
Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and *Elementary*'s Creation: A Comparative Analysis of the "knotty problem"

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Abstract:

The *Elementary* series, portraying Sherlock Holmes and his universe, fills up the unsaid portions of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's writings. The characters swell and extend from their Victorian setting to a modern one. The original composition serves as clues to develop an enlarged view and re-reading of the canon in the series. The CBS Holmes switches from a stoic superhuman to a genius not without vulnerabilities. A drug addict, the television series shows Holmes sleeping with women, attending Narcotics Anonymous meetings for sobriety, licking pavements to gather evidence, waking Watson up in the most bizarre manner possible, and accepting himself. Characters like Watson and Moriarty undergo transformations too which contributes in the character development of Holmes. Although Sherlock's independent ways of leading his own life gets cloaked by his suavity usually yet *Elementary* unmask his impeccable lifestyle. This contemporised version takes a progressive leap from the Victorian decorum to the age of experimentation of forms. It tries to question the stereotypical construction of the Victorian hero and exposes the human behind it. The present paper is an attempt to study and understand the iconic character of Sherlock Holmes and his universe in *Elementary* series comparing it with Conan Doyle's creation.

Key words: Sherlock Holmes, Conan Doyle, *Elementary*, Victorian age, comparison

Introduction

Crime fiction is the genre that encompasses acts of offence, involves violation of law by criminal moves like murder, kidnap, and blackmail, among others, wrapped in a fictional narration. It constitutes of a police

or detective investigation to track down the problems to a fruitful solution (Abrams & Harpham, 2017).

The Victorian age witnessed a proliferation of detective novels and short stories which increased the readership of crime fiction (Landow, 2006). Social erosion gave way as prostitution was rife, murders and robberies were the order of the day especially in the notorious corners of England like the London East End (Loftus, 2011). The ‘criminal class’ was that strata of the society which formed the lowest part and was thought as the ‘dangerous classes’ by the upper crust (Emsley, 2011). Besides, the contemporary state of economy was so miserable that the society was in desperate need of a saviour, an all-pervading figure to solve the otherwise unfathomable mysteries, hence crime fiction.

Notable detective novelists from Sir Arthur Ignatius Conan Doyle, Dame Agatha Christie to G.K. Chesterton, quenched the needs of the common mass consequently giving birth to Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, Ms. Marple, and Father Brown. However, in the words of Satyajit Ray’s Feluda, Holmes is widely considered as the torchbearer in the arena of detection, which is, time and again proved by the television series and the movie adaptations. Yet the 2012 version entitled *Elementary* attempts to take a drastic step in bringing out the raw truth behind the multiple masks of Sherlock Holmes without caring much about the strict conventions that it canonically followed.

The reason behind how the series got its name is a rather compelling one. As an answer to Watson’s “Excellent!”, Holmes’ prompt reply “Elementary” in *The Adventures of the Crooked Man* helped P.G. Wodehouse rephrase it as “Elementary, my dear Watson” in his novel, *Psmith, Journalist* (Doyle, 2012; Wodehouse, 2008). Many mistake Wodehouse’s quotation as Doyle’s but Holmes does speak nearly the same thing yet not the exact one (Smallwood, 2013). Thanks to both Doyle and Wodehouse, the series retains its name from their imaginations.

It was in the novel, *A Study in Scarlet* that Sherlock Holmes is first introduced as he meets Dr. John Watson, proudly showing the latter his scientific discovery which is reliable enough to renew his hopes of apprehending criminals roaming about without evidence.

“Ha! ha!” he cried, clapping his hands, and looking as delighted as a child with a new toy. “What do you think of that?” (Doyle, 2011).

He is, according to Stamford, the “knotty problem”, a mystery to be studied. Stamford did emerge to be true, however, as each adaptation tends to have its own version of Holmes and his ecology; he is the man

shrouded in the mists of his formidable enigma other than that of tobacco and cocaine. But that does little to sway *Elementary* from carving out the unsaid gaps into an extraordinary yet troubled mind, which is why the conventional semiotic cues of Doyle's presentation as the six feet charismatic, sophisticated, and elegant persona finds a transition in its roguish, squalid, tattooed, and struggling guise with a middling stature. Unlike Benedict Cumberbatch's Holmes who looks dapper in his traditionally tailored Belstaff Milford Coat referring to his easy movements as Doyle's, nearing the Ulster coat Holmes dons in the books, Miller's Holmes perfectly pulls off an unflatteringly ill fitted one reflecting an ongoing struggle with his own as well as a disregard for the societal expectations.

This paper, therefore, is an attempt to look at how Holmes grapples with his own problems, past, present, family, and those who surround him, both friend and foe in the twenty first century. It also includes the evolution of Holmes from being a perfect problem solver who remains unbothered by almost every situation in the canon to his being bothered by almost everything in *Elementary*. However, the thing that claims to be unchanged is the indisputable brilliance and a curious mind. It is not only the character of Holmes which remains to be the focus here but also a few others, both friend and foe, who are part of his journey, namely, Dr. Watson and Professor Moriarty. It would endeavour to show how the series offers to the viewers an enlarged interpretation of its canonical counterpart.

In one of his interviews, Robert Doherty, the creator and writer of the series, pays homage to Doyle, and undertakes to depict yet another representation of the consulting detective based on the standard image with a stand of its own.

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Conan Doyle's brainchild embarks much beyond the analysis of criminal psychology, motives and observations. One of the greatest characteristics that makes Sherlock Holmes stand out is an honest emphasis of the detective himself. This makes it easier for *Elementary* to redesign the character with more layers of humour and eccentricities. The absurd elements that Robert Doherty makes evident in his version from Sherlock's acting skills to his preference of pugnacious behaviour are the ones that validate the authenticity of the literary figure rather than straying from it.

Being a physician himself, Doyle desired to impart qualities of both science and humour in his hero, a combination that would go on to make him a classical charisma. From the introduction of forensic sciences to a mode of entertainment, Holmes could be deduced as the detective fiction with many firsts. All of which are exposed on a modern note in the series. On an apparent note, it would be difficult to point a limitation on Holmes' part but deep down, there are some. He is described as the one who smokes avidly, seeks refuge in violin, opium, and coffee when his intellectual faculty demands it. Interestingly, *Elementary* strikes a note with the viewers where the protagonist is a recovering drug addict himself, something that has swiftly mushroomed in the contemporary time engulfing millions across the world.

Compared to the BBC adaptation of the prim and proper *Sherlock*, who tends to be inclined to the canon, Jonny Lee Miller's avatar sweeps away the drab, dry, and cold appearance in a flamboyant manner. If Benedict Cumberbatch is the familiar be-all and end-all Holmes who proceeds in each case strategically, Miller's Holmes always "has a process" which further goes on to highlight his exclusivity than the rest. From sniffing the walls, sticking a finger straight down a dead man's throat, to bringing in a caged cock in Watson's room as well as smashing things abruptly, his approaches are no less than Cumberbatch's storing a dead man's head in the refrigerator. *Elementary* proves to play a game of opposites where much unlike the traditional, this Holmes is the one who, despite his brilliance, avoids seeing life in the organised way both readers and viewers are used to see him. Contrary to the notion of Sherlock Holmes being the most serious individual possessing an extreme loathing for casual company, the image takes a rather different turn here. In the episode, *Tremors*, be it facing interrogation by the prosecutor, "Do you routinely break the law during the course of your investigation?", the investigation bureau's warning tone to Holmes that it is not a joke, or his apparently dubious methods where a police officer is hospitalised, all point to his sheer indifference in following a set of conventional police procedures, and law and order. He identifies himself as a "joke machine" but is aware of his strengths deep down.

While reading Sherlock Holmes' cases, it could not be denied that many of the readers possess a penchant to outsmart and challenge the detective in his quest for truth. They tend to conjecture the matter and solve the mysteries before he does are eventually forced to give up. Being absent from the present scenario, it is only through Watson's and Holmes' account that readers get to know the events as well as the progresses. In most cases, Holmes makes a series of revelations at the end which include

many of the observations that he draws but due to lack of space and time, the readers fail. Hence, Doyle tactfully deprives the readers from outwitting his hero. The shift of media seems to stitch this deprivation where the viewers will get a chance to observe but only when the camera wants them to. From the furnished rooms to the resplendent paintings at Moriarty's house in *Elementary*, the viewers have convenient images to look at, because of which, we do suspect Moriarty's collection as something which does not transpire as innocent.

Elementary becomes a text in its own right as a part of the postmodern narrative compared to the Victorian one. Retelling of a story is a postmodern aspect which becomes a new object and, therefore, stands original. It denotes to a re-interpretation of the existing text. The Victorian narrative devotes time to the new inventions like the steam engines for which the journeys become shorter. For instance, in the *The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist*, Holmes' client, Ms. Smith relies on railway to visit her mother on weekends (Doyle, 2020). On the other hand, cars and aeroplanes are shown as they are now the advanced modes of transportation. The usage of multi-media on the same screen serves as an example of pastiche. The viewers are introduced to Holmes in the first episode of the first season as he watches six televisions at one go when he first meets Dr. Watson (Carli, 2014).

Elementary's Holmes is a man in hiding, the one who has fallen from grace after his drug addiction to cope his lover, Irene Adler's death which eventually leads him to step back from Scotland Yard. Holmes is, at present, a consulting detective to the New York Police Department (NYPD). New York and not London, therefore, becomes a setting to prove his worth, which would only be possible with the help of the former surgeon, Dr. Joan Watson, as his sober companion.

Apart from Holmes himself, the show also takes a closer look at Joan Watson. A woman who has been commissioned by Holmes' father, Moreland, to stay with his son, Watson proves to be a more capable figure than just an associate to an acclaimed detective who follows him for the mere sake of it. Her stay at 221B Baker Street with Holmes proves to be beneficial for both of them. While Holmes gradually learns to have an emotional equilibrium at her presence, Watson focuses on the basics of investigation from him which would go on to help her both in diagnosing and analysing medical and criminal cases later (Nyapathi, 2022). This builds on the introduction of Dr. John Watson, a decorated and retired medical officer just returned from the Afghan war, who first comes to share lodgings with Holmes and remains to be a lifelong friend and

associate. He represents the readers, hard in observing every detail, hardly able to reach a solution, and unable to follow Holmes' methods. Sexuality is one of the elements which plays a significant role in both the mediums with a hushed portrayal in the canon and a destigmatised one in the show. Writing during the end of the Victorian time, it was of course, a topic which was not supposed to be discussed in the open but in the arenas of love marriages, private, "or else in certain other socially tolerated contexts, as gentlemen did with London's thousands of prostitutes" (Redmond, 1984). The women mentioned in the stories are either victims of abuse and ignorance or are cheats and blackmailers. They do not find themselves contributing primarily to the plots in most cases and usually remain offstage, apart from a few like Irene Adler, the one woman who sees through Holmes and succeeds in outwitting him (Poole, 2014).

Elementary, therefore, morphs the two very different characters of Adler and Moriarty into one. She is both 'the woman', whose strength and independence, as an opposite sex, stands out to Holmes, as well as the Napoleon of crime, Holmes's arch rival. Both when mingled into one draw Holmes' attention as a unique puzzle piece. Although in *A Scandal in Bohemia* Adler escapes leaving behind a photograph, never to return, she eventually does in the show only to beat Holmes as Jamie Moriarty (Doyle, 2023). In the guise of Adler, she makes Holmes fall in love with her and studies Holmes' methods whilst carrying out her plots of terror as Moriarty, her true self. Although Holmes canonically stops undermining women as subordinate figures as opposed to men, Jamie Moriarty succumbs to the pressures of misogyny herself, threatening Joan Watson, underestimating the latter's capabilities as just another woman who is not Sherlock. But it is both her experience as a surgeon and close following of Holmes' skills that enables Watson diagnose Moriarty's affection for Holmes as a 'condition'. She tricks Moriarty into thinking that he is shattered and heavily drugged for which the latter returns, makes her confess, and outsmarts her.

The series, therefore, employs gender identity to do away with the otherwise taboos of the Victorian England (Das, 2020). If Jamie Moriarty happens to be the dark side that Holmes' brilliance threatens to turn him into, it is Joan Watson's presence that ensures his sanity and humanity. This does not necessarily refer to the point that while the former is 'bad', the other is 'good' but seems to hint at the inevitability of a human's existence whilst balancing both inherent in him or her.

While Doyle does not make substantial character growth in terms of his hero as he hardly needs one, the perfection he has been woven into, *Elementary* sets out to chart the road of a flawed individual for which his arc is considerable. He makes peace with his present, confronts his past, acknowledges the contributions and concerns of the others in his life, and learns to forgive. It is through Hartley's analysis that one understands how Victorian literature can be retrieved, seen, and brought to light in an emotionally clearer explicit sense (Hartley, 2011). Members of the Victorian middle class aimed to maintain their respectability, status achieved, controlled behaviour as well as individualism instead of collectivism (Isokosi, 2008).

Victorian masculinity found itself existing on a spectrum; while one end depicted violent ideals with the honest citizens like sailors, firemen, blacksmiths, army officers working for the betterment of the country, the other pictured the Victorian gentleman of the middle class who would be polite, stoic, and in full command of all of his senses striving for the country's improvement (Martinka, 2024). It is the latter category that confirms to Holmes' character by Doyle, the man who prides himself to be in full possession of his nerves, doing and being everything that is right.

In the pilot episode of *Elementary*, Holmes confronts a suspected murderer, Dr. Richard Mantlo, and grows restless at the man's awareness of Holmes' inability to prove him guilty at the moment. Enraged, Holmes demands Watson's car keys and crashes into Mantlo's car in retaliation which leads him to spend the night in jail. Besides, in the episode, *Paint in Black*, Holmes flings chairs, smashes both his and Mycroft's phones as well as the latter's watch and crushes it under his feet to let off his frustration and avoid the National Security Agency (NSA) from tracking them any further. On the other hand, Doyle's portrayal of Holmes is a man who does get annoyed but his anger is not without composure. In the story, *The Final Problem*, while describing Professor James Moriarty, the criminal mastermind, to Watson, Holmes betrays restlessness and unease thinking that Moriarty walks about the streets of London wrecking havoc while he sits back (Doyle, 2015). In yet another story, *The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle*, when a young James Ryder admits to stealing the carbuncle and framing the innocent Horner for it, he begs Holmes for mercy. Although Holmes does forgive him recognising his guilt stricken self and unlikely involvement in further crimes, he infuriatingly shouts at Ryder commanding him to leave immediately (Doyle, 2018). In other words, abiding by the Victorian codes of morality, Holmes seldom lets emotions to cloud the judgements of his own, channelling it all into

playing violin, locking himself alone for hours, strolling instead. He even goes on injecting drug in *The Sign of Four* to drive away boredom in the midst of a case, hence combating the possibilities of distracting himself from the case itself (Doyle, 2001).

Conclusion

It is safe to say at this point that besides Doyle, the recurring portrayal of Sherlock Holmes and his adventures on screen helped immortalise Sherlock Holmes. They break, remould, retell, and represent the writings in audio visual without altering the original essence. *Elementary* makes sure that the detective dons a new cloak which would compel many to question and compare with the original version. The versatility of the character lies in his effort in getting Doherty's Holmes out of ill activities like, the chronic drug addiction which costs him his job. This is something that most television adaptations glide past (Kulzick, 2019). Although Sherlock Holmes is actually someone who is pointed as an idiosyncratic man yet he never steps headlong into the dangers that might have fatal consequences to those who are dear to him. What sets a new trademark for the series is, it zooms all the prospective images that Doyle dotted out. It should be noted that it was not only the Victorian period that was in search of a saviour but the following ages as well. That is the reason why Sherlock Holmes is so repeatedly a designed and redesigned fictional character of whom the viewers never seem to get over with. Sherlock, and universe in *Elementary*, therefore, attempts to rescue us from the morbid crimes to conflicting relationships in his very own terms of deduction.

While speaking about his fascination for Holmes, Doherty says, "He really is in many, many respects an alien among us" (CBS, 2013). Holmes, therefore, is paired up essentially with Joan Watson and not John Watson, the only one patient to his attitudes who can team up with him, mother him and scold him to perfection. The distinction between both the media also depends on the basis of whose perspective he is being described from. Holmes's characteristic traits in the novel could be understood by Watson's gaze yet his opinions are present, especially the ones he put forth himself without the description of the doctor. *Elementary's* Holmes is presented before us by the behaviour of the others through audio-visual media (Carli, 2014). Thanks to Doherty, Watson's responsibility in sketching her flatmate's deeds is now shared by the other characters to some extent.

This paper attempts to trace the comparison between both the Sherlocks, then and now with an emphasis on how they contextualise themselves in

their respective time periods. It is obvious that when a renowned character becomes a celluloid sensation for multiple times, there would be criticisms and comparisons among them. Although *Elementary* welcomes a fresh face of the protagonist and endeavours to break through the shackles of orthodoxy commendably yet it is the classical Holmes who has been stealing the show so far. Despite his celebrated shadowy appearance, he remains to be the one who readers prefer to get back to, after every *Elementary* watch. No doubt, Doyle's creation is the torch bearer of all media depictions of Holmes' universe including Doherty's production.

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