

Metafiction in the Holmesian World

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ABSTRACT

Metafiction, a literary technique that self-consciously addresses the devices of fiction, finds a unique expression within the Sherlock Holmes canon and its adaptations. This paper explores different kinds of metafictional elements that are embedded in Arthur Conan Doyle's original works, the myriad of adaptations, and modern reinterpretations. Through this examination, the paper elucidates how the structural framework of Holmesian narrative facilitates a critical discourse on storytelling, perennial nature of the character of detective, and the interplay between fiction and non-fiction.

Keywords: Holmesian World, Intertextuality, Metafiction, Self- reflexivity

INTRODUCTION

Metafiction refers to a form of writing that self-consciously addresses the nature of fiction, often blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction. This leads to showcase the artificial nature of the fictional characters. However some critics have noted the disadvantages of using this literary technique. For example, in his analysis of postmodern literature, Frederic Jameson, argues that the self-referential nature of metafiction can lead to a kind of depthlessness in postmodern culture, where the focus on *surface* and *form* detracts the reader from deeper social and political engagement (68). David Foster Wallace, despite using metafiction in his own works, criticizes its overuse in his essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction", suggesting that a relentless focus on irony and self-reference can ultimately be counterproductive and alienating (51). Patricia Waugh, in her book *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, explores both the strengths and limitations of metafiction, noting that excessive self-referentiality can lead to a detachment from emotional engagement and thematic depth (34). Similarly, Linda Hutcheon, in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, acknowledges the value of metafiction but also points out its potential pitfalls, noting that an overemphasis on self-referential techniques can risk becoming self-parody, thus diminishing the impact of the narrative (87). These critics underscore the need for balance in the use of metafictional techniques to ensure that they enhance rather than detract from the narrative's overall impact.

In this context, the *Sherlock Holmes* stories, created by Arthur Conan Doyle, provide fertile ground for exploring the impact of metafiction on the audience and the growth of its literary canon pertaining to the unique narrative structure, character development, and enduring popularity of these stories in contemporary world. On this account, the present paper examines how metafictional techniques are employed in the original Holmes stories and their subsequent adaptations and reinterpretations.

Metafiction in the Original Canon

Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories are rich with metafictional elements, primarily through the narrative voice of Dr. John Watson. Watson's role as both a character in and the chronicler of Holmes's adventures creates a layered narrative that invites readers to question the authenticity and reliability of the account. Doyle's frequent references to Holmes's dissatisfaction with Watson's dramatization of his cases serve to highlight the constructed nature of the narratives.

For instance, in *The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier*, Holmes himself narrates the story, explicitly critiquing Watson's previous accounts. Holmes remarks, "Watson's occasional literary lapses may be forgiven in the light of his devotion to his friend and his work," (Doyle 89) underscoring the tension between the "real" events and their representation in the narrative. In *The Adventure of the Lion's Mane*, Holmes narrates the criminal case himself. He addresses the readers directly, discussing his own perspective on the events and providing insights that only he could give, "I am inclined to think – for I have certain sources of information of my own– that there was more than I had ever understood at the time" (Doyle 128). Hereby, the writer breaks the fourth wall between the readers and the main character.

In the short story, *The Adventure of the Mazarin Stone*, the narration is in the third person, but there is a notable moment where it feels as if the narrator is directly speaking to the readers. The narrative acknowledges Holmes' awareness of his audience, "Holmes seldom laughed, but he got as near it as his old friend Watson could remember, when he brought out this letter, and read it aloud to him." (Doyle 59). This line subtly hints at an awareness of an audience who is familiar with Holmes' and Watson's relationship and their history, thus engaging the readers directly.

Apart from this, in the Preface of *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes*, Doyle addresses the readers directly, discussing the character of Sherlock Holmes and the impact of the stories, "In these pages, I hope to show that my friend Mr. Sherlock Holmes still retains his well-known methods of investigation and that his rapid deductions are as accurate and as serviceable as of you" (Doyle 187). This becomes an apt example of metafiction in the Sherlockian world of detective fiction, as Doyle speaks directly to the readers about the character they have come to know, making them part of the conversation about Holmes' legacy.

Metafiction in Adaptations

The adaptations of Sherlock Holmes, spanning over a century, provide a rich tapestry of metafictional commentary. These adaptations, including films, television series and stage plays, often reflect on their own storytelling processes and the iconic status of Sherlock Holmes.

Film and Television Adaptations

The twenty first century television series *Sherlock*, created by Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss, is a prime example of modern metafiction. The series not only updates Holmes to a contemporary setting but also frequently breaks the fourth wall. For instance, in the episode "The Reichenbach Fall," Holmes's confrontation with Moriarty includes references to their mythic status, suggesting a self-awareness of their roles as legendary figures.

Apart from this, Sherlock often addresses the audience directly or makes remarks that reveal an awareness of his own self being in the fictional narrative. This self-referential humor extends to numerous nods to the original stories and other adaptations, playing with the audience's expectations and familiarity with Holmes lore.

In the 2015 film *Mr. Holmes* also, the aging detective reflects on his legacy, grappling with how his exploits have been romanticized and fictionalized by Dr. Watson. The film delves into the tension between the 'real' Holmes and the legend, with Holmes reading Watson's embellished accounts of his adventures, thus providing a metafictional commentary on his transformation into a popular narrative.

Another example is *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* (1970), which takes a playful and often irreverent look at the Holmes mythos, incorporating elements that suggest an awareness of its own fictional nature. The film portrays Holmes as conscious of his fame and the stories written about him, leading to humorous critiques of his public persona.

Similarly, the 2009 film *Sherlock Holmes* and its sequel *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* use visual techniques like slow-motion and graphic novel-like sequences to draw attention to the storytelling mechanics, thus creating a layer of metafiction by highlighting the constructed nature of the narrative. Characters in these films also reference previous adaptations or well-known lines from the original stories, acknowledging the broader cultural context of Holmes' character. In the CBS series *Elementary*, the modern-day New York City setting allows for references to contemporary culture, creating a dialogue between the classic stories and their modern reinterpretation. The show includes meta-comments on the process of adapting Holmes for a new audience, reflecting on how the character must evolve while staying true to his roots. These metafictional elements in Sherlock Holmes adaptations not only enrich the narrative but also invite the audience to explore the broader implications of storytelling, legacy, and cultural significance.

Literary Pastiche

Sherlock Holmes pastiches that explore metafictional aspects often play with the boundaries between fiction and reality, making Holmes or other characters aware of their literary status. Here are a few notable examples:

The Seven-Per-Cent Solution by Nicholas Meyer (1974)

This novel presents itself as an unpublished manuscript by Dr. Watson, revealing a "true" story of Holmes's treatment for cocaine addiction by Sigmund Freud. The book plays with the idea that Watson's published stories were often inaccurate or embellished. It blends the world of detective fiction and psychoanalysis while commenting on the nature of fiction and the relationship between the author and the readers. By exploring the personal struggles of a protagonist who is not real in the non fictional world, the novel not just showcases postmodernist traits but also subverts the expectations of the detective fiction genre which were present at the time of publishing of the original canon by Doyle.

***The Beekeeper's Apprentice* by Laurie R. King (1994)**

This novel introduces Mary Russell, a young Jewish- American woman, who becomes apprentice to Sherlock Holmes. The book treats the Holmes stories as true events, with Holmes having retired and living in Sussex. The metafictional aspect comes from Russell often referencing Doyle's stories and correcting their inaccuracies. It blends the world of feminism and detection when the novel shows the growth of Russell as a detective in her own right. By highlighting her personal struggles, the novel parodies and pays homage to the original Doyle stories.

***A Study in Emerald* by Neil Gaiman (2003)**

This short story, published in the anthology *Shadows Over Baker Street*, merges the world of Sherlock Holmes with H.P. Lovecraft's mythos. The story is presented as a pastiche of Doyle's style, complete with metafictional references to the famous detective and the inversion of some established norms. It is a blend of horror and mystery, creating a unique genre that immediately points reader's attention to the metafictional nature of the narrative.

***Sherlock Holmes's War of the Worlds* by Manly Wade Wellman and Wade Wellman (1975)**

This crossover pastiche combines Doyle's Sherlock Holmes series with H.G. Wells' "The War of the Worlds." The narrative blends Doyle's and Wells' worlds, suggesting that Holmes's adventures are a small part of a larger, interconnected fictional universe. The novel presents the detective as a part of a setting that is appropriate to science fiction. For example, Holmes and Watson, along with Professor Challenger are engaged in a battle of wits with Martian invaders. This blending of different genres and reimagining of classic stories is a characteristic of postmodernism.

***The Case of the Detective's Smile* by Mark Bourne (2002)**

A short story that appeared in the anthology *Sherlock Holmes in Orbit*, it plays with the idea of Holmes encountering characters from various literary worlds. The story explicitly puts spotlight on the detective's awareness of fictional nature of his own character. For example, the detective Emily is aware that she is a character in the story and often addresses the readers directly. She frequently breaks the fourth wall, acknowledging the readers' presence and commenting on the ongoing narrative. The story pokes fun at common detective fiction tropes such as the detective trusty sidekick and the villain's elaborate scheme. The narrative is full of wordplay, puns and clever turns of phrases, drawing attention to the artificial nature of the story. Emily's narrative is often unreliable and she frequently contradicts herself or withholds information, blurring the lines between truth and fiction. The story also uses humor to subvert expectations and challenge the reader's assumptions about the genre. By incorporating these metaphorical elements, Haddon creates a playful, self-aware narrative that explores the boundaries of story telling and challenges the reader to think critically about the constructed nature of reality.

CONCLUSION

A study of metafictional analysis of the fictional world of *Sherlock Holmes* serves as a powerful tool for examining the nature of storytelling and the relationship between fiction and non-fiction, especially since detective fiction has been viewed as a socio- cultural commentary since the time of its genesis. From Conan Doyle's original stories to their contemporary adaptations and reinterpretations, the Holmesian canon invites readers and viewers to reflect on not just the constructed nature of the narratives but also how multiple layers contribute to the evergreen appeal of the detective, Sherlock Holmes as a literary and cultural icon. Through its layered narratives and self-referential commentary, the Holmesian world continues to captivate and challenge audiences, highlighting the timeless feature of metafictional storytelling.

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