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A Study in Sherlock

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Communication Studies. This excerpt, taken from her Honors Thesis, began as part of an Adrian Tinsley Summer Research project, under the mentorship of Dr. Kathleen Vejvoda. This work was presented at the 2013 Popular Culture Association Conference in Washington, D.C. Rebecca will begin her graduate studies in English at Northeastern University in Fall 2013.

In 2010, the BBC launched its newest series, *Sherlock*. The show was an instant success in the UK, Europe, and the United States. In early 2012, Season Two aired with even greater success. But we might ask why, nearly 120 years after he was first introduced, the character of Sherlock Holmes, along with his companion Dr. John Watson, still captures the attention of TV audiences? My study examines the representation of this fictional male friendship as a popular culture phenomenon both at the turn of the twentieth century and today. Focusing on the representation of domesticity and unmarried men, homosocial bonding, and professionalism in the television series, I hope to illuminate parallels between late Victorian and contemporary cultural anxieties about masculine identity.

When the BBC first aired *Sherlock* in July of 2010, co-creators Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss anticipated success but were greatly, and pleasantly, surprised with the show's actual reception. Reflecting on the show's success, Moffat recalls, "We thought it would be like an audience of four million and an obscure award at a Polish festival or something like that. It happened so completely suddenly. We barely finished the show and it's this enormous hit. There seemed to be no intervening moment of escalation" (Moffat, Interview). Neither Moffat nor Gatiss could have predicted the show's success. *Sherlock* reached international acclaim, sparking an internet "#believeinsherlock" campaign and capturing audiences across the globe. Ecstatic with the show's reception, both Moffat and Gatiss claim that the show was really only written with one purpose in mind, to express their love of the Sherlock Holmes canon. Moffat remarks, "We [wrote] *Sherlock* to entertain each other," while Gatiss claims that he [did] it to "please the eight year old version of [himself]" (Moffat, Interview). For these men, writing what they call a "Modern Sherlock" was something they wanted to do for quite sometime, and it was instantly accepted by the BBC. (Note, in relation to the stories, the characters are Holmes and Watson, but, when referring to the series, they are Sherlock and John.) With this passion for the original Holmes canon, and in some ways these "new characters," both Moffat and Gatiss brought a contemporary Sherlock to the screen, with very little change to the original stories and the successful incorporation of the male friendship between Holmes and Watson.

Unlike an original text, *Sherlock*, an adaptation, has the ability to incorporate criticism that has arisen over the decades. And that is precisely what Moffat and Gatiss have done. Unlike in the original texts, where Holmes' behavior

is never questioned, others in *Sherlock* explicitly question Sherlock's involvement with criminal acts and his role as a degenerate. This notion stems from decades of criminality research, including research conducted by Cesare Lombroso and Max Nordau. In many ways, *Sherlock* fulfills the attributes regarding the idea of a criminal, and the show, unlike the stories, emphasizes his criminal tendencies with the use of characters like Irene Adler and Jim Moriarty. However, unlike Adler and Moriarty, Sherlock never acts on his criminal tendencies. Arguably, what sets Sherlock apart from criminals is his friendship and bond with Dr. John Watson. Likewise, Sherlock gives purpose to John's existence, preventing him from falling into degeneracy.

For Moffat, this is the one aspect of the Holmes' stories that trumps the rest. It's not the detective stories nor is it Holmes' superior intellect. Above all, it is the friendship and bond that Holmes and Watson share that make the stories truly captivating:

Under the surface—the detective stories are the surface—is the story of the greatest friendship ever. Because it's a male friendship, they simply never talk about it...I find joy in writing this, in writing the friendship. It's subtext, but it really is right to the top level of subtext and just in those two men, and the fact that they endure each other ("A Study in Pink" Commentary).

Sharing Moffat's point of view, I agree that the male friendship is by far one of the story's most important aspects. Both Sherlock and John rely on their friendship, albeit for different reasons. For John, the relationship offers rehabilitation, an introduction back into society, adventure, and safety from criminality. For Sherlock, John offers morality and humanity. He is what prevents Sherlock from succumbing to criminal actions and degeneracy.

In the show, Sherlock and John meet much like they do in the original texts. John, having just returned from war in Afghanistan, is introduced to Sherlock via a mutual friend. Sherlock quickly reveals his intellectual genius through an analysis of John himself. Upon viewing the infamous 221b Baker Street, both men agree to be flatmates. This is the beginning of their bond and friendship. Throughout the rest of the series, John accompanies Sherlock on all of the cases he solves, blogging about the happenings consistently and defending Sherlock's honor against those who try to tarnish his name. The loyalty between these two men is carefully crafted throughout the series. It represents the friendship of the original stories, with a much greater emphasis on the reasons why these men need each other.

Dr. John Watson is a man haunted by his past in Afghanistan. "A Study in Pink," the first episode of Series One, opens with a representation of John's war-dream and him waking in a cold sweat. The viewer can see the panic and horror in John's eyes, only to be followed by John locking away a pistol in his drawer. Cutting to the next scene, John is meeting with his psychiatrist. This is where John is defined for the viewer. When questioned about why he hasn't started blogging, John remarks that "Nothing happens to [him]" ("A Study in Pink"). He also witnesses his psychiatrist noting that he "still has trust issues" ("A Study in Pink"). We see that John is a man troubled by his past, trying to reenter society after being away at war. He has no purpose in life and needs to find reasons to carry on. These are the kind of men who were most at risk for degeneracy and were the perfect candidates for adventure stories (i.e. the Holmes cannon), Stephen Arata argues. He writes that these adventure stories were "centrally concerned with the possibility of renewal" and, citing David Trotter, they take "exhausted, purposeless men...whom we expect to degenerate or wither away, and transposes them to a new territory, the frontier, where a more vigorous identity can be created" (Arata 80). John is both exhausted and aimless upon his return from Afghanistan. With no job, little money, and the need for new rooming, John needs a change, an adventure. And for him the adventure, the "frontier," is the city of London, where he is able to create a new identity through his friendship with Sherlock. This opening context also gives John a comparative identity. It shows that he was someone before he met Sherlock, and it isn't until Sherlock's "death" at the end of Series Two that he'll ever be that way again.

In many ways, it is Sherlock who saves John from a purposeless existence, with the most tangible evidence being John's blog. In "A Study in Pink," John's psychiatrist recommends that he keep a blog, recording all of his daily activities. John remarks that nothing happens to him, thus he has no purpose for a blog. However, enter Sherlock, and everything changes. By the beginning of the second series, John's blog is an internet success, reaching 1,895 views overnight. Because of the friendship between these two men, and John's role in accompanying Sherlock, John's life is given purpose. He represents Sherlock to the public, sharing all of the cases and their details. For John, the relationship with Sherlock is rehabilitative. He uses his blog and role in solving cases as a way to reenter society and rehabilitate after returning from war. Using the cases, John finally has a perspective for not only his blog, but for his personal life.

After meeting Sherlock, John also undergoes both physical and psychological changes. Physically, John loses his limp. John was wounded in action while in Afghanistan, a wound

that Sherlock claims is psychosomatic upon first meeting him. For John, though, the wound is very real. However, when the thrill of following Sherlock on an investigative lead takes hold, John forgets about his once physically-restricting limp. From this moment on, John is able to walk on his own, with neither limp nor cane. Along with his physical change, John undergoes a psychological change from the first series of *Sherlock* to the final episode in Series Two. While visiting Sherlock's grave in "The Reichenbach Fall," John remarks in a very emotional apostrophe:

You told me once that you weren't a hero. There were times I didn't even think you were human, but let me tell you this. You were the best man, and the most human human being that I've ever known and no one will ever convince me that you told me a lie. I was so alone, and I owe you so much. Please there's just one more thing, one more miracle, Sherlock, for me. Don't be dead. ("The Reichenbach Fall")

Here we see the depth of John's relationship with Sherlock. He refers to Sherlock as "the best man," and refuses to believe that Sherlock is anything less than that. We also see here the psychological change in John, and his affirmation that his change is in great part a result of his relationship with Sherlock. John states that he was "so alone" and owes so much to Sherlock. It was this relationship and the adventure it offered that kept John from leading a purposeless and idle life. With Sherlock around, John was kept from criminalistic tendencies and was kept in the realm of the professional. He was deterred from falling into degeneracy through his work with Sherlock. Although it was Sherlock who held the title of consulting detective, John was also a crucial part of the business that Sherlock conducted. After all, it was his blog that brought new clients to 221b Baker Street. Also important to note is that after meeting Sherlock at the beginning of Series One, John never again met with his psychiatrist. It isn't until Sherlock "dies" that we see John with his psychiatrist again. She asks the reason for his sudden return and he attributes it to the death of his best friend, Sherlock Holmes. Because of Sherlock's "death," John reverts back to a purposeless existence. He has lost his adventure, his reason for blogging, and his best friend. Essentially, John has lost his identity, an identity that Sherlock helped him create. These are the many reasons for John's homosocial bond with Sherlock. He relies on this friendship for adventure and, more importantly, purpose. With Sherlock, John feels a sense of identity. He has the ability to rehabilitate both his physical and psychological wounds. Because of this relationship, he needs neither cane nor psychiatrist. Sherlock keeps John busy and on track, preventing him from the criminalistic temptations that can occur when one leads an idle life.

Just as Sherlock is the reason for John's well being, John also offers a great deal to Sherlock. In his book, *Degeneration*, German physician Max Nordau explores the characteristics that define a criminal. He writes,

...degenerates are necessarily egotistical and impulsive...His excitability appears to him a mark of superiority; he believes himself to be possessed by a peculiar insight lacking in other mortals, and he is fain to despise the vulgar herd for the dullness and narrowness of their minds. The unhappy creature does not suspect that he is conceited about a disease and boasting of a derangement of the mind. (19)

In all of these ways, Sherlock is the epitome of Nordau's defined degenerate. He is both egotistical and impulsive, often having to be reminded by John the reason for his presence. He shows excitement at the start of a new case, with John reminding him that there has been a murder or that innocent lives are involved. His most defining attribute, however, is his detestation for what he sees as inferior human beings. On many occasions, Sherlock remarks that it must be so boring not being him and wonders what it must be like in other people's heads. One of Sherlock's infamous lines, in both the series and the original texts, is that one "see[s] but do[es] not observe" (Conan Doyle 5). He believes that people can understand certain things, but only to a point. However, they do not observe their surroundings and take in all of the details, as he does. Recalling Nordau's research on criminals, Sherlock does not believe that he is conceited or wrong in his actions. He believes that his superior intellect and deduction skills are worthy of such a personality. He often criticizes the Scotland Yard officers for not having the capacity to live up to his abilities. Thus, Sherlock is a prime candidate for degeneracy, based on the definition put forth by Max Nordau.

Just as Sherlock's qualities meet Nordau's definition of a degenerate, so do they raise suspicions amongst others whom Sherlock encounters. One member of the police force, Sgt. Donovan, says of Sherlock:

You know why he's here? He's not paid or anything. He likes it. He gets off on it. The weirder the crime, the more he gets off. And you know what? One day just showing up won't be enough. One day, we'll be standing around a body and Sherlock Holmes will be the one that put it there...Because he's a psychopath. Psychopaths get bored. ("A Study in Pink")

This is her warning to John to stay away from the likes of Sherlock. His love of crimes and his ability to solve them raises

concerns about his involvement. She questions his actions and his resources when solving crimes around London. However, despite all the evidence against him, Sherlock remains resistant to degeneracy.

Because of his relationship with John, Sherlock is able to remain untainted by criminal actions. John provides a humanizing balance to the sometimes overly-rational mind of Sherlock. When starting a new case, Sherlock often shows excitement over the new distraction. When he has no cases, he often complains of boredom and falls into a type of depression. With John around, Sherlock is reminded that, although he finds new cases stimulating, they are still cases and there are still innocent lives involved. John is also able to assist Sherlock in solving certain aspects of the cases, proving that his knowledge is actually beneficial to Sherlock. In Series One episode three, "The Great Game," John criticizes Sherlock for not knowing anything about the solar system. Sherlock defends himself by describing this type of knowledge as "not important" ("The Great Game"). He remarks that, "Ordinary people fill their heads with all kinds of rubbish. And that makes it hard to get at the stuff that matters...All that matters to me is the work. Without that, my brain rots" ("The Great Game"). Here we see Sherlock's deep rooted connection to his work as a consulting detective. For him, his work is all that matters. This scene is also example of Sherlock's self-imposed superiority. He refers to others as "ordinary people," while placing himself above all the "rubbish" that fill their heads. But, what is most important, here, is that Sherlock is wrong. Later in this same episode, it is knowledge of the solar system that helps Sherlock to solve his case and save a child's life. The only reason for his knowledge of the solar system is because John brought it to his attention. John serves to balance Sherlock's rational mind by offering compassion and companionship.

The best example of Sherlock's need for his relationship with John comes in the form of Sherlock's greatest nemesis, Jim Moriarty. In many ways, Moriarty is an exact replica of Sherlock. Moriarty matches him in terms of intellect and genius and makes his living in a similar fashion. Sherlock is the only consulting detective in the world, while Moriarty is the only consulting criminal. The striking difference between the two men is John; Moriarty does not share a homosocial bond in the way that Sherlock and John do. In "The Reichenbach Fall," Moriarty acknowledges that he and Sherlock are the same, saying, "You need me or you're nothing. Because we're just alike, you and I. Except you're boring. You're on the side of the angels" ("The Reichenbach Fall"). For Moriarty, the difference between Sherlock and himself is the "side" that each chooses to work for. Moriarty has chosen to oppose the "angels" as a consulting criminal. However, what keeps Sherlock on this side

is his relationship with John, a relationship that Moriarty lacks.

Unlike Sherlock, Moriarty has no specific bonds with humanizing and moral beings such as John. Instead, he works a web of criminals, never bonding with any of them. People are merely tools for his business. Moriarty remarks, "Aren't ordinary people adorable? Oh, you know. You've got John. I should get myself a live in one" ("The Reichenbach Fall"). This raises a few points. Moriarty refers to others as "ordinary people." Recall here Sherlock in "The Great Game." Moriarty and Sherlock share the notion of others as ordinary in comparison to their superior selves. This idea also resonates with the ideas posed by Max Nordau concerning degeneracy. Moriarty, like Sherlock, feels he has a "mark of superiority" and believes he is "possessed by a peculiar insight lacking in other mortals" (Nordau 19). Also important here is Moriarty's remark that Sherlock has John, as he goes on to say that he should "get [himself] a live in one" ("The Reichenbach Fall"). Moriarty sees John as a stark difference between Sherlock and himself, viewing John as ordinary and mere entertainment, while Sherlock understands that his bond with John is both beneficial and necessary.

Moriarty represents Sherlock without John. He is an example of what Sherlock has the potential to become without the bond he shares with John. In the original texts, Moriarty is used as a mere tool to lead to Holmes's death. However, the show emphasizes the potential in Moriarty's character. He is used to highlight the importance of the relationship between Sherlock and John. Sherlock plays with ideas of criminality relating to Sherlock himself, and Moriarty highlights all of the suspicions that Sherlock raises. Sherlock has all the potential to end up just like Moriarty, yet his ability to resist this destiny lies in his relationship with John.

Since they were first published in 1887, the Sherlock Holmes stories have sparked a number of adaptations. What is most fascinating about the BBC's adaptation with *Sherlock* is that it incorporates criticism that has arisen regarding the texts. The show explicitly challenges Sherlock's role in criminal activity while still maintaining Sherlock's respectability. Even more important is the way *Sherlock* composes a ternary amongst Sherlock, John, and Moriarty. The relationship between Sherlock and John holds significance for both men, albeit for different reasons. Enter Moriarty, and their relationship's importance is further emphasized. Unlike in the texts where Moriarty is a mere tool to ensure Holmes's downfall, he is used as a foil character in the show. He highlights the qualities in Sherlock that make him ideal for degeneracy and criminality, while further highlighting Sherlock's relationship with John as the reason he is able to resist. These characters,

and the friendship they share, will live on. Sherlock and John are examples of men with the potential to degenerate, while running the risk of falling into the realm of criminality. Yet through their friendship and bond with one another they resist.

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