**Heteronormativity and Queerbaiting in BBC's Sherlock**

**Rating:** Not Rated  
**Archive Warning:** No Archive Warnings Apply  
**Fandom:** Sherlock (TV)  
**Relationship:** Sherlock Holmes/John Watson  
**Character:** Sherlock Holmes, John Watson, Irene Adler (Sherlock Holmes), Jim Moriarty  
**Additional Tags:** Essays, Essay, non-fiction, Critical Essay  
**Series:** Part 1 of My Essays  
**Stats:** Published: 2017-12-13 Words: 4492

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**Heteronormativity and Queerbaiting in BBC's Sherlock**

by booksblanketsandtea

**Summary**

An exploration of how The BBC’s television show Sherlock manages to not only take up heteronormativity but also challenge it through an easily accessible queer reading of the characters.

Great literature is almost always an exploration of people and society; a good story is a comment on humanity’s fears, hopes, and values. The context of a society can never truly be removed from the material it produces, and as media has developed and the way we tell stories has changed over time, we can see that the dominant ideologies within society extend their influence over not just literature, but also film, television, and even video-games. Authoritative ideologies such as heteronormativity, in particular, are often depicted through the medium of television, some shows acting as a confirmation, some acting as a challenge, and some acting as both. The BBC’s television show *Sherlock* is a modern-day adaptation of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s stories featuring the great detective Sherlock Holmes and his companion Doctor John Watson which manages to not only take up heteronormativity but also challenge it through an easily accessible queer reading of the characters. *Sherlock* is very open to a queer interpretation, despite the creator’s attempt to distance the show from a non-heterosexual reading through queerbaiting and deliberately undermining those who view the show as a queer text. The relationship between Sherlock and John, the use of mirroring between characters, the ironic way that heteronormativity is enforced upon a lesbian character and the way that Sherlock himself is portrayed as a post-human being all lend themselves to a queer analysis of the text, perhaps in spite of the creator’s intentions.

The BBC’s *Sherlock* enforces heteronormative standards through the practice of queerbaiting, a strategy employed by media creators in which a queer relationship is suggested between two characters (usually of the same sex) in order to gain the attention of the LGBT+ audience – but the
relationship is never intended to be actualised and the creators often respond to queer readings with “denial and mockery [to] reinstate a heteronormative narrative that poses no danger of offending mainstream viewers at the expense of queer eyes” (Judith Fathallah, cited in Brennan). Heteronormativity is the concept surrounding the normalisation of heterosexuality, and the belief that people belong to a binary system of gender (male and female) and as such have natural, predetermined roles in life based on their respective gender. It perpetuates the idea that heterosexuality is the baseline against which other sexualities are to be compared, and that any other sexuality is to be considered ‘other’ - the result of which can often be the dehumanisation and stigmatisation (in varying degrees of severity) of those who do not identify as heterosexual or who do not otherwise meet the heteronormative standards of society. This compulsory heterosexuality is tied into not just sexuality, but the very structures of society, and is “connected to central social institutions, such as the family and marriage” (Herz). The French philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault believed that society is influenced and created by various institutions, both public and private, that in turn are formed from the “relationships between different people, and between people and objects” (Danaher, 36). Understanding that heteronormativity is both informed and enforced by the very institutions that Foucault describes (such as education, religion, government, and family) and that the influence of these institutions is all but inescapable within society, it can perhaps be understood why LGBT+ audiences become frustrated by queerbaiting – an expression of heteronormativity that not only teases the queer viewer with the apparent promise of representation in a generally hetero-dominated medium, but that often vehemently denies the very possibility or existence of a queer reading of the text. Such readings could simply be the result of an audience recognising certain coding within the text that would suggest a non-heterosexual relationship, or they could be readings by an audience informed by Queer theory. A body of thinking that takes its roots from gender studies, feminist theory and post-structuralist philosophy, Queer Theory seeks to question what is naturalised and privileged within society and to ask who is then excluded and/or oppressed by those societal norms. Queer theory generally stands as a challenge to the normalised, and as a subversion of static identity.

Though the creators of the BBC’s *Sherlock* also fall into this pattern of queerbaiting as an extension of heteronormativity, it has not stopped fans and academics alike from reading the show through a queer lens, not just in terms of the character’s sexuality, but also in terms of how they are depicted as a person. The relationship between Holmes and Watson has long been under scrutiny, and the bond between Sherlock and John in the BBC’s modern-day adaptation is no exception. The first episode of the series, ‘A Study in Pink’ sets up the underlying connection between Sherlock and John from the moment the two characters meet, and within the first half of the episode three different characters have mistaken their connection for a non-platonic relationship. First, their landlady Mrs Hudson asks if they’ll “be needing two bedrooms”, and then Sherlock’s older brother Mycroft enquires whether there is to be a “happy announcement by the end of the week”. As they stake out an address looking for a potential murderer under the guise of a candlelit dinner (deemed “more romantic” by the restaurant owner), even the highly observant Sherlock seems to interpret John’s questions as romantic intent:


SHERLOCK: John, um ... I think you should know that I consider myself married to
my work, and while I’m flattered by your interest, I’m really not looking for any ...

JOHN: No. No, I’m not asking. No. I’m just saying, it’s all fine.

SHERLOCK: Good. Thank you.

Sherlock’s response to John’s apparent interest is stated “without referring to an incompatible sexuality” (Valentine), and the series continues to drop these hints and jokes about the relationship between Sherlock and John with many other characters assuming that the two are in a romantic relationship. This homoromantic subtext between the detective and the doctor is blatant enough that popular media picked up on it within days of the shows airing – it is even addressed by one notable interview published before Sherlock premiered. Lucy Connolly interviewed Benedict Cumberbatch (who stars as Sherlock Holmes) ahead of the first season – this interview is notable “for the ways in which it attempted to prepare its audience for the depiction of Sherlock and John’s relationship” (Greer, 62). In the interview, Cumberbatch both predicts and rejects the homoerotic reading of Sherlock, and the interview is headlined “Holmes was not gay... he and Watson had the first bromance” in a deliberate, pre-emptive defence of Sherlock’s heterosexuality. Despite this apparent desire to portray Sherlock in a non-homosexual manner, the show continues to make suggestive comments about the sexuality of the two lead characters, the running joke from the first episode recurring at least once in every episode following.

Even when John is given a steady romantic relationship in the form of Mary Morstan, who he marries in ‘The Sign of Three’ (S3E2), there is always at least one comment, directly or implied, about the relationship between John and Sherlock. John’s marriage is originally seen both by the audience and by Sherlock as John succumbing to heteronormativity; during his best man speech, Sherlock describes weddings as “a celebration of all that is false and specious and irrational and sentimental in this ailing morally compromised world.” Despite this, the relationship between Sherlock and John is still at the forefront, and when it is revealed that Mary is a (not so) retired assassin, Sherlock explains to John that he is “abnormally attracted to dangerous situations and people” and that he shouldn’t be surprised that his wife conforms to that pattern. Mary confirms later in the conversation, “it’s what you like”. Both Sherlock and Mary can see the similarities between the two of them, not just in how they share certain deductive skills and an at times abrasive personality, but perhaps especially in how John is drawn to them. This use of mirroring between characters is a common theme in the BBC’s Sherlock. In the first episode of the second season, ‘A Study in Belgravia’, Sherlock and John go up against lesbian dominatrix, Irene Adler. There is a moment where John confronts her about lying about her death to Sherlock. In this scene, Irene manages to be presented as both a confirmation of the heteronormative and as a queer character:

JOHN: You… flirted with Sherlock Holmes?

IRENE: At him. He never replies.

JOHN: No, Sherlock always replies, to everything. He’s mister punchline. He will
outlive God trying to have the last word.

IRENE: Does that make me special?

JOHN: I don’t know. Maybe.

IRENE: You jealous?

JOHN: We’re not a couple.

IRENE: Yes you are. [she sends a text] There. ‘I’m not dead. Let’s have dinner.’

JOHN: Who the hell knows about Sherlock Holmes. But, for the record, if anyone out there still cares, I’m not actually gay.

IRENE: Well I am. Look at us both.

Though she identifies as a lesbian, Irene is still depicted as being attracted to Sherlock, and her homosexuality is pushed aside for a more heteronormative interaction with the male detective. While this can clearly be taken as heteronormativity being privileged over homosexuality (and specifically, female homosexuality) at the same time it presents Irene as queer, as a changing, non-static identity. Her career as a professional dominatrix already places her in opposition to a heteronormative view of sexuality, but as the episode progresses and Irene becomes more intrigued by and attracted to Sherlock, her identity is further queered. Her discussion with John, in which she openly declares herself to be gay, raises the idea of a more complex understanding of sexuality than is generally seen in conjunction with a character that has been deliberately heteronormised. Irene’s attraction to Sherlock not just presents her as a queer and complex character, but acts as a reflection for John who is portrayed as steadfast in his heterosexuality but with numerous nods and comments that draw the audience to believe that John’s own captivation with the detective goes past the platonic homosocial to the homoromantic or homosexual. Irene “appears able to comprehend John’s attachment to Sherlock because she mirrors him in her own” (Greer, 64). In being portrayed as a mirror to John, Irene’s queerness, in turn, leads to a queer viewing of John in which both characters are implied to move beyond the binary of hetero and homosexual through their interest in Sherlock.

The depiction of characters as reflections of each other is not the only way that characters are queered in the BBC’s Sherlock. The character of Sherlock is also queered through interactions with his arch nemesis, James Moriarty, who is presented as the detective’s darker mirror image. Though the mirroring of Sherlock and ‘Jim’ acts to queer their identities in a similar manner as other instances of character doubling in the series, the relationship between them is queered deliberately by the show creators as a means of undermining those with a queer reading of Sherlock. A direct use of queerbaiting can be seen between these two characters and it is used deliberately to reinforce a heteronormative point of view. The first episode of series three, ‘The Empty Hearse’ follows on from the famous ‘Reichenbach Fall’ episode that had fans worldwide trying to work out how Sherlock survived falling from the top of St Bart’s hospital, has a scene that depicts one such fan in a negative and borderline mocking manner. The scene starts with Sherlock and Moriarty sitting on the top of St Bart’s, laughing as together they appear to fake Sherlock’s death using a mannequin with a printout of Sherlock’s face taped to it. The two catch eyes, pause in their laughter, and slowly lean in- before the scene is interrupted by the male leader of Sherlock’s fan club, Anderson, saying “What?! Are you out of your mind?” The camera cuts to a young
woman with a nose piercing who says “I don’t see why not. It’s just as plausible as some of your theories.” This reference to the many fan theories that came about post ‘The Reichenbach Fall’ – many of which not only discussed how Sherlock might have survived the fall but also considered the development of Sherlock’s relationships with both John and Moriarty. Notably, it is often those who view Sherlock through a queer lens that accuse the writers of queerbaiting, “primarily because of [the inclusion of] such textual elements, even as show producers have sought to shut down Johnlock readings” (Collier, cited in Ng). This depiction of one such fan is at best a nod to the large fandom culture that sprung up around Sherlock, and at worst a deliberate portrayal of those exact same fans as ridiculous and over the top as a way to undermine their reading of Sherlock as a queer text.

The decision to use a young woman as a means of representing this particular kind of fan theory (one that focuses on Sherlock’s relationships rather than the crimes he solves and the way he survives the second season finale) was no doubt deliberate, and it reads as viewing female fans with a derisive sort of condescension. This tendency to view female fans with contempt is a common trend, not just in fan culture itself but in representations of ‘geek girls’ in popular media. Often women who identify with fan culture will be portrayed in a negative light in ways that men who identify with that same culture are not. This could be because “nerd women… reject hegemonic social practices, namely, hegemonic femininity” (Robinson, 13). This inclination of ‘geek girls’ to reject dominant gender norms could be seen as opposition to heteronormativity, and the negative depiction of the ‘geek girl’ on Sherlock a response to this position. The scene alienates her through the negative reactions to her theory, and the way she is portrayed as a caricature of a fan (slightly overweight, heavy eye make-up, a nose piercing) the writers ensure that the viewer understands that she is part of a specific culture that is to be considered ‘other’. Because of this implied position the young woman holds in relation to society as a whole, the scene makes it clear to the viewer that the fictional fan’s theory is to be laughed at and not taken seriously. This negative depiction could also be an extension of society’s predisposition to trivialising women, their opinions, and their expressions of sexuality. The depiction of the young woman in ‘The Empty Hearse’ discussing theories with her fellow Sherlock Holmes fans is intended to imply that her theory about how the detective survived falling from the roof of St Bart’s (with the help of Jim Moriarty) is based on her own, voyeuristically portrayed desires, rather than any reasonable extrapolation, and so is not a legitimate reading of the possibilities. The show portrays this fictional fan as unreasonable, and undermines her theory not just by portraying her interest in the characters as weird and unusual; in comparison, Anderson’s own interest is not given the same spin. The show does this through the almost comical way her theory is depicted, with both Sherlock and Jim laughing together as though the very theory itself was a joke. This is underpinned by Anderson questioning the young woman’s sanity. In doing so, the writers (through Anderson) undermine the theories of real-life fans who view Sherlock through a queer lens; those who considered not just how the detective survived, but also how his relationships with other characters in the show could potentially develop in the coming season.

This condescending attitude towards fans who read Sherlock through a queer lens – and in particular, female fans – is an attitude that creators Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss have become known for in regards to the Sherlock fandom. Despite their emphatic position that there is no room for a queer reading of their adaptation of the Sherlock Holmes stories – a response that fans have viewed largely as disappointing, perhaps even more so considering Mark Gatiss’ own position as a well-known gay public figure in Britain – the popular adaptation of Conan Doyle’s detective has been viewed through a queer lens almost as much as (if not more so) than the original Holmes stories. This is perhaps to do with the medium in which the narrative is portrayed – to be viewed
queerly is to be seen, and it could be argued that the form of television is, by its very nature, more open to different viewings than words upon a page. The BBC’s depiction of Sherlock is particularly accessible to a queer reading, and “Holmes’s queerness is the result of a collection of nonnormative characteristics that exclude him from traditional paradigms of identity and sexuality” (Valentine). The detective’s ambiguous sexuality, the way he is mirrored by other characters, and the specific ways he is depicted as a human being all serve to queer the famous detective.

As a character, Sherlock is often mechanised by the way he describes himself and by the way the show is edited – “both Sherlock himself and the show’s omniscient perspective seem to see him more as a technology than as a person” (Coppa, 211). The detective is, at times, depicted as cold and unfeeling; he is a self-proclaimed “high functioning sociopath” and often refers to his brain as a “hard-drive”. Sherlock is first introduced through the form of a text appearing on screen, and this association between the detective and technology continues throughout the series. When he accesses his ‘Mind Palace’, a technique used to strengthen memory recall, Sherlock is depicted in a manner that is suggestive of a computer programme; data scrolls before his eyes and he recalls knowledge by making connections in a way that is reminiscent of the way hyperlinks are used in digital literature to draw the reader onwards towards further information. In a way, Sherlock is depicted as a post-human being; he is queered in the way he deliberately attempts to distance himself from a heteronormative, generic, ‘human’ experience. In the first episode of the series, Sherlock claims to be a “high functioning sociopath” – he medicalises himself in order to create distance between him and those around him, but also to allow him to create a disconnect to his own feelings. Steven Moffat explains that Sherlock has “repressed his emotions, his passions, his desires, in order to make his brain work better” (Moffat, cited in Martin). Sherlock does this by abstaining from common aspects of humanity; when on a case, he often refuses to eat or sleep, the detective attempting to streamline his intellect by suppressing that which he considers the antithesis of his mind – his heart, and his body. However, Sherlock also attempts to distance himself from his humanity through scientific knowledge; he believes that because he understands how the chemistry in the brain works, he can control it. After he has bested Irene Adler and deduced the passcode to her phone (a derivative of his name; ‘SherLOCKED’), Sherlock boasts that love is a “chemical defect found on the losing side”.

Rather than the crimes that he and John solve together that catch the attention of the audience, it is the drama that unfolds as John’s influence over Sherlock begins to show – the man who once aspired to be a machine eventually learning to feel, to care for those around him (Coppa). There is a dualistic split that emerges within Sherlock’s identity, and it is this apparent struggle between the higher thought that Sherlock aspires to achieve and the emotions he begins to feel in response to the influence of the people around him that allows the show to progress in terms of plot and character arcs.

The BBC’s Sherlock uses heteronormative ideals to denounce the queer reading of characters and the relationships between them. Queerbaiting is used to draw the attention of a queer audience hoping for representation, but the lack of follow through on the hinted at relationships leaves the LGBT+ fans at a disadvantage, unable to call out the queerbaiting without being denounced in turn by the show and the creators. Lack of queer representation is an issue in all forms of media, and the use of queerbaiting to hook in an LGBT+ audience without any intention on the creator’s part to actually provide the representation only adds to this problem. Both fans and academics have stood strong against the show creator’s emphatic denial of any form of queer reading, and the fan response to the use of queerbaiting in Sherlock has been varied. Many have called out the writers for the disparity between the homoromantic subtext and the heteronormative norms that are pushed
by the show, as well as by the press releases about the show. Other fans have taken their frustration at the lack of representation and the use of queerbaiting in the show and have channelled it into creative works; “those concerned with gay issues, have used [fanfiction] to establish a gay presence in a straight universe” (Pugh, cited in Berger, 177). In doing so, these fans have taken queer representation into their own hands; by reworking the story and characters in the base text through a fan-based medium, the fans are able to create their own versions of queer representation that mainstream, heteronormative media consistently fails to provide.

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