



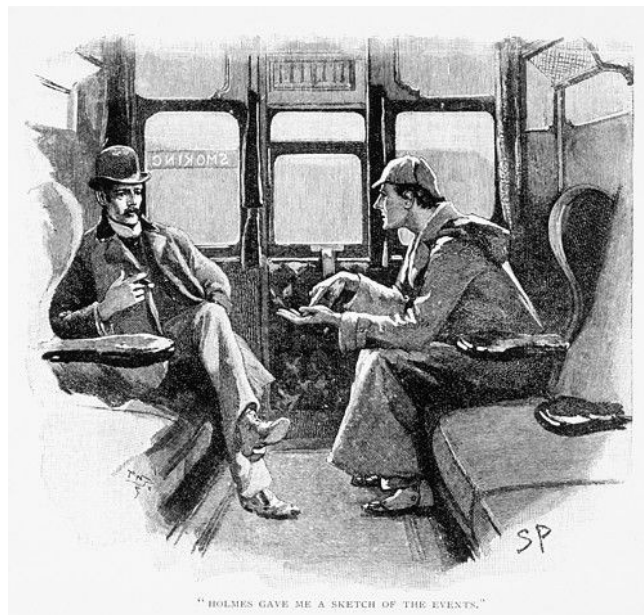
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The Doctor on Screen

Adapting the character of Dr. Watson from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories in *Sherlock* and the *Sherlock Holmes* films

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Abstract

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson are two of the most recognizable figures in crime literature. They worked numerous cases together; in total, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle wrote 56 short stories and four novels about them. These adventures have been adapted more than once, most recently in two films directed by Guy Ritchie, *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) and *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011), and a television series by the BBC titled *Sherlock* (2010). Like a lot of adaptations, they make changes from their source material, including changes to the characters. Watson is no exception. For the purpose of this essay, the Watson from the literary stories will be analyzed and compared to the Watsons from the adaptations to examine the changes they have made to his character, as he has changed from just being the assistant and chronicler of Holmes to becoming more intelligent, independent and being given a more active role than in the original stories. In addition to some general alterations along those lines, *Sherlock* gives Watson's journals a greater significance and Guy Ritchie's films make Watson more professional and even something of a detective in his own right.

Keywords: Sherlock Holmes, Dr. Watson, Arthur Conan Doyle, adaptation, film, television, detective, sleuth, crime fiction, characterization, point of view, focalization

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Introduction

This essay covers a study of the adaptations of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's stories about the iconic Victorian detective Sherlock Holmes and his assistant Dr. Watson. In particular, I compare the portrayal of Dr. Watson in the original literature with those of two recent adaptations based on Conan Doyle's hero: a film series currently consisting of two parts and a television series that so far has had two seasons.

I think it is safe to say that no criminal investigation has ever been the work of only one person. Modern day detectives work with a number of people; not just other investigators, but also forensic technicians and pathologists. However, Sherlock Holmes, who lived in an age before much of the forensic technology we enjoy today existed, fulfilled most of these functions on his own. But even he did not work alone. He had a partner, retired army doctor John Watson, who moves in with him in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), the novel that introduced them, after which the two went on several adventures together and solved a number of cases.

It is not uncommon for literary crime solvers to have some sort of partner; for instance, Holmes had Watson, Hercule Poirot had Captain Hastings, Nero Wolfe had Archie Goodwin, and Sexton Blake had Tinker. Sometimes these assistants might exist primarily to carry the thoughts and actions of the sleuths to us, the readers, or to present the sleuth from a more human perspective. However, despite having become the namesake of such a figure, Watson himself has not received as much scholarly attention as his eternal partner. Watson's contributions to the partnership with Holmes will be explored further here, especially as it is portrayed in two recent adaptations. Most of them draw inspiration from at least one of Arthur Conan Doyle's original stories; some are heavily based on a single specific story, such as the *Sherlock* pilot "A Study in Pink" (2010), which is based on *A Study in Scarlet*, or not based on any particular story in great detail, such as Guy Ritchie's first *Sherlock Holmes* film, which

uses many of Conan Doyle's characters and the setting of his stories, but creates its own antagonist and an original plot.

The first adaptation that will be examined is Guy Ritchie's films from 2009 and 2011, in which Watson is portrayed by Jude Law. The first is titled simply *Sherlock Holmes* and the second *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows*. The second adaptation I study is the BBC television series *Sherlock*, which so far has had two seasons with three episodes each and co-stars Martin Freeman as Watson. The analysis of their relationship, which will focus on Watson, will also be based on pertinent parts of a variety of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's original stories.

This essay as a whole will analyze the character of Dr. Watson and how it is portrayed in these two recent adaptations. The first section will focus on points of view and focalization in the literature and the adaptations. Here, I study Watson's documenting of his and Holmes' adventures, which is most prominently adapted in *Sherlock*. The second section examines how the relationship between Watson and Holmes is portrayed in the original texts and in the adaptations. The third section will compare the portrayal of Watson's capabilities as a detective in the literature and the adaptations. The fourth section will examine possible reasons for why the changes have been made in the adaptation. I will argue that the adaptations make the character of Watson stronger, more intelligent and more independent than he is in the literary stories by making such changes to his character.

Previous research

While doing research for this essay I noticed how underresearched the character of Watson seems to be in academic studies. The anthology *Sherlock Holmes: Victorian Sleuth to Modern Hero* (1996), for example, contains 24 essays about Sherlock Holmes; all but one of them are exclusively related to Holmes alone and only contain references to Watson. The remaining essay attempts to solve one of Conan Doyle's contradictions regarding Watson's war injury.

A similar situation appears in the case of five essay collections by Swedish Sherlock Holmes expert Lars Strand; the topics range from broad ones such as Sherlock Holmes pastiches and the intertextuality of later works inspired by Conan Doyle's stories, to finer points such as Holmes' trademark deerstalker, the weather in the stories and even the dogs that appear in them. And yet not one of the essays is dedicated to Watson, his most trusted friend and companion. In his sixth and most recent essay collection, *Anhalter* (2012), Strand finally included an essay about Watson. Furthermore, *Teller of Tales* (1999), Daniel Stashower's award-winning biography about Conan Doyle, does not even name Watson in the index.

In a way, this is not surprising, given that Watson's journals are about Holmes and the cases they work together. The journals do not give Watson much attention, even in the entries when he is alone. Watson's character as depicted by Conan Doyle is strictly that of the assistant, the author of the journal and the narrator and, as such, it is only logical that research has not paid very much attention to the character. Since the adaptations give Watson a more substantive and significant role, they indirectly explore a relatively uncharted area in Conan Doyle's stories. This essay could be considered a modest contribution to address that issue.

Understanding Adaptations

There are numerous ways in which adaptations can be studied and compared to their source material. A number of aspects of the original work can, and often have to be altered when a written work is transformed into film. Such adaptation requires transforming the written words and their meaning into visual elements, actions and sounds (Hutcheon, 40). When adaptations are analyzed and compared to their source material, such changes are usually examined to determine what is gained and what is lost when it is adapted from one medium to another or when the story is somehow reinterpreted or altered, such as changing the setting to another time, social context or location.

One aspect of adaptation theory which will be crucial for this essay is “point of view” and “focalization”. The study of literature and film use the terms (the latter of which is originally a literary term) when discussing from whose perspective narratives are presented. While “point of view” can refer to emotional or ideological portrayals of events as well as from which character they are told, focalization refers to how much the narrator *knows*; Genette describes narration as “who speaks” and focalization as “who sees” (Stam, *Literature and Film* 39-40).

Another central issue in adaptation theory is the process in which adaptations change the story or characters, which will be explored in the second and third sections. The second section explores the extent to which the adaptations make Watson’s character more independent, while the third section is devoted to an analysis of his capabilities as a detective. The fourth section will attempt to explain *why* the changes have been made in the adaptations. In “Beyond Fidelity”, Stam remarks that the plot and the characters in adaptations are sometimes changed from their original versions for various purposes, such as changing the ethnicity of a character if racism has been a complaint about the source material. Another thing of the original narrative that might change in the adaptation is the point of view, i.e. who is telling the story and how that affects the viewer’s perception of it (84).

1. “I’m Lost Without My Blogger”

This section is devoted to the narrative arrangement in the stories of Sherlock Holmes and the transformation of that narrative in the subsequent films and TV series. I first discuss the narrative in Doyle’s stories and then compare that with the narrative in the TV series and the films. I will also touch on the role of the journals in the literary stories and the TV series.

The original stories of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson span decades, not just their publication but also the events described in them. The first story in the series’ chronology was the novella-length *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), in which Watson is introduced to Holmes, and the last in the chronology “The Lion’s Mane”¹ (1926), in which Holmes is retired. Throughout the series, Dr. Watson records his and Holmes’ adventures in his journals and narrates all the longer stories and almost all of the short stories. The exceptions are two short stories which are told in third person with the typical partially omniscient narrator, two in which Holmes reminisces about old cases he worked himself and tells the story of the case to Watson, and two stories in which Holmes personally chronicles a case he handled without his biographer present. Since Watson’s memoirs are featured most prominently in *Sherlock* but are hardly mentioned in Guy Ritchie’s films, any discussion about the adaptation of Watson’s journals in this chapter will focus on the series.

In “A Scandal in Bohemia” (1891), Holmes calls Watson his “Boswell” (432), a reference to James Boswell, the biographer of 18th-century author Samuel Johnson. It is odd that Holmes would use that particular word to describe his (arguably) closest friend and most trusted companion. In a way, it does indicate that they are close, as Boswell and Johnson were. Since some translations into Swedish translate the word Boswell into simply “biographer” it is

¹ Note that many of the titles of the literary stories begin with “The Adventure of”, though those words are sometimes omitted in republications and were so in the collection used as primary source for this essay, so they will be in this essay as well.

possible that Holmes uses the word “Boswell” as an idiom. Even though the remark is made fondly, there are some implications that can be read from it, the obvious one being that he best recognizes Watson as his biographer. It is a slight problem that that is probably how most readers also remember him; Watson is in fact best known as Holmes’ partner and his own presence in his journals is quite limited even though he writes them and tells the story from his point of view.

This begs the question of the nature and role of Watson’s journals as a narrative instrument. In the end of *A Study in Scarlet*, after reading a newspaper article about the case which credits the somewhat inept Scotland Yard inspectors Gregson and Lestrade with solving the case and states that Holmes “may hope in time to attain to some degree of their skill”, Watson says that Holmes’ achievements deserve public recognition (93).

It is also apparent from Watson’s narration that, although he greatly admires and respects Holmes, he does not consider him some kind of demigod above criticism. To the contrary; he notes the rare instances where Holmes gets his deductions wrong or makes some other mistake, such as in “The Yellow Face” (1893), and points out when he doesn’t know something that would be obvious to others. For instance, in *A Study in Scarlet* he describes a rather famous occasion when he found out that Holmes is unaware that the Earth goes around the sun and also points out his lack of knowledge in subjects such as literature and politics (19-20). However, in “Silver Blaze” (1892), Holmes remarks that Watson sometimes fails to note moments when he makes mistakes in cases (658), though Watson does record one in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902) (204). Watson thus wants his journals to give a complete and unbiased account of Holmes. They will only serve as a credible narrative instrument if they present not only Holmes’ achievements but also his flaws and shortcomings. By using Watson as the narrator, the character of Holmes becomes more credible but also more complex.

Another reason why the stories are told from Watson's point of view appears to be to observe Holmes from the perspective of an ordinary person. In *Kriminal litteratur* (2011), Sara Kärrholm describes the so-called "Watson figure", i.e. the companion of a brilliant sleuth such as Holmes, as doing just that, describing the detective the way an ordinary person might perceive him and in doing so making the detective appear even more brilliant. This narrative arrangement is predicated on portraying the companion as less smart than the detective and unable to make the deductions that he makes (57-58). Here, Conan Doyle has to strike the balance between making Watson appear not too smart or too plain. On the one hand, readers will not be interested in the narratives of a simpleton. On the other hand, if the partner appears highly intelligent, the assistant might gain too much attention and even outshine the sleuth, the star of the story.

To sum up, the point of view and the narrative arrangement chosen by Doyle allowed the reader to identify with Watson as an average person observing and recording the achievements, but also shortcomings, of an eccentric but brilliant sleuth.

How does this narrative arrangement compare with the narration in the adapted TV series? In the story of *Sherlock*, Watson's way of journaling Holmes' cases has a greater significance than it does in the literary stories, in which the format serves basically to convey Holmes to the readers through the eyes of an ordinary person. *Sherlock* is set in the digital age of today, when literally anyone with an internet connection can write a blog, which is the form Watson's journal takes. The first and second seasons show on many occasions how the blog attracts fans (including Moriarty) and clients. Consequently, Watson now becomes a major driving force in Holmes' rise to fame. Presenting Holmes' achievements, Watson's blog helps elevate Holmes into something of an internet celebrity, giving the new journals a more important role than they have in the literary stories. Technological advances aside, however,

from the perspective of point of view analysis, the lack of use of the journals as a means of narration has an effect on the way Watson is perceived by the viewers.

In both adaptations, Watson is no longer the primary focalizer since the narratives are no longer told from the journals alone. An exception might be *A Game of Shadows*, which begins with Watson, who is documenting the adventure after Holmes' presumed death, introducing the story and ends with him typing "The End" at the bottom of the page before Holmes is shown to be alive. However, this use of the journals as a means of narration appears to be mostly cosmetic since there are events in the film which are shown to the viewers, but which Watson could not possibly have seen or even learned through research in such detail.

The adaptations are thus told from a different point of view than are the original stories. In almost every canonical Holmes story, Watson is the narrator and retells them in past tense as he reads them from his journals. He often expresses great admiration and surprise at Holmes' skills and, in a way, represents the average reader, who would likely react the same way. The key question against this backdrop becomes whether altering the narrative arrangement by changing the point of view from which the story is told also changes elements of the plot or the characterization of the heroes. I would suggest that by not confining the point of view to Watson's perspective, the makers of the adaptations place greater emphasis on Watson himself and his skills. In some ways, the change in point of view transforms Watson's role from that of a narrator to a character in his own right. Once Watson is no longer integral to the story as an observer and narrator he can contribute to the story as a character almost on a par with Holmes. Since we now experience him from our own viewpoint, his own intellect shines through much more clearly.

As the point of view has been changed in a way suggested by Stam in "Beyond Fidelity" (84), the adaptations have indirectly redefined Watson's role in the story-telling process and given him a character almost as important as Holmes'. It is logical to expect that this would

also mean that the adaptations give a different account of the relationship between Holmes and Watson compared to the original literature. I will now turn to that issue.

2. Friends and Colleagues, or Hero and Side-Kick?

This section will discuss whether Conan Doyle's depiction of the relationship between Holmes and Watson was altered during the process of adaptation of the texts into film or TV series. The previous section concluded that the adaptations changed the point of view of the narrative, thus giving Watson's character a more prominent role than did Conan Doyle's original works. We will now see whether these changes also affect the relationship between the two characters in a different way.

In Doyle's original characterization of Watson and Holmes, and given Watson's great admiration and respect for Holmes, it is difficult to imagine him as anything but a rather passive partner in their dialogues. Watson does not really talk back at or argue with Holmes. When it comes to his deductions, this may be understandable since they are based on objective facts, but it does not account for the moments when they have had differences on more emotional topics.

Readers' impression of Watson as the more passive and subordinate of the two is further enhanced by the fact that, as stated earlier, Watson spends most of his time with Holmes documenting their adventures while not sharing much about himself. Yet, there is a subtext which emphasises close friendship and affection, at least on Watson's part, in the relationship. His strong attachment to Holmes is substantiated by the way he moves in and out of 221B Baker Street whenever he is between wives.²

Yet another illustration of Watson's submission to Holmes is his tolerance towards Holmes' antics and oddities, frequently described in the original literature as well as in the adaptations. An example of such scenes is in "The Musgrave Ritual" (1893), in which Watson describes some of the more bizarre habits of Holmes' daily life, such as keeping his room in

² For instance, during his marriage to Mary Morstan he moved out and went back to practicing medicine. Also, in "The Blanched Soldier" (1926), Holmes (who is narrating himself) mentions the second (or possibly third) wife and Watson's living with her.

the apartment in a state of disarray, allegedly because it helps him keep track of things, and occasionally shooting at the wall with a gun (724-725). These accounts of living with Holmes differ significantly from the one of their first weeks together described in *A Study in Scarlet*, where he is described as the ideal roommate (18).

Unfortunately, the Sherlock Holmes stories have not been known for consistency with details. In the context of literary analysis, it is difficult to know where to begin when characterizing Holmes and Watson in their domestic setting, given the two widely different descriptions above. If one selects the version from “The Musgrave Ritual” as point of departure, the fact that Watson is still willing to live with Holmes shows how tightly knit a pair they are. Even though he knows how difficult and idiosyncratic Holmes is, he continues living and working with him, only moving out of Baker Street when he marries.

Watson and Holmes differ widely in their views on romantic relationships. In the end of *The Sign of the Four*, Holmes explains that he is not interested in such things because they are too emotional:

I think [Mary, Watson’s recent significant other] is one of the most charming young ladies I have ever met [...] love is an emotional thing, and whatever is emotional is opposed to that true, cold reason which I place above all things. I should never marry myself, lest I bias my judgement. (174)

He has similar feelings about Watson’s way of documenting his exploits, which according to him in *The Sign of the Four* romanticises them too much:

Detection is, or ought to be, an exact science and should be treated in the same cold and unemotional manner. You have attempted to tinge it with romanticism, which produces much the same effect as if you worked a love story [...] (98)

From this it is clear that Watson has a more relaxed, “human” personality than Holmes does, one that is not driven solely by reason and logic but actual emotion as well, one which it will be easier for the average reader to empathise with.

Let us now see how the adaptations portray the relationship between Holmes and Watson. While Watson does not change much during his time with Holmes, his personality is altered so that he stands up to Holmes when issues related to his romantic relationships are brought up. While Martin Freeman’s characterisation of Watson still shows a great respect for Holmes, he does have a few clashes with him. This happens for instance in “The Great Game” (2010), when Moriarty is forcing them to solve a series of murders and giving them time limits by strapping explosive vests onto innocent bystanders and threatening to blow them up if the duo do not solve the cases in time. Watson takes issue with the fact that Holmes not only is able to ignore the fact that there are hostages, but admires the man behind the kidnappings and is even enjoying himself solving the cases:

Watson: “So why is he doing this? Playing this game with you. Do you think he wants to get caught?”

Holmes: [intrigued] “I think he wants to be distracted.”

Watson: “I hope you’ll be very happy together.”

Holmes: “[reacts after a few seconds] Sorry, what?”

Watson: “[angry] There are *lives* at stake here, Sherlock, actual human lives! Just so I know, do you care about them at all?”

Holmes: “Would caring about them help save them?”

Watson: “Nope.”

Holmes: “Then I’ll continue to not make that mistake.”

Watson: “And you find that easy, do you?”

Holmes: “Yes, very. Is that news to you?”

Watson: “No.” (“The Great Game”)

In the above exchange, Watson puts his foot down and, in doing so, sets himself apart from Holmes. While he is only exercising basic human empathy, which Holmes, who in the adaptation is a self-described sociopath (“A Study in Pink”), apparently cannot do that as naturally. Even though Holmes’ response makes sense from a practical viewpoint, it is still very cold and uncaring, contrary to how we expect someone to react to it.

Guy Ritchie’s films portray Watson in a similar way. He lets Watson get into serious arguments with Holmes, something that rarely happens in Conan Doyle’s literary stories. The arguments never refer to the ways in which Holmes pursues a case, probably because Watson has been working with him for a long time and knows that his methods work.

The BBC series’ depiction of Watson is similar, though he knows to trust Holmes’ skills as a result of their first meeting, which mirrors the one in *A Study in Scarlet* when Holmes can immediately tell that he is an army doctor recently back from Afghanistan (16, 23-24). Now, while Holmes’ detective skills and his deductions remain undisputed by Watson, they do get into personal, quite loud and sometimes slightly childish arguments during which both of them stand up for themselves.

There is thus a clear pattern of differences in how the relationship between Holmes and Watson is described in Doyle’s literary works and the recent adaptations. While Doyle emphasised Watson as the more passive personality of the two and accorded him a role primarily as a narrator, the adaptations portray Watson as more assertive, self-confident and not shying away from arguments with Holmes. The original account of Watson highlighted his medical training but limited knowledge in deduction or other aspects of solving crime. To what extent do the adaptations portray Watson not only as a medical doctor but also as someone with the skills of a detective? This question will be dealt with in the third section of this essay.

3. “You Know My Methods”

Since one of Watson’s key roles in Conan Doyle’s stories is to document Holmes’ work and his skills as a detective are of much smaller significance compared to Holmes’ detective work, his contributions to their criminal investigations are rather limited. In some stories he just provides a form of support, either intellectually when trying to assist Holmes in the case (and making incorrect deductions) or physically, such as when they arrest the perpetrator. Indeed, sometimes, such as in “The Red-Headed League” (1891), Watson does not do anything concrete to aid Holmes. In the adaptations, however, Watson is very much involved in detective work and crime solving.

This section will examine Watson’s role as a crime solver. Both of the adaptations which I have chosen as subject for this essay give Watson a more prominent role than his function as Holmes’ biographer. Guy Ritchie’s films portray Watson as more intelligent and independent by making certain changes to his personality and giving him a more active part in his and Holmes’ adventures. The BBC series, by comparison, gives Watson a more normal image and makes it easier for the viewers to identify with the character. As this section will demonstrate, both versions are also made more competent detectives.

In 1928, crime author Ronald Knox put together what he called the ten commandments of detective fiction (due to their age and the way law enforcement and crime fiction have changed since then, they can be considered a bit outdated), the ninth of which states that “the stupid friend of the detective, the Watson, must not conceal any thoughts which pass through his mind; his intelligence must be slightly, but very slightly, below that of the average reader” (Redmond 147-148). This statement is rather cynical, but is surprisingly applicable to the original Dr. Watson, even though, being a doctor, he is probably more educated than most of the readers.

Even though Watson is fairly intelligent, he is a bit lacking as far as the qualities associated with sleuths like Holmes such as talent for observation and deductive reasoning are concerned. This is illustrated in the first chapter of *The Valley of Fear* (1915), when Holmes receives a coded message in the mail. It appears to just be a collection of random numbers, but Holmes quickly figures out that it refers to words on a page in a book. As he then guides Watson (and by extension the reader), through the process by which he cracked the code, Watson makes several incorrect guesses and even leaps to conclusions uncharacteristic of someone who would have worked with someone like Holmes for so long. The guesses are similar to ones the average reader might make; they are reasonable but still flawed.

It is clear that Watson looks up to Holmes and even wishes to learn from him, but sometimes that makes him look rather passive. In *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902), for example, he attempts to identify the owner of a walking cane belonging to their most recent client. Based on some markings on the item, he comes to a relatively informed conclusion and presents it to Holmes, who congratulates him on his skills before doing his own analysis and telling him that most of his conclusions were wrong. Before being given the bad news, Watson expresses great pride about his attempt:

He had never said as much before, and I must admit that his words gave me keen pleasure, for I had often been piqued by his indifference to my admiration and to the attempts which I had made to give publicity to his methods. I was proud, too, to think that I had so far mastered his system as to apply it in a way which earned his approval. (178)

When Holmes lets him know that he was incorrect, Watson does not describe how he felt about failing on so many counts. Since Watson is rational enough and made mistakes about facts, it can be presumed that he took little to no offense from it. Nor does he argue with

Holmes when he criticizes his style of writing in *The Sign of the Four*, then also apparently because the discussion pertained to objective facts.

There are however exceptions to this characterisation of Watson as largely incapable of crime solving. *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is one of the rare instances in the Sherlock Holmes canon where Watson goes off on his own and gets a moment to shine. After the first few chapters, Watson goes with their latest client to his family home on the countryside while Holmes stays behind in London and gets reports from Watson in the mail. During his stay, Watson is able to uncover a number of mysteries on his own, though he doesn't use Holmes' characteristic sense of detail. In the later chapters, he and Holmes are reunited and conclude their investigation together. Even though Holmes does most of the more impressive detective work in the story using his regular observation and deduction skills, Watson is shown to be fastidious and capable of investigative thinking.

As mentioned earlier, Watson's own detective skills are rather limited even though he spends so much time working with Holmes. However, in some later stories he proves able to tell how Holmes arrives at his conclusions, though he does so *after* he tells them to him. An example is in "The Norwood Builder" (1903), when Holmes observes a guest at Baker Street and comes to the conclusion that he is "a bachelor, a solicitor, a Freemason, and an asthmatic". Watson comments in his narration: "Familiar as I was with my friend's methods, it was not difficult for me to follow his deductions, and to observe the untidiness of attire, the sheaf of legal papers, the watch-charm, and the breathing which had prompted them" (867).

If this is thus Doyle's characterisation of Watson's capacities as a crime solver, the adaptations provide a very different picture. In the BBC TV series, Watson is shown as being capable of at least some detective work, for instance in "The Great Game", the last episode of the first season. In the episode, Watson, on behalf of Holmes' older brother Mycroft, finds himself investigating the death of an MI6 employee who was found killed near train tracks

despite not having a train ticket of any kind on his person.³ The case gets relatively little screen time due to the occurrences of other murders and ticking bombs, though it later turns out to be connected to the string of cases they are investigating as a challenge by Moriarty. When Watson finally gets the chance to visit the scene where the body was found, he is told by a railroad worker that there was not much blood at the scene even though the victim suffered a blow to the head. When Watson sees the railway points, he realizes that the body was left on top of the train and fell off when it made a turn. Holmes then appears behind and reveals that he came to the same conclusion. He also reveals that he has been following Watson from the beginning and compliments him: “I knew you’d get there eventually”. While this case may not have involved the same kind of detail observation that Holmes is best known for, it does show that in the adapted version Watson is made a more competent detective than he is in Conan Doyle’s stories.

Another comparison between the original text and the adaptation can be made at an earlier moment in the same episode, when Watson and Holmes examine a pair of sneakers for clues. Watson picks up on some basic details, such as a faded name written with a felt-tip pen inside one of them suggesting that they belonged to a child and that the soles are worn even though the outsides look new. Holmes compliments him on his skills, but remarks that he “missed almost everything of importance” and points out finer details that Watson missed. The phrase “missed almost everything of importance” is an almost verbatim quote from the story “A Case of Identity” (1891), where Holmes asks Watson to try and make observations of a woman who visits them. In great detail, Watson recounts what she was wearing and describes her as having “a general air of being fairly well-to-do in a vulgar, comfortable, easygoing way”, but fails to notice the finer details, such as a mark above her wrist, and make a deduction from them. While the same phrase was used in both of the above cases, there is a difference

³ The storyline of the episode was based on “The Bruce-Partington Plans” from 1912.

between the situations in which it was used: in *Sherlock*, Watson actually made some correct observations of consequence.

One way in which Guy Ritchie's films change Watson is that he is shown to have learned from Holmes over the course of their adventures together. While the literary Watson, as described above, only showed limited skills at the Sherlockian method of observation and deduction, Jude Law's version in the first film is able to rather quickly figure out what the clues with which he is presented reveal:

“Right, scratches around the keyhole where the watch was wound. What does that tell you?”

“The man was likely a drunk. Every time he wound the watch his hand would slip, hence the scratches.”

“Yes. Very good, Watson. You've developed considerable deductive powers of your own. [...] I see now there are several sets of initials scored into the-”

“Pawnbroker's marks.”

“Excellent.” (*Sherlock Holmes*)

A Game of Shadows takes Watson's detective skills even further by having him use them to identify a would-be assassin by a process of observation and elimination. The Watson of Conan Doyle's stories would probably not have been able to do so, even after all his time spent journaling Holmes' exploits. Because of this, Guy Ritchie's (and actor Jude Law) portrayal of the good doctor becomes more intelligent.

4. A Case of Fidelity

In the past three sections, this essay has illustrated the various changes that have been made to Dr. Watson's character in the adaptations. However, when considering *why* he has been altered the way he has in the adaptations in question it is important to take note of how much has changed culturally, socially and politically from the Victorian age to ours. This section will cover the reasons for why the adaptations might have made such changes, first from a production-related perspective and then from a creative one.

As stated earlier, there are various reasons for why adaptations not just might but *have to* make certain changes from their source material. Hortense Powdermaker summarized it thus: “[The adapter] makes the changes necessary for dramatic effect in another medium, those required to conform to the producer's personal fantasies and his conception of what the public wants, and to meet the taboos of the Production Code, and tailors it all to the screen personalities of the actors who will play the star roles” (qtd. in Whelehan 7). These are aspects of adaptation restrictions that concern its financial production. Furthermore, Stam remarks other such difficulties, such as budget limitations, the shift from literature's single-track nature to film's multitrack, and what he calls “automatic differences” (*Literature and Film*, 16-18). The term refers to aspects that are not described in detail in the source material but which the adaptations create anyway; an example is if a novel mentions that a room has paintings on its walls but does not describe what they are paintings *of*, leaving that to the reader's imagination, but the film adaptation has to add those images. Another kind of necessary alterations, which will be most relevant in this section, pertains to the changes of certain characters and sometimes the plot.

One reason to adjust the characters and plot is to make them fit the views and realities of the time and context in which the adaptations are made, which is not uncommon when doing adaptations of older works (Hutcheon, 142). One such case is a rather controversial adaptation

of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) made in 1999; some viewers were angered by the fact that the slavery subtext in the novel was emphasized in the film (Watson, 53), though it would not have been realistic to make a film featuring slavery today while addressing the issue from a 19th century perspective.

However, though the original Sherlock Holmes stories were written in a societal context vastly different from ours, collectively they do not have any obvious such political or social issues. This is also the case in Guy Ritchie's films; in the first the relationship between Watson and Holmes is explored and the second focuses on the rivalry of Holmes and Moriarty. In the case of *Sherlock*, where the alterations from the source material are perhaps most obvious due to the shift in time and which does have a political subtext in some episodes, the changes to Watson's personality from his originally rather passive character could be intended to make him someone the average modern viewer is more likely to identify with. According to April Toadvine, the BBC version of Watson as a man who searches for a job while recovering from his military life represents the modern-day worries about the economy and military conflicts the average viewer might have (55). There is indeed a change in Watson's story in that respect, since he in the stories apparently practices medicine as his day job and does not suffer much employment problem, though he still comes back from a war in Afghanistan.

One possible reason for the changes to Watson's character is the fact that numerous other filmmakers have also created their own adaptations of Conan Doyle's stories, some more faithful to them than others, which may have served as examples of how to do a good adaptation as well as how to do a bad one. One example of a less faithful adaptation is Nigel Bruce's incarnation from Universal's series in the 1940s played next to Basil Rathbone's Holmes. According to Lars Strand, Bruce seems to have left an imprint on the minds of viewers and shaped the way we picture Watson today despite having been criticized for his

portrayal by later critics. His Watson was something of a bumbler who served as comic relief while his literary counterpart is more competent (62-63). Jude Law's Watson is almost diametrically opposite in that he shows competence as a detective and provides some comic relief through sarcasm and clever remarks rather than tomfoolery.

That being said, there are additional reasons why the adapters might have made changes in the portrayal of Dr. Watson. An obvious one is the way the taste and preferences of audiences and readers regarding entertainment have changed since Conan Doyle's days since we now not only have motion pictures in general but also bombastic blockbusters. In Guy Ritchie's films, Watson, in addition to being more independent and skilled as a detective, tends to become the "straight man" to the idiosyncratic, almost Jack Sparrow⁴-like Sherlock Holmes, which is a change from the literary stories where most of Watson's narration covers his time at Holmes' side while sharing little about himself. Watson is also portrayed as someone who has gained experience from all his years with the great Victorian detective and is actually able to talk back at him, setting himself apart from the original Watson, may have done because the audiences of today would find a character like that more appealing. After all, if someone with Watson's intelligence and combat skills were to be too passive, it would look rather odd.

⁴ A character from the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films.

Conclusions

In 2010, when *Sherlock* was about to premiere, Mark Gatiss, one of the series' creators (who also plays Mycroft Holmes in it), remarked regarding the series' portrayal of Watson that "it's important that Watson is not an idiot, although it's true that Conan Doyle always took the piss out of him. But only an idiot would surround himself with idiots" (qtd. in Thorpe). It is shown that he took that into account when he took part in adapting the stories, as did apparently Guy Ritchie and the others involved in the making of his Sherlock Holmes films.

Though Conan Doyle clearly describes Watson as a fairly intelligent person, his contributions to Holmes' detective work are rather limited. He does, however, provide their partnership with a touch of humanity that Holmes lacks but which the average reader is likely to have. Given that Watson is characterized as not being as sharp minded as Holmes when it comes to solving crimes, it is not hard to jump to the conclusion that he is intellectually inferior to Holmes. However, the eloquent way in which he documents their cases as well as his own budding detective skills indicate the opposite.

Kärrholm described Watson as character "naïve", "less bright" and "not as quick-thinking as the primary detective" (57-58). However, the Watson of *Sherlock* and Guy Ritchie's films does not quite fit the way Kärrholm describes him. While each portrayal of Watson in various ways appears to be stronger on his own than the other in certain aspects, such as Law's Watson displaying better detective skills and Freeman's having a greater part in Holmes' career, they are both made more intelligent and more independent compared to Conan Doyle's characterisation. Ironically, the character who served as namesake for the aforementioned Watson figure is now less of a Watson figure himself.

The two adaptations used for this essay make important changes to Watson's character. The most significant change is related to Watson's role in the story. While Conan Doyle used Watson's character mainly as a narrator, the adaptations give Watson a proper role in the

storyline. The adaptations furthermore make changes in Watson's personality. In the TV series *Sherlock*, Watson emerges as a more patient personality and more capable of detective work himself. And, in Guy Ritchie's films, he is presented as a rather average person (albeit a formidable sword fighter).

Another difference is that Watson's journal, which in the TV series has been given the form of a blog, is given a much more vital role. There, apparently through a combination of Watson's writing skills and the outreach of the Internet, it becomes one of the fundamental reasons for Holmes' rise to fame. Also, more crucially from the viewpoint of adaptation theory, the point of view and focalization have been changed so that they are no longer fixed to Watson; instead, we now see Watson and experience him on his own.

There are a number of possible reasons for why Ritchie and the BBC series may have made the changes to Watson's character that they did. One reason may be because, as stated earlier, the point of view is now different. Since the adaptations present Watson through a camera and in third person, it would not seem natural for them to tell so much about what happens around him but nothing about him personally.

Another possibility related to the previous point is that a completely bland character who does little more than just follow Holmes and document his exploits would not be as appealing as the Watson who is now capable of detective work himself and has arguments with Holmes. Also, Holmes' deductions are an intellectual exercise that needs to be communicated to the viewers to make sense and Watson often plays the role of the listener as Holmes explains his thinking to him, and to the audience.

Thirdly, it is important to remember that the adaptation of Conan Doyle's texts to current films and TV series is a significant leap in time; at least a century has transpired between the time of writing and the production of the adaptations. There have also been numerous other

adaptations which might have served both as sources of inspiration and as examples of what did not work.

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