

Gerald Saul, presentation of films of Sherlock Holmes at the “Re-Examining Arthur Conan Doyle: An International Symposium” at the University of Regina, Friday November 7, 2008.

Over the past few months, I have turned my gaze to the film and television adaptations of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories. While this is certainly not a comprehensive study of all of the filmed versions and I have omitted the use of Sherlock Holmes as a minor character, I have looked at a fair cross section of portrayals from the past 80 years. I should admit that I am not tremendously interested in the Holmes character within the written stories and I read none of them in my youth. However, I was naturally very aware of who Sherlock Holmes was, the iconic nature of his wardrobe and deductive investigative style was solidly ingrained with everyone I knew through the myriad of filmic representations. He was as big a part of our cultural mythology as Dracula and Frankenstein. It was not until I met my now wife in 1991 that I turned any serious attention to mystery stories and films, as she is a voracious consumer of Doyle, Christie, Hammet, Stout, Chandler and their ilk.

Thus, carrying with me only the cultural stereotype of the Holmes character, but having neither scholastic nor nostalgic ties to the material, I became a consumer of the mystery films. What I discovered was that depictions of Sherlock Holmes do not vary far from what I always understood of him. However, it is the role of Dr. Watson and the relationship of Watson and Holmes which is most interesting. Now I am certain that some of you are already studying this relationship. The books reveal little about the two of them, yet the cinema obsesses over them.

Of course, we must first ask ourselves why is Watson in the story? In the books, he is an intelligent, educated man, trusted by Holmes, who acts as a middleman between the genius of Holmes and the average intelligence of the common reader. He is able to praise Holmes and TELL US how brilliant a detective Holmes is. However, a central tenant of the cinema is to SHOW, not TELL. Here is where the primary shift in the adaptation occurs.

Since Watson is at Holmes’s side, his actions, reactions, and interactions have been used to SHOW the audience the nature and genius of Holmes. The earliest clip I have is from the 1931 feature [The Speckled Band](#) in which Raymond Massey’s Holmes runs his contemporary agency like a machine. Watson’s role is to contrast Holmes’ cold, proto-computer nature with his own approachable, humanistic side. Women come to Watson for assurances, intimidated by the heartless Holmes. The pattern of using Watson as a sounding board for Holmes to spin out his deductions and for them to discuss the case is established here. These exchanges are infamously dry, amounting to nothing more than exposition contrary to the “show, don’t tell” strategy cinema attempts to maintain. *The Speckled Band*’s German influenced filmmakers finds an intriguing visual approach to this scene, using superimposed images of the characters discussed, but dramatically the role of the scene remains the same.

In 1932, the [Sign of Four](#) begins the rapid, downhill slide for the Watson character. Notice his blank stare in contrast to Holme’s intelligence and focus. Watson, in addition to being a device for exposition, demonstrates Holmes’ intelligence through his own lack of such. The pattern is quickly established that Holmes proves his deductive prowess to Watson’s amazement. It seems that the filmmakers have decided that the

dumber Watson appears, the smarter Holmes appears in contrast. Reaching the pinnacle of incompetence in the popular and well renowned series of films with [Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce](#), Watson is a blithering idiot, his mouth hanging open and he's never able to comprehend his colleagues conclusions. While these films were highly significant in establishing the Holmes mythology as a genius, it also places Watson as the proverbial fool. It was here where I always doubted the relationship of Holmes and Watson. While supposedly a competent doctor and world traveler, Watson is reduced to comic relief. How could Holmes tolerate living with and partnering with such an ass? Could his ego be so big that he'd want such an incompetent near him all the time to win bets from?

In the [half hour British television](#) series produced from 1954-1955, Watson becomes less oafish but continues to be intellectually limited. In these short episodes, the dialogue and occasional voice-over narration are important short-hand devices for story exposition. Otherwise, Holmes and Watson seem to behave like co-workers rather than roommates, let alone best friends.

From Hammer Films, a company best known for its lurid horror films, the 1959 version of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* presents a bold and dynamic Holmes played by Peter Cushing and a Watson whose dialogue seemed trimmed to the bare minimum and a performance, by Andre Morell, where he acts only as an observer, standing in for Holmes when he is absent, standing by his side when Holmes is present. Emphasizing Holmes adventurous side, Watson remains highly neutral. He is there as an accessory to complete Sherlock Holmes, but his role remains unobtrusive. I would suggest that the non-presence of Watson was an attempt to have audiences take Holmes serious again, cutting off the comic relief but not knowing what else to do with the character.

After nearly two decades in which Sherlock Holmes appeared rarely as anything but a parody, came the 1978 Canadian production of *Murder by Decree*. Audiences, although tainted against the character, remained aware of the Holmes genius and this deductive method; his character could not be reinvented. However, Dr. Watson, whose personality in the original stories was less clearly defined, was ripe for renewal. In this new story, Holmes and Watson are on the trail of Jack the Ripper. Finally Watson is able to think for himself and is revealed to have a better instinct for human nature than the detective; Watson takes action in situations where Holmes had less aptitude such as rallying a theatre audience to support the royal family. Holmes and Watson seem, for the first time, to be a well suited team in which Holmes has the intellect and Watson the heart. The conflict between the two reveals their differences, their failings, and their mutual dependence. The clip you will see from this film shows the recurring motif with Watson where he is more connected with food and human comforts than Holmes. I found this arose in many of the adaptations.

1991 brought us another Holmes and Watson, Christopher Lee and Patrick MacNee in BBC's *Sherlock Holmes the Golden Years*. By casting two veteran actors of more-or-less equal stature, the story became a sort of buddy picture with the team of Holmes and Watson behaving like an old married couple, knowing each other much too well, squabbling and chasing after their lost youth (and a large stolen diamond). This became more of a celebrity vehicle and lacked production values or a decent script. In the end, it did little to advance the myth or the genre.

To me, the most astonishing Holmes screen adaptations came from the BBC television series starring Jeremy Brett and David Burke. This series ran from the mid-80s

to the mid-90, adapting most of the Doyle stories to the screen. While generally remaining accurate to the original text, a combination of good directing and performance brought a complex layer of subtext to these versions. These versions are not only the closest adaptation to the original Doyle but also contain the most “real” relationship between Holmes and Watson.

For example, in *A Scandal in Bohemia*, the adaptation retains the scene where Holmes shows the mysterious letter to Watson, asking him to interpret it. Watson makes good progress, reading what he can from the words, the handwriting style, and the type of paper. Holmes continues where Watson leaves off, finding even more discrete clues within the letter. This scene turns its back on the usual Holmes showmanship and demonstrates Watson’s intelligence rather than lack thereof. Holmes proves himself the genius without demeaning anyone, treating Watson as a trusted and intelligent protégé.

I would suggest that whenever Watson is used as a dramatic device for exposition, character defining, or comic relief, the stories invariably succumb to the artificiality that haunts the edges of cinema. With a relationship we can believe in place, the stories, regardless of how artificial they may seem, are imminently more believable.

This evening we will watch *The Naval Treaty* from this series in its entirety. While I have always believed that filmmakers should have license to modify and revise stories that they are adapting to screen, I cannot help but applaud the closeness of these dramatizations. I am impressed with them on many levels, from writing to acting to direction to art direction. You are brought into the world of Sherlock Holmes. These films do credit both to the producers of the films as well as to Doyle, clearly showing off the fine crafting of his stories. I would like to point your attention to the relationship between Holmes and Watson throughout the film. Rarely are they master and servant, nor is one of them definitively superior to the other. Their interplay is complex as we see their respect for each other, with occasional teasing, with trust mixed with uneasiness, with understanding going hand in hand with confusion. This is a portrait of two real human beings who are real friends.

## **Dr. Watson I Presume? Films of Sherlock Holmes**

Presented by Professor Gerald Saul of Department of Media Production and Studies,  
University of Regina, November 7, 2008

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Excerpt from [\*The Speckled Band\*](#), 1931,

Holmes: Raymond Massey      Watson: Athole Stewart  
Writer: W. P. Lipscomb      Director: Jack Raymond

Excerpt from [\*The Sign of Four\*](#), 1932

Holmes: Arthur Wontner      Watson: Ian Hunter  
Writer: W. P. Lipscomb      Director: Graham Cuts

Excerpt from [\*A Study in Scarlet\*](#), 1933

Holmes: Reginald Owen,      Watson: Warburton Gamble  
Writer: Robert Florey      Director: Edwin L. Marin

Excerpt from [\*Dressed to Kill\*](#), 1946

Holmes: Basil Rathbone      Watson: Nigel Bruce  
Writer: Leonard Lee, adapted by Frank Grubber      Director: Roy William Neill

Excerpt from [\*Sherlock Holmes Tv series, Case of the Cunningham Heritage\*](#), 1954

Holmes: Ronald Howard      Watson: H. Marion Crawford  
Writer/Director: Sheldon Reynolds

Excerpt from *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, 1959

Holmes: Peter Cushing      Watson: Andre Morell  
Writer: Peter Bryan      Director: Terrance Fisher

Excerpt from *Murder by Decree*, 1978

Holmes: Christopher Plummer      Watson: James Mason  
Writer: John Hopkins      Director: Bob Clark

Excerpt from *Sherlock Holmes the Golden Years: Incident at Victoria Falls*, 1991

Holmes: Christopher Lee      Watson: Patrick MacNee  
Writer: Bob Shayne      Director: Bill Corcoran

Adventures of Sherlock Holmes Tv series: *The Naval Treaty*, 1984

Holmes: Jeremy Brett      Watson: David Burke  
Writer: Jeremy Paul      Director: Alan Grint