Sherlock Holmes Reimagined: An Exploration of Selected Short Stories from *A Study in Sherlock: Stories Inspired by the Holmes Canon*

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**I. Introduction: A Study in Sherlock**

This article examines contemporary literary recastings of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, concentrating on selected texts from the 2011 short story collection entitled *A Study in Sherlock: Stories Inspired by the Holmes Canon*. The discussion focuses on the new perspectives these contemporary
short fictions contribute in their representations of Holmes and detection, and examines how such texts chime with critical debates on Conan Doyle and recent literary adaptations. The editors of the anthology, Laurie R. King and Leslie S. Klinger, comment on the authors’ different approaches to recasting Conan Doyle’s Holmes: ‘Some recount untold adventures of the Master Detective; others look at him from fresh perspectives; still others listen to the echoes of his passing’ (viii). The title’s pun on the Conan Doyle story ‘A Study in Scarlet’, and the emphasis on the words ‘Holmes canon’, further highlight the tension between the traditional representations of Holmes and the reinvention of his character in these short fictions. Conan Doyle wrote a number of short fictions featuring Holmes, a dimension of his work which constitutes the genre connection to the contemporary detective short stories in A Study in Sherlock. Martin A. Kayman discusses Conan Doyle’s employment of the short story genre, acknowledging its ‘verve’ and ‘the ingenuity of the stories and the skill and economy of their construction’ (48). Due to the complexity and detail of the stories, the article’s primary focus is on the strategies used by these contemporary authors to recast Holmes, rather than on tracing the history of Holmes adaptations and their changing priorities over time.

As we shall see, the stories examined here are indicative of the influence Conan Doyle has had on contemporary detective fiction, and support Ailsa Cox’s observation that: ‘Sherlock Holmes has been a particular favourite for literary reworkings’ (Cox 96). Scholarly attention to the subject of Holmes adaptation and refashioning has grown considerably, as have studies of fandom and fan fiction. Thus, the continued significance of Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes as a literary and cultural figure is both interrogated and expanded in these diverse short stories. In my article, I focus on three specific types of Holmes reimaginings from A Study in Sherlock, namely the
contemporary pastiche, the American-inspired hard-boiled short story, and the Holmes-as-child story. These particular texts have been chosen for their rich and complicated representations and diverse, mainly contemporary settings, aspects which illustrate the complexity of portraying Holmes, and for the specific cultural- and gender-political way they ‘write back to’ the traditional portrayals of his character.

II. Challenging the Sherlock Pastiche

The first story to be examined, the British writer Tony Broadbent’s short story, ‘As to “An Exact Knowledge of London”’, explores questions surrounding adaptation and contemporary Holmes pastiche. The text is set in contemporary times, and describes an unnamed male protagonist’s taxi ride round London visiting famous locations. During the drive, the two men discuss the various Holmes recastings and the fandom industry that has emerged. Acknowledging these developments, Broadbent’s story also references the various adaptations of Conan Doyle and the different actors who have presented Sherlock Holmes. The reader soon identifies the first-person narrator of ‘As to “An Exact Knowledge of London”’ as Dr. Watson, or someone playing his character, through clues in the text, such as the reference to his need for a ‘walking stick’ (Broadbent 17), and his act of maintaining ‘British Army time’ (17). The conversation between the narrator and the taxi driver turns into a discussion of Holmes, as the various destinations the narrator is heading for all feature in Conan Doyle stories (23). The narrator explains that he is writing a book about Holmes (24), thereby adding another layer to the story’s interrogation of textuality. ‘As to “An Exact Knowledge of London”’ further questions the role and position of the detective, and the reader’s assumptions, as it deftly switches the role of the questioning detective to the driver, quizzing his passenger, and finding
himself able to map the passenger’s activities and character on to Dr. Watson, by using Holmesian methods of deduction (26-7): “I’ve found it pays not just to look, but to try to really see.” (27) The driver’s deduction powers surprise the narrator with their Holmesian accuracy: “how could you deduce so much from so little” (27). The notion of deduction alludes to the detective process of reading clues, thus ensuring that the crime motif with its dark connotations is highlighted. Indeed, the driver suggests the idea of textual complexity. Referring to the interplay of the characters of Holmes and Dr. Watson with Conan Doyle, he comments: “It’s always wheels within wheels with them three.” (34).

The story takes a sinister turn, as the driver is revealed to be working for Moriarty (39), tasked with identifying ‘incarnations’ of Holmes. The critic Lynette Porter has said in her discussion of Holmes adaptations in children’s literature that the text: ‘relies on readers’ knowledge of Conan Doyle’s Moriarty and Moran to create the story’s twist’ (195). This reliance on the reader’s ability to link back to Conan Doyle’s texts is at the heart of this adaptation’s success. The narrator reaches his destination, and Holmes appears, as their surveillance of the driver and his master Moriarty is revealed. When Holmes’s name is finally given to the reader, the gratification of suspense reflects the story’s dynamic of withholding and building on information.
Pastiches of Holmes are nothing new, as Peter Ridgway Watt and Joseph Green explain: ‘Hundreds of writers, since the first in 1893, have written Sherlock Holmes pastiches’ (1). Similarly, critical and scholarly engagement with Sherlock Holmes has increased in recent decades, Ridgway Watt and Green assert (1). Thereby it stages an encounter between the ‘texts’ written about Holmes (film adaptations, Holmes tourism and fandom, etc.) and the appearance of the fictional characters as voices in the actual narrative. Broadbent’s cunning tale builds on, and satirizes, Holmes pastiches and fandom; playing on the reader’s familiarity with ‘the original’, while simultaneously disturbing assumptions about ‘originality’ and ‘authenticity’ through its use of recycled imagery. The title of ‘As For “An Exact Knowledge of London”’, echoing Conan Doyle’s original short story ‘The Red-Headed League’ (Doyle), foregrounds this riddle of allusion. Broadbent’s tale problematizes the relationship between the ‘authentic’ Holmes portrayed by Conan Doyle and later recastings. The phrase, ‘in constant reinvention of itself’ (17), used to describe the metropolitan setting, is equally applicable to the character of Sherlock Holmes, and it is precisely on this ambiguity and mobility of identity that the story’s enquiry rests. These narrative features highlight the ambiguities of language and identity in relation to Holmes, blurring the lines between fiction and reality, in the playful encounter between texts and modern London settings.

III. Hard-Boiled Recastings

The ‘Americanization’ of Holmes11 is foregrounded through the next two short stories to be discussed, by Gayle Lynds and John Sheldon, and Lee Child respectively. Here the figure of Sherlock Holmes, and the literary language conventionally associated with Conan Doyle’s Holmes narratives, undergoes further adaptation in a North American guise. In both cases the
stories pivot around a discursive refashioning, through the employment of a narrative mode associated with hard-boiled crime fiction. The implication of this recasting for Holmes’s character is that his manner, discourse, and contextual and discursive parameters, are altered to match a modern urban setting. These hybrid short stories merge a hard-boiled sensibility with humour, thereby creating what John Cawelti calls a ‘genteel’ ambience, which impacts on the portrayal of Holmes and the type of crime he encounters in a contemporary hard-boiled mode.

The American authors Gayle Lynds and John Sheldon have co-authored the short story ‘A Triumph of Logic’, a creative revisioning of canonical Holmes using this approach. The story opens on the steps of a modern-day courthouse, which immediately foregrounds matters of crime and justice. An irreverent tone is introduced from the start, the hallmark of the hard-boiled mode and its wisecracks. The plot in ‘A Triumph of Logic’ turns on the transformation of what at first appears to be the private tragedy of a young woman’s suicide, into a murder involving a public male figure of high standing – a judge. The revelation of the secret cocaine addiction and subsequent downfall of Judge Watts, a senior judge described as having ‘a profile like Basil Rathbone’s’ (200), and ‘known as the Sherlock Holmes of the judiciary’ (201), is key in ‘A Triumph of Logic’ and its questioning of characters and roles. Incorporating a reference to Holmes, ‘Crime is common. Logic is rare’, from Conan Doyle’s ‘The Adventure of the Copper Beeches’, Lynds’s and Sheldon’s story however questions the Holmesian emphasis on logic, by insisting on the equal importance of emotion in solving crime (216). This change of emphasis underscores the story’s insistence on the similarities between detective and criminal, blurring the boundaries between their positions and the values they represent. Lynds’s and Sheldon’s witty afterword supports this alternative reading of the characters
and a subplot (217) involving a switch of roles for the villain and detective.

The title of the British author Lee Child’s story, ‘The Bone-Headed League’, brilliantly resonates with Conan Doyle’s narrative ‘The Red-Headed League’ (Child 94), by foregrounding the interplay between original and adaptation. The use of the contemporary word ‘bone-headed’, meaning ‘stupid’, imbues the story with irony and self-deprecating humour. A central feature in hard-boiled discourse, humour is also used to undermine the authority of the unnamed narrator. For the narrator turns out to be the ‘bonehead’, as he discovers he has been used as a decoy by Secret Service, and ends up in prison as the fall guy. ‘The Bone-Headed League’ places national identity and its complex construction at the heart of its examination of the assumptions regarding culpability and justice which drive crime fiction. The fact that the American narrator of the short story describes himself as an ‘Anglophile’ (87), and his implicit criticism of the FBI: ‘For once the FBI did the right thing: it sent the Anglophile to England’ (87), highlights the issue of ‘Britishness’ and Holmes.

Set in London and featuring Baker Street as the crime scene, ‘The Bone-Headed League’ plays up its allusions to Conan Doyle fictions. The narrator himself acknowledges that these allusions: ‘send a little jolt through my Anglophile heart (Child 87) The reference to the term ‘Anglophile’ underlines the identification of Sherlock Holmes with ‘Britishness’, underscored by the narrator’s humorous quips at British customs and police methods (88), and allusions to Holmes and his complicated relationship with the police. This aspect is reflected in the narrator’s banter with Police Inspector Rose over Holmes. Child’s story self-consciously highlights attempts at interpretation and problem-solving, mocking the police inspector’s effort at ‘reading’ Conan Doyle’s story ‘The Red-Headed League’:
'He started to think the story he had read could be approached obliquely, as if it were written in code' (93). Conan Doyle’s ‘The Red-Headed League’ is a story about deception and ‘decoy’ (92), and Child’s text draws on similar themes. However, in contrast, Child’s adaptation employs a contemporary setting, with an American narrator out of his depth and without a Watson sidekick.

‘The Bone-Headed League’ closes as the narrator comes to the realization that he was in fact decoyed, and was being used. He finds himself imprisoned, a victim of a miscarriage of justice, having allowed himself to be seduced by Conan Doyle’s fiction into the pursuit of ‘fun Anglophile things’ (93-4). The irony of his prison reading – *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* – is not lost on the reader. Child cleverly constructs the story so that the reader begins to put two and two together, suspecting that the narrator is decoyed, before the character himself eventually makes that realization. For the narrator of ‘The Bone-Headed League’, his deadpan narrative voice and retrospective insight render him a typical anti-hero.

Having thus adapted a hard-boiled, dead-pan discursive tone to the Holmes recasting, the second of these two stories also traces a gradual move, away from the detective ‘partnership’ of Holmes and Watson envisioned by Conan Doyle, towards a focus on the single individualized detective character, epitomized by Raymond Chandler’s statement about the independent detective: ‘down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid’ (Chandler 18)\(^{14}\). As with the use of the discursive narrative mode, this move is influenced by the American hard-boiled Private Investigator crime fiction (Rzepka 180) - what is lacking, however, is the dimension of Watson as Holmes’s sidekick.
IV. *Boys and Girls*

The following two short stories both engage with the character of Sherlock Holmes in an imaginative way through their use of a child protagonist emulating Holmes. Interestingly, both texts continue the trend, observed in my previous discussion, of using a single Holmesian detective without a sidekick. Evidently, these two short stories focus on pivotal moments of self-realization and personal development in their young protagonists’ lives, and the connection between that self-realization and the character of Holmes. Consequently, in both cases, a sense of self-reliance and individualism is crucial to their emerging self-identity, and this forces the significant change in the familiar Holmes-Watson pairing, to a single character.\(^{15}\) Jacqueline Winspear’s short story, ‘A Spot of Detection’, operates through the reader’s knowledge of detective fiction’s canonical authors and texts, and the connection between Conan Doyle and Raymond Chandler via that tradition. Laura Lippman’s short story, ‘The Last of Sheila-Locke Holmes’, is a more introspective text, seen through the personal reminiscing of an older female character reflecting on a turning point in her life when she was eleven. Commenting on Conan Doyle’s Holmes, the critic Megan Hoffman argues that: ‘The Holmes of Conan Doyle’s stories is a paragon of rationalized masculinity, a seemingly all-knowing father figure who polices gender roles and social order’ (81).

These stories recast Holmes as child characters, with the child detective figure as ‘self-styled expert’ (Kayman 50) following Holmes’s strategies. In doing so, they push the reader towards rethinking some of their expectations regarding Holmes, his use of language, his habits, and not least the crimes he solves. The stories also foreground issues related to gender in the recasting of Holmes, an aspect examined by Nicola Allen, who highlights ‘the usually
male-centric world of figures such as Sherlock Holmes’ (171). Lippman’s short story in particular serves this function of critically interrogating the gender-political dimensions of Holmes adaptations. As Allen points in her examination of detective fiction featuring child characters, such contemporary adaptations constitute a ‘metafictional engagement’ (169) with the crime fiction tradition. Both short stories engage directly and indirectly with Conan Doyle’s canonical Sherlock Holmes works, by incorporating depictions of characters reading about Holmes, or modelling their detective activity on Holmes, or echoing Holmes stories.

The short story ‘A Spot of Detection’, by the British writer Jacqueline Winspear, features a child protagonist called Ray, who the reader later learns could be a fictional portrayal of the American crime writer Raymond Chandler, depicted when he was living in London with his family as a boy just after 1900 (362). The story explores young Ray’s imaginative engagement with Conan Doyle’s Holmes stories during time spent off school with an illness. On being sent home from school due to illness, Ray overhears what he assumes to be a domestic quarrel from inside a house, followed by a gunshot (Winspear 360-1), and imagines that a murder has taken place. The book he reads while recuperating from his illness, The Boys’ Sherlock Holmes, ‘feed[s] his appetite for murder’ (362) and ‘inspired him’ (371). The boy sets himself a challenge: to solve the crime he believes he overheard in three days, just like Sherlock. Because he is at home ill, Ray has to sneak out of the house when his mother and aunt go out, to undertake his detective investigation. To aid him in his detection, Ray assembles his own manual from snippets from A Study in Scarlet (364). In seeking to order Conan Doyle’s fiction into a useable detective manual, Ray runs into considerable difficulty, a point finally proved at the end when, although using Holmes’s strategies for deduction, Ray reaches the wrong conclusion.
When confronting the local police with his findings on the suspected murder, he is dismissed by the Detective Inspector with a patronizing: ‘Been reading a bit of old Sherlock, have we, son’ (Winspear 377), thereby mocking the idea of the boy following Holmes’s example.

Theatricality and performance are central to ‘A Spot of Detection’ and its portrayal of Conan Doyle’s character. Keen to emulate Sherlock Holmes, young Ray acquires the necessary objects and a disguise for his detective ‘case’, to enable him to copy Holmes’s look, through the adoption of the iconic Holmesian imagery. Later in the story, it emerges that the shouting and threats that Ray overheard from inside a house, were in fact two actors rehearsing their lines, and not the sounds of a violent crime being committed. Thus, Winspear foregrounds the significance of the imagination and the reader’s active participation in the crime plot, but also highlights the perils of confusing fiction with reality. The advice given to Ray by Detective Inspector Stickley – ‘Deeper questioning’ (380) – cautions the boy against the uncritical application of abstract principles of detection, based on Conan Doyle’s fictional model, to real-life phenomena. However, young Ray’s nascent experimentation with detection leaves a deep and lasting impression. As the reader observes Ray discovering the name ‘Philip Marlowe’ during his study of Elizabethan poetry (382), we (with our knowledge of the detective fiction canon) begin to understand the profound implications that Winspear’s story is suggesting. Thereby, the story provides a fictional context for the creation of Chandler’s detective character Philip Marlowe, one of the most influential figures to have emerged after Conan Doyle’s Holmes. Winspear’s snapshot of the young writer yet to grow into his craft also suggests that, although Marlowe’s discursive and detective strategies are different from Holmes’s, they too emerge from a preoccupation with unlocking puzzles and solving problems, and address a human need to
rectify wrongdoing.

The other short story from *A Study in Sherlock*, which features a Holmesian child protagonist, is the American writer Laura Lippman’s ‘The Last of Sheila-Locke Holmes’. This text specifically focuses on gendered experience in relation to Holmes’s character, reflecting Michael Cornelius’s observation that: ‘Girl sleuths must [...] navigate their complex relationships to their own gender’ (Cornelius (a) 2). Set in contemporary America, and concentrating on the private and domestic sphere, the story differs widely from Conan Doyle’s creations; however, the close connection to Holmes’s character is reinforced by the story’s title. The text focuses on an eleven-year-old female protagonist, Sheila, and her summer holiday quest for independence, through taking on an investigative detective persona, based on Holmes. Her identification with Holmes and detection is inspired by a deerstalker hat that she discovers among her mother’s old things, in an ‘unmarked box’ (218). Sheila associates her detective identity with the visual image of Sherlock Holmes, not the textual representation, ‘Despite her deerstalker cap, she did not read Sherlock Holmes’ (221). She assumes another name to reflect her detective persona, ‘Sheila Locke-Holmes’ (Lippman 218) - a name suggestive of Holmes, but with a twist that denotes the gendered differentiation that this story problematizes. Echoing this point, Megan Hoffman argues that: ‘Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories provide one of the examples of “classic” detective fiction that has been appropriated by women writers seeking to create new narrative paradigms by reinterpreting conventional plots’(81).

In the story, Sheila’s detective activities focus on family and domestic secrets, one of which is the fact that her beloved father has been married before. Following her discovery, Sheila begins to reflect on the shifting and
ambiguous nature of truth: ‘all these things went unsaid. Which, to Sheila’s way of thinking, was also a kind of lying, but the kind of lying of which grown-ups approved’ (232). This realization makes Sheila re-evaluate the values represented by each of her parents. From her initial perception that her mother is: ‘not the kind of mother who was actually up-to-date on what was cool’ (Lippman 219), she gradually recognizes her shared commonalities with her mother. The story suggests that those commonalities are linked to the experience of being a female circumscribed by a patriarchal culture which values certain qualities in women (such as beauty and popularity) whilst devaluing others. Identity and its multiple layers are the mystery to be ‘solved’ in ‘The Last of Sheila-Locke Holmes’. Through a process of retrospective questioning, the ambiguity around the nature of concealed information within the family promotes a rethinking of ethical and moral dimensions.

These two short stories both use child characters, cast in the role of Sherlock Holmes, as the focal point for their exploration of the problem of identity and its multi-layered, multi-dimensional nature, and to probe the problematic question of individual and collective ‘truths’. These narratives reflect on the significance of children’s imaginative engagement with Holmes as part of their development. For them, Conan Doyle’s detective figure Sherlock Holmes serves as that pivotal character which crystallizes poignant and sometimes uncomfortable questions around language, gender and agency.

V. Conclusion: Versions of Holmes

This essay has explored a selection of contemporary recastings of Conan Doyle’s character Sherlock Holmes, taken from the recent anthology, A Study in Sherlock. The parameters of this exploration of contemporary representations of Holmes have been defined by pertinent questions
surrounding textual revisioning. By focusing on those *A Study in Sherlock* short stories which feature varied, mostly contemporary settings (Winspear’s story is a historical pastiche), the discussion has concentrated on the diverse, sometimes conflicting ways in which Holmes is reinvented or recast in recent adaptations. The article’s investigation has preoccupied itself with specific types of adaptation, namely the extent of identification with the character of Sherlock Holmes and a particular literary discourse, and the challenges to the construction of Holmes posed by gender and age-related revisionings.

The short story genre is still frequently viewed as a neglected and overlooked literary form (Lasdun). However, examinations of uses of the short story genre suggest that this format may lend itself to exploring ideas, motifs, characters, or techniques, without being bound by a traditional crime fiction plot (Beyer 2013, 38). As we have seen in this article, the openness that the short story format affords has contributed to allowing the selected texts to present a number of ways of rethinking and adapting Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes character, through strategies such as the evocation of affect, allusion, and humorous subversion. Therefore, it seems evident that the postmodern scepticism of the positive closure offered in traditional crime fiction (Rzepka 235), is further enhanced in these short stories.

The short fictions in *A Study in Sherlock* ‘write back to’ the assumptions, voiced by Broadbent’s taxi driver and self-appointed expert on Holmes, that only the original is of value, and that later recastings are rubbish: ‘”all that fake Holmes nonsense that gets cobbled together [...] nothing compares to Conan Doyle’s original stories”’ (Broadbent 32). These texts question the assumptions of value and longevity behind notions such as ‘originality’ when used to belittle the significance and merit of later textual revisionings. They suggest that an important aspect of Conan Doyle’s continued relevance
and vitality lies in the way in which authors, readers and audiences have reinterpreted the Sherlock Holmes character. As we have seen, far from presenting merely pastiche, these texts offer challenging and intriguing Holmes fictions which take Conan Doyle’s creation in new directions.

WORKS CITED


Hayaki, Reina. “Fictional Characters as Abstract Objects: Some Questions.”


1 My essay focuses on selected stories from the book, rather than all the texts.

2 This particular anthology was chosen, due to the encouragement of experimentation and the breadth and scope offered in its reimaginings. For example, as well as more conventional short fiction, the book contains a graphic fiction and a spoof interview with a fictional character from a contemporary recasting.

3 There isn’t the scope within the present article for in-depth discussion of the history of Holmes pastiche, nor for detailed pursuits of links between individual stories and Conan Doyle’s texts.

4 Conan Doyle wrote fifty-six short stories featuring Holmes (Hayaki 141).

5 My discussion assumes that readers are largely familiar with Conan Doyle’s works and with the character of Sherlock Holmes.

6 The book will from here onwards be referred to as A Study in Sherlock.

7 By this I mean inspired by the American hard-boiled crime fiction tradition.
All references to the individual authors’ nationality are taken from the biographical notes following each short story.

Recent examples of scholarly engagement with Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes figure and its recasting and adaptation include: Vanacker and Wynne (Eds.) (2012); Dirda (2012); Porter (Ed.) (2012). Commenting on this, Ridgway Watt and Green state that: ‘Since 1944, literature on Holmes has increased enormously and so have collections, anthologies and indexes. Critical studies, biographies, essays, radio and television scripts, films and plays abound’ (1).

See also Neil McCaw on the politics of Holmes adaptation (36).

The idea of the ‘Americanization’ of Holmes is also discussed in Porter (a) in relation to TV adaptation.

John Cawelti uses the term ‘genteel’ to describe the ambience achieved by Erle Stanley Gardner in his Donald Lam Bertha Cool books (Cawelti 139).

For further discussion of Lynds’s spy fiction, see my article on her work (Beyer 2012(a)). I also touch on 'A Triumph of Logic' in my interview with Lynds (see Beyer 2012 (b), 204-205).

The Chandler quote is also cited in Cawelti (150-151) in his discussion of the hard-boiled mode.

Interestingly, some other recent adaptations featuring child narrators mirror this trend, such as Andrew Lane’s ‘Young Sherlock Holmes’ series.

This term is used here with reference to the conversation taking place in the story around Conan Doyle’s text versus later recastings. The assumptions behind the conversation are problematic, because they suggest that the original work is of intrinsic value, and that the recasting is nothing but a pale imitation of that original.