The Game is Afoot! (Again): An Analysis of Why Sherlock Holmes Adaptations Continue to be Produced and Consumed

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Named the “Most Portrayed Human Literary Character of Film and TV” in 2012 by Genus World Records, Sherlock Holmes is one of the most well-known literary characters of all time. From his debut in the first story *A Study in Scarlet* in 1887 to today, Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories have been adapted to radio, film, and television among a variety of other mediums and are well known across generations and around world. While there are many factors as to why the British detective has remained so popular over the course of time, one remains a constant: Holmes reappears when the world is in need of a strong, intelligent, and trusted authority figure. Famous for his powers deduction and high intellect, Sherlock Holmes solves every case presented to him with ease, even when given the smallest amount of details; it is this seemingly effortless power of turning a chaos into order that makes Conan Doyle’s consulting detective so appealing. In the original stories, Sherlock Holmes offered “reassurance to the Victorian society,” that they could maintain control over both their colonies and “trouble that may confront them on their own shores;” throughout Sherlock Holmes adaptations, the detective’s ability to “maintain law and order” continues, while the “trouble” itself changes with time (Raheja 426). The reassuring authority of Sherlock Holmes provides security to an increasingly chaotic world, suggesting through each new adaptation that there are answers to even the most complicated of problems. Tapping into subjects and issues present in the original Sherlock Holmes stories that resonate with modern audiences, and applying Homes’ reputation as one of the greatest detectives, modern adaptations of Sherlock Holmes use the figure to represent a reassuring authority presence that offers ease to the problems of the modern world.

Where other research has focused only on one adaptation, or a select few existing in the same time period, my research follows the detective through time; starting in the 1940s with *Sherlock Holmes and the Secret Weapon*, followed by Disney’s 1986 animated adaptation *The
Great Mouse Detective, Guy Ritchie’s Sherlock Holmes of 2009, and one of the most recent adaptations, BBC’s ministry series Sherlock, the selected adaptations represent some of the most popular and/or highest grossing portrayals of the detective from their respective time periods. While the popularity of an adaptation may not be the best indicator of quality or dedication to the original source material, popularity is a good representation of the number of people being exposed to this version, as well as a reflection of an audience’s connection to the particular adaptation in question. While there is an incredible amount of Sherlock Holmes adaptations to choose from, the four I selected, Sherlock Holmes and the Secret Weapon, The Great Mouse Detective, Sherlock Holmes, and Sherlock, all fall within the categories of film and television; in other words, they are all aural-visual adaptions, in which the viewer is exposed to the image and speech of Holmes himself, rather than an imagined figure existing only within their minds. While other mediums are capable providing their audiences with emotional and/or engaging experiences, film (both in terms of movies and television) tap into the “human psyche in a deep way” due to its visual component (McGinn 3). It is for this reason, along with the breadth of audience which this medium reaches, that I chose to focus only on film and television adaptions. But before analyzing the adaptations in question, however, it is important to define what an “adaptation” is, and how it is used in the context of adapting written text into film.

Adaptation Theory:

Starting at a basic level, an adaptation, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, is “the action or process of adapting one thing to fit with another, or suit specified conditions, esp. a new or changed environment, etc.” This definition, while accurate, is fairly broad. In her book A Theory of Adaptation, Linda Hutcheon expands on the idea of “adapting one thing to fit another,” focusing specifically on creative adaptation. On this subject she states “when we call a
work an adaptation, we openly announce its overt relationship to another work or works” (Hutcheon 2); this means that the final work will always have a connection to its original piece, no matter how different the end result it. An adaptation “is repetition, but repetition without replication;” in other words, while an adaptation can in no way be completely disconnected from its source material, its purpose is not to recreate a work exactly (Hutcheon 2). A great adaptation will make changes for the benefit of its intended audience and message rather than try to replicate the original to every detail. This is in part because the audience may have already been exposed to the original, and therefore would find an exact replica redundant, but also because we as humans change over time.

There are multiple reasons for an adaption to be produced, such as “the urge to consume and erase the memory of the adapted text,” “call [the original] into question,” or simply “the desire to pay tribute” (Hutcheon 3). In terms of types of adaption, Sherlock Holmes adaptations can be defined as “canonical,” meaning adaptations on subjects “we may not actually have direct experience of…but may rely on a ‘general circulated cultural memory’” (Hutcheon 116). For many, the figure of the British detective himself as well as a basic understanding of his character is recognizable, whether one has read any of Coyle’s original works on the character. With the knowledge that their audience is less familiar with the original works, the adaptor has much more freedom in their adaptation. It is easier for an adaptor to “forge a relationship with an audience that is not overly burdened with affection or nostalgia for the adapted text;” in other words, it is easier when the audience in question has a limited personal connection with the text being adapted, as they are more likely to receive the adaptation positively (Hutcheon 115). This is part of what makes the Holmes character so appealing to those looking to create an adaption; adaptors know that the general public will recognize the figure, but not necessarily the Holmes
stories. Therefore, audiences approach the adaptation with a connection already formed with the character, presumably it was this that brought them to the adaptation in the first place, but are not looking to point out any inconsistencies with the original texts.

Characters are important when adapting for they “engage receivers’ imaginations through…recognition, alignment, and allegiance” (Hutcheon 7). This point is central when it comes to Sherlock Holmes adaptations, as the character himself is more well-known than the stories; the audience is interested in the adaptation through character recognition rather than their want to revisit the stories, if they are familiar with the originals at all. They therefore approach the adaptation with preconceived ideas about the character but little connection to specific stories, giving the adaptor a strong basepoint from which to launch into their own story where the characters are already recognizable. This then brings forward another aspect of the adaptation, a “comfort of familiarity…countered by the unpredictable pleasure in difference” (Hutcheon 165). The viewer both finds comfort in recognizing characters, storylines, themes, etc. that they are familiar with, as well as pleasure in finding differences from the original.

Returning to the basic understanding of adaptations however, “to adapt” means “to adjust, to alter, to make suitable” (Hutcheon 3). While not specific to film adaptations, this definition is great in understanding the adaptations addressed in this thesis. The changes made in the process of creating these adaptations were done with purpose; the original Sherlock Holmes stories, or aspects of the stories, have been adjusted, altered, or “made suitable” for their given audiences and time periods, rather than for the sole purpose of paying tribute to the originals. These four adaptations, along with being popular among audiences, exist in times of instability in their respective country or countries, depending on the adaptation. *Sherlock Holmes and the Secret Weapon*, for example, was released and takes place in 1940s Britain, during the time of
the Second World War, while BBC’s *Sherlock* brings forth anxieties of the digital age. Each of these adaptations function by setting up the well-known character(s), Holmes and Watson, before launching into their own tale that may or may not be based on an original Holmes story; they are then altered or “made suitable” to fit the time in which they are released to connect with their intended audiences.

There are many changes that take place when a text is translated into film, but one of the most obvious is the addition of the visual element. Film actually gives a face for the character(s), supplying the audience with eyes on a screen that “manage to achieve a kind of transcendent life of their own… Reveal[ing] the true lineaments of the soul beneath” (McGinn 75). When given a face to latch on to, the viewer connects to the character through their eyes, facial expressions, and perceived emotions. This makes the viewer a detective in their own right, giving them a chance to “read” the character(s) in question as they would do in everyday life. We are not simply given dialogue of our day-to-day encounters with others, but are often reading their expressions and interpreting what is *not* being said to fill in the blanks for ourselves. This then, is one of the reasons that film and television can be so powerful, for it calls forward aspects of our daily lives in order to be fully understood.

Film is also capable of presenting a believable world, one that the audience could mistake for their own. As McGinn states, the goal or purpose of art is to “aim to be mistaken for the original” (McGinn 92). While discussing other aspects of art in this quote, such as painting and sculpture, McGinn brings up an important aspect of film—recognizing the character on screen as an actual person. This is not to say that the viewer finishes a film or television episode with the belief that they might later run into the character(s) at the grocery store, but rather that they could exist within our world. While immersed in the film, the viewer accepts the characters on screen
as people, rather than as characters. McGinn argues that film is like a dream in this regard, in which the film first creates “reality reproduced” and then “reality reconfigured” (McGinn 117).

In other words, a film should show us our own world to establish our connection and interest in the story, but also be able to show us a new, or different way in which to view it.

Putting these two ideas together then, Sherlock Holmes adaptations both acknowledge that the original stories exist, as they can never be separate from them, as well as bring forth new material that connects more closely with its given time period. Along with this, these adaptations, as movies and television series, bring a visual element to the stories that aims at reproducing reality as well as reconfiguring it to suit its purpose. The Sherlock Holmes that appears on screen should retain well-known characteristics and elements of the original stories, but also address the feelings and anxieties of its modern audiences, in an effort to provide comfort and even closure to their contemporary problems. Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories, as well as their adaptations, are character driven works. While the plot is important, it is the character we continue to come back for. When one approaches a Sherlock Holmes story, it is expected that the detective will be solving a case using his incredible intellect and skills of deduction, and that, in the end, he will solve said case and order will be restored. While this expected plot is important, it is the characters, particularly Holmes and Watson, and their human reactions to the action happening in the stories that continues to entice. How will Holmes interact with his client(s) this time? Will Watson leave detection behind in favor of marriage? This does not mean the deerstalker and violin, staples of Holmes’ image, are responsible for our fascination, but rather the reassuring authority presence Holmes brings forth.

**Authority Theory:**
Authority, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, is the “power or right to give orders, make decisions, and enforce obedience; moral, legal, or political supremacy.” A little farther down in the entry, however, authority is defined as “power derived from or conferred by another; the right to act in a specified way, delegated from one person to another; official permission, authorization.” What these two definitions propose is (1) authority is at some level tied to power, and (2) the power aspect of authority can be seen as a “right,” usually associated with a position or title, but can also be rendered powerless without the recognition of those under their proposed control.

It can be seen just looking at this one source, that there is no one single type of authority, but rather a multitude of definitions. To understand the authority of Sherlock Holmes and why this aspect of his character is so appealing, it is important to explore those types of authority that come into play in both the Canonical Holmes as well as its adaptations. One type of authority present in Sherlock Holmes stories is traditional, or “top-down,” authority; this is the type of authority that is tied to tradition, in which those who have always held power are seen as having authority over the rest of society. Proposed by Max Weber, this type of authority is most commonly associated with aristocracy and nobility, such as the role of the queen in British society (Maboloc).

Another type of authority described by Weber is “rational-legal authority,” in which one’s authority is tied to a position, rather than through birth as in traditional authority (Maboloc). This type of authority is defined as one that is connected to a specific occupation, position, title, etc. For example, police officers have authority over the citizens they serve based on their profession, rather than by the “divine right” often expressed in traditional authority. Rational-legal authority is most commonly associated with the modern state in the 20th and 21st
century, particularly in democratic states, in which society is regulated through the use of rules/laws and the penal system. For this form of authority, control is kept through the use of these laws and the use of punishment in response to those who break these rules.

Closely tied to rational-legal authority is situational and competence authorities. Situational authority is one that arises only in certain situations or under specific circumstances. In an emergency, for example, a person present, who may not normally have any authority or authoritative power, has the ability to exercise some under the circumstances. Competence authority, on a similar note, also operates in terms of specifics, but rather than coming out of a specific situation, competence authority deals with a specific ability or knowledge (Maboloc). Someone who has extensive knowledge on a specific subject, for example, could be said to be an “authority” on the subject. Thinking in terms of Sherlock Holmes, it can be seen that he has elements of both of these types of authority.

Part of Holmes’ authority is derived from the situations at hand, such as in the event of a crime, while another part comes from his reputation as a great detective. For readers, this competence authority is in part created through Holmes’ relationship with Watson, who often excitedly exclaims when Holmes discovers an important clue, solves a crime quickly, or comes to an accurate conclusion with only minimal information. Holmes appears more brilliant then based on his juxtaposition to Watson, and his “ordinariness” (Davies 45). This is in part a way of Conan Doyle establishing the detective’s credibility, as well as a form of both situational and competence authority in Holmes; in certain situations, such as investigating a murder, Holmes has an authority on the subject. When Watson states Holmes has “brought detection as near an exact science as it ever will be brought in this world,” we accept the detective as the greatest authority on the subject in any situation in which he is present (Doyle 21). This establishment of
Holmes as the “greatest” detective then adds another layer of authority to this character; he becomes the face of the detective figure, and is then therefore regarded as the best person, if not the only person, fit to handle the job at hand. This makes the character a more appealing lead in making films, television shows, etc. that deal with modern-day issues that have not yet been solved, or at least solved in a way that make the problem or fear less threatening.

Lastly, Weber proposes a third type of authority, “charismatic authority;” this type of authority is less one of “given” and/or positional power, and more of an authority based on the personality and qualities of the person in question (Maboloc). The source behind this authority ultimately boils down to a specific person’s personality, and the way in which it is received and perceived by those around them. This form of authority, while ultimately sounding positive, has the ability of being used both positively and negatively; for example, Nazi leader Adolf Hitler was said to have this type of authority, often winning over crowds with his “charismatic” presence, but used the power that came with this authority to meet his own means. This aspect of “charismatic authority” is particularly important in understanding Sherlock Holmes’ authority, both within the stories themselves as well as in his reception by audiences.

Thinking of the personality of Sherlock Holmes, “charismatic” does not at first appear to be a contributing factor to his authority, given his often curt, or even harsh, dealings with those around him. The character, while still an advocate for reason and rational thought, had to be “enthralling in his own right” in order for the readers (as well as viewers and listeners) to continue coming back for more (Davies 41). Despite Holmes’ often disconnectedness with the rest of humanity, it is again his relationship with Watson that softens his character and reveals the emotional side of the rational detective. The “warm-hearted and good-humored everyman” brings out the detective’s warmer side, often reminding him of the human aspect of his line of
work when Holmes becomes too focused on the rational (Davies 27). Despite Holmes snide remarks toward him, Watson non-the-less points out that there is “no man better worth having at your side when you are in a tight place,” again informing the readers that Holmes is the best man for the job at hand (Doyle 660).

Holmes’ “charismatic” authority is partly created through his relationship with Dr. Watson. Making Holmes so highly intelligent could easily alienate the character from his readers. To combat this, Conan Doyle includes a translator of sorts so that both other characters and readers can understand the detective’s methods. This task again falls on the shoulders of Dr. Watson, who acts as the middleman between Holmes and the world, narrating and communicating the cases that he and Holmes had worked on together, and putting to words the actions and thoughts Holmes takes as he moves through the case. Watson also stands in as a channel between Holmes and the reader, filling in the blanks when it comes to clues, methods, character descriptions, etc. that are not readily given by the detective himself.

Conan Doyle likewise uses other elements in his creation of Holmes’ more “human” qualities, such as through the detective’s musical abilities; Conan Doyle balances Holmes more rational and cold exterior with hints at his “hidden depths” where emotions lie. While not overtly discussed by Watson as such, Holmes’ violin playing appears to work as an “outlet for emotions that cannot be expressed otherwise” (Davies 23). At times his stony exterior breaks to reveal an “extraordinary river of compassion that runs through [his] dealing with the many people, including villains, in his cases” (Davies 23). Along with this, however, is Holmes’ understanding and recognition of these different types of authority, and his ability to judge when they should and should not be recognized. While Lestrade and the rest of the police force hold rational-legal, or positional, authority, Holmes is often seen to be undermining it.
While these definitions of authority help in our identifying of authority in found in Sherlock Holmes stories, it does not clearly show who this authority is “reassuring” for audiences across decades. To understand this aspect of his authority, one must first look to the history of the character, and the time in which he was originally introduced to the world, for the answer.

**History of Sherlock Holmes:**

In 1887, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle released the first of his Sherlock Holmes novels, *A Study in Scarlet*, thus introducing what would become one of the most recognizable literary characters. The story was released as a part of Beeton’s Christmas Annual in Stand Magazine, and was followed by fifty-six short stories and three other novels between the years of 1887 and 1927.

In the 19th century, Britain’s colonial power over foreign places was increasingly expanding, with the country reaching the “later stages of acquiring the largest empire the world had ever seen” by 1882 (Evans). By the end of Victoria’s reign, the country had extended its empire over “about one-fifth of the earth’s surface and almost a quarter of the world's population” (Evans). While there were positives to this expansion of power, the country also saw an influx of British citizens coming into contact with other cultures or else traveling outside the country for themselves. Wanting to keep the British citizen refined by their own standards, the country began making their own national identity. Creating a set of traits, qualities, beliefs, etc. to be applied to the British as a whole was a way of categorizing people—both in and out of the country—as either British or “other;” this was done in an effort to support changes taking place within the country, as well as an attempt to justify their growing imperial power. In creating this identity, the country likewise worked to toward spreading the “virtues of an ordered, advanced
and politically sophisticated Christian nation,” meaning themselves, to the farer reaches of its empire (Evans).

Along with their growing global power, the country was also dealing with the Industrial Revolution during this time. This change in the country brought on “rapid, and sometimes chaotic change as towns and cities expanded at a pace which precluded orderly growth” (Evans). While the Industrial Revolution had many positive effects, such as a more efficient and profitable factory system, it also had many negative repercussions. Workers were given less rights within the factories, as well as were subjected to increasingly dangerous new machinery; with the number of poor growing, women and children were often employed in these factories as well to earn money for their families. While the Industrial Revolution did provide the country with new technology and products, as well as provided more efficient factories, it ultimately created more divides. The “modern” Victorian town of the time “symbolised Britain’s progress and world pre-eminence,” but at the same time revealed “some of the most deprived people, and depraved habits, in the civilized world” (Evans). If the country was to continue to flourish in it’s new, modern state, it needed to find ways of “taming, and then improving” its ever growing cities, a task that continued to present “a huge challenge” (Evans).

In response to these two goals, Britain also saw the creation of an official police system during this time. With the creation of Robert Peel’s “reformed ‘new police,’” Britain hoped to establish order within its own country, as well as “enforce norms of law and order” that they had be creating within British society (Mukherjee 4). But as the new police were formed, so too were the criminals. This is not to say that there was to crime prior to the establishment of the police system, but rather that there was now a clear labeling of who was a criminal and what made them such. The developing British identity, while intended to draw up an idealized British individual,
equally had the power to shun those who did not fit the ideal. With this emergence of the police and the criminal, as well as a clearer understanding of what would be labeled a criminal act. This labeling worked in a way to both establish an idealized British citizen, meaning one that did not act in the way of a “criminal” and commit “criminal acts,” as well as help in regulating and maintaining control over the ever-growing population, particularly the factory workers who in their harsh conditions through strikes and revolutions of their own.

One way in which Britain accomplished the integration of the police system as well as advocated for their new national identity was through the use of literature. Approaching the issue in this way, Britain was able to target the class they intended to fit the ideal (the upper classes, who would have more access to literature), while doing so in a non-threatening way, through causal reading. If the police were to come in full force and attempt to establish dominance, the public would rebel and become alienated from them; in supporting the country’s changes through written word, particularly through fiction where the change is shown as positive, the public is less likely to rebel. The British detective and detective fiction emerged from this idea, with the detective not only acting as a connecting piece between the new police and civilians, but also as an idealized version of a British citizen himself.

The British detective was originally depicted as “a well-educated professional whose most powerful weapons against crime are intelligence, observation, and deduction,” a figure much like that of the “well-educated professional” of high intelligence that Britain was trying to integrate into its national identity in the 19th century (Gates 5). The figure of the detective was often made out to be of a higher intelligence than those in their company, therefore elevating the figure as an ideal. With this in mind, the narrative often suggests to the reader that only an elite person of high intelligence and a keen eye is capable of solving modern crimes. The detective
then becomes an unreachable and almost God-like figure, one that can “read” people and know their entire history with a glance and solve a seemingly impossible crime much faster than most, and usually by himself. The detective figure also suggests, however, that while the detective is above them in terms of intelligence, he is ultimately on their side. This then gives audiences a figure to try and emulate, as well as a figure to look to in times of trouble and unease.

In his original stories, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle makes Sherlock Holmes the “defender of the empire,” who, as highly intelligent, well-educated man, supports the new national identity. Holmes, in his work as an independent consulting detective, working for the police at times while not officially being a part of them, fights for the “peace and stability of Victorian society” (Raheja 420). He acts as a “defender” of the country without being a part of the official police force, therefore offering an authority that exists between the two. Readers of both the general public as well as the police could find comfort in Holmes’ way of creating order out of chaos, while his above standard intelligence keeps them from trying to take on crimes for themselves, ignoring the police at times as Holmes does.

Not only is Holmes extremely intelligent, he is unabashedly so. Holmes does not back down from a challenge or allow anyone, in anyway, to get the upper hand on him. He flaunts his intelligence in the way that he calls out others for their lack of theirs’ and takes on cases that stimulate his mental prowess. He is shown to be unafraid of putting others in their “place,” by pointing out the clues they had missed and the flaws in their logic. Holmes does not hide from the public nor shy away from showing off the matchless expanse of knowledge that he possesses. With the knowledge and belief that there is no other that can match him at detection, Holmes does not feel the need to hold anything back, much like the country he became a symbol of.

Threatened by outsiders, both directly and indirectly, Britain’s God-like hero addresses the case
with a calm rationality as well as enthusiasm, treating crime, detection, and power as a game to be played, and one that he excels at. Getting to the bottom of the most complex crimes comes to Sherlock Holmes with ease; with Holmes around, no crime will go unsolved.

Given these multiple versions of authority as well as a background of the time in which Holmes was first released, it can be argued that Holmes authority is in part his position, intelligence, and personality, but also derived from his ability to restore order out of chaos. Holmes was initially released in a time when the legal system was at its beginning, when citizens were unsure of this new system, and acted as a guide to the uneasy. While his championing of the system’s pillars of reason and rationality helped in the promotion of the system, it is his unabashed way of acknowledging the faults in the system and ability to correct them that continues to resonate with modern audiences. When reason continues to disappoint, we turn to the symbol of rationality and reason himself, Sherlock Holmes, to help in restoring order and provide reassurance in our rational way of life.

Holmes authority as “the greatest” detective is part of the character’s appeal, but it is ultimately his readiness to break the rules in favor of the “greater good” that makes him so appealing. Holmes uses evidence to help him reach a better understanding of the situation at hand, but in the end makes his conclusions based on his own judgement. It is not just his celebrated use of reason and rational thought that gives Holmes his authority, but the addition of his personal judgement. Holmes is ready to “disregard legal rules when they seem to him unfair or out of place” given the situation at hand (Gray). There is not a clear set of rules or directions that can be followed in order to solve a crime like Holmes; while another can attempt to follow suit through the use of rational thought, it is ultimately Holmes himself who is seen as the ultimate authority, due to his original function as middleman between society and the new legal
system. Holmes himself acknowledges this aspect of his character, telling Watson, “I have learned caution now, and I had rather play tricks with the law of England than with my own conscience” (Doyle 612). In other words, Holmes rather put aside the law than his morals; morals that, because of use of the detective as a figure of the new British identity, are meant to be the morals of the country as a whole.

**Sherlock Holmes the War Hero:**

European films of the 1940s can, for the most part, be categorized as either dedicated to the war effort, as in documentaries and newsreels, or in response to the war, usually in the form of fiction films devoted to boosting public morale (Giannetti 208). In contrast to the flourishing movie business of the United States, which saw an immense boom in film production and movie-goer rates, European cinema was dominated by the Second World War (Giannetti 182). Many of the major studios of Europe that were still standing despite the war unfurling around them were dedicated to the war effort; most if not all film-producing countries of Europe were also “principal combatants” in the war itself (Giannetti 208). While documentaries and newsreels were the dominate forms of film being produced at this time, though there were a number of fiction films produced as well. These fiction films were more often than not devoted to presenting “escapist fare” and/or “sentimental home-front movies” during these wartime years (Giannetti 208). In other words, while nonfiction film relayed the war, fiction film gave audiences a way of escaping or otherwise dealing with the emotional and psychological toll the war had on them. Part of the lack in fiction film production was the lack of resources and money, both of which were being eaten up by the war, as well as the growing number of filmmakers being brought into the war effort directly.
One of the only major film producing countries that was able to stay afloat was Great Britain. Though a major player in the war effort as well, Britain’s major cinemas that were not bombed out by Germany’s attacks were able to put forth both war-oriented films as well as a number of fiction pieces. Though not many fiction films were produced overall, especially when compared to other times in the country’s history, Great Britain was able to continue with an old standby in regard to their film industry—adaptations (Giannetti 214). These literary and theatrical adaptations, while not directly tied to the war, addressed issues brought forth at the time as well as worked to boost the country’s public morale. A major player in literary critique and theatrical productions, Britain returned to its roots in order to deal with the toll World War II was having on their citizens. Shakespeare, Wilde, and Shaw were often sources of film adaptations, with the primary goal of British acting based on the “perfected art of reciting highly stylized dialogue,” such as that found in literature (Giannetti 216). As a major literary work and key figure in the British literary identity, it was only a matter of time before Conan Doyle’s famed detective appeared on the big screen to take on the county’s current issues.

Set in London during WWII, *Sherlock Holmes and the Secret Weapon* (1943) sees Holmes saving physicist by the name of Dr. Tobel from Nazis in Switzerland, and bringing him back to Britain to protect him. Holmes’ sole purpose, however, was not just to save Dr. Tobel’s life, though this was one aspect of it, but rather to retrieve the physicist’s bombing invention before it got into the hands of the Nazis, thus saving the country from more accurate bombing technology. The film stars Basil Rathbone as Sherlock Holmes, perhaps one of the most famous Holmes actors, and Nigel Bruce as the detective’s partner, Dr. Watson. Set in the same time period in which the film was made, *Sherlock Holmes and the Secret Weapon* plunges the famous
detective into the middle of World War II, setting Holmes up in a race against the Nazis for control over a bombing device.

A driving theme throughout *Sherlock Holmes and the Secret Weapon*, is of course, war. The film was meant to boost the morale of Britain, which was at the height of World War II when the film was released. The message of the film was one of Britain’s triumph over Nazi Germany and the restoration of order to British society, at least for the time being, but along with this, the film puts forth a message of intelligence over brute force. In terms of the film, the “brute force” is equated to the Nazis, whom attempt to take Dr. Tobel, and the intelligence is equated to Britain’s famous detective, Sherlock Holmes. We are given this comparison in the opening scenes of the film alone, in which Holmes, heavily disguised as a book seller, converses with two Nazis. Pretending to be helping them in their efforts to kidnap Dr. Tobel, Holmes jumps between giving the two men false information and explaining the books he has brought with him. Discussion of the kidnapping plans are then intermittent with talk of the Bismarck Papers and Shakespeare, whom Holmes refers to here as “the great German writer,” reflecting German opinion of the playwright at the time. There is a duality in this scene that is not fully recognized until later, when the audience learns the books are in fact hollow; Holmes gives the Nazis false information verbally while also trying to “sell” it to them through the emptied books. This scene, as well as the scene following it, set up the Germans to be powerful in terms of brute strength, but unequipped to understand Holmes’ powers of the mind. The disguised Holmes even gives the two men a warning, telling them Britain has put a “stupid, bumbling, amateur detective” on the case, to which the men reply they will take Tobel “while this Holmes is still having his tea.”

Throughout the first ten minutes of film Holmes makes multiple literary references, setting the 1940s version of the detective up as just as well-read as ever, Holmes himself stating
outright “I’ve always felt a thorough knowledge of the classics might come in handy.” Just before sneaking Tobel out of the country, Holmes explains the plan of the hollowed books which will serve as carrying cases for the bomb-sight; the books, Holmes states, will slip right past the Nazis, suggesting they do not concern themselves with literature or knowledge, though “the thought of disemboweling a complete set of Charles Dickens” sickens him. These literary references and the stacks of books throughout these opening scenes support the idea of Holmes a man whose authority lies in the intellectual fields. As Tobel and Holmes speed out of the country, Holmes explains “I’ve always felt a thorough knowledge of the classics might come in handy,” suggesting that, as they drive away in a car stolen from the Nazis, England is capable of defeating their current threats due to their superior intellect.

Holmes authority in this film, therefore, is one of competence, as intelligence is a field in which he is highly celebrated, as well as one of reassurance for the then-modern audiences, who in watching the film saw a celebrated figure of their country easily taking down their real-life threats. The quickness with which Holmes’ outsmarts the Nazis planning to kidnap Tobel suggests early on that the Nazis are no match for Holmes, and therefore Britain. If the great Sherlock Holmes can sneak a wanted physicist out of the country right under the Nazis’ nose, what did Britain have to worry about? It suggested that Britain, which was currently being bombed by the Germans, would soon find itself out of this chaos of war.

As with the original Holmes stories, in Sherlock Holmes and the Secret Weapon, the gap between Holmes and the legal system is clearly expressed; he is neither a police officer nor government official, but occupies a position all his own. While government officials and police officers try to persuade Dr. Tobel into handing over his bomb-sight invention, Holmes remains a silent bystander; he allows the bickering of men to take place without so much as a change in his
facial expression. There are several times where he is removed from the shot altogether, and when he is present, he is partially obscured by a large chair, furthering his removal from this aspect of the situation at hand; Holmes’ role in the retrieval of Tobel was complete, his draw to the situation being one of loyalty for his country. If he did not retrieve the physicist and his device, the Nazis would have the device for themselves. The state of the device, now that it is back in England, is no longer of his concern. He is too far removed from these “trivial” matters to comment on the conversation unfolding around him.

The multiple layers to Holmes’ authority are presented within this scene of the film. Watson, feeling Holmes did not save Dr. Tobel so he could hide his invention, tries to intervene, but is immediately quieted by Holmes. After Dr. Tobel leaves the room, Lestrade suggests they force Dr. Tobel to give them the device, to which one of the officials replies they cannot legally do, a fact he confirms with Holmes. Holmes then utters one of his only lines in the scene, asking Lestrade for his permission to remain on the case, given that he is “not officially attached to the government.” A lot of Holmes’ authority is expressed in this one scene, especially in terms of situational and competence authority. Not an official part of the legal system and therefore lacking rational-legal authority, Holmes remains quiet throughout the majority of the conversation. When asked to confirm a legality, however, Holmes speaks up, as he has a thorough understanding of the legalities surrounding the situation, despite not having a definitive place within the system. But while he is shown to have situational and competence authority in this moment, it is quickly followed by a reminder of his lack of authority in the law and order system through his asking Lestrade for permission to stay on the case. This relationship between Holmes and the legal system highlights his reassuring authority present in the original stories; he
is not an official part of the government, but rather understands how to navigate it when the situation arises.

He refrains from commenting on the argument going on, but insures his involvement in it. His silence suggests that he is above these men and their issues; he lets them argue amongst themselves, but prevents his partner, Watson, from becoming involved in their trivial matters. Prior to this scene, it would seem that Holmes was for the use of Dr. Tobel’s bombing invention, for he was the one to save him from the Nazis and bring him to the British government, but this scene offers a different interpretation. Holmes appears less concerned with the British using the bomb than he is with the thought of the Nazis obtaining it. This again shows his removal from the legalities and procedures of the system and focus on the overall problem at hand, the safety and well-being of the country as a whole. While he remains confined within the rational-legal authority of the police and governmental system in this early scene, shown in his asking for permission, Holmes soon brings forth his charismatic authority later on.

In *Sherlock Holmes and the Secret Weapon*, the Nazis are not the only threat presented. Later in the film, when Dr. Tobel goes missing, it is first assumed that the Nazis have found him, and thus gotten a hold of the bomb-sight device, but in visiting Tobel’s wife, Holmes discovers by way of a tampered letter this is not the case. This letter, which should have contained a secret message for Holmes, turned out to be a short note from none other than Professor Moriarty. In the original novels and stories, Professor James Moriarty functioned as the “other” Holmes, one that was just as intelligent, influential, and resourceful, but on the other side of the law. In bringing Moriarty into the 1940s adaptation of Sherlock Holmes, the film not only reminds audiences of Holmes’ strong sense of morals, but also works to undermine the Nazi threat. It
suggests, in Holmes quick outwitting of the Nazis and focus on Moriarty instead, that Britain will quickly take care of the German problem, as it has more pressing matters to deal with.

The discovery of the letter by Holmes shifts the film’s focus from the Nazis to Moriarty as the film’s villain, thus signaling that Moriarty is a greater evil but one Holmes still has the ability of beating. Following the discovery of the letter, Holmes bolts from Tobel’s apartment yelling that Tobel has been captured by “one of the most brilliant men in the history of crime.” Holmes’ labeling of Moriarty as a top figure in the “history of crime” is significant given the time period; in this adaptation, Moriarty is existing at the same time as Adolf Hitler, a real and present threat in the lives of the British people during the time of the film’s release. The film does not simply call Moriarty “brilliant,” however, but takes the situation a step further to really push the idea that the Nazis are no threat in comparison to Moriarty. In a scene directly following the discovery of the note, Holmes relays to Watson that the issue at hand is “not a duel of intellects with a cruel, but simple-minded Gestapo killer,” referring in general to the Nazis and specifically to Hitler, but rather “our greatest problem.” What was only suggested in the previous scene is explicitly stated by Holmes to Watson: the German threat is nothing compared to the threat of Moriarty. By placing Moriarty above Hitler in terms of criminality, the film suggests that Hitler is a lesser problem, and therefore one Britain will be able to overcome.

It is at this point in the film Holmes’ authority more obviously comes into play, as it is being threatened by an equally competent and intelligent foe. It is clear from the beginning of the film, in which Holmes’ outwits the Nazis in the first ten minutes of the film, that Holmes is incredibly capable of outsmarting the Nazis through his wit and intellect, but his reassuring presence is less obvious. With Moriarty on an even level with Holmes in terms of situational and competent authority, it is Holmes’ moral standpoint that must prevail if Britain is to be saved.
from the devious villain. As Holmes relays to Watson, “England is at stake” if Moriarty gets involved in the war, particularly if he sides with the Nazis. Holmes had easily deceived the Nazis at the beginning of the film with the addition of some facial hair and a false accent, but Moriarty had seen through his disguise almost instantly, suggesting it will take far more effort to take Moriarty down.

Though they express pleasure in facing off once again, Holmes takes little time in confronting Moriarty about the issue at hand; “this is not simple crime that you contemplate,” Holmes says, only inches from Moriarty’s face, “It’s a staggering blow against your country.” Already from this comment it is clear where Holmes’ loyalty stands, with his country, and establishes Moriarty’s lack of this loyalty. In the Canonical Holmes’ tales, face-offs between Holmes and Moriarty were both exciting and pleasurable for readers as well as for Holmes and Moriarty themselves. Every much one another’s equals, the tension created between the characters similarities against their competing morals made for interesting characters for readers and intellectually stimulating interactions for the two. In *Sherlock Holmes and the Secret Weapon*, however, this excitement is only short-lived before Holmes takes a more serious tone with his foe. The lack of banter between the two throughout the film creates more tension, as well as again puts the focus on Holmes’ moral standing. The stakes are so high in this situation, with the state of the country in Moriarty’s hands, Holmes does not have the time to find pleasure in the intellectual mind-games Moriarty puts forth.

Holmes’ eventual outwitting of Moriarty and success in retaining the bomb-sight device and its blueprints accurately restores order to British society and continues the idea of Holmes as the ultimate authority on the restoration of order. While his intelligence and fast-thinking were certainly important factors in the defeating of Moriarty, it was ultimately Holmes’ strong sense
of loyalty and moral standing that made him a hero. As a symbol of rationality and British
gentlemanliness, particularly one with set morals, this rendition of Holmes suggests to audiences
that the horrors of World War II would soon be over and Britain would again be a strong, secure
place.

**Sherlock Holmes the Disney Mouse:**

The 1980s saw a dramatic change in the realm of film, both in subject matter as well as
the process itself. Reflecting the time in which it was operating, the film industry saw a
movement toward a new era of family oriented entertainment and programming. The decade was
“dominated by the conservative ideology” of President Reagan, a former member of the film
industry himself, with many “mainstream Hollywood films” reflecting the president’s values,
particularly “nationalism, winning, money, family solidarity, and militarism” (Giannetti 420).
Not only were there more family-focused sitcoms on television during this time, there were also
a multitude of animated films, television programs, and videogames that surfaced thanks to
advancements in computer technology.

The spread of home television sets across the previous two decades and the progression
of family sitcoms that premiered weekly episodes brought forth a change in the movie making
process. Theaters were no longer the only form of entertainment as it was in previous decades,
particularly the 1940s and 50s, and was now completing with television and the new
videocassette recorder, or VCR. This new technology, which brought movies right into the
viewers’ homes, “changed the way films were made and seen” (Giannetti 420). Watching an
older film (or at least one that was no longer playing in a theater) no longer had to take place in a
crowded theater, but rather in one’s own home, at any time. Movie sales began to see a decrease
given these new alternative ways of movie-watching, which even included “direct-to-video”
films in which a new film could be watched right at home, skipping the theater altogether. This shift caused its own set of shifts to the movie industry; marketing and merchandise became a top priority for film makers, to the point of overshadowing the film itself at times, as a way to get more profit out of a theater-released film (Giannetti 421). Film makers, likewise, had to come up with content that would guarantee seats in the theater. Part of this problem was dealt with in creating films that were closer to the “simple, formulaic images of routine television,” but also through the use of big-name actors, currently popular subject matter/figures, and adaptations of well-known stories/works (Giannetti 423).

This shift toward seriality in film brought back the major studio model of early Hollywood, in which studios became factories of movie making (Giannetti 421). One of the largest of these studio powerhouses was the Walt Disney Company. As one of the largest and most prominent companies of family entertainment, the 1980s became the beginning of the Walt Disney Company’s “Renaissance Era,” in which they flourished both on the big screen as well as within the television world (Bjorkman). Given the company’s reputation as an adaptation machine, it comes as no surprise that Disney would provide their own take on the famous British detective as a way of getting more people back into the theater.

At this time in Disney’s history, however, there was a certain “uncertainty prevailing at the studio” following Walt Disney’s death (Allan 252). After his death, the studio continued to follow Disney’s tradition of adapting traditional European fairytales and fables, while also dipping into some outlying sources. While the first few films following Disney’s death did fairly well, such as *The Aristocats, Robin Hood, and The Jungle Book*, by the 1980s the company was beginning to lose steam. The film just before *The Great Mouse Detective, The Black Cauldron*, was the first film to be released under the company’s new management team of Michael Eisner,
Frank Wells, and Jeffery Kratzenberg; despite the film’s eventual failure at the box office, the company regained confidence and the film “sufficiently succeeded” in encouraging the new regime (Allan 253). With the release of The Great Mouse Detective, the company was once again using Europe as its source for new material (Allan 245).

The unofficial time frame for Disney’s “Renaissance Era” falls between 1989, with the release of The Little Mermaid, and the late 1990s; accepting this time frame, The Great Mouse Detective would then be pitted more toward the “Bronze Era” or “dark age” as it is sometimes referred to, in which original animators were growing old or else leaving, and the company’s films became increasingly more dark in tone (BJORKMAN). Along with this, numerous studios were being taken over by multi-national conglomerates during this time, with The Walt Disney Company being one of only a few companies to survive. Desperate for new ideas and wanting to keep larger corporations from buying them out, it seems only natural for the company to turn to one of the most well-known literary figures in an attempt to gain back the success they were losing. The Great Mouse Detective, released in 1986, follows the story of a little mouse named Olivia, who seeks the help of famous consulting detective Basil of Baker Street in finding her kidnapped father. Based loosely on the original Sherlock Holmes tales, as well as a children’s book series of the late 1950s entitled Basil of Baker Street by Eve Titus, the company, as always, takes creative license in their portrayal of the British detective.

Though 1980s America attempted to return to wholesome family values and traditionalism, the country could not pretend that the chaos of the sixties and seventies did not occur. Addressing this shift, Disney returned to some of its original conventions in The Great Mouse Detective, which refuses to hide true horrors of the real world, despite being intended for children. Like fellow “dark film” Pinocchio, The Great Mouse Detective lacked the traditional
Disney formula of a “romantic plot and the use of musical comedy,” and refused to offer a “sentimental alternative” (Allan 67). The film overall, in fact, remains one of their more “realistic” or grounded films, despite the majority of the characters being animated mice. Within the first few minutes of the film, the audience is introduced to one of the film’s main characters, a young mouse named Olivia, and establishes her strong relationship to her single father, before ripping this happy image away. The scene is incredibly dark, with Olivia’s father being kidnapped while Olivia watches from behind a cupboard door. It is at this point, directly following the kidnapping of Olivia’s father, that the film’s title surfaces in golden letters, as the music suddenly switches to an upbeat number. This juxtaposition between terror and elation becomes a reoccurring characteristic throughout the film, in which moments of comedy abruptly turn negative and frightening. Throughout these moments, however, it is Basil who remains ultimately unfazed; he does not dwell on whatever horror had just presented itself to them, but rather goes straight to work collecting evidence.

While Basil is incredibly intelligent, his emotional instability is often exaggerated throughout the film and his outbursts call into question his rationality. His authority then, is called into question. Throughout the film Olivia, who is to be the character children are meant to connect with, is constantly meeting Basil’s intelligence, correcting his mistakes, and telling him off for his emotional outbursts. While this seems problematic, Basil’s emotional instability creates a more humanized (ironically) version of Sherlock Holmes, in which children are shown that adults do not always handle situations perfectly and that they will at times have to act on their own. In this way, the message of the film becomes one of independence and self-sufficiency in an increasingly instable world.
Like Basil, the film’s villain, Ratigan, is always toeing the line between rationality and insanity; again addressing a line that seemed all too real in 1980s America, in which the country attempted to bring back the idealism of the 1950s, which had appeared on the surface as a time of economic progress and set familial roles (“bread-winner” husband and housewife) after the chaos of the sixties and seventies. Both Basil and Ratigan present themselves as rational and stable, with both also dressing for the part in upper-class type outfits, but often have bursts of irrational behavior. This irrationality present in both characters reflects adults of the 1980s who, despite trying to conform to a more traditional 1950s-esque version of the country, have clear and present memories of the chaos that was the sixties and seventies. Ratigan, while dressed in a suit with styled hair, holding a glass of champagne, quickly shows his irrational, instable side when one of his henchman accidently calls him a rat; Ratigan quickly switches then, breaking his rational façade, and feeding the henchman to his pet cat. Basil, on a similar note but less murderous, has fits of anger that quickly turn into despair. In presenting both Basil and Ratigan as unstable, despite their attempts to hide this fact, the film highlights the fine line between “good” and “evil,” as well as reflects the current state of many adults within 1980s America.

Olivia, in contrast to Basil and Ratigan though, remains the same throughout the entirety of the film; Olivia does not grow in any respect, but remains the same spunky, smart, independent child she was shown to be at the beginning of the film. When Basil does not take the kidnapping of her father seriously, Olivia puts Basil in his place. In this way, she becomes a secondary Watson-figure, who both keeps “Sherlock’s” God-like image grounded, as well as stands as the middleman between the detective and the audience. But Olivia does not replace the Watson of Conan Doyle’s original tales, but is an additional character altogether, created by Disney to make the film more child-oriented. But her purpose is not only to ground Basil’s
authority, but also to serve as a representative of 1980s children; Olivia’s rationality reflects that of her audience, of whom were not alive during the sixties and seventies, or else were too young to remember much about it. Olivia, therefore, presents an idealized child of the 1980s, whom is untouched by the country’s recent chaos and therefore able to remain rational. In highlighting Olivia’s qualities and establishing her ability to remain rational in times of distress, the film attempts to foster similar qualities in its young audience, setting them up to be an idealized version of the American adult focused on Reagan’s traditionalism. In this way, Olivia functions in a similar fashion to Holmes in the original stories, in which he stood for the idealized British figure of his time.

As the central figure in the film, particularly for the intended audience, Olivia is given her own form of authority; she is the character we are to connect with, to side with, and to root for when trouble arises. She does not, however, seem to have any obvious flaws; it is for this reason, Olivia is removed from a portion of the film, being kidnapped and brought to Ratigan to be used as leverage over her father and lure Basil into Rattigan’s lair. The audience is then left only with Basil and Dawson, our Sherlock and Watson figures, as the ones who can save our heroine and her father from Rattigan’s clutches, as well as save the mouse queen and restore order to the rodent world. In saving Olivia, Basil also gives the girl a chance at a “complete” family, as her father is all she has left with her mother dead. In bringing the two back together and reuniting their little family, Basil succeeds in restoring their family unit, an important aspect of the 1980s traditional shift.

Following the kidnapping of Olivia, the focus (and therefore power) shifts back to Basil who must make order of the chaos at hand. Though he has been irrational, erratic, and emotional up until this point in the film, it is at this time we begin to see a shift in Basil’s character. Initially
angry at being outwitted by Ratigan, Basil sees how upset Dawson is at Olivia’s kidnapping and changes his tone; he becomes more soothing, and ensures the doctor that Olivia will be recovered. This is an aspect of Basil that is only briefly shown at the beginning of the film, in which he ceases his pouting in favor of concern when told that Olivia does not have a mother. It can be seen then that Basil, though living alone, sees value in the family unit and family-like ties. This view is again one celebrated in 1980s America, as well as by the Disney Company itself. The shift in Basil’s character also shows the effect both Oliva and Dawson have on him, suggesting that even “the great mouse detective” is better off with a “family” of his own.

Despite the focus being on Olivia, it is Basil and Ratigan who star in the film’s climax—a fight to the death among the gears of Big Ben’s clock. After escaping with Olivia as his hostage, Ratigan becomes distracted by Basil’s chase and flies the blimp straight into the face of Big Ben. Their ensuing fight taking place among the many moving gears of the clock, with Olivia almost being crushed by the interlocking gears herself. Throughout the scene, Basil remains almost silent as Ratigan becomes more and more animalistic. Ratigan’s clothes become ripped as he continues to strike Basil, exposing his fur, as his hands become increasingly more claw like. The fight therefore becomes one of rationality over animalistic brutality, as well as one of intellect over brawn. Despite Basil’s irrationality expressed throughout most of the film, here he has only one focus, retrieving Olivia, who’s only downfall is her inability to escape Ratigan due to her size. In the end, it is Ratigan, almost completely animal now, who falls to his death while Basil, reworking a broken piece of the blimp midair, escapes death and reunites with his new “family” unit made up of Olivia, her father, and Dawson.

This final battle between the two semi-irrational figures reveals the line between “good” and “evil” and the role family plays within this. The film suggests that Ratigan, incapable in
loving another aside from himself and often murdering or else threatening to murder those few that follow him, has little chance of being deemed “good,” and coming out on top. Basil, in contrast, presents a character that realizes and accepts his irrational ways, and works to correct it. When Olivia and Dawson first come into his life, Basil is continuously having outburst of irrationality, but by the end of the film has been shown to change. In the final scenes of the film, Basil admits his fondness for Olivia, and sheepishly invites Dawson to move in with him, not wanting the doctor to leave him alone. His authority then, lies both in his ability to recognize his lesser qualities as well as his ability to overcome them.

**Sherlock Holmes the Action Hero:**

The turn of the millennium in 2000 was the start of major change across the world. Advancements in technology brought forward a stronger sense of globalization and the feeling that the world was not as big as it had always seemed to be. Likewise, scientific advancements at the beginning of this millennium, and the ability to share this information across the world almost instantly, seemed both incredibly exciting and as well as frightening. At the beginning of the century, a scientific breakthrough brought us a little closer to understanding the human body. Completed in 2003, the Human Genome Project gave scientists “the ability, for the first time, to read nature's complete genetic blueprint for building a human being” (NIH). While the international study made strides in terms of our understanding of human genes across the globe, it also brought forward a discussion of how far science can go before we begin “playing God.”

The 21st century also brought forth a new age of fear. While terrorism had existed prior to this time, the 21st century saw the beginning of a new type of terrorism, one that invaded their homes via their televisions, computers, and other electronic devices and refused to be ignored. In previous centuries, lack of immediacy in news and the inability to actually see the horrors
happening across the world made compartmentalizing easier; in this new age of technology, however, ignoring the terrors going on around the world became increasingly difficult, if not impossible. The attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001 not only took the lives of many Americans, but sent a wave of fear over the entire country that would last for years to come. News of the attacks spread quickly, and sent many Americans rushing home to be with their loved ones, or else frantically calling those they could not physically reach. Film coverage of the attacks showed the flaming towers being hit on an endless loop, and eventually their fall. Likewise, the attacks effected other countries across the world who saw the United States as a powerhouse, and therefore believed themselves equally at risk of coming under attack. The role of fear then, became an increasingly powerful tool in terms of gaining power over others, as well as a defining theme of this time period.

Set in the end of the 1800s, Guy Ritchie’s *Sherlock Holmes*, sees the detective in a battle against Lord Blackwood, and increasingly power figure in Victorian London and a practicer of the “black arts.” While set closely in time to the original stories, Ritchie’s film gives a more “modern” take on the Sherlock Holmes character by focusing on smaller aspects of the original stories. The Holmes created in *Sherlock Holmes*, played by American box-office success Robert Downey Jr, shows the detective in a more physical portrayal; while still incredibly intelligent and noted for his use of rational thought, this Holmes is more of an action hero than brooding, drug-addled detective bent over a microscope. His second, Watson, is likewise a more modern interpretation of the war doctor; played by British actor Jude Law, this Watson is tall, thin, and like his detective friend, always prepared to jump into action when presented with a potentially dangerous situation. Ritchie’s focus on specific details from the Holmes’ tales that are not commonly highlighted in adaptations brings a freshness to the character and quickly turns him
into the action hero figure that often dominates American screens; despite this change, however, the films still maintains the character’s reassuring authority presence in the way Holmes tackles modern day fears and anxieties and restores order to society.

The film opens by setting the scene, panning up from a view of the cobblestone streets (which have production information embedded into them) and into a late 1800s era London carriage; here we see Detective Lestrade, though at this point his identity is unknown to the viewer, before the camera moves on to a figure running through the streets—this, is Sherlock Holmes. Little time is spent in creating this version of Holmes as an action hero, as he comes across a human road block and quickly removes the threat. In a style quite unique from previous Sherlock Holmes adaptations, the fight scene is first played in slow motion, as Holmes talks through how to take down his opponent. This breakdown not only consists of how to physically render the adversary inept at furthering the attack, but also how his attack will affect the subject in the future, and the amount of recovery time needed if possible at all. This form of slowing down the action as Holmes explains himself before letting the action play through in real time is repeated throughout the film; while there are a few moments in which Holmes explains his reasoning and thought process, this is always done out loud for the benefit of his companions rather than internally. The focus then, is on his physical abilities rather than his intellectual ones, though he is not in any way inept at deducing a situation.

Watson, likewise, is shown to be a more physically apt character than in the original books. After apprehending one of Blackwood’s cronies in the opening sequence, Holmes is caught off guard by another before Watson appears at his side; like Holmes, he is introduced to the audience while in action, rather than by introducing himself to Holmes or entering 221b as is commonly done. Later in the film, when faced with Lord Blackwood’s tricks, Watson expresses
his frustration for the villain by exclaiming that he would like to hit him in the face. The physicality of these two characters is something only touched on in the original stories. While Holmes was stated to have been “a boxer, a swordsman and an expert in single stick,” a form of martial arts, in the original Canonical stories, in this adaptation makes this aspect of the character front and center (Davies 41). While the Holmes of *Sherlock Holmes* is still just as intellectually superior to those around him, his physical abilities are far more expressed than his intellectual. This change suggests that, while intelligence is still important, an ability to jump into action when the situation presents itself is just as or even more so.

This idea is presented within the opening scene alone, in which Holmes comes face-to-face with the film’s antagonist, Lord Blackwood, played by Mark Strong. In this scene, Holmes and Watson rush to save the life of a girl about to be sacrificed for the sake of Blackwood’s magic, fighting off his followers in doing so; in the end the two successfully save the girl, but it is soon revealed that they were not supposed to have jumped into action until after Inspector Lestrade and the other police arrived. In response to Lestrade telling him off for not waiting, Holmes replies, “If I had, you'd be cleaning up a corpse and chasing a rumor. Besides, the girl's parents hired me, not the Yard. Why they thought you'd require any assistance is beyond me.” This comment is important for two reasons: (1) it shows that Holmes’ position as a consultant to the police rather than a part of it remains true to the original stories, and (2) that this version of Sherlock Holmes puts value in action over rules and orders. While Holmes’ reputation for taking care of a situation despite governmental or police orders is not a new one, in using this action sequence as an introduction to this version of the character, this aspect of his character takes a heightened role in his personality. Holmes does not only set aside rules in favor of morals, a characteristic found in the original stories, he is also willing to risk his life in doing so.
Along with this more physical portrayal of Holmes and Watson is a stronger hinting at the nature of their relationship. While both men have significant others of the opposite sex in the film, Watson his fiancé Mary and Holmes his “muse” Irene Adler, as she is referred to by Watson, their interaction with one another are far more intimate and personable. This aspect of their relationship was stated even before the film’s released, with Robert Downey Jr.’s “pre-film hype” leading audiences to suspect more out of the traditional Holmes-Watson relationship; this “hype” likewise “effectively created a ready-made framework” through which audiences could view the film (Porter 35). While the film does not go so far to make Holmes and Watson an actual couple in the romantic sense, it does bring more attention to their relationship than in other adaptations. Their “back-and-forth banter… love-hate dynamic, codependency, masculine physicality and action” suggests “potential homoeroticism,” despite both men being presented as straight through their relationships with Mary and Irene (Porter 38).

In their initial interaction in the film, in which he is choking a man to save Holmes, the two engage in playful banter, with Watson berating Holmes for leaving the stove on. This banter remains constant throughout the film, with Holmes often appearing hurt at the mention of Mary and/or referring to himself and Watson as “us,” usually to Watson’s disapproval. While Watson often dismisses Holmes use of “us” in reference to the two of them, he too engages in almost hostile reactions to Holmes’ interactions with Irene Adler. While both are shown to be with women, and are not openly gay in the film, their interactions and side comments to one another at least puts forth the possibility of something more. While the relationship between Holmes and Watson in the original stories have likewise been questioned, viewers of Ritchie’s interpretation of the duo would be more likely to pick up on the homosexual undertones given the advancements made in gay rights, and specifically gay marriage rights, during this time. Sherlock
Holmes, then, presents a version of Holmes who is secure in his relationship with another man, here deemed a “bromance,” despite the inclusion of both leads’ female counterparts. Their “bromance,” which refers to a close relationship between two men, closer than just friends but not involved in a romantic sense, makes the relationship between the two men stronger than that of their romantic, heterosexual relationships.

While Holmes and Watson are more physical in their portrayal, their adversary in Ritchie’s Sherlock Holmes, Lord Blackwood, almost never fights another throughout the entirety of the film. In contrast, Lord Blackwood is often seen calmly standing in the shadows, with little to no change in his expression throughout his scenes. Instead of using physical power over his enemies, a job he delegates to his subordinates, Blackwood uses his “powers,” or “dark magic” to achieve power—or at least this is what he leads London to believe. In the end, it is shown that Blackwood’s mastery of “black arts” is in fact a series of simple tricks and a modest understanding of science. It would therefore seem that the common traits of a Holmes story are reversed; the normally rational, clue-oriented detective is physically fighting his adversary, of whom uses his wit and science to set his plan into motion. When first introduced to Lord Blackwood, he is wearing a long black cloak with the hood up, preparing to “sacrifice” a young woman for the sake of his Order; physically jumping into action to apprehend Blackwood, Watson misses the almost invisible glass needle that almost goes through him, which Holmes points out. This scene highlights both Holmes’ intelligence and his propensity to jump into action for the sake of the “greater good.” The juxtaposition between Holmes’ action and Blackwood’s more behind-the-scenes work suggests the Holmes will get the root of the problem. Like Moriarty in the original stories, Blackwood operates through the use of others as well as tricks, and instead of only using his intellect to defeat his adversary, Holmes springs to action to
reach Blackwood himself, suggesting that there are times in which action is required in countering chaos.

But Blackwood’s power is not solely reliant on the number of people answering to him nor his talent for trickery, but in his understanding of the power of fear. This aspect of the film is the most relatable for its modern audiences, of which terrorism is a real and present fear. Throughout the film Blackwood repeatedly pops up, even being hanged and buried and then presumably “resurrecting himself” all for the power it gives him over the people who do not understand the simple trickery involved in this. After his presumed resurrection, a police officer comes to fetch Holmes from 221b to come to the scene of the event to examine the grave; when asked by Holmes what he is so fearful of the man responds “Sheer and utter panic, sir;” the fear of this officer was not only a response to Blackwood’s supposed magical abilities, but that this simple idea would spread throughout London and send the city into chaos. With the attacks on 9/11 occurring only several years earlier, the power of fear and the quickness with which it spreads would have been only too real for the film’s original viewers, as well as modern audiences as well.

Blackwood’s actions, however, are not suggested to be simply a result of his character or personality, but rather a result of his upbringing. More than halfway into the film, it is revealed that Blackwood’s father is a prominent member of the government, Lord Chief Justice Sir Thomas Rotherham, as well as a member of the secret society Temple of the Four Orders. With this information, the film then not only critiques the terror-tactics of Lord Blackwood, but also the corruption of the government itself. It is Holmes then, who recognizes the two and reveals them for what they truly are, and thus retains authority in the film. He successfully thwarts Lord
Blackwood’s attempt to murder those members of Parliament who do not agree with him, as well as outs those officials who sided with Blackwood or else aided him in some way.

While many aspects of the original Sherlock Holmes stories are represented in this adaptation, *Sherlock Holmes* ultimately creates a Holmes completely its own. In highlighting the more physical aspects of the original character, this adaptation suggests there are certain situations in which action must be taken with minimal planning. This view does not take away Holmes’ intellectual authority, which is still present within this film, but rather suggests that the hero must be quick on his feet in order to deal with the problems of the time. These issues, such as the misuse of science and controlling people through the use of fear, are two major issues still present today; in having Holmes’ defeat Blackwood, the film puts forth Holmes as yet again a figure of reassuring authority.

**Sherlock Holmes the Digital Native:**

In a similar fashion to Guy Ritichie’s adaptation of the Sherlock Holmes figure, BBC’s *Sherlock* was created in an attempt to reinvent the famous detective, while at the same time remaining true to the originals. The first series of the shows was released in 2010, with the most recent being released in late 2016. The show, set in the time in which it was released for the most part, follows the famous detective and his doctor partner in their adventures in and around London, but in modern times; the famous Sherlock Holmes in all his glory is given the power of the internet and advanced technology and science. What this adaptation does differently than its predictors is not only set the series in modern times, as this was done a few times before, but it also attempts to remain more faithful to the original stories. This could be due to a multitude of reasons, one of which could be a resurgence of nostalgia brought on by the ability to “relive” the past through internet searches and other modern technological advancements, as well as the fact
that the original stories are a great source material, and one many modern viewers are not familiar with. They may know Sherlock Holmes the figure, but not the stories themselves.

A major aspect of this adaptation is the inclusion of modern technology to the process of detection, as well as the addition of the use and understanding of this technology by Sherlock Holmes. The idea of “daily life mingled with modern technology” during the Industrial Revolution has become exceedingly amplified in today’s world, in which we are almost always with technology in some way (Porter 145). During the 19th century, growing technology was so new that the idea of implementing it into daily life seemed positive; though not always the case, at times protested against through riots and strikes, the overall idea behind the used of new technology, particularly in factories, was seen to be a huge advancement for the human race. These new technologies, most of which were new machinery, were created in order to make factories more efficient, though often at the expense of the worker. In today’s world, technology still has the ability to both help and harm. However, in today’s world, technology does not always advance for a purpose, but rather for the sole purpose of advancing. New phones, tablets, computers, etc. are released only a short time before another follows, with the latest versions only having minimal changes. Where the line between technology and human was clear in the 18th and 19th century, in the 21st the line has become far more blurred. At this point, the removal of technology seems highly improbable, as well as impractical for those technological advancements that have in the end saved lives, so what remains is the question of how we navigate this technological world in which technology and humans appear inseparable.

With the first series of the show being released in 2010, audiences of *Sherlock*, are in no way strangers to the digital world. Where previous adaptations of the Sherlock Holmes stories worked off of and made use of new technological advancements, or else made only minimal
remarks or undertones as to these advancements’ effects on society, *Sherlock* makes this issue front and center in terms of its used in the show; both the positives and negatives of technology are addressed, as well as used in the creation of the show itself. In one of the earlier scenes of the series, Inspector Lestrade is holding a press conference when everyone present begins receiving text messages; the messages, which turn out to be from Sherlock Holmes himself, relay the message that what is being categorized as a series of suicides is in fact something more. Given this scene appears in the first episode in the series, it is an introduction for the audience to the style the show will be working with. Instead of showing the texts on each individual phone screen, as is often done, the text appears on screen, popping up just over the phones they are meant to be coming from. This technique is not only more effective in showing the viewer the text without removing them from the scene, but it also shows how new technology has been integrated into everyday life. We see, as the texts fill the room, how invasive and present this form of communication really is, but also how useful, as they are receiving more information in regard to the case at hand. This scene, in which a whole room of reporters and police officers receive texts all from Sherlock himself sets up the rest of the series in terms of its modern take; the Sherlock Holmes of *Sherlock*, played by British actor Benedict Cumberbatch, is not only mentally superior, but also incredibly apt at navigating the increasingly more advanced technological world.

Through the use of technology, *Sherlock* highlights a modern fear in today’s society: the relationship between the private and the public. In an earlier press conference scene, of which there are many within this episode, the camera flips from showing the reporters and press’ perspective of the conference, to focusing on the spectators. As the camera focuses on the reflection in the camera lens of the woman who was having an affair with the now dead subject
of the conference, the audience gets the feel of watching something private; this, though a small scene, relays a fear that the show plays off of, the fear of the personal being public. This idea again occurs when John comes into contact with Sherlock’s brother, though at the time he did not have this knowledge. After being left at a crime scene by Sherlock, John finds the payphones he passes ringing and eventually picks one up. Using security cameras, Mycroft Holmes gets John to meet with him and then relays to him a series of information John believed to be private, such as his new address and the contents of his meetings with his therapist. In fact, the entirety of this pilot episode entitled “A Study in Pink,” after its source material, the first Sherlock Holmes novel *A Study in Scarlet*, is littered with technology and the private/public divide; this episode not only sets up the use of modern technology and the fears that accompany it, but also Sherlock’s ability to understand and harness it.

Where Victorian readers were more receptive to a Holmes that was “technologically adept and extremely intelligent in a machine-like way,” the Holmes of the 21st century must connect to modern audiences as well as modern technologies; if Sherlock Holmes’ authority was originally in part due to his connections to modern technology, it follows that in modern adaptations he likewise has this ability (Porter 145). Within this adaptation, Sherlock is shown to be a master of information and its use” (Porter 128). Throughout “A Study in Pink,” this point is made clear, with Sherlock even catching the criminal by texting him from the murdered woman’s cell phone and tracking the call through her email and the phone’s corresponding website. Sherlock is “designed as a resident of the digital age,” which only makes sense given the time period in which the series both takes place and exists (Porter 131). The use of technology in communication and in gaining information is second nature to audiences of *Sherlock*, the majority of whom have grown up in a digital and technology-oriented world.
Sherlock’s use of technology and the speed at which he uses it, therefore, is meant to “express his intelligence” (Porter 148).

Sherlock does not only have the ability to use technology to effectively navigate the digital world, he also reflects it in his personality. While he is referred to as having a “composure which made so many regard him as a machine rather than a man” is Conan Doyle’s “The Crooked Man,” Sherlock takes this idea a step further in having Sherlock self-identify as a computer himself; Sherlock refers to his mind as a “hard-drive,” telling John that “it only makes sense to put things in there [his mind] that make sense,” and is shown to “read” people in an almost technological like way (Porter 152). When examining the body of a dead woman in “A Study in Pink,” text overlays float over the different features Sherlock is analyzing, showing audiences what he is thinking and how he is reaching his conclusions. This addition of text, as well as the many references made to his computer-like way of operating, feed into this idea of technology becoming wholly integrated into human life. While this relationship between technology and humanity is part of Sherlock’s computer-like way of thinking, Sherlock adds a social disorder to the mix, furthering the detective’s intellectual authority by adding an additional obstacle for him to operate with.

BBC’s Sherlock not only makes reference to the multiple platforms of conversing and/or connecting in some way to another person through the use of technology, it also seeks to do so itself. Unlike other adaptations, Sherlock expands its reaches by making Dr. Watson’s retellings of the famous duo’s adventures a blog of which the audience has access to through the show’s website. His blog, of which he started at the insistence of his therapist, is how the audience initially learns of who Watson is, played here by British actor Martin Freeman, when the camera cuts to a shot of his computer screen which reads “The personal blog of Dr. John H. Watson.”
This blog, along with the blog of Molly Hooper, a new character to the series, and Sherlock’s website, are all actually in existence for audiences to peruse.

Unlike other adaptations, BBC’s *Sherlock* does not let the consulting detective dominate the narrative, but rather follows Watson in a similar fashion to his telling of their adventures in the original stories. The first episode of the series opens with Watson’s flashbacks to his time in Afghanistan, both a nod to the classic tales and an acknowledgement of the real-life struggle with the country. After he wakes from his nightmares of that time, the camera focuses on Watson doing everyday things, such as sitting on his bed and drinking coffee, showing the juxtaposing between his life in the service and life now that he has returned to London. Watson’s time in Afghanistan is repeatedly mentioned throughout the first episodes, and periodically throughout the rest of the series. This focus in his time as a war doctor not only connects to real-life issues, but also addresses a modern soldier’s life after returning home. As seen by the portrayal of Watson, the effects of war are not always physical, but mental as well. Watson becomes aware part way through the episode that his injury is psychosomatic, meaning it is a psychological issue rather than a mental one; along with this, he also comes to see his condition as a longing for the action of war, rather than a reaction to it. But it is not only Watson who is given more background in terms of his physical and mental state, as Sherlock too is shown to have his own medical disorders.

In setting the series in the 21st century, there also comes advancements in science and medicine. Where the detective of the Victorian age was at times aloof, this was in line with the standards of the time; in contrast, the disconnectedness of *Sherlock’s* title character from those around him can be attributed to his “high-functioning” autism. A modern topic, as well as more accepted one in today’s time, Sherlock’s autism acts as an excuse of sorts for his rudeness
towards everyone else. His high intellect and almost machine-like way of functioning, both of which are present in the original stories, fits nicely into this diagnoses, therefore retaining as well as adapting his original attributes for a modern world. For Victorian audiences there was no need to “normalize” Holmes, as his stoic character and disconnection to others was “more acceptable” by those of the Victorian period, in which this reserved nature was part of their “behavioral standards” in placing Holmes in the modern world, however, his personality could be interpreted in a negative manner (Porter 145). For Sherlock, this antisocial personality disorder is just another fact or aspect of his being. This can be seen through his interactions with Anderson, who refers to him as a psychopath, and Agent Donovan, who repeatedly refers to him as a “freak.” In response to their jeers, Sherlock corrects them, informing Anderson in “A Study in Pink” that he is a “high-functioning sociopath,” not a psychopath, and that there is a difference. His specificity in regard to his autism and the way in which he corrects those who misdiagnose him again shows his intellectual authority, while his ability to solve the crimes at hand despite being “othered” by those around him again marks him as a reassuring figure. Sherlock is in no way hindered by his autism, but rather thrives, particularly in his field of work.

While an actual disorder is never really discussed in the original stories, Sherlock’s interactions with others has always been straightforward and honest, with little back and forth in regard to social norms. In BBC’s Sherlock, this small detail is taken a step further by being made into a disorder. While it does not seem to be an extreme jump for the character, the discussion of his social disorder is significant. In the time in which the series was released, open discussion of mental disorders was only just making mainstream. In showing these two characters, Watson and Sherlock, of whom both suffer in some respect to a disorder, the show puts forth the idea that they are not held back in anyway. While not necessarily going as far as to say Holmes is made
out to be a hero for those diagnosed with a variety of disorders, he does not let the comments of others affect him, but rather bites back with a harsh, but intellectual comment, often informing his attackers of information they have neglected to notice. Despite his inability to conform to social standards and norms, Sherlock flourishes in these “face-to-face” interactions (Porter 153).

While he retains his authority in terms of intelligence, now updated to suit a modern world, and reputation as a great detective, it is again Sherlock’s moral authority that shines through in this adaptation. This moral standing is partially exposed through his relationship with John and partly through his interactions with James Moriarty. Sherlock’s lack of kindness toward those around him and his inability to blend into social situations sets him up in the end, with Moriarty turning the tables on him and easily convincing the public at Sherlock was a fraud and he only a victim. While not at first obvious, Sherlock’s moral standing is an important aspect of Sherlock’s rendition of the character and the authority he holds.

Throughout the series, Sherlock often expresses pleasure in his work, particularly when the crimes at hand are particularly gruesome or high-stakes, once referring to a series of supposed suicides “Christmas.” Despite this apparent coldness in regard for the loss of human life and pleasure in crime, Sherlock continuously, though not always obviously, reveals his compassionate side. This compassion is more often than not directed or equated to John, who continues to act as the humanizing figure for the character, though it can be seen directed toward others as well, such as Mrs. Hudson, Molly, and “the Woman,” Irene Adler. When Sherlock becomes too enthused about the crime at hand or too invested in the situation as a “game,” it is John who “repeatedly reminds Holmes that the victims are people” (Porter 142). This aspect of the character is slightly different than in different adaptations; while Holmes was shown to find pleasure in his work in the original stories, as well as in most adaptions, Sherlock heightens this
aspect to the point of it becoming an issue for the character. While this appears to make the character out to be less compassionate or morally sound, it actually heightens his reassuring authority presence in that the line between “hero” and “villain” is exposed as a thin one.

Similarly to the Canonical Sherlock Holmes, the relationship between Sherlock and Moriarty is an important one in the creation of Sherlock as a hero, and therefore reassuring figure. While these relationships aid in expressing Sherlock’s more emotional side, it is ultimately his relationship with Moriarty that reveals which “side” Sherlock is truly on; the line that stands between Moriarty and Sherlock is one of morals, of which Sherlock is shown to have the capacity for, with John being the one who reminds him of this fact. Moriarty, on the other hand, seems much more driven by the power aspect of his intellectual authority, rather than on the numerous lives lost for the sake of his “games.” The addition of Moriarty to the series, equally intelligent and technologically savvy as Sherlock, reveals the similarities between the two characters. If both present equal authority on the intelligence and digital understanding front, the question is what makes Sherlock the hero of the two, rather than a villain himself.

After turning the media and (seemingly) many of Sherlock’s friends against him by making it appear that Sherlock is on the villain side of the equation, Moriarty makes an attempt to force Sherlock to suicide, thus completing the story he has fed to the media that Sherlock is a fraud. While they have their final moments together, Moriarty makes the comment that Sherlock is “on the side of the angels,” referring to his sense of morals. While Sherlock agrees that he is on their side, he warns Moriarty “don't think for one second that I am one of them.” This self-awareness is the final piece to Sherlock’s moral and reassuring authority within this adaptation, in which Sherlock himself realizes the divide between himself and the rest of society, but rather than turn on the society that labels him an outcast, he continues to fight for it. In the episode
“The Sign of Three,” in which Sherlock attends John’s wedding as the best man, Sherlock expresses this self-awareness, stating “I am the most unpleasant, rude, ignorant and all-round obnoxious arsehole that anyone could possibly have the misfortune to meet,” expressing his recognition of how society sees him. He goes on to say that he is “dismissive of the virtuous, unaware of the beautiful and uncomprehending in the face of the happy,” recognizing his faults and admitting them in front of all the wedding guests, all while he continues to solve the crime at hand, eventually narrowing in on the intended victim, murder weapon, and murderer. But despite society’s labeling of him, and his knowledge of this view, Sherlock still saves the victim from being murdered and catches the criminal, both for the sake of the victim as well as John and his wife Mary, but also because it is the “right” thing to do.

The Sherlock Holmes of *Sherlock* presents a modern detective that can not only navigate the digital world with quickness and ease, but also one that is still tied to human connections and morals. Sherlock, despite is social disorder and keen ability to put people off, continuously reveals his emotional side, providing audiences with a character that finds a balance between the technological world and the real-life human one. The addition of Sherlock’s social disorder again raises the detective to a higher level; he is not only trying to remain “human” while navigating the digital world, he is also dealing with a disorder that makes these human interactions difficult and often makes him out to be an outcast. Sherlock’s authority, then, lies in his ability to navigate this increasingly technological world, in which crime still exists, as well as his ability to deal with the physical, human world as well. He presence a figure that is fully immersed in the technology of the day, but one that also finds meaning in human connections, in the end admitting that it is the human interactions that keep him going, telling John during the best man speech, “I am a ridiculous man redeemed only by the warmth and constancy of your friendship.”
Concluding Thoughts:

It is safe to say that Sherlock Holmes will not be disappearing into history anytime soon, but rather will continue to appear in popular culture. Given the amount of adaptations already present, the popularity of these adaptations, and the number of references to the character in popular culture alone, it is very likely that Sherlock Holmes will continue to live on through new adaptations. While I have only covered a select few adaptions, all within the same medium, the use of Holmes as a reassuring figure is very likely present in and could easily be applied to other adaptations given the presence of this use in the original Arthur Conan Doyle stories. Just as he was introduced, Holmes will continue to serve as a reassuring authority presence in each new adaptation, in which the detective takes on the world’s current issues and offers comfort in his ability to restore order, no matter the issue at hand.
Works Cited


