believe, has been now told to receive all orders for fly-paper and for preservation of your hen-pheasant’s life” (374). Amused by his friend’s perplexity (as always), Holmes immediately embarks on his account of the case. However, as far as the reader can tell, Holmes actually does relate the case exactly as he experiences it.

The case of “The Gloria Scott” takes place during Holmes’ university years. Visiting a

friend named Trevor for the long vacation, Holmes practices his powers of observation on his friend's father, noting that the old man is in fear for his own safety, that he has been a boxer, that he once did "a good deal of digging" (375), and that he has "been most intimately associated with someone whose initials were J.A., and whom [he] afterwards [was] eager entirely to forget" (375). Old Trevor faints away at these last words. When he recovers, he brushes off the concern of the young men and does not explain why he reacted so strongly, though the change in his manner toward Holmes soon leads the latter to cut his stay short. Before he leaves, however, a stranger appears who seems to terribly upset Old Trevor, though neither his son nor Holmes knows why. Holmes reenters the case when his friend Trevor comes to tell him that his father is dying, virtually plagued to death by the stranger, a sailor acquaintance of Old Trevor's from Australia named Hudson. Hudson's demands on Old Trevor, both financial and otherwise, have been so importunate that young Trevor calls him "the devil himself" (377). After young Trevor insults the old sailor, he stalks out of the house, and soon afterward Old Trevor receives a message that so shocks him that he has a stroke and dies. Confused and grief-stricken, young Trevor looks to the old man's papers for an explanation and finds the message that caused the stroke. The apparently nonsensical message (the same that Holmes hands to Watson in Baker Street) seems too ridiculous to frighten anyone. Called in by his friend, Holmes strategically eliminates words from the original message and reveals this: "The game is up. Hudson has told all. Fly for your life" (380). This warning triggered the stroke that led to Old Trevor's death. This decoding is really Holmes' only solid contribution to unraveling this mystery, and even that effort is ultimately unnecessary since that Old Trevor leaves a full account of his dealings with Hudson.

This account marks a major difference between "The Gloria Scott" and more typical

Holmes stories like “The Red-Headed League.” Where those stories end with Holmes explaining his investigative process to Watson so that the audience can fit the detective’s thoughts to his actions, this one ends with an account by another person that explains the case to Holmes and the reader at the same time. In this case, there is no investigative process for the reader to follow, no eccentric behavior on Holmes’ part to make sense of, no crime to solve except one committed decades previously by a man who is now dead. But because Holmes and young Trevor have been held in the same kind of suspense that usually falls to Watson, the reader’s interest is maintained, and the ending is still satisfying.

Holmes’ narrative style differs considerably from his friend’s, particularly in the apparent lack of narrative manipulation in this case, but the nature of the case itself maintains the necessary suspense for the reader. Because Holmes stands in the place of secondary observer usually occupied by Watson, the reader remains unenlightened as long as Holmes stays in the dark. And though Holmes’ intervention in this mystery is limited, the fact of its being his very first case is bound to interest readers, making it more interesting from the perspective of Holmes’ biography than for its own sake. However, this example of Holmes’ narrative style confirms that the essential facet of the detective story, with or without Watson’s intervention, is the reader’s suspense. In another Holmes-narrated story, “The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier,” Holmes admits that though he has often accused Watson of “pandering to popular taste instead of confining himself rigidly to facts and figures” (Doyle 1000), his first attempt at writing an account forces him to “realize that the matter must be presented in such a way as may interest the reader” (1000). To some extent, therefore, Watson’s narrative manipulation is excused by Holmes as necessary to maintain the reader’s interest.

Another of Holmes’ early cases, “The Musgrave Ritual,” though structured very similarly

to “The Gloria Scott,” does follow Holmes through an actual investigation step by step to its logical solution. However, unlike “The Red-headed League,” Holmes himself does not know the full solution until the very end of the case, and therefore has no need to withhold information to increase the reader’s suspense. In that case, just as in “The Gloria Scott,” Holmes’ suspense and the reader’s are relieved simultaneously. However, in another case, narrated entirely by Holmes without even an introduction by his friend, Holmes himself takes part in some of the same manipulation of his narrative for which he once chastised his friend. In this case, that of “The Lion’s Mane,” Holmes has already retired to Sussex, where he keeps bees and, he says, enjoys “that soothing life of Nature for which [he] had so often yearned during the long years spent amid the gloom of London” (1083). A reader familiar with Holmes must express some little skepticism here, as no man seems less likely than the detective to yearn for a Walden-like retreat from the cares of life. However, Holmes’ quiet retirement quickly fades into the background when he encounters this dramatic case.

“The Lion’s Mane” begins when Holmes and a friend (not Watson, for a change) see a man they know as Fitzroy McPherson, a “science master” at a nearby school for boys, collapse and die on the road after saying the bizarre phrase “The Lion’s Mane” into Holmes’ ear (1084). This man, who clearly died in terrible agony, seems to have “been terribly flogged by a thin wire scourge” (1084), though these injuries alone do not account for his death, which was caused by some sort of poison. Holmes’ investigation reveals McPherson and another teacher were in love with the same woman and that therefore the other man, Ian Murdoch, had motive to murder the victim. However, in the middle of the story, Holmes, having been bothered by a nagging, half-remembered fact relevant to the case, experiences a moment of epiphany. “Like a flash,” he relates, “I remembered the thing for which I had so eagerly and vainly grasped” (1090). He

rushed back to his house and rummages among his books before finding the bit of information that reveals who the murderer is. But, just as Dr. Watson often withholds the key piece of information on his friend's behalf, Holmes does not relate the crucial clue until he can point out the murderer. At the very end of the case, after a dramatic rush to the seaside, where McPherson received the terrible wounds that led to his death, Holmes points out "a curious waving, vibrating, hairy creature with streaks of silver among its yellow tresses" that looks very much like "a tangled mass torn from the mane of a lion" (1093). In fact, the "murderer" is a type of poisonous, stinging sea creature, a sort of first cousin to the jellyfish. McPherson's death was an accident, caused by a strange creature washed up on the Surrey coast by a storm, and though Holmes knows this fairly soon after beginning his investigation, he withholds the essential facts from his readers until he can thrill them with his dramatic conclusion.

In "The Lion's Mane," as in "The Red-headed League," "The Gloria Scott," and indeed all other Holmes stories, the reader's suspense is maintained as long as the narrator (or the plot itself) withholds the solution to the mystery. In some cases, as in "The Gloria Scott," the nature of the plot does not demand a narrator's interference, while in others, like "The Red-headed League," the narrator intervenes to prevent the reader from knowing the solution until Holmes is ready to unveil his dramatic result. The case's effect depends upon the reader staying in the dark until the detective's enlightened mind illuminates the conclusion. In effect, the ending of the case is not when Holmes knows the answer; in fact, as Jann explains, "Even after Holmes has dramatically confronted the wrongdoer with the truth and forced him to confess, our suspense does not end until he explains to Watson how he reached his conclusions" (23). Readers not only want to know what happened; they want to know how Holmes knows what happened. And this effect has persisted through well over a century of reading and rereading, even while the fame of

other detective stories has waned. The unceasing, undiminishing tide of Holmes' popularity begs the question: why has Doyle's detective stayed so firmly in the forefront of public consciousness, when other sleuths have faded into the background? Unsurprisingly, the answer lies largely in the hands of Dr. John H. Watson. Or rather, in the forms that the stories take as a result of his narrative. And as fascinating as his handling of his friend's cases may be, his remarks *before* the cases begin are sometimes just as interesting, and may shed some light on the avid interest of Holmes' ever-growing legion of fans.

Even as Watson withholds clues in his friend's cases, he also keeps back the details of Holmes' life and character. Krasner points out that this holding back on Watson's part means "the reader is, in effect, encouraged to be jealous—to feel excluded from an intimate social group. Yet, as with Watson himself, this only makes the reader more eager to join" (435). The same tactic of withholding information that keeps readers interested in Holmes' cases also keeps them interested in Holmes himself. And Watson makes his position as keeper of that information very clear to his audience. In his introductions to Holmes' cases, he frequently alludes to the cases he cannot or will not relate rather than the one he is about to tell. In those introductions, Watson usually "either ... locates the stories [he tells] among many other untold ones, or he explains why he can only now, and only partially, relate the tale. Both techniques allow Watson to occupy the same position Holmes has at the beginning of 'The Musgrave Ritual'—he has the knowledge we want—and both sorts of remark tend to rub our noses in it" (Krasner 432-33). For example, in the opening of "The Five Orange Pips," Watson specifically mentions no less than five of these "lost" cases, even giving detailed information about one of them and adding that it "may be remembered" (218) by the reader. But this case, of the "Camberwell poisoning" (218), was never published; therefore, the reader obviously cannot have knowledge of it. And this

circumstance leads to another essential point about the Holmes cases; that of audience.

Watson rarely alludes to his audience in his accounts; when he does so, he simply refers to “the reader” or “my readers.” However, from the tone of his works, the reader may infer that Watson’s narrative audience is in fact nearly identical to Doyle’s: the average reader who feels the same interest as he in “all that is bizarre and outside the conventions and humdrum routine of everyday life” (54). The only difference between Watson’s implied audience and Doyle’s actual audience is the information that the former seems to have and latter does not. That Camberwell poisoning case may not have been available to Doyle’s readers, but it seems to have been so for Watson’s. However, as often as these “lost” cases appear in the accounts of Dr. Watson, those same accounts regularly refer to cases that are within the reach of his non-fictional audience. Within the first story collection, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, several stories refer to the others; “The Red-headed League” refers to “A Case of Identity” (176), and the latter refers to “A Scandal in Bohemia” (191). Yet another story, “The Blue Carbuncle,” mentions not one but three previous cases: “A Scandal in Bohemia,” “A Case of Identity,” and “The Man with the Twisted Lip” (245). As often as readers feel left out by mention of cases they cannot know about, they read references to cases with which they are familiar. Therefore, they are as likely to be in the know with Watson in these references as they are to be puzzled.

While the ease with which Doyle’s real audience can identify with Watson’s fictional one may be part of the explanation for Holmes’ popularity, it does not justify the astounding fascination this character has always held in the public consciousness. The devotion with which readers have returned to the Holmes stories time and time again must be due to more than identification with a generalized audience. Perhaps the interest of the audience is maintained in Holmes as a character by the same method as in the detective’s cases: withheld information. Just

as the readers' fascination with Holmes' cases keeps them reading to the last page, their fascination with Holmes' character leads not only to reading and rereading, but to writing as well. Watson's reticence regarding his friend's personality and history have the same effect on the reader as his withholding clues from them. However, unlike in the case of his friend's mysteries, Watson never offers the reader a final solution to the mystery of Sherlock Holmes himself. But as in Holmes' cases, the critic will be well served by taking careful notice not only of the evidence, but of the places where evidence is lacking. Holmes' life is actually far more mysterious than most of his cases, and an examination of what his audience is missing may help to account for their extraordinary energy in filling in those missing clues about the private life of their favorite detective.

Chapter Two – The Missing Clues: Gaps in the Canonical Texts

“It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts.” – Sherlock Holmes, “A Scandal in Bohemia”

Since withheld information is key to maintaining audience interest, then perhaps the perpetual fascination that Holmes has always had for his readers is less remarkable than it seems, for very little information about him is given in the canonical stories. His history, his family, even his education are entirely mysterious aside from a few hints dropped in his friend’s accounts. Despite the sixty stories and novels that make up the Holmes canon – most of which are narrated by the man who should know more about Holmes than anyone – very little information about the detective himself is ever offered to readers. Though the stories describe Holmes’ investigative methods, his failings as a roommate, and his dependence on tobacco and cocaine, they give away very little about other aspects of his life. In spite of Watson’s decades-long association with Holmes, he either never learned or chose not to tell anything about his friend’s personal life. Most frustrating of all are those cases that drop tantalizing hints about Holmes’ early life while still failing to offer the detail that readers crave. But the frustration of that craving has certainly not diminished its force; in fact, Holmes’ extraordinary persistence in the forefront of public consciousness seems to be increased rather than diminished by the very little that his readers can know about him. In her essay on Holmes’ modern fame, Lindsay Faye coins the term “heroic opacity” in connection with Holmes (5), explaining that “a hero about whom very little is known proves to be the most compelling sort of protagonist to muse over once the plot has ended and the book is closed” (5). And certainly in the case of Doyle’s detective, readers’ interaction with the character seems to have barely begun when they finish the canonical stories. From there, Holmes’ readers have become writers, producing hundreds of

short stories, novels, and plays about the exploits of their hero. These adaptations have multiplied without a significant pause since before the death of Arthur Conan Doyle in 1930, and the print versions have been joined by radio, film, and television forms as well. But while the fact of those adaptations is undeniable, their existence raises some important critical questions: by what mechanism does missing information lead Holmes' audience from reading Doyle's stories to writing their own? And what happens to the character of Sherlock Holmes through all of these incarnations? Is each version of the detective equally valid? Do the subsequent adaptations of Holmes in some way build upon the original? In order to answer these questions, the critic must first turn back to the canonical stories, looking once again for those areas where information is missing as well as where it is present.

Missing information about Holmes generally falls into three distinct categories: his personal history, his relationships, and his untold cases. The first two are of the greatest interest for readers since their interest lies more in Holmes as a character than in the cases he solves. The untold cases are of interest primarily because Watson withholds them from his audience as well as because readers may suspect that these cases reveal what they want to know about their favorite consulting detective. However, in all three categories, the narrative offers hints that only emphasize what the reader does not know. The first category, Holmes' personal history, contains by far the greatest number of clues for readers. In some cases, scholars of detective fiction have examined these to see what might be made of them. For instance, the case of "The Gloria Scott," already discussed in the previous chapter, offers the only information in the canon about Holmes' education, but the facts given are sparse at best. The detective merely mentions to Watson that at the time of this case, he was "at college" (Doyle 374) and that his "line of study was quite distinct from that of the other fellows" (374) which had led him to make very few

friends. Dorothy Sayers writes at great length about what this line of study might have been, and after discarding classics, theology, philosophy, and mathematics for various reasons, she suggests that Holmes most likely studied “natural sciences” (143), specifically chemistry and anatomy (143). Sayers also concludes after some deliberation that Holmes most likely attended Cambridge (145), although the canon never confirms this fact. Although it does not offer any further information about Holmes’ education, “The Gloria Scott” does contain Holmes’ inspiration for his unusual profession in a comment made by Old Trevor. After Holmes’ practices his deductive powers on the older man, Old Trevor exclaims, “[It] seems to me that all the detectives of fact and of fancy would be children in your hands. That’s your line of life, sir” (Doyle 376). Obviously, Holmes takes his advice, for in his very next case, that of “The Musgrave Ritual,” he has moved to London and is struggling to find clients for his new business (387). But aside from these small scraps of information, the canon provides no other clues about Holmes’ personal history.

If anything, Holmes’ personal relationships are even more obscure than his education. Those relationships are few, and the closest is certainly his friendship with Watson. The good doctor makes it clear in one of his earliest accounts that Holmes will have no romantic entanglements, for “as a lover he would have placed himself in a false position” (164), regarding romance as “a distracting factor that might throw a doubt upon all his mental results” (164). So while Holmes shows distinct interest in several women connected with his cases, including Irene Adler of “A Scandal in Bohemia” and Violet Hunter in “The Copper Beeches,” Watson himself says of the latter that Holmes “manifested no further interest in her when once she had ceased to be the centre of one of his problems” (332). Holmes’ interest in his clients is more as puzzles to be solved than as people. His family relationships are hazy; he has one brother, Mycroft, who

does not appear until rather late in the canon in the case of “The Greek Interpreter,” and who, amazingly, is regarded by Holmes himself as his superior in deductive skill (435). The Holmes ancestors were “country squires” whose line was enlivened by the importation of the Holmes brothers’ grandmother, who was the sister of a French artist (435). No mention is ever made of their parents or any other family members. In a very real way, Watson is the closest family that Holmes has.

Without a doubt, the Holmes-Watson relationship is the center and motivating factor of the canonical stories. But even Watson himself is often unsure of how deep that friendship runs. Holmes is sometimes dismissive or even outright rude to his friend,⁵ regularly remarking on his inferior mental powers,⁶ and often irritated by what Watson calls “a certain methodical slowness in [his] mentality” (Doyle 1071). In return, Watson is regularly baffled by Holmes’ oddities and frustrated by his exclusion from the detective’s knowledge during cases.⁷ Though their mutual interest in “all that is bizarre and outside the conventions and humdrum routine of everyday life” (54) unites them to some extent, their personalities are hardly compatible. During the earliest days of their sharing the rooms in Baker Street, Watson is dumbfounded to find Holmes ignorant of the earth’s revolution around the sun, and proceeds to make a list of his friend’s accomplishments to attempt to figure out his profession. In this document, the doctor notes that Holmes knows almost nothing of literature, philosophy, astronomy, or politics, but a considerable amount about poisons, the geology of London, chemistry, anatomy, law, and sensational literature. Watson also applauds his friend’s skill at the violin, boxing, and fencing

⁵ As in “The Case of the Red-Headed League,” when Holmes brushes off Watson’s queries about the case with the remark that “this is a time for observation, not for talk” (184).

⁶ See “A Scandal in Bohemia” and “A Case of Identity,” though Holmes’ comments on his friend’s failures to observe or understand the clues in his cases occur in nearly every story.

⁷ See the opening of “The Musgrave Ritual” for Watson’s description of Holmes’ habits as a roommate, and “The Red-Headed League” for one of Watson’s several cogitations on Holmes’ intention to keep him in the dark.

before throwing away the document “in despair” (22). In contrast with his friend’s eccentricity, Watson is characterized by “military neatness” (204), methodical and thorough in his professional duties, and fond of domesticity and comfort.

The doctor’s feelings toward his friend are divided between awe and respect for his abilities and frustration with his faults. In the case of “The Final Problem,” Watson concludes his account and defense of his friend by calling him “the best and the wisest man [he] has ever known” (480). The rest of his accounts are sprinkled with references to his friend’s “masterly grasp of a situation, and his keen, incisive reasoning” (167), as well as his “extraordinary energy in action” (198). His admiration of Holmes is unflinching, no matter how many cases he has seen the man solve, but he is equally aware of his friend’s faults. He deplors Holmes’ personal habits; he is messy, a “self-poisoner by cocaine and tobacco” (225), prone to mood swings that take him from “extreme languor to devouring energy” (185). Watson also regularly refers to Holmes as a “cold” and a “machine” (161). However, his loyalty is unwavering through all the danger that their relationship exposes him to.

Watson seems to perceive his relationship with Holmes more as master and pupil than a partnership, and his narration reflects this perspective. In fact, only one case gives clear evidence that the Holmes-Watson connection is more than a matter of convenience (Holmes’, not Watson’s). The case of “The Three Garridebs” contains Watson’s only proof of how much Holmes values him. When the two of them confront the criminal in this case, the man shoots at them and hits Watson in the leg. Holmes’ concern in the aftermath of that shooting is Watson’s confirmation of his own standing in his friend’s affection:

It was worth a wound – it was worth many wounds – to know the depth of loyalty and love which lay behind that cold mask. The clear, hard eyes were dimmed for

a moment, and the firm lips were shaking. For the one and only time I caught a glimpse of a great heart as well as a great brain. All my years of humble but single-minded service culminated in that moment of revelation. (1053)

Despite decades of following Holmes on his cases, this will be Watson's only insight into how his friend really feels about him. But Holmes' affection for his friend is evident throughout the canon in the simple fact that he continues to seek Watson's company, if not his help, in his investigations. That relationship humanizes Holmes, takes the edge off his keen intellect to make him more approachable for the reader. In a way, Watson is Holmes' interpreter, and as such, he is the reader's inroad to the detective's mysterious personal life.

However, Watson's accounts only stretch so far. Though he relates many of his friend's cases, many others are merely name-dropped in the text and then left as enticing hints for readers, never to be fully explained. These are in many ways the most frustrating of the gaps in the Holmes canon. Dozens are mentioned by Watson in his introductions to his accounts, sometimes with additional detail. In the account of "The Five Orange Pips," no less than five untold cases are mentioned: "the Paradol Chamber, of the Amateur Mendicant Society. . . the British barque Sophy Anderson, of the singular adventures of the Grice Patersons in the island of Uffa, and finally of the Camberwell poisoning case" (218). As if these titles were not intriguing enough, Watson offers some detail to further heighten the reader's interest; for instance, the Amateur Mendicant Society "held a luxurious club in the lower vault of a furniture warehouse" (218). Most tantalizingly, the Camberwell poisoning case is solved because "Sherlock Holmes was able, by winding up the dead man's watch, to prove that it had been wound up two hours before, and that therefore the deceased had gone to bed within that time" (218). In the opening of "The Musgrave Ritual," still more cases are mentioned, including those of "the Tarleton

murders, . . . Vamberry, the wine merchant, . . . the old Russian woman, . . . the aluminium crutch, [and] Ricoletti of the club-foot, and his abominable wife” (387). None of these are mentioned further; no additional details are offered. The same lack of detail applies to those cases mentioned in “The Reigate Pizzle” – those of “the Netherland-Sumatra Company” and “the colossal schemes of Baron Maupertuis” (398) – and in “The Naval Treaty” – which mentions “The Adventure of the Second Stain” and “The Adventure of the Tired Captain” (447).

These “lost” cases, though often simply name-dropped at the beginning of Watson’s accounts, are sometimes even compared to those that the doctor goes on to tell. In fact, the “Adventure of the Second Stain” is described by Watson in the following terms:

[This case] deals with interest of such importance and implicates so many of the first families in the kingdom that for many years it will be impossible to make it public. No case, however, in which Holmes was engaged has ever illustrated the value of his analytical methods so clearly or has impressed those who were associated with him so deeply. (447)

After such a panegyric on this case, Watson turns to the subject of his account with the rather lukewarm note that it “promised also at one time to be of national importance, and was marked by several incidents which give it a quite unique character” (447). The same distinct let-down occurs at the beginning of “The Engineer’s Thumb,” where Watson notes that the case of “Colonel Warburton’s Madness” “may have afforded a finer field for an acute and original observer” than the case he actually does relate (274). Naturally, readers may wonder why they are not even being told the best of Holmes’ cases, the ones that Watson himself thinks are the most interesting. No wonder Krasner complains, “Watson’s editorial remarks about the case he will relate generally take one of two forms: either he locates the stories among many other untold

ones, or he explains why he can only now, and only partially, relate the tale. Both techniques [show that] Watson ... has the knowledge we want[,] and both sorts of remark tend to rub our noses in it" (432-33). The hints about these "lost" cases, dropped like breadcrumbs leading to nowhere, are surely one of the most frustrating things about the Holmes canon. For an audience who wants ever more tales of the detective's exploits, being teased by the possibility of these lost tales is a particularly subtle form of torture.

For all the exhilarating adventures, fascinating deductions, and colorful characters that populate the Holmes canon, many more details are withheld than are offered to readers. Worst of all, those missing details are the things that readers want to know most: Holmes' history, his personal relationships, and the cases that even his biographer admits are the best ones. This information is not simply misplaced or lost in time somewhere; as far as anyone can tell, Doyle never wrote a backstory for Holmes, never created those missing cases, never bothered to delineate exactly what his relationship with Watson or anyone else really was. As Faye points out, "The map that Conan Doyle left us, the un-careful and at times reluctantly rendered guide to Sherlock Holmes' brain-attic, leaves the precise amount of negative space necessary to fire the imagination of his readers" (7). And while calling any part of Doyle's writing "precise" as far as the Holmes stories go is a bit of a stretch (particularly when scholars have bemoaned their tangled chronology and careless contradictions for decades), his audience is certainly enthusiastic, even ravenous, for more Holmes. And even before Doyle's death in 1930, more Holmes began to be available for audiences in various forms: short stories, plays, radio drama, books, films, even several television series, not to mention a veritable ocean of online "fan fiction" that has grown exponentially since the most recent Holmes adaptations have appeared. Modern readers seeking more information about Holmes than Doyle's stories can give have easy

access to every detail of his life, including accounts of those missing cases, his entire personal history, and every possible interpretation of the Holmes-Watson relationship.

But all of this missing information is not filled in by the help of good fairies (although in his later life, Doyle might not have been surprised if it were). How are readers motivated to become author in their own right? What operation of the mind makes it natural rather than highly presumptuous for them to fill the gaps left in the private life of Sherlock Holmes? In order to bridge the gap between reading and writing, the critic must turn to those theorists who have studied the interaction between reader and text. Two of the most notable are Louise Rosenblatt, whose theory of transactional reader response ideally accounts for the high degree of audience involvement in the Holmes canon, and Wolfgang Iser, whose theory of indeterminacy suggests that reading is ultimately a process of the reader being “drawn into the events and made to supply what is meant from what is not said” (168). The extraordinary degree of reader involvement with the character of Sherlock Holmes makes accounting for the proliferation of adaptations an ideal case for the application of reader response theory.

Both Iser and Rosenblatt focus primarily not on the reader or the text, but on the interaction between the two. Iser writes that at its most basic level, “[r]eading is an activity that is guided by the text; this must be processed by the reader, who is then, in turn, affected by what he has processed” (163). So both reader and text contribute to the creation of meaning from the reading process. Rosenblatt, too, stresses that reading is a transaction between reader and text, so much so that she assigns a separate term to the product of that transaction: “the poem” (12). When reading, the reader is “actively involved in building up a poem for himself out of his responses to the text” (10). During that process, as Rosenblatt notes, “The reader’s attention to the text activates certain elements in his past experience – external reference, internal response –

that have become linked with the verbal symbols” (11). Essentially, reading is not a passive activity, but one in which the reader’s mind is continuously referring back to its own experiences to assign meaning to the words, concepts, and situations contained in the text.

Iser takes this transactional approach to reading a step further by suggesting that the reader not only assigns meaning to what is contained in the text, but also to what is *not* present. In fact, he argues that the meaning of the text as a whole hinges upon both what is and what is not there; effectively, “[w]hat is said only appears to take on significance as a reference to what is not said; it is the implications and not the statements that give shape and weight to the meaning” (168). And though in this instance he is referring to the novels of Jane Austen and the many conversations that are not reported in her writing, the same principle applies to the Holmes stories. What Holmes and Watson do in these stories – solve mysteries and bring criminals to justice – is only a small part of the meaning of these texts; if it were not, readers would be satisfied by the stories themselves. The discontent of Holmes’ audience with his canonical adventures is proof that their meaning is incomplete; the text requires something more from the reader to make it whole. What readers miss in the canon is a matter of motive; specifically, Holmes’ motive for pursuing his unique calling and honing his unusual skills. Readers seek for more information about Holmes’ history and relationships precisely because these things may lead to an answer for the question of motive, just as they often do in the detective’s own cases.

The entire structure and content of the Holmes stories goes to answering the simple question, “What happened?” They focus intensely on plot, following the progression of crime and investigation and usually concluding with an account from either Holmes or the criminal – or both – to explain what events led up to the mysterious event that engaged the detective’s notice. However, Scholes and Kellogg note that the focus of narrative is ultimately the “inward

life” of the characters involved, and that “[t]he less [inward life] we have, the more other narrative elements such as plot...must contribute to the work. A successful narrative need not emphasize the inward life and present it in detail; but it must be prepared to compensate with other elements if it is to remain an object of interest to men” (171). The inward life of Holmes is mysterious at best, and that of Watson is not much clearer, but the canonical stories, particularly the early ones, are masterfully plotted, which serves to maintain the reader’s interest in the main characters despite the very little information given about them. However, plot is not meaning, and though the audience is always fully informed about what has happened in the story, they are never given the answer to an equally important question: “Why?”

The “why” of the Holmes stories is a riddle as puzzling as any case solved by the detective. Why does Holmes possess such extraordinary gifts? What life experience led him to such cynicism, emotional instability, and obsessive devotion to rationality as are displayed in his friend’s accounts of his work? Why does he shun human companionship with the sole exception of a former soldier turned doctor? These questions simply cannot be answered from the canonical stories. Rosenblatt notes that, in most reading, “there may be unfulfilled expectations, unanswered questions, details that cannot be assimilated, so that much is held in suspension until it all ‘falls into shape,’ or there is a ‘click’ of insight.... If such a putting-together... does not eventually happen, the cause may be felt to be either a weakness in the text, or a failure on the reader’s part” (55). Readers of the Holmes canon will regularly experience that feeling of satisfaction in terms of the plot, the detective’s solution of the mystery, but his audience will never know that same satisfaction regarding the detective himself. The stories simply do not provide the information the audience needs to make sense of Holmes as a character, which means that his cases, though interesting, offer little in the way of larger meaning. Because of this

inability to create meaning from the canon, readers have gone elsewhere for further information about their favorite consulting detective, and when information was not available, they have created their own.

The failure of the Holmes stories to satisfy their audience could be due either to Doyle's writing skill, or to his lack thereof. The manifold errors in the canon seem to suggest the latter – for instance, Watson's wife addressing him by the wrong name in "The Man with the Twisted Lip," the nearly identical plots of "The Red-Headed League" and "The Stock-Broker's Clerk," or the convoluted chronology of the cases that defies the efforts of scholars to untangle – but either way, this unsatisfied longing for more information has undoubtedly contributed to the perpetual popularity of Holmes as a character. The reader is always tempted to go back once more, hoping to find the clue that he missed, the hint that will bring Holmes' character within his reach. As Rosemary Jann writes, "[I]t is a rare compliment to [Doyle's] skill that he could make characters so imaginatively credible as to transcend the boundaries of fiction" (9-10). Holmes is such a character: so lifelike that the layman may be forgiven for considering him a true historical figure, and so fascinating that public interest in him has never waned in all the years since his earliest appearances in print. Precisely because of the avidity of that interest in Holmes as a character rather than just in his adventures, readers have taken the clues given by Doyle in the canon and used them to create new versions of Holmes that will fill in the gaps left in the life of their favorite consulting detective. The existence of these adaptations is therefore natural enough, but their overwhelming number requires that any discussion of new versions of Holmes' character and cases begin with some mention of what makes a valid adaptation.

In her book *Adaptation Revisited*, Sarah Caldwell notes that adaptations of classic novels "are valued not for their potential to develop or improve upon the original but for their potential

to refer back to and revitalize the source of their geneses” (13). This may be the case for new versions of *Pride and Prejudice* or *Wuthering Heights*, but Sherlock Holmes adaptations do much more than renew interest in the original stories – a project that has never really been necessary in the first place. The Holmes adaptations, even those that purport to remain faithful to the originals, do more; they expand on Holmes’ history, relationships, and untold cases as well as presenting the familiar ones in new media. Because of this constant progression, this reinvention of the character and cases of Holmes, the canonical stories have lost some of their prestige, their status as the most authoritative source of Holmes information. This seems like a bold claim, but in fact many of the most well-known details about Holmes as a character are never presented in the canon at all. For example, Holmes’ famous catchphrase – “Elementary, my dear Watson” – never appears in Doyle’s writing at all, and its actual origin is unclear. Even worse, the famous deerstalker hat, so universally associated with the detective that it is often called the “Sherlock Holmes hat,” is never mentioned in the canon either; its first appearance was actually in the illustrations by Sidney Paget that accompanied the original stories. While Holmes regularly uses a magnifying lens and smokes a pipe in the canon, much of his popular image is the product of later adaptations, which naturally leads to the question of which is the “real” Sherlock Holmes. Is it the deerstalker-wearing silhouette so ubiquitous in pop culture, or the top-hatted, cane-carrying figure that Doyle actually wrote?

Caldwell suggests that, rather than throwing out the canonical stories *or* discounting the adaptations, critics should consider what each part contributes:

Subsequent “adaptations” can be regarded ... as part of the extended development of a singular, infinite meta-text: a valuable story or myth that is constantly growing and developing, being retold, reinterpreted and reassessed. It might be

more accurate to understand each new *Macbeth* (for example) – whether play, film, poem or television programme – as an adaptation of a sort of ‘myth’, an ur-text that stands outside and before each retelling of the story, and which contains the most fundamental parts of the tale without which an adaptation would lose its identity as that tale. (25-6)

While the canonical stories stand firm as the starting point of the Holmes narrative, the “ur-text,” later adaptations expand upon that foundation to produce a new and ever-evolving whole, the “meta-text.” Although Iser acknowledges that filling the gaps left in a text is an important part of the reading process, the material used to fill these blanks is just as important: “What is concealed spurs the reader into action, but this action is also controlled by what is revealed” (169). Though this principle is intended to apply to the reading process, it is just as relevant to adaptations; any interpretation of Holmes must consider what the canon says about him as well as what is missing, maintaining the “most fundamental parts of the tale” (Caldwell 26) to remain valid. For instance, an adaptation that depicts Sherlock Holmes happily married with several children must be considered highly questionable, and one portraying Holmes as a man of sub-par intelligence is unthinkable. So the first requirement of an adaptation is that it be faithful to what may be called the “heart” of the character and the canon.

Despite the massive number of adaptations ranging from radio shows to online fan fiction, they fall neatly into the same three categories as the information missing from the Holmes canon: the detective’s personal history, his relationships, and his untold cases. Examining some of these adaptations shows not only that they contribute precisely the information that is missing from the canonical stories, but also that they have played a crucial part in perpetuating the fame of Sherlock Holmes for audiences in the twenty-first century. In

order to narrow the otherwise overwhelming number of adaptations into something more manageable, parodies and pastiches of Holmes' character and cases have been excluded. The remaining adaptations in print, radio, film, and television, though still a formidable number, are worthy of study for their contributions to the meta-text of Sherlock Holmes.

Chapter Three – Back to the Scene of the Crime: Holmes' Personal History

“[Sherlock Holmes' reticence about himself] had increased the somewhat inhuman effect which he produced upon me, until sometimes I found myself regarding him as an isolated phenomenon, a brain without a heart, as deficient in human sympathy as he was pre-eminent in intelligence.” –

Dr. Watson, “The Greek Interpreter.”

Sherlock Holmes' path to fame as a consulting detective is shrouded in as much mystery as his cases, but the public fascination that follows the origins of any famous person is only poorly satisfied by the canonical stories of his life. The Holmes canon is essentially what Roland Barthes calls a “writerly” text as opposed to a “readerly” one (4). Where a “writerly” text invites readers to produce their own work in response to it, a readerly text, usually a classic text, stands static in the canon, not inviting readers to produce a creative interpretation of their own in response (4). In his seminal work *S/Z*, Barthes prioritizes writerly texts over readerly ones, insisting that “the goal of literary work...is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (4). This transformation of readers into writers has surely never been performed as successfully by any text in recent memory as by the Sherlock Holmes stories. As Faye notes in her essay on audience investment in Holmes, readers of the detective generally have “a strong desire to engage directly with Holmes and Watson ... rather than finishing the original canon and walking away” (6). This desire for direct engagement, filling in the blanks left in Holmes' life, has led readers to produce their own works featuring Doyle's detective. These new works have done much more than feed the public hunger for more stories of Holmes; through their interaction with and borrowing from the canonical text, they emphasize those areas where the canon is lacking, the gaps that Arthur Conan Doyle left that beg to be filled in by later authors.

The number of Sherlock Holmes adaptations is surely attributable to the comparable number of missing facts about his life. In “His Last Bow,” set in 1914 and one of the latest chronological stories, Holmes is described as a “tall, gaunt man of sixty” (975), which would place his date of birth around the year 1854.⁸ From that day until his time in university, the canon offers no information about his life. His university studies are only mentioned as they relate to the cases of “The Gloria Scott” and “The Musgrave Ritual”; both the site of his studies and their subject are omitted. From university until his meeting with Dr. Watson in “A Study in Scarlet,” Holmes’ life is a blank. Even Watson complains at the beginning of “The Greek Interpreter” about the little information he has ever learned about his friend’s background:

During my long and intimate acquaintance with Mr. Sherlock Holmes I had never heard him refer to his relations, and hardly ever to his own early life. This reticence upon his part had increased the somewhat inhuman effect which he produced upon me, until sometimes I found myself regarding him as an isolated phenomenon, a brain without a heart, as deficient in human sympathy as he was pre-eminent in intelligence. His aversion to women and his disinclination to form new friendships were both typical of his unemotional character, but not more so than his complete suppression of every reference to his own people. (435)

Naturally, as his friend and biographer learned so little about the family and childhood of Holmes, the canon can offer no more. His childhood, his immediate family (with the exception of his brother, Mycroft), and his early education are all completely absent from the canon.

⁸ This date would put Holmes in his mid-thirties during most of the cases contained in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. However, even this apparently incontrovertible starting point of Holmes’ birth date has been ignored or altered in some adaptations. In Laurie King’s novel *The Beekeeper’s Apprentice*, Holmes’ date of birth is reported as 1861, with the explanation from the detective’s own lips that “Conan Doyle...thought to make me more dignified by exaggerating my age. Youth does not inspire confidence, in life or in stories” (31). The later date puts Holmes only in his mid-twenties during his most classic cases.

However, the detective's devoted public has not been satisfied to consider him "a brain without a heart" (435), and have offered him a range of possible childhoods and families that might help to account for his extraordinary character.

Equally shadowy in the canon is Holmes' life after retirement; the detective himself writes only that he purchased a house in Sussex, where he kept bees and "gave [himself] up entirely to that soothing life of Nature for which [he] had so often yearned during the long years spent amid the gloom of London" (Doyle 1083). In response to this intolerable informational vacuum (and perhaps in skepticism at the concept of a Holmes longing for a country life), authors have provided their own interpretations both of Holmes' history and of his retirement. These works contribute to the "ur-text" of Holmes, the version of the detective that even those who have never read the stories are familiar with. Where the original source of any text can usually be assumed to be the authoritative version of that work, the Holmes stories are so lacking in the information that readers want most that the adaptations they have produced to fill in the blanks have taken on an authority at least equal to, if not greater than, Doyle's writings. Essentially, because Doyle did not fully perform his duty as author toward his creation, Sherlock Holmes, readers have usurped that place and written their own versions of the detective and his adventures, as if those versions are just as authoritative as the originals.

Unsurprisingly, since the adaptations have retained so much authority, new versions are just as likely to borrow from other adaptations as from the original stories with equal weight given to the validity of the items borrowed. One interesting, though rather convoluted, example is Dr. Watson's middle name. An essay by Dorothy Sayers focuses entirely on accounting for one of the most glaring errors in the canon; an occasion when Dr. Watson's wife addresses him as "James" instead of his real name of John. Sayers concludes that the apparent mistake is

actually an affectionate nickname used by Mrs. Holmes, anglicizing her husband's middle name, which Sayers asserts to be "Hamish" despite the fact that the canon only offers the initial H (151). This conclusion reappears in the BBC show *Sherlock*, in which Watson's middle name is, again, Hamish ("A Scandal in Belgravia"). Such borrowing constitutes an example of Caldwell's point that "a later adaptation may draw upon any earlier adaptations, as well as upon the primary source text" (25). Though borrowing between adaptations is by no means unique to Sherlock Holmes, it is particularly pervasive in writing about his life and constitutes one of several notable scholarly oddities that appear in the adaptations.

Though most of the interpretations discussed here are openly fictional, others follow the longstanding tradition of Holmes scholars writing as if the detective were entirely real and Doyle were fictional; a tradition which is adequately accounted for by the reader's consciousness that Doyle has failed in his duty as author to Holmes. T.S. Eliot, of all people, writes that "perhaps the greatest of the Sherlock Holmes mysteries is this: that when we talk of him we invariably fall into the fancy of his existence" (17).⁹ This fancy has ensnared even such respected names as Christopher Morley, Dorothy Sayers, and Rex Stout,¹⁰ all of whom contributed ostensibly nonfictional works to the body of Holmes adaptations. However, many of these authors acknowledge certain inherent difficulties in writing about Holmes' pre-Baker Street life: one Holmes biographer, Gavin Brend, notes that because Watson was too preoccupied with his friend's "long pageant of sensational cases" to "investigate his subject's early days," the critic

⁹ Eliot's review is an amusing mixture of appreciation and bafflement over the popularity of Holmes. He notes that in the Holmes stories, Doyle's style is far from perfect: he "repeats himself," reusing character names and plot devices, and his work is riddled with inconsistencies and contradictions (18). However, he concludes in a somewhat puzzled tone, "I am not sure that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle is not one of the great dramatic writers of his age..." (Eliot 19).

¹⁰ Stout, best known for his Nero Wolf mysteries, also authored an essay in which he theorizes that Watson was actually a woman; in fact, that Irene Adler of "A Scandal in Bohemia" was actually Holmes' partner in life as well as in detective work (164). Whether this essay was the inspiration for the CBS show *Elementary*'s female version of Watson is unknown, but it does show that the idea of a female Watson is not a new one.

may reasonably conclude that “any biography of Holmes becomes a series of elaborate conjuring tricks” (15). However, the desire to know more about the detective trumps the difficulty of searching out that information. In his essay, “Studies in the Literature of Sherlock Holmes,” Ronald Knox touches on the appeal of studying Holmes’ life by saying, “If there is anything pleasant in life, it is doing what we aren’t meant to do. If there is anything pleasant in criticism, it is finding out what we aren’t meant to find out... There is [special] fascination in applying this method to Sherlock Holmes” (145-6). Just as Holmes himself searches out what is hidden in order to solve his cases, his biographers search out clues in the canon to the hidden details of his life.

One of the most notable of these biographies is *Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street*, by William Baring-Gould, who seems to have been quite unaware of the difficulties Brend mentions. His book purports to give a complete account of the life of Sherlock Holmes, from his birth to Siger and Violet Holmes on January 6th, 1854 (Baring-Gould 13) to his death on his one hundred and third birthday in 1957 (287), walking along the cliffs near his Sussex farm. The biography even provides a comprehensive family history of Holmes, including the assertion that he is related on the father’s side to another character of Doyle’s, Professor George Edward Challenger (12), and that his brother’s name, Mycroft, is a family name derived from the name of the family estate (11). A reader unfamiliar with the convention of writing as if Holmes really existed would be forgiven for considering this a work of nonfiction; however, readers more familiar with Holmes scholarship will note subtle borrowing from other sources in Baring-Gould’s work, such as the connection to Professor Challenger and the maiden name of Sherlock’s mother, Sherrinford, which was originally to have been the given name of Doyle’s detective (13). The book also begins with a somewhat whimsical note from the author stating,

“No characters in this book are fictional, although the author would very much like to meet any who claim to be” (10). Aside from points like these, the book is written in an entirely straightforward manner as if its subject were merely a notable public figure rather than a phenomenally popular fictional character. The most remarkable characteristic of Baring-Gould’s work is its thoroughness; it extrapolates the entire early life of Holmes without losing sight of those details that are offered by the canon, maintaining an excellent balance between old and new information.

The interest that many later authors have shown in Holmes’ childhood and education seems to be tied to the question of whether his extraordinary observational and analytical skills are inherent or acquired. The fact that the canonical Watson never gains any ground in his own attempts at deduction seems to indicate the former (although his narrative manipulation makes this evidence somewhat questionable. Other adaptations are divided on whether Holmes’ skills can be learned or not; in CBS’ *Elementary*, former surgeon Joan Watson acquires formidable detective skills of her own and acts more as Holmes’ partner than as his sidekick, while BBC’s *Sherlock* presents Holmes responding to a question about his mental powers, “Nothing made me. I made me” (“The Abominable Bride”), implying that his parentage and education had little to do with his amazing mental acuity.¹¹ But whether his extraordinary character is the result of nature or nurture, Holmes’ childhood and schooling have been of considerable interest to readers and scholars, who have produced their own theories and adaptations to account for these crucial periods in the detective’s life.

¹¹ A subgenre of Holmes literature is the “think like Holmes” self-help book. Most of these works promise to teach readers to observe people and make deductions like Doyle’s detective: titles include Maria Konnikova’s *Mastermind* and Daniel Smith’s *How to Think Like Sherlock*. The efficacy of these books is called into question by the enormous number of unsolved cases that plague the American legal system, but the idea that readers can become more like their favorite detective has certainly made such works popular.

Aside from biographies like Baring-Gould's, few adaptations offer much detail regarding Holmes' childhood. Most later works merely drop hints about the detective's early life in passing: Laurie King's Mary Russell series suggests that Holmes' relationship with his parents was a complex and often painful one (31), while the BBC series *Sherlock* offers the Holmes brothers a mother and father who, though highly intelligent, are also shockingly ordinary in comparison with their sons ("His Last Vow"). On the same theme of a dysfunctional Holmes family, a series of young adult novels by Nancy Springer depicts the adventures of Sherlock and Mycroft Holmes' brilliant and unconventional younger sister, Enola, who starts her own business as a "scientific perditorian" (18) or finder of lost things and persons, in competition with her brother's consulting detective business. In these novels, the elder Mr. Holmes is a deceased scientist, and Mrs. Holmes is a bohemian artist who deserts her family to roam with a caravan of gypsies. A letter from President Franklin Roosevelt, an honorary member of the Baker Street Irregulars, presents the theory that Holmes was "born an American and was brought up by his father or a foster father in the underground world, thus learning all the tricks of the trade in the highly developed American art of crime" (199). Possibly as a result of this letter, Christopher Morley produced an essay in which he explores what he calls Holmes' "American connection" (171), suggesting that Holmes was born and received his early education in the United States, which would account not only for the many other Americans that appear in the canon, but also for Holmes' failure to make many friends in the close-knit university atmosphere of England (176). But whether he was American, British, or (heaven forbid) French, the one fact that almost all authors of adaptations agree on is that a man as extraordinary Sherlock Holmes could not have had an ordinary childhood.

Another topic that seems to have been of great interest to Holmes enthusiasts is where he attended university and what he studied while there. The vast majority of writers consider that the cultivation of so unusual a mind must have been done in one of England's more prestigious universities, but scholars are divided between Oxford and Cambridge as the site of Holmes' higher education. Brend asserts that Holmes must have attended Oxford because details in several of his cases reveal him to be more familiar with the area of Oxford than with Cambridge (26). From some facts offered in "The Musgrave Ritual," Dorothy Sayers concludes that Holmes attended Cambridge, where he studied chemistry and anatomy (143). The difficulty of these studies would account for Holmes' own account in "The Musgrave Ritual" that his "line of study was quite distinct from that of the other fellows" (Doyle 374). Baring-Gould, taking the middle ground, insists that Holmes attended Oxford at first, but after his friend Trevor's father recommended he become a detective, he transferred to Cambridge for its superior opportunities for studying science (33).¹² And although Holmes' education has been a source of such interest to scholars, his life just after leaving university is sufficiently explained in the canon not to have required any explanation from non-canonical sources. The next area that is popular among Holmes' adapters, aside from his missing cases, which will be discussed at a later point, is his retirement and later years. The idea that so unusually active a mind could peacefully retire and give up its professional interests is universally rejected by those who write upon Sherlock Holmes, but the canon offers very little to account for his doings after his departure from London.

¹²A lesser area of interest for Holmes enthusiasts has been the site of Watson's medical education. Although *A Study in Scarlet* specifically states that Watson attended the University of London (15), John Keddie insists that in fact, Dr. Watson was educated at Edinburgh University Medical College, and that while there, he met a gentleman "frequently overlooked by students of Baker Street lore" (69), Mr. A.C. Doyle.

While the canon relates that Sherlock Holmes purchased a small estate in Sussex, where he kept bees and produced the occasional monograph related to his investigative skills, so prosaic an ending to his career has not contented the detective's devotees, who have offered him a much more active later life. The most popular works on Holmes' activities after his retirement are Laurie King's series of novels, beginning with *The Beekeeper's Apprentice*, in which the detective literally stumbles upon a teenage girl named Mary Russell, who becomes first his protégée, then his partner, and finally, his wife (*A Monstrous Regiment of Women*). Naturally, readers of the canonical Holmes may be inclined to protest so unconventional a breaking in upon the detective's bachelorhood. However, King's Mary Russell is herself a highly unconventional character, and her partnership and eventual marriage with Holmes seem quite reasonable as the novels progress. These novels also present Holmes with an estranged son by Irene Adler, born during the three years after Holmes' and Moriarty's struggle by the Reichenbach Falls, when even Dr. Watson thought that his friend was dead (*The Language of Bees*). Holmes' retirement in these novels includes an encounter with Professor Moriarty's daughter (*The Beekeeper's Apprentice*), meetings with the protagonists of several other Victorian novels, including Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (*The Great Game*), and a return to the wilds of Dartmoor to assist an elderly man, Sabine Baring-Gould (*The Moor*), who, in another instance of borrowing between adaptations, was the real-life grandfather of Holmes' biographer, William Baring-Gould. Holmes' involvement in World War I, in international espionage, and in early modern forensics in these novels strikes a compromise between the detective's Victorian origins and the demands of a changing world. However, a major issue is missing from King's novels as well as from many others, partly due to the same kind of scholarly pretense that maintains Holmes' reality: how and where did Holmes die, and what were his final years like?

Though Baring-Gould's biography presents Holmes with a peaceful end to an unusually long life, most Holmes enthusiasts avoid discussion of the detective's death, primarily by the further scholarly pretense that Holmes is not only real, but still alive (despite the fact that he would be one hundred and sixty-two years old as of 2016). Members of many of the thriving Sherlock Holmes societies (including the Baker Street Irregulars, whose former members include Christopher Morley and Rex Stout as well as more illustrious personages like FDR) hold lively discussions as to where Holmes is now and what cases his mind may be engaged upon. However, *Mr. Holmes*, a recent film starring Ian McKellen as the ninety-three-year-old detective, depicts not only the last years of Sherlock Holmes, but also the effects of age on such an extraordinary mind.

Based upon Mitch Cullin's novel, *A Slight Trick of the Mind*, the movie shows a frail and increasingly forgetful Holmes who has been reduced to writing the name of his housekeeper's son on his shirt cuff in order to remember it. More importantly, he has forgotten the outcome of the case that led him to retire; he only knows that he must have mishandled it terribly if it caused him to leave his profession and his home in London. Throughout the novel, Holmes searches for ways to bring back his failing memory so that he can remember and come to terms with his final case. He also builds a relationship with the son of his housekeeper, Roger, who helps with the bees and gives Holmes someone to care about for the first time since his friend Watson died. Readers of the canonical Holmes will not be surprised by this isolation, or by the arcane nature of the retired detective's studies into bees; what makes *Mr. Holmes* as heartbreaking as it is insightful is the fact that this nonagenarian Holmes looks back on a profoundly lonely life. When he does finally remember the outcome of his final case, and that his handling of an emotionally unbalanced woman led her to commit suicide, he concludes, "I had successfully deduced the

facts of her case, but I had failed to grasp their meaning. Never had I felt such an incomprehensible emptiness within myself. Only then did I begin to understand how utterly alone I was in the world” (*Mr. Holmes*). Ultimately, though his life has been one of devotion to his art, he has missed the human connection that would have enriched that life.

Mr. Holmes also touches upon an issue that has been of interest to many Holmes scholars, and one that is particularly fascinating as it relates to whether the canonical Holmes or the adapted Holmes is the “real” character. Arriving in Japan to pursue a possible remedy for his mental lapses, Holmes is asked by his host whether he has brought his famous hat and pipe. Holmes replies that he has never worn a deerstalker, and prefers to smoke cigars, explaining that both accessories were “embellishments of the illustrator” (*Mr. Holmes*). At one point, he describes his friend Watson’s stories as “penny dreadfuls with an elevated prose style” (*Mr. Holmes*), and that one story in particular, the account of that final case, was deliberately changed to make Holmes the hero. As Holmes notes in the film, Watson “knew no other manner in which to write the character he had created” (*Mr. Holmes*). Clearly the question here is whether Sherlock Holmes, stripped of many of the trappings that make him familiar to the public, is still the same character. However, the Holmes presented in the film still retains the same essence: in one scene, the housekeeper’s son Roger hesitantly asks Holmes to do “his thing” where he tells people about themselves “just by looking at them” (*Mr. Holmes*), and even a senile Sherlock maintains his sharp wit during most of the film. In an ending that offers a more human Holmes than the canonical version, the film shows the former detective finally taking the time to grieve over those he has lost – his brother, Mycroft, his friend John Watson – and making connections with others for the future. While this is not at all the version of Holmes that Doyle wrote, the

aging detective's desire to put aside the loneliness of his previous life is one to which audiences can relate without sacrificing their veneration for his extraordinary skills.

The Holmes canon's status as a writerly text is firmly established on the overwhelming number of writings produced by the desire of readers to know more about their favorite detective. From the "biographical" works of Baring-Gould, Brend, and Sayers, with their exhaustive attention to detail and tongue-in-cheek pretenses of the reality of their subject, to the more openly fanciful productions of King and Springer, Holmes' childhood, education, and retirement have been the subjects of dozens of written and film productions. Highly educated and intelligent people have devoted thousands of hours to topics as trivial as Holmes' alma mater, the county where he was born, or the degree to which he continued to solve cases after his retirement. With any other character, such a flooding of the literary market would have exhausted the interest of the reading public decades ago, but the fascination with Holmes's life persists as strong as ever, long after his literary contemporaries (like Professor Challenger) have become obscure and uninteresting to the same audience that devours new tales of Sherlock Holmes. The origins, education, and eventual retirement of Holmes are one of the richest sources of inspiration for those who would take advantage of the chance to offer a deeper understanding of the world's greatest detective.

Chapter Four – Gone Cold: Holmes’ Missing Cases

“When I glance over my notes and records of the Sherlock Holmes cases [...], I am faced by so many which present strange and interesting features that it is no easy matter to know which to choose and which to leave.” – Dr. Watson, “The Five Orange Pips”

The desire of readers to know more about the undocumented parts of Sherlock Holmes’ life, including his childhood and retirement, extends with even greater intensity to his undocumented cases. The hints dropped by Watson regarding the cases he cannot or will not relate to the reading public have only made his readers more intent on filling in the details of the great detective’s lost adventures. Just as with the gaps in Holmes’ personal life, these missing accounts act as evidence of Doyle’s rather ambivalent attitude toward his character, and readers have stepped in to invent their own interpretations of the lost cases of Sherlock Holmes. Authors from the late nineteenth century to the present have either offered entirely new cases or completed versions of those cases mentioned by Watson, with varying degrees of faithfulness to the canon. Just as in adaptations focused on Holmes’ history, these missing cases range from whimsical pastiche to serious recreation of Doyle’s style.¹³ These “found” cases are not confined to print: from 1939-46, NBC produced a radio show starring Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce, voice and film actors well known for their roles as Holmes and Watson. This show produced not only many of the canonical cases but missing ones as well, including the “Campberwell Poisoning case,” the “Paradol Chamber,” “Colonel Warburton’s Madness,” and the “Amateur Mendicant Society,” not to mention many more entirely new adaptations. Between the contributions of print, radio, television, and film, fans of Sherlock Holmes may rest secure that

¹³ In the former category, Bliss Austin wrote a Holmes-esque case in which the “detectives” solving the problem are real-life Holmes scholars, including Christopher Morley and Howard Haycraft (228). This story constitutes another instance of borrowing between adaptations (or rather, borrowing adapters).

they will never run out of new adventures to read. These new cases are perhaps the neatest example of readers filling in the gaps in the text; one has only to find where the canon has failed to follow up a dropped hint about a Holmes case with the necessary detail, and inevitably, some other author will have provided an account of that case. The lost cases have been irresistible for Holmes' readers, not only because Watson implies that these adventures are the most interesting that the detective ever solved, but also because readers believe that these must be the cases that offer the answers they want about their favorite detective.

While the total number of missing cases mentioned by Watson in his introductory remarks amounts to a startling thirty-eight, other lists of lost stories include every case mentioned in all of the canon by Holmes and his clients as well as by the good doctor. One such list, in Vincent Starrett's *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*, contains no less than fifty-two instances of cases that were never accounted for by Doyle (90-92); this number is even more surprising when compared to the total number of Holmes stories in the canon, only fifty-six. Essentially, the accounts of Holmes' cases that *are* fully detailed only barely outnumber those that are *not*. With such an overwhelming number of cases never offered by the canon, scholars should not be surprised that authors besides Doyle have stepped in to close this particular gap. However, a systematic examination of so many cases is not practical here, so discussion will be limited to those accounts of missing cases that are most famous or most notable for their interaction with the canonical stories.

While the new adventures of Sherlock Holmes were produced via radio, film and television, the printed page is still the detective's first home, and the print adaptations of lost and new cases vastly outnumber any other medium. Some authors of these include well-known names like O. Henry, James M. Barrie, Stephen King, and Neil Gaiman. However, even before

these other famous authors tried their hands at writing his character, Doyle himself produced one of Watson's hinted-at cases, entitled "The Adventure of the Second Stain." The fact that even the original author of the Holmes canon felt the need to fill out one of these missing cases emphasizes the gap that their nonexistence leaves for readers. And the question of whether the adaptations of others are really authoritative also applies to some degree to Doyle's "Second Stain." The most pressing question for this new version of Doyle's is the same as if it were written by someone else; that is to say, if the adaptation clearly contradicts facts given earlier in the canon, is it still a valid adaptation?

Though his handling of this case raises some serious critical questions, Doyle's decision to finally write out this particular missing account is perfectly understandable. As mentioned in a previous chapter, Watson notes that none of Holmes' other cases "has ever illustrated the value of his analytical methods so clearly or has impressed those who were associated with him so deeply" (447). Naturally, these superlatives made the public interested in the details of the adventure, and Doyle obliged, although not until over a decade had passed. From its first mention in the opening of "The Adventure of the Naval Treaty" in 1893, this case waited eleven years before being published among the stories in the collection *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*. "The Adventure of the Naval Treaty" specifically states that the "The Second Stain" contains a dramatic scene between Sherlock Holmes and a "Monsieur Dubuque, of the Paris police, and Fritz von Waldbaum" (447), neither of whom appears in the actual story at all. Ultimately, though the version of this case which Doyle finally wrote was an unqualified success, it was a success which makes Watson's praise of it seem rather hyperbolic. The only point where the

projected and actual cases coincide is that the actual case was published after the turn of the twentieth century, just as Watson promised (447).¹⁴

In his opening remarks for this case, Watson acknowledges the delay in releasing it to the public, noting that he “had intended ‘The Adventure of the Abbey Grange’ to be the last of those exploits of [his] friend, Mr. Sherlock Holmes, which [he] should ever communicate to the public” (650). However, Holmes’ dislike of the doctor’s publications proved so intense, Watson explains, that he allowed this case to be released only after his friend pointed out that he had promised his readers to do so (650). Perhaps Holmes’ reluctance to allow this case to be read was a reflection of Doyle’s reluctance to write it, because this adventure is the only one of the lost cases to which he returned. While the canonical stories act as the ur-text, or starting point of Holmes as a character, the later cases contribute to the overall meta-text, the ever-shifting narrative of the detective with which the public is familiar. But the question remains: when the earlier and later texts contradict one another, one may rightly wonder which should be given more weight in critical study, especially when, as in the case of “The Second Stain,” they are written by the same person?

Here, Iser’s theory of indeterminacy comes to the critic’s aid, for though he insists that the process of reading is one of filling gaps in the text, he never suggests that every reader should fill in those gaps in the same way, or even the same way twice. Iser writes of “the unsaid [or untold] com[ing] to life in the reader’s imagination” (168), just as the unwritten cases of Holmes have come to life in the minds of readers who become writers; naturally, no one reader’s

¹⁴ Many Holmes scholars have bemoaned the contradictions of this adventure; in a parody entitled “The Adventure of the Second Swag,” Robert Barr offers a narrative in which Sir Arthur Conan Doyle murders Sherlock Holmes by electrocution and buries him in the Strand (both the name of a street and of the publication in which most of the Holmes stories appeared). Perhaps this depiction of the animosity between author and character is connected with the frustration that Doyle often expressed with the public’s desire for more Holmes stories like “The Second Stain,” which he was obliged to provide rather than focusing on other works which he preferred.

imagination has more authority than another's, and as the product of imagination, the works they produce in response may be as contradictory as they like without posing any critical difficulties. Doyle, as the original Holmes author, is merely the man who imagined first, and while this status gives his writings priority over those of subsequent authors, it does not require that his imaginings be any more consistent than anyone else's. Many Holmes scholars have lamented the lack of internal consistency that characterizes the canon; T.S. Eliot points out that character names and plots are often recycled in the stories (18), while Jane Nightwork notes that the "infuriating inconsistencies of Watsonian chronology have cost scholars many a megrim" (46). However, these issues have not detracted one iota from either the fame of Holmes as a character, nor from the enjoyment readers derive from Doyle's stories. Rather than considering the adaptations as puzzle pieces, which must fit exactly into the space left for them by the canonical stories, the critic might be better served – and less frustrated – by thinking of them as variations upon a theme, one supplied by Watson's off-handed remarks about his friend's most interesting, but unpublished, cases.

Other variations on the same theme include short stories like John T. Lescroart's "The Adventure of the Giant Rat of Sumatra," based upon a brief mention of this case by Holmes in the opening of "The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire." This particular missing case seems to be of special interest to the Sherlockian community as a whole; not only has it been the subject of much speculation in online forums, but it also garners a mention by Dr. Watson in the 1945 film *Pursuit to Algiers*, starring Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce. Lescroart's version incorporates the canonical characters of Professor Moriarty and his right-hand man, Colonel Sebastian Moran, but ignores a detail mentioned by Holmes of a ship called *Matilda Briggs* (1034). The story describes a plot of Moriarty's to destroy England by introducing bubonic plague into the country,

saving himself and his henchmen by the use of a vaccine developed by a doctor in his pay (Lescroart 672). Like Doyle's "Second Stain," Lescroart's adaptation alternately adopts and ignores previous canonical details, producing a blend of original and canonical detail that contributes to the meta-narrative of Holmes, as well as satisfying readers' curiosity with a story to go with the case of "The Giant Rat of Sumatra."

Another notable account of one of the lost cases is David Stuart Davies' "The Darlington Substitution Scandal." The original mention of this case, in connection with "A Scandal in Bohemia," suggests that in the course of his investigation, Holmes uses the trick of crying "fire" to get a suspect to reveal the location of an important piece of evidence by rushing to save it from the alleged flames (173). Davies' version dispenses with this detail and instead features a scheme by the indebted step-son of a nobleman to sell his art collection and substitute forgeries for the original paintings (375). However, Davies' account also includes the common canonical themes of Holmes concealing the guilt of someone involved – in this case, the young man's indulgent mother (Davies 376) – and seeking the expert advice of a criminal during his investigation; specifically, the dog-loving art forger who copies the victim's paintings (372). As in many adaptations of Holmes' cases, the elements borrowed from the canon ground the work sufficiently to allow for a new plot or new perspective to be tied into the ur-text as well as a contribution to the Holmes meta-text.

Those contributions to the meta-text have only increased as the Holmes' fame has grown, and the detective's massive popularity in the early twentieth century made his adventures a natural choice to transition into the increasingly ubiquitous medium of radio. Jeffrey Richards suggests that "there is a case for saying that radio was the medium which served Holmes best after the printed page" because it was "particularly effective... for evoking the Victorian world

of Holmes and Watson – the clatter of horse’s hooves on cobbled streets, the rattle and hiss of steam trains, the melancholy sirens of ships on the Thames” (272). The use of sound effects was therefore a highly important part of bringing the Holmes stories to auditory life. Richards also notes that “the radio career of Holmes and Watson...flourished in the United States long before it did in the United Kingdom,” so much so that the “radio adventures of Sherlock Holmes were an integral part of US radio culture for virtually the whole of its existence” (272). While a few other Holmes radio programs existed earlier, by far the most popular began in 1939, when Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce, fresh from their highly successful film *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, were hired by the NBC network to star in *The New Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (Richards 275-6). This program, first written by Edith Meiser and later by Denis Green and Anthony Boucher¹⁵ (Richards 276), produced several of the “lost” cases mixed with canonical stories as well as new adventures. Most of the surviving recordings are those written by Green and Boucher, and these were remastered in the 1980s and sold for a new generation of listeners (Richards 277). This show not only helped spread the fame of Sherlock Holmes even further in the United States, but the combination of canonical and “lost” cases offered via radio served to put Doyle’s stories and those written by other authors on the same level of authority in the public mind. Surely some of those listeners were surprised to find that “The Adventure of Colonel Warburton’s Madness” and “The Case of the Camberwell Poisoning” were not to be found in any of Doyle’s writings.

The most interesting aspect of these radio productions of the missing cases is that whenever possible, they take into consideration those details offered in the canon.¹⁶ This

¹⁵Boucher was not only a script-writer, but also an author of mystery novels and at least one Holmes adaptation; “The Adventure of the Bogle-Wolf.”

¹⁶ For example, Green and Boucher’s version of “The Darlington Substitution Scandal” actually does include Holmes’ trick of crying “fire,” just as the canon says and unlike Davies’ adaptation.

blending of new and canonical information helps to add credibility to the adaptations; because they originate directly from the canon, they are seamlessly incorporated into the meta-text of Holmes, where more discordant adaptations raise an outcry from Sherlockian traditionalists. This prioritizing of canonical detail must have been rather difficult in cases like “The Politician, the Lighthouse, and the Trained Cormorant,” with so many apparently random elements involved as the title implies, but the ingenuity of Green and Boucher’s productions seems to take that difficulty in stride. An excellent example of this seamless interweaving of canon and adaptation is “the Camberwell poisoning case” (Doyle 218). This adventure is mentioned by Watson in the opening of “The Five Orange Pips,” and given an unusually large amount of detail compared to other missing cases; “In the latter, as may be remembered, Sherlock Holmes was able, by winding up the dead man’s watch, to prove that it had been wound up two hours before, and that therefore the deceased had gone to bed within that time—a deduction which was of the greatest importance in clearing up the case” (218). This information, prefaced by the familiar but frustrating suggestion that the audience already knows all about the case, is the starting point for Green and Boucher’s script.

In one sense, the two radio writers had a greater challenge before them than authors of other missing cases, since they chose to accommodate this detail of the dead man’s watch in its solution. However, they achieved this by providing a complicated but interesting case, in which five cousins are forced to share a house by the conditions of their grandfather’s will in order to inherit his substantial fortune. If any of them dies, however, his or her share of the fortune is divided among the rest. After finding cyanide in the pockets of one of his fellow heirs, one of the cousins, Mr. Lovelace, engages the services of Sherlock Holmes in order to prevent murder before it occurs (“The Camberwell Poisoning Case”). However, by the time Holmes and Watson

arrive at the house in Camberwell, a murder has already taken place; the very cousin on whom the cyanide was found has been poisoned in his bed. Through a series of interviews, the detective discovers that the alibis of the other four cousins are airtight except for one hour, a different hour for each suspect. Only by learning when the man last wound his watch can Holmes uncover which was the hour of his death. After seeing how many turns are required to fully wind the watch, Holmes deduces the killer's identity and solves the case. The neatness with which this canonical detail is incorporated into the adaptation is characteristic of Green and Boucher's writing.

While many of these radio adaptations integrate canonical detail when possible, they often also exhibit a degree of melodrama that might repulse, but should not surprise, Holmes aficionados. For instance, Green and Boucher's adaptation of "The Amateur Mendicant Society" begins with the arrival at Baker Street of a beautiful woman in beggar's clothing and ends with Holmes and Watson tied up in the basement of a furniture warehouse in danger of being blown up by an anarchist bomb. Although several canonical Holmes stories make reference to secret societies – for instance, the allusions to the Ku Klux Klan in "The Five Orange Pips" – the inclusion of anarchists planning to blow up Parliament is rather exaggerated. Green and Boucher's adaptation of "Colonel Warburton's Madness," a lost case also mentioned at the beginning of "The Engineer's Thumb," includes the daughter of an African chieftain, a man with hyper-sensitive hearing, and a dog whistle.¹⁷ These apparently wildly varying elements, not to mention the extra touches of romance that are added to the story itself, are considerably more florid than most of Doyle's writings, which, even when the case is apparently grotesque or

¹⁷ As is true for many of the other missing cases, that of "Colonel Warburton's Madness" has been written several times over by different authors. In addition to Green and Boucher's version, Lindsay Faye produced a print adaptation, which features an entirely different, though no less dramatic, storyline.

ridiculous – as in “The Man with the Twisted Lip,” for instance – usually have rather pedestrian crimes behind them. Despite its melodrama, however, Green and Boucher’s “Colonel Warburton’s Madness” does retain the canonical detail of being brought to Holmes’ attention by Dr. Watson, one of only two cases to reach the doctor before the detective. More shockingly still, the radio version of “The Paradol Chamber,” mentioned by Watson in his opening to “The Five Orange Pips,” contains a female scientist, an alleged teleportation chamber, and a near-death by asphyxiation for Holmes and Watson. The tone of these adaptations differs considerably from the canonical stories; if Holmes complained to Watson that the doctor’s accounts of his cases focused far more on romance than on logic, he would surely be horrified by Green and Boucher’s versions.¹⁸ However, these radio dramas certainly served their purpose of encouraging interest in the continuing adventures of the world’s greatest detective.

The continuation of that interest has been recently evidenced by the enthusiastic public response to a recent episode of the BBC show *Sherlock*, which serves as another example of a highly interesting, if rather loose, interpretation of one of the lost cases. This episode, entitled “The Abominable Bride,” takes its name and the origin point of its plot from a brief aside by Holmes in “The Adventure of the Musgrave Ritual.” While looking through the same dispatch-case that contained the accounts of his early cases, Holmes mentions that it holds “a full account of Ricoletti of the club-foot, and his abominable wife” (Doyle 387). Though the BBC sadly chose to dispense with Ricoletti’s club-foot, the episode expanded the “abominable wife” into a feminist vigilante who murders men who mistreat their wives (“The Abominable Bride”). The dramatic scenes contained in this episode – for instance, a gun-wielding woman in a wedding

¹⁸ Other lost cases adapted by Green and Boucher include “The Tankerville Club Scandal,” “The Politician, the Lighthouse, and the Trained Cormorant,” “The Darlington Substitution Scandal, and “The Notorious Canary-Trainer.”

dress shooting up a busy street – are balanced out, just as in print adaptations, by the canonical detail prevalent in the rest of the story. The opening of the episode is entirely true to the canon, depicting the original meeting of Holmes and Watson as facilitated by Watson’s friend Stamford, down to the detail of Holmes beating a corpse with a riding crop. And while the latter half of the episode spirals far outside the bounds of the canon, eventually tying in with the modern-day storyline of the rest of the series, that beginning with its canonical detail serves as the touchstone that makes even this unusual account of a missing case a valid addition to the Holmes meta-narrative.

The lost cases of Sherlock Holmes have been both a well of frustration and a boundless source of creativity for his many enthusiasts. The irritation that comes with being denied knowledge Holmes’ most interesting cases has produced in his readers the desire to create those cases for themselves. Their versions of these untold stories range from ridiculous to romantic, serious to satirical, but their origins all rely upon the chance words of the world’s greatest detective and his faithful biographer. These hints from Holmes and Watson have been the starting point for hundreds of pages of speculation upon the adventures that Doyle never penned. And though those speculations have sometimes strayed far from their canonical origins, offering exploits of Holmes more far-fetched even than Watson’s accounts, they have all served to contribute both to the fame and to the ever-expanding narrative that is the adventures of Sherlock Holmes.

Chapter Five – Caught on Tape: Holmes’ Relationships

“It was worth a wound – it was worth many wounds – to know the depth of loyalty and love which lay behind that cold mask” – Dr. Watson, “The Three Garridebs”

Although the childhood and lost cases of Sherlock Holmes have long been objects of interest to his devoted readers, neither of these areas compares to the bottomless well of fascination that readers have always found in his relationships with others. Holmes’ relationship with Watson is obviously the central one of the canon, and therefore the one most often shown by authors of adaptations. Their partnership and friendship has been portrayed in every possible permutation (including depicting Watson as a woman), and each new version explores a different aspect of the relationship between the doctor and the detective. Watson himself has been depicted in guises that range from a bumbling, if lovable, oaf¹⁹ to a highly capable ex-soldier who is very nearly the mental equal of his friend.²⁰ While the canonical Watson falls somewhere between these two extremes (though perhaps somewhat closer to the former), each adaptation offers a new shade of the character and the relationship between the two men. Of barely less interest to adapters have been Holmes’ romantic relationships; though the canon makes it perfectly clear that Doyle’s detective will hold himself apart from women except in his professional capacity, later authors have nevertheless offered a wide range of possibilities, from *Elementary’s* depiction of a Holmes that maintains purely sexual relationships with dozens of women, to Laurie R. King’s novels featuring the aging detective married to a woman less than a third of his age. Perhaps less fascinating, but still of interest to later authors, is the possibility of Holmes’ other connections and friendships; his interactions with his brother, Mycroft, with

¹⁹ This is particularly the case in the series of films and radio programs starring Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce, where the latter’s Watson is often as pitiable as he is verbally incomprehensible.

²⁰ As in the pair of films starring Robert Downey Jr. as Holmes and Jude Law as Watson.

Scotland Yard detectives, with criminals, and even with his housekeeper, Mrs. Hudson, have often inspired sub-plots or entire works at various times. Together, these adaptations contribute to the meta-text of the character the possibility of making connections with others—perhaps not many or profound connections, but certainly more than are allowed by the canon.

One of the most notable characteristics of the canonical Holmes is that his life revolves around his work; as he says to Watson, “L’homme c’est rien—l’oeuvre c’est tout” (Doyle 190).²¹ Throughout Doyle’s stories, the detective is never shown in a social situation. While he goes to concerts and plays, museums and exhibitions, he never spends time with friends or family. In the canon, Watson passes off this unsociability with the remark that Holmes “loathed every form of society with his whole Bohemian soul” (161) and leaves the matter at that. Perhaps in the time of Doyle’s writing, this justification really was sufficient. Despite his indulgence in cocaine and tobacco, Holmes seems an ascetic at heart, content to be alone with his criminal problems and chemical experiments and requiring nothing from the outside world but puzzles to solve. His focus on his work to the exclusion of all else is quite in keeping with Victorian social expectations. For example, Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* frequently discusses the importance of employment as a means of understanding the self:

[O]f your Strength there is and can be no clear feeling, save by what you have prospered in, by what you have done. . . A certain inarticulate Self-consciousness dwells dimly in us, which only our Works can render articulate and decisively discernible. Our Works are the mirror wherein the spirit first sees its natural lineaments. Hence, too, the folly of that impossible Precept, Know thyself; till it be translated into this partially possible one, Know what thou canst work at. (74)

²¹ Or “The man is nothing—the work is all,” quoted from a letter written by Gustave Flaubert to George Sand, as Holmes acknowledges in the story.

Perhaps because of this common Victorian emphasis on one's profession, Doyle's original audience did not seem to feel any lack in the social life of Sherlock Holmes. After all, he has Watson to act as friend and biographer, and seems quite content without any other relationships. However, more modern readers have not been satisfied with this isolated version of the detective. Holmes may be eccentric, and he may be devoted to his work, but he cannot possibly be as isolated as the canon suggests. The modern world is based on connections – between people, between countries, between ideas – and modern audiences want a more socially connected version of their favorite consulting detective. And as in other areas where Doyle's writings seem to fall short, his readers have become writers themselves to fill in the gaps he left in the life of his character. They have offered Holmes friends, a family, even romantic attachments at times, all in order to better understand him not only as a detective, but also as a person.

Within Doyle's text, Holmes has only two relationships that can be considered more than simple acquaintances; the first, obviously, is with Watson, and the second is with his brother Mycroft. Despite his blood ties to the latter, much less detail is offered in the canon about the brothers' interactions than about Holmes and Watson's. In fact, Mycroft appears in only four stories in the canon: "The Greek Interpreter," in which it is "news to [Watson]" not only that his friend has a brother, but a brother who is "another man with such singular powers" (435); in the story of "The Final Problem," where Mycroft facilitates his brother's and Watson's escape to Switzerland from the enmity of Professor Moriarty (475); in "The Adventure of the Empty House," when Holmes, newly returned from the dead, admits that his brother was his "only confidant" in the deception of the public and of his friend Watson (487); and in "The Bruce-Partington Plans," in which Holmes describes his brother as a man of extraordinary mental powers whose "specialism is omniscience" (914). Interaction between the two brothers occurs

only in connection with one of the younger Holmes' cases, and even then, they hardly exhibit much fraternal affection. Naturally, later adaptations have offered various interpretations of the relationship of the Holmes brothers.

Though many adaptations limit Mycroft to his canonical role of enigmatic supporting character, some have offered the character a much larger part, and contributed considerably more information about his younger years. For instance, BBC's *Sherlock* features Mycroft in nearly every episode; in the pilot, "A Study in Pink," Mycroft, played (and co-written) by Mark Gatiss, has Watson kidnapped to interrogate him about his connection with Sherlock Holmes, and offers him a bribe in exchange for information about his brother's doings, identifying himself as the detective's "arch enemy" ("A Study in Pink"). Later in the episode, Mycroft admits that his motivation is his genuine concern for his brother's welfare. Other episodes show Mycroft, in his government capacity, sending his younger brother on various covert tasks, including hunting down an underground terror cell in London. As in the canon, this version of Mycroft purports to be far more intelligent than his brother, insisting that he is "the smart one" and that he is "living in a world of goldfish" ("The Empty Hearse"). Mycroft's mental superiority is borne out by some incidents in the episode "A Scandal in Belgravia," where he responds to a planned terrorist attack on a plane by filling that plane with previously deceased passengers so that the attack will appear to have been successful; a plan which, despite many clients who report missing bodies of loved ones, his younger brother does not discover until he is actually on the plane in question. The same show also offers some details about the rest of the Holmes family, including an episode in which the brothers are visiting their parents for Christmas and Watson learns that Mrs. Holmes was a brilliant mathematician, which might account for her sons' mental acuity ("His Last Vow"). The relationship between the brothers is often strained and sometimes outright

hostile, but Mycroft proves himself willing to sacrifice a great deal to keep his brother safe (“His Last Vow”). In contrast, the films starring Robert Downey, Jr. and Jude Law portray Mycroft, played by Stephen Fry, as a socially awkward, slightly ridiculous character whose superior intelligence is somewhat doubtful (*Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows*).²² But all of these adaptations offer a very different Holmes relationship from the canonical one, in which the brothers interact only on a professional basis. Later authors have expanded upon the character of Mycroft to offer his younger brother not only a family connection, but an intellectual equal, which, though it may somewhat diminish the latter’s apparently one-of-a-kind talents, makes those talents more believable by contrast.

While Mycroft and Watson are Holmes’ closest connections in the canon, other versions of the detective’s adventures suggest the possibility of other relationships, including those most obviously forbidden by Doyle’s stories: romantic relationships. The only women in which Holmes ever shows an interest in the canon are his clients, and, as Watson admits, “rather to [his] disappointment, [Holmes] manifests[s] no further interest in [these women] when once [they cease] to be the centre of one of his problems” (Doyle 332). In the adaptations, on the other hand, the detective is often shown at least on the verge of a relationship, and sometimes even maintaining several at once. Some are with canonical figures like Irene Adler, while others introduce entirely new characters, but all these newly imagined relationships have one thing in common: they are not ordinary, any more than the man involved in them is ordinary.

The most obvious canonical candidate for a relationship with Sherlock Holmes is, of course, the only woman who ever outsmarted him: Irene Adler. Her combination of beauty,

²² One of the most interesting portrayals of Mycroft is that in *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*. This film depicts the elder Holmes as a spymaster for Great Britain, working from his headquarters at the Diogenes Club. Mycroft is played by Sir Christopher Lee, who also portrayed Sherlock Holmes in other films. Lee’s version of the elder Holmes brother is similar to Gatiss’ in terms of mental superiority to his detective sibling.

intelligence, and cunning makes her more than a match for Holmes, but she appears in only one canonical story, “A Scandal in Bohemia.” Of course, authors of adaptations have not been satisfied with this single meeting between the pair, and have produced many new stories involving Irene Adler, particularly in the last ten years. One thing most of these adaptations have in common is portraying Adler as what her canonical former lover, the King of Bohemia, calls her, an “adventuress” (Doyle 165). Certainly, her actions in that story – having an affair with royalty, dressing as a man to follow Sherlock Holmes, hastily marrying her lawyer and fleeing the country – indicate a daring and resourceful individual. However, many of the adaptations have taken that bold inventiveness and made it into something darker; in fact, almost every new story featuring Irene Adler portrays her as at least highly scandalous, sometimes even criminal. In the 2009 film starring Robert Downey, Jr., she appears as a world-class thief and criminal-for-hire whose exploits include stealing a maharaja’s diamond and breaking up the engagement of a Hapsburg prince to a Romanov princess; the film also shows Adler working, albeit unwillingly, for Professor Moriarty, and soundly beating three men who attempt to pick her pocket (*Sherlock Holmes*). In this adaptation, Adler and Holmes have an on-again off-again romantic relationship, complicated by their operating on opposite sides of the law. Her criminal charm here is perhaps the closest of recent adaptations to the canonical version, only a little exaggerated. In contrast, the version of Adler in BBC’s *Sherlock* is a blackmailing professional dominatrix, whose clients range from law enforcement to politicians, businessmen, and aristocrats. Holmes is introduced to her when his brother Mycroft hires him to retrieve some incriminating photographs of her and a member of the royal family (“A Scandal in Belgravia”). As in the canon, the battle of wits between Adler and Holmes is almost even; unlike Doyle’s story, however, the detective is ultimately victorious and solves not only the crime for which he was hired, but a much larger

conspiracy as well (“A Scandal in Belgravia”). Again, Irene Adler is tied to Professor Moriarty in this adaptation, consulting him for advice on how best to promote her own interests with the leverage she gains through her profession. This edgier version of the character sacrifices what did exist of her canonical respectability, but fits into *Sherlock*’s world of government conspiracy and bizarre crimes much better than Doyle’s operatic diva from New Jersey would have.

The tie between Irene Adler and Professor Moriarty that appears in several adaptations is a major plot point in CBS’ show *Elementary*. In this version, Holmes and Adler have a romantic relationship several years before the show’s arc begins, and her murder precipitates the detective’s descent into drug addiction. After a stint in rehab, Sherlock Holmes’ father hires Joan Watson, a former surgeon turned professional companion to recovering addicts, to help with his sobriety (“Pilot”). When Irene Adler suddenly reappears, apparently after several years of psychological torture at the hands of Moriarty, Holmes’ pursuit of the master criminal begins again (“The Woman”), only to discover that the woman he thought was the American painter, Irene Adler, is actually the Napoleon of Crime, Moriarty (“Heroine”). A Sherlock Holmes adaption in which Watson and Moriarty are both women might be a bit much for canonical devotees to swallow, but this creative reimagining of Irene Adler’s character also sheds an entirely new light on the detective. The possibility of a Holmes damaged by the death of the woman he loved, betrayed and emotionally devastated when that woman turns out to be a murderer and criminal mastermind, makes the detective far more human and more relatable than the canonical version. Of course, adaptations have suggested or invented many other candidates for Holmes’ other half, including canonical characters like Miss Violet Hunter of “The Copper Beeches.” Laurie R. King’s series of books, beginning with her novel *The Beekeeper’s Apprentice*, creates an entirely original character in Miss Mary Russell, whose unusual mind

proves to be an equal match with Sherlock Holmes. This relationship, which progresses from master and apprentice to husband and wife, is certainly unusual among those detailed in the adaptations, but it maintains authenticity by focusing far more on the intellectual than on the emotional. Still, any adaptation in which Holmes has a wife and partner must portray the detective as far less unapproachable than the canonical version. This humanizing of Holmes is the most common effect of including romance in the adaptations; where Doyle's version of the detective exists on a purely intellectual plane, far above the possibility of emotional entanglements, more modern writers, unsatisfied with a character so isolated, have made Holmes more accessible to readers through the addition of a romantic relationship.

The idea of a Sherlock Holmes romantically involved has been hugely popular among his modern audiences. For example, a phenomenon among fans of the BBC *Sherlock* is to “ship”²³ the detective with various characters in the show. While putting Adler and Holmes together is one of the most popular pairings, other candidates include a woman named Molly Hooper who works in the same hospital where Dr. Watson was trained, a friend of Watson's wife named Jeanine, and, more controversially, Watson himself. The close friendship between the two men has led many Holmes scholars as well as fans of the BBC show to theorize that Holmes and Watson are actually romantically involved, although *Sherlock's* version of Watson vehemently denies this claim in nearly every episode. However, the couple nicknamed “Johnlock” is still by far the most popular among the show's fans.

While many of the later Holmes adaptations have added complexity to his character through romantic and family relationships, not to mention various interpretations of his partnership with Watson, his less central relationships have also contributed to the meta-text of

²³ Abbreviation for “relationship,” used as a verb in the sense of wanting two characters to end up together.

his character. For example, in BBC's *Sherlock*, the detective's relationship with Mrs. Hudson, his landlady, acts as an indicator that, despite his usual arrogant and anti-social behavior, he is capable of affection and even sacrifice for others ("A Scandal in Belgravia"). When a group of CIA agents invades Baker Street and attempt to interrogate Mrs. Hudson for information they believe Holmes has, the detective responds by knocking out two of them and throwing the third from a second story window ("A Scandal in Belgravia"). This protective behavior contrasts sharply with Holmes' usual selfish and isolated habits, and his apparent soft spot for Mrs. Hudson makes the detective far more relatable to his audience.

Holmes' interactions with Scotland Yard's Inspector Lestrade, though usually more condescending than companionable in Doyle's stories, also serve to enrich the character in various adaptations. In Laurie King's Mary Russell series, the aging Holmes is still working with an Inspector Lestrade, the son of his original police counterpart, and their relationship is much as the canon describes – sometimes a source of great frustration and injured pride to the official detective, often productive of new cases for Holmes, but ultimately one between comrades-in-arms against the criminal underworld. In BBC's *Sherlock*, Lestrade's investigative capacity is considerable greater than in Doyle's version, but he still relies on Holmes' help with the more bizarre cases that come to his attention. He is not above underhanded tactics to secure the consulting detective's help – for instance, staging a narcotics raid on the Baker Street apartment to find evidence he believes Holmes has hidden ("A Study in Pink") – but his appreciation of Holmes' skills and assistance is clear. When Holmes returns to London three years after faking his death, Lestrade is the only character whose initial reaction is a positive one (Watson breaks his friend's nose) ("The Empty Hearse"), and his initial aversion to Holmes early in the series changes to something like friendship in the later seasons. In contrasting the highly conventional

Lestrade with the often eccentric tactics of Sherlock Holmes, the adaptations offer not only some insight into the complexities of Holmes' professional life, but also suggest that his capacity for friendship is not entirely confined to Watson.

But whatever other relationships – romantic, familial, or friendly – Sherlock Holmes might have, no other name is as closely tied with his as that of Dr. John H. Watson, so much so that T.S. Blakeney writes, “[W]e cannot think of one without envisaging the other; we can hardly think of the time when either was not; their names are interlocked with the history of crime” (1). Holmes and Watson are arguably the most famous pairing in all of literature, and the former likely “would not have become a household word the world over but for the stimulating influence and literary craftsmanship of his faithful satellite” (Blakeney 1). That relationship, the cornerstone on which the canon is built, has also been the foundation of many, if not all, later versions of Holmes' life and cases. The various depictions of Watson, from bumbling idiot to concerned friend to capable soldier and medical man, have necessarily informed the Holmes meta-text as well, showing a different facet of the detective for every corresponding version of the doctor. As this connection between the two men is the most important relationship of the canon, it should come as no surprise that it has also been a major focus in many adaptations.

Early depictions of Dr. Watson tended to remain fairly close to the canon; when they did diverge, it was usually to the doctor's disadvantage. Perhaps the most familiar portrayal of Dr. Watson is in the series of films that spanned the 1940s, where the doctor is played by Nigel Bruce. These fourteen films, considered by many critics to be “without question . . . the most famous, and most popular Holmes films ever made” (Haydock 107), starred Basil Rathbone as Sherlock Holmes opposite Bruce's Dr. Watson. The two actors became so identified with these roles that in 1975, thirty years after most of the films were made, a newscaster “found himself

interchanging the names of Sherlock Holmes, Basil Rathbone, Dr. Watson, and Nigel Bruce without so much as blinking an eye; without a single bit of self-consciousness, and in all perfect honesty” (Haydock 107).²⁴ Bruce’s Watson – plump, middle-aged, mustachioed, and mumbling most of his lines – sets off Basil Rathbone’s incisive, masterful Holmes, but does little to increase the prestige of the doctor’s character. Much of the perception of Watson as an idiot is likely due to Bruce’s interpretation of the character. However, his interactions with this more avuncular and less capable version of Watson make Holmes appear considerably more patient and less eccentric than most adaptations show. If the contrast between Holmes and Watson works to the former’s advantage in the canonical stories, the Rathbone-Bruce team takes full advantage of this contrast. Rathbone’s Holmes is universally considered one of the best on screen, “physically perfect and vocally commanding” (Richards 262), and Bruce’s Watson “convey[s] all the warmth, charm and flavor that *are* Doyle’s stories” (110, emphasis in original).

The first and most famous Rathbone-Bruce film is *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, “arguably the best Sherlock Holmes film and the most faithful adaptation of a Conan Doyle story produced for theatrical release” (Nollen 126).²⁵ As Holmes is absent for a considerable portion of this case, it also showcases the talents (or lack thereof) of Dr. Watson. However, the film version

²⁴ Rathbone and Bruce’s identification with their roles as Holmes and Watson also hampered their careers somewhat; in fact, Rathbone, “haunted by a character who had become repetitious, . . . wanted to finish him off” (Nollen 169). He later refused to play the detective again because he felt that Holmes was “distracting him from more ‘important’ work” (169). He “found it difficult to escape the inevitable typecasting,” finding that “[p]roducers and audiences . . . had come to think of him as Holmes and not Rathbone” (Haydock 109). His career never quite recovered from his stint as Holmes, and “the shadow of the great detective followed him the rest of his days” (171). As Doyle discovered first, and many others have found since, the character of Sherlock Holmes has a habit of pulling in not just fans, but writers and actors as well.

²⁵ Despite being filmed in California, this film managed to be “diabolically menacing” with its sets and effects, particularly during “the classic finale that saw Holmes and Watson out on the fog-shrouded moors of Grimpen Mire stalking the legendary Hound with a pistol, lantern and stealth” (Haydock 113). The immediate and lasting success of this film launched the entire series of Rathbone-Bruce films, and almost certainly contributed to the fame of this case in particular, despite the fact that Holmes is absent for well over half of Doyle’s story.

also removes some of those details from the canonical case that redeem the doctor's investigative skills. For instance, in the famous opening scene of the case, where Holmes and Watson each try their deductive skill upon a walking stick that has been left by a client, the canonical version has Watson deducing (correctly) that the owner is a doctor practicing in the country, "well-esteemed" by his patients, who have given him the stick as a "mark of their appreciation" (Doyle 669). Of course, he fails to deduce as many details as his friend, but this is only to be expected. The film version, on the other hand, allows Watson to infer that the owner of the walking stick is a popular gentleman from the dedication engraved upon it, but nothing more, leaving Holmes to add that the man is a country doctor who owns a large dog (*The Hound of the Baskervilles*). The remainder of the film is littered with similar examples of Watson's inadequacies, exaggerated by Bruce's perpetually confused interpretation of the doctor. As in the canon, Watson's intellectual failings serve to set off Holmes' brilliance, but do little to enhance his own reputation.

Later interpretations of Watson have largely served to counteract this legacy of incompetence by offering far more intelligent and skillful versions of the good doctor. In 1984, Granada television began airing a Holmes series starring Jeremy Brett as the detective and David Burke as the doctor, later replaced by Edward Hardwicke (Nollen 231). This series was intended to be as faithful to the canon as possible, so much so that the scene between Holmes and Moriarty was actually filmed at the Reichenbach Falls in Switzerland (231). The determination to maintain authenticity also stretched to the series' portrayal of Watson, who appears as a capable doctor and caring friend to Holmes, concerned about his health and scolding him about his use of cocaine, but still willing to accompany him in his cases and even break the law to help if necessary ("A Scandal in Bohemia"). This warmer and more accomplished Watson also sets off Holmes' eccentricities, a trend which continues through many later adaptations.

Although the Nigel Bruce model of Watson may have gone a bit too far with its blundering, if lovable, ineptitude, the opposite pole has its own drawbacks. For instance, in the 2009 film starring Robert Downey, Jr. as Holmes and Jude Law as Watson, the doctor's capacity as a medical man, a scientist, and an investigator seems quite equal to the detective's, particularly since the latter is hampered in his work by his extreme eccentricities (*Sherlock Holmes*). And while this version of the doctor is a refreshing change from decades of incompetent sidekicks, the partnership of Holmes and Watson loses something by this equality between the two men. The essential element of their relationship is, as Ron Buchanan points out, twofold, in that "Watson . . . is his friend's loyal companion who becomes the recipient for the central character's wisdom," and "Watson as biographer also becomes Holmes's public defender empowered in this capacity because of the special bond between the two" (18). While a totally incapable Watson loses his ability to work with Holmes, a Watson who is the detective's equal in every way cannot learn from him, nor can he stand in for readers as a vantage point from which to appreciate the detective's skills. This balance is well struck in the canonical stories, but the adaptations have not always been so fortunate.

One of the most interesting takes on the Holmes-Watson partnership is in BBC's *Sherlock*, which, despite its modernization of the detective's cases, maintains close ties to the canon. Dr. Watson, acted by Martin Freeman, strikes a familiar balance between military man of action, put-upon roommate, and assistant investigator, all without sacrificing his middle-class British respectability. In contrast with this comfortable ordinariness, Benedict Cumberbatch's Holmes is eccentric to the point of mental illness. His narcissistic tendencies and bizarre personal habits are a source of constant frustration to his roommate; he keeps dismembered body parts in the refrigerator ("A Scandal in Belgravia") and makes inappropriate deductions about Watson's

dates (“The Blind Banker”). However, Watson regularly assists on Holmes’ cases, where his military and medical skills are regularly of use to his friend; for instance, in the very first episode, Watson saves the detective’s life by shooting a serial killer who was about to make Holmes his next victim (“A Study in Pink”).

As in the canon, the two men bond over their mutual interest in “all that is bizarre and outside the conventions and humdrum routine of everyday life” (Doyle 54). This facet of Watson’s personality is particularly emphasized in *Sherlock*, especially in the third season, in which he learns that his new wife is actually a highly trained assassin and concludes that, as Holmes says, he is “abnormally attracted to dangerous situations and people” (“His Last Vow”). The contrast between the two men highlights Holmes’ intellectual thirst for problems to solve and Watson’s fascination with danger for its own sake. However, the show also depicts the two men in less serious situations that have delighted old and new fans of the detective; for instance, in “The Sign of Three,” the two men go out drinking the night before Watson’s wedding in a scene that includes complex alcohol-related chemistry and a rather tipsy investigation of a disappearance. Especially since the canon limits its depiction of the Holmes-Watson friendship to cases and evenings at Baker Street, these scenes help round out the audience’s understanding of the relationship. Despite its emphasis on the doctor’s interest in crime, *Sherlock* has the most balanced and well-rounded characterization of Watson in the recent adaptations.

While most adaptations stay fairly close to the canon in their portrayal of Holmes and Watson’s friendship, those that change the dynamic of that relationship also contribute something new to the meta-text of Holmes. The most drastic alteration presented by a recent adaptation is the female version of Watson in CBS’ *Elementary*. A disgraced former surgeon, Joan Watson, portrayed by Lucy Liu, begins the series acting more as Holmes’ nanny than his

partner. She is hired by his father to supervise his recovery from drug addiction, and, as a condition of his staying clean, goes along with him in his investigations. Her medical expertise proves helpful in some of their early cases, and Holmes eventually begins to train her as his protégé. Within a few years, she takes on cases of her own and becomes almost Holmes' equal as a detective. While she does reveal some of the canonical Watson's frustration with her roommate's arrogance and eccentricities, their relationship is otherwise quite unlike Doyle's version. In this adaptation, Watson is poised, the consummate professional, while Holmes is scattered, compulsive, sometimes emotionally unstable. Struggling with his sobriety and maintaining casual relationships with dozens of women to avoid real relationships, *Elementary's* Sherlock Holmes, played by Johnny Lee Miller, is a very different man from *Sherlock's* narcissistic thrill-seeker or Granada's respectable, if eccentric, gentleman detective. And while Miller's version of Holmes entirely lacks the detective's canonical polish and some of his professional credibility, *Elementary's* interpretation of Holmes is undoubtedly the most human, the most relatable, of any recent Holmes depiction.

All of these adaptations, with their different versions of the world's greatest detective, also feature corresponding portrayals of Dr. Watson which serve to set off different characteristics in Sherlock Holmes. Each Watson perfectly fits his Holmes: Nigel Bruce's plump ineptitude sets off Basil Rathbone's razor-sharp competence, Jude Law's strait-laced military bearing contrasts with Robert Downey, Jr.'s unorthodox genius, Martin Freeman's long-suffering respectability opposes Benedict Cumberbatch's sociopathic behaviors, and Lucy Liu's understated professionalism diverges sharply from Johnny Lee Miller's brilliant but chaotic instability. Throughout the adaptations of Holmes' character and cases, other characters are dispensable; Irene Adler, Mycroft, Mrs. Hudson, and Lestrade need not appear, and the story

may still be a classic homage to Sherlock Holmes. But no adaptation can do without Dr. Watson. He (or she) is essential, part of Holmes' life that can never be left out. Watson is more than the detective's biographer, friend, and assistant; he is Holmes' caretaker, his interpreter to the outside world, his "conductor of light" as Holmes says himself (Doyle 669). Despite his superior fame, intelligence, and skill, Holmes needs Watson as he needs no one else.

In the canonical stories, Sherlock Holmes' relationships are few in number and minimal in intimacy. He has clients, colleagues, acquaintances, and a brother, but only one real friend. He may be professionally connected, but he is socially and personally adrift. The adaptations have stepped into this gap and provided analyses and interpretations of each of these relationships, enriching the character of Sherlock Holmes by offering him a far more complex social life than the canon does. For the canonical Holmes, his work is his life, and he seems content to devote himself entirely to his cases. Modern readers, however, have not been satisfied with this partial view of the detective. Through the adaptations, Holmes has had romantic relationships, meaningful friendships, and a family, which is more than Doyle ever gave him. The isolated, purely intellectual detective in the canon is not a believable human being, even with Watson's efforts to soften him; the adaptations add depth to Holmes' character by allowing him to interact with a wider range of people, to build relationships, and even to show emotion at times. Most of all, through these adaptations, readers have been able to interact with Sherlock Holmes in a way that the canon, with its invariable focus on the case over the character, simply does not allow.

Conclusion – The Legacy of Sherlock Holmes

“Here, though the world explode, these two survive,

And it is always eighteen ninety-five.”

-Vincent Starrett, “221b.”

In all the canonical Holmes stories, all of the essays, articles, reinventions, and adaptations of his life and exploits, one thing remains the same: the affection and interest that the detective has always inspired in his readers. From the original audiences who devoured Doyle’s stories to the modern viewers who wait in painful anticipation for the next episode of *Sherlock*, the detective’s adventures are never without an appreciative public to enjoy them. Where many of his fellow detectives have fallen out of favor since their introduction in literature – the name of Poe’s detective Auguste Dupin, for instance, is virtually unknown to the public – the fame of Sherlock Holmes has only grown since his first appearance in *A Study in Scarlet*. The perpetual fame of the character, when the name of his creator is comparatively obscure, is entirely worthy of the attention of literary critics and scholars, who will find that their attention is well repaid by the inexhaustible examples of Holmes’ influence in the real world as well as in literature. As Benjamin Poore writes, “The Sherlock Holmes fandom has gone on for so long and acquired so many dimensions and traditions that it has developed some of the characteristics of institutionalised religion” (159). While this may be a bit of an exaggeration, those same characteristics make the Sherlock Holmes phenomenon an interesting cultural study as well as an object of interest for literary critics. The paper and ink expended on Holmes’ behalf by scholars, authors, and prominent figures (as in the case of President Roosevelt) demands to be accounted for, and the ever-evolving meta-text of Holmes poses theoretical questions of authority, validity, and readerly responsibility that could occupy critics for many more years.

An examination of the narrative structure of the canonical stories helps to account for the enthusiastic interest of readers in further information about the life of Doyle's detective; in the genre of detective fiction, where the search for truth is the entire purpose of the work, readers naturally desired to go beyond the plot-focused nature of the Holmes stories and seek out more information about the character himself. The limited perspective of Watson as narrator, paired with the canonical focus on the crimes to be solved rather than the man who solved them, means that very few details are given about the extraordinary man whose mental powers make him "the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has ever seen" (Doyle 162). Unsatisfied with this lack of information in the canon, readers have become writers to produce those details that will account for the astonishing gifts, eccentric personal habits, and shady history of the world's greatest detective.

The theories of Wolfgang Iser and Louise M. Rosenblatt help to account for this interaction between the reader and the text, not only by explaining what readers gain from reading the text, but, more importantly in the case of Holmes, what they bring to the text as well. The idea that the reader can offer just as much to the text as the text can to the reader is the foundation for understanding how and why the detective's devotees have been so invested in providing him the past and relationships that his creator did not. By identifying the gaps in the canonical texts, the critic can see how the adaptations fit into those gaps as neatly as a key into a lock. So exact a match are the adaptations to the canon, in terms of content if not always of tone, that they interact with Doyle's original works to create a new and richer version of Sherlock Holmes, one that turns the character from an inhuman thinking machine to a human being with his own history, his own weaknesses, and his own emotions.

Those adaptations, though they range from faithful reproduction to exaggerated parody, also neatly fill the three primary areas of missing information in the life of Sherlock Holmes: his personal history, his untold cases, and his relationships. In the more than one hundred years that have passed since Holmes' first appearance, every new medium has brought new stories of his adventures to an eager public, and all of those stories have added more detail and depth to Holmes' character. In print, stage, radio, and film, new interpretations of canonical cases, as well as entirely new Holmes exploits, have satisfied audiences' desire to learn more about their favorite consulting detective.

Holmes' personal history is undoubtedly the most mysterious of the many mysteries of the canon. Watson's complaint of his friend's reserve seems fully justified, since this quality has had a similar effect on readers. Part of the appeal of Sherlock Holmes has always been his extraordinary intellectual gifts, but those same gifts have their cost – his mental superiority comes with a certain emotional detachment that limits his friends to those, like Watson, who are hardy enough to bear his sharp tongue and rapidly shifting moods. Telling nostalgic tales about his family and childhood seems highly out of character for the prickly detective, which may be why so many authors of adaptations have suggested that Holmes must have had an unhappy earlier life. By far the most positive portrayal of the Holmes family is that offered in *Sherlock*, which depicts Sherlock and Mycroft's parents as supportive but ultimately far too ordinary to relate to their astonishing offspring. Most other adaptations seem to be in consensus that the detective's childhood could not have been a happy one, which might account for his adult disinclination for close relationships. Readers have taken the utter silence of the canon on the subject of Holmes' life before his college years as permission to offer their own interpretation of what his pre-Baker Street years were like.

Even after Holmes established his practice as a consulting detective and joined forces with his biographer, Watson, readers were still not guaranteed full knowledge of his doings, even his professional ones. The missing cases of Sherlock Holmes, in many ways more interesting to readers than the ones Watson chose to tell, have long been a fruitful source of inspiration for later authors. Even Doyle himself, against his own inclination, wrote out one of these hinted-at adventures, in the “Adventure of the Second Stain.” Though this case does not fulfill the many promises made about it in Watson’s first allusion at the beginning of “The Naval Treaty,” it does show that, even in the early years of Holmes’ literary life, the untold cases were a source of great interest to his readers. Adventures like “Colonel Warburton’s Madness” and “The Darlington Substitution Scandal,” with their intriguing names and limited canonical details, have been interpreted several times over by different authors, multiplying one sentence of Doyle’s into two or three new adventures for his detective. These adventures were primarily offered in print, but the advent of radio also proved well suited to producing Holmes’ lost cases. Denis Green and Anthony Boucher’s radio program, “The New Adventures of Sherlock Holmes,” offered many such imaginative new tales of Holmes, often in an even more dramatic style than Watson’s, and spread the detective’s fame to new audiences. Further scholarly examination of the adaptations and their interaction with the canon might study the web of intertextuality that binds the adaptations not only to the original stories, but to one another as well; such a study might break down further the mechanism by which the meta-text is formed, and the influences it has over authors of new adaptations. The new versions of Holmes and his cases are so numerous that an in-depth study of their interaction might occupy scholars for decades to come, but this study would also be an invaluable resource, not only for criticism of Sherlock Holmes, but also for other works or characters who have been adapted in a similar manner, if not to the same extent.

Undoubtedly the most intriguing area of missing information for Holmes readers has always been his relationships. Though his close friendship with Watson is the most important human connection he has in the canon, even that partnership is described in very little detail. Because Holmes' entire being is invested into his work, he seems to have neither the inclination nor the social skills for other friendships. The possibility of romance, so fascinating to readers, is denied almost at once by Watson's insistence that love, were Holmes capable of it, would merely be "a distracting factor that might throw a doubt upon all his mental results" (Doyle 164). However, this apparently firm prohibition against placing the detective in a romantic entanglement has not discouraged authors of adaptations at all. *Elementary* shows Holmes crushed by the death of a woman he loved and engaging in various entirely sexual relationships, *Sherlock* offers Irene Adler as the detective's match in wit and potential romantic partner, and Laurie R. King's book series imagines a much younger wife and partner who joins Holmes in his investigations. Modern authors apparently cannot be satisfied, as Doyle was, with a Sherlock Holmes who is satisfied without human connections. His friendship with Watson varies widely in the adaptations as well, from Nigel Bruce's plump, mumbling middle-aged doctor in the 1930s series of films, to Jude Law's sharp-tongued and fully capable ex-soldier in the recent films directed by Guy Ritchie; however, the one thing upon which all authors of adaptations, from Doyle's time to the present, can agree upon is that Holmes cannot do without Watson any more than he can do without his investigative calling.

Despite his rather inauspicious first appearance in print, Sherlock Holmes has grown into an iconic figure in the modern consciousness. Even those rare people who have never read a Holmes story, seen him in film, or listened to his broadcast adventures still know about the detective's amazing mental acuity, his magnifying glass, and his deerstalker hat. His partnership

with Watson is the most famous in all of literature,²⁶ and the pair's adventures have surprised and delighted audiences in all possible media for well over a century. The adaptations of the life and work of Sherlock Holmes have turned him from a popular Victorian character into the world's greatest detective in any age. From the thousands of pages of his adventures in print to his hundreds of on-screen cases, beginning with his very first appearance in film²⁷ and stretching well into the twenty-first century, Sherlock Holmes has drawn the attention and the efforts of authors, actors, and audiences of every possible kind, and will surely continue to do so long into the future. The detective himself may not be real, but because of his presence in the public mind, his impact upon detective literature through the many adaptations of his cases, and the contemplation of his life and work enjoyed by the many great minds who produced those adaptations, he might as well be.

²⁶ With the possible exception of *Romeo and Juliet*.

²⁷ Holmes' many on-screen adventures began in the year 1900, with a silent film produced by Thomas Edison's American Mutoscope and Biograph Company. The film depicts the great detective dumbfounded by a burglar who can appear and disappear at will; its total running time was thirty-five seconds (Haydock 1).

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