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Minding the gaps: deducing meaning in Sherlock Holmes fanfiction

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DePaul University

Minding the Gaps:
Deducing Meaning in Sherlock Holmes Fanfiction

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Abstract

Online fanfiction communities are increasingly coming to light as an independent manifestation of an (often queer) interpretation of popular media. This paper investigates the different causes of this phenomenon, how the participants craft individual meaning that addresses perceived gaps in representation, and the ways in which fanfiction authors and readers work with the boundaries of the original work. Specifically, I reference the subset of the *Sherlock Holmes* fan community that romantically pairs Sherlock Holmes and John Watson. By analyzing the numbers of fanfiction and providing a reader response and intertextual analysis that delves into specific influential works, the conclusion is that in the process of appropriating these historic characters, fans are creating new ways of translating and perpetuating meaning that work outside of traditional commercial formats.

INTRODUCTION

You see, but you do not observe. The distinction is clear.

-Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, A Scandal in Bohemia

In a world defined by its connectivity, fan studies is increasingly gaining ground, and sometimes friction, between what is meant to entertain, and what we choose to be entertaining. I incorporate my knowledge of the connection between fandom culture and fanfiction conventions and demonstrate that relationship through the words of fans themselves, from social media and stories, in order to uncover the singular value of fanfiction as a vehicle for specific literary theories, hopefully demystifying the process and often intimidating world for those who may question the place of these works in the present—and future—of literature. By detailing the process from media consumption, to fan interactions, and eventual fan writing, I aim to break down the causal relationship between reader identity and impulse to create, as well demonstrate how this process has its touchstones in conventional literature.

Much of previous fandom scholarship has focused on either the ways of grouping or the existence of fans at all. Very little examines the role of queer participants in particular. This paper will explore the intersection between fans and queer fanfiction in its present state. Even by this point, so much has changed in the ways that fans manifest their own meaning within their communities. Each generation has had its specific conventions and goals, and the current climate has crafted a consumer base with a specific set of representational needs to be addressed.

My work attempts a close reading and intertextual analysis of the stories in question, treating queer fanfiction as its own genre of literature in order to test the line between the

accepted canon and the frequently marginalized “other.” I explore what I consider to be the inherent role of queer theory in these works and the process of creating them; in this theorist Michael Warner is especially helpful. And is a response to the modern state of prevalent heteronormativity in media.

First I will provide a broad overview of fandom and fanfiction using statistics from research and documenting current trends; this is particularly necessary because the field is a constantly evolving landscape in which things can change from decade to decade, or even fandom to fandom. Throughout I reflect upon the influential work of cultural theorists Henry Jenkins and Matt Hill, as well as critics more specifically focused on the social media site Tumblr and fanfiction in general (Anne Jamison).

Next I incorporate critical reader response theory, using Wolfgang Iser’s more general notion of the relationship between the text and the reader, in order to identify what is it that fans and fan writers are responding to that possesses them to put forth the effort necessary to contribute with fans writing. In this way I will break down the process from instigation to act and investigate how this process is perpetuated and enacted upon itself. From there I will use a more general approach to establish how this meaning is crafted in the particular instance of queer fanfiction.

My next step is to harness intertextual criticism to not simply fill the existing gaps in understanding, but also create even more spaces for expression and world building. This continued questioning is characteristic of fandom, in which its own manifestations are not exempt from the process of reflection. Lastly, by performing an intertextual analysis and probing

the text itself I will identify specific points of divergence between the source material, an official/sanctioned television adaptation, and a fanfiction story that responds to both.

I. FANDOM AND FANFICTION INTRODUCTION

Fanfiction is a vast category, with an extensive history and varied definitions. Generally, fanfiction is a work that references the world or characters of a preexisting work, be it a book, movie, television show, etc. Depending on how loose of an interpretation, many works deemed classics would be classified as fanfiction—Shakespeare, for example, wrote Ovid fluff (a work without angst) titled *Midsummer Night's Dream*, complete with his own original characters (OCs).

In the context referenced here, a fan is someone who seeks out further material beyond the canon for consumption and begins interacting with these previously created worlds. Indeed, writers and artists often refer to the canonical material as a sandbox that has been created for others to play in. A fandom, then, refers to the general group of fans of a certain work. Fandoms can be further delineated by “ships”—which character pairing, or relation(ship)—a fan prefers. “Ship” is used in various grammatical functions: This shipper ships that ship when shipping. “Slash” refers to art depicting same sex, usually non-canon relationships; it is named for the backslash between the names in early *Star Trek* ship Kirk/Spock. Relationships now generally have a portmanteau, if the names allow it. The match we will chiefly be talking about here is Johnlock—the romantic pairing of John Watson and Sherlock Holmes.

The distinction of “canon” is very important, especially in the early seasons/books when it has not potentially been contaminated by any biases perceived and acted upon by the creators. “Canon” in fandom refers to the published materials, or, sometimes, remarks from the creators themselves. For example, the showrunners of *BBC Sherlock* are very aware of Johnlock and have

voiced their disapproval.¹These actions impact the fans' perception of what actually ends up occurring on the show to indicate the characters are not in a relationship, for now everything is suspect—particularly newly-introduced love interests or a decrease in joint screentime. In fact, oftentimes this is so divisive that many writers and consumers of fanfiction do not even keep up with watching the show; they'll say it ended, for example, at season 3 and only accept up until that point as canon.

These fan-created texts have their own set of rules and tropes, known only to participants in that specific fandom. This is what Jonathan Culler describes in literature broadly as a “complex system of knowledge that experienced readers have acquired, a system of conventions and norms which we might call ‘literary competence.’”² In addition, thorough knowledge of the stories invoked is assumed. This crucial context, derived from knowledge of fandoms' canon, in addition to the conventions for each of their fanfiction, must be understood in order for meaning to be gleaned. Fan theorist Catherine Tosenberger explains that “fan communities develop their own cultural norms for what is or is not acceptable in fanfiction.”³ These cultural norms only come as the result of extensive interaction with the texts, and vary greatly by fandom, yielding “common interpretive operations.”⁴

¹Olivia Truffaut-Wong, "The Way Sherlock Creators Told Fans Sherlock & John Aren't Gay Is so Rude" on *SheKnows*, 2016.

² Jonathan D. Culler, *Structuralist poetics: structuralism, linguistics, and the study of literature* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), 290.

³ Catherine Tosenberger, "Homosexuality at the Online Hogwarts: Harry Potter Slash Fanfiction" in *Children's Literature: Annual Of The Children's Literature Association And The Modern Language Association Division On Children's Literature* 36, 2008, 190.

⁴ Culler, “Structural Poetics,” 295

“Tropes” or conventions generally accepted by fandom that do not appear in canon are differentiated with the term “fanon.” John, for example, never makes tea on camera; for some reason, however, in fanfic he is often (exasperatedly) making tea for both himself and Sherlock. The term alternate universe (AU) indicates that it does not take place in the canon world. The difference can be as small as the story being set in high school (Teenlock) or as big as them being in space, or the future, or another story altogether. In this last instance, it is called a “crossover fic,” and John and Sherlock can be flying around on the Tardis from *Doctor Who* or attending Hogwarts, with or without the Doctor or Harry.

Many outside of the community are under the impression that fanfiction is almost all pornographic in nature, and there certainly are stories of any tendency or sexual kink. However, porn without plot (PWP; also Plot what Plot?) is a minority of the works posted, as the pie chart below demonstrates.

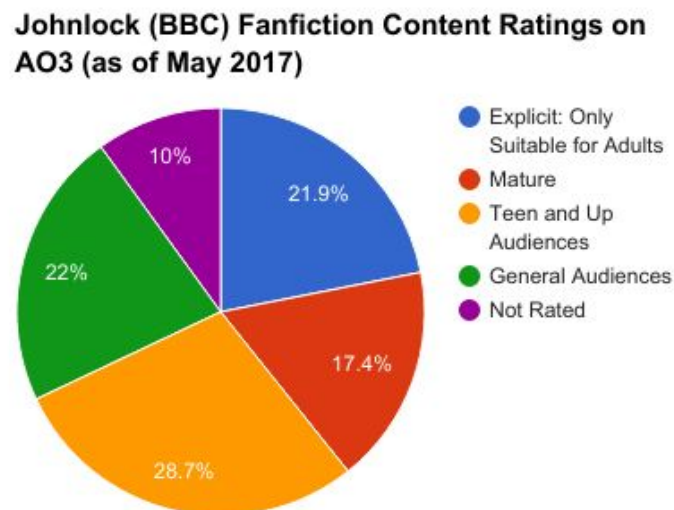


Fig 1. Percentage of each category in Johnlock fanfiction of content ratings, which are required

for every story posted on AO3. Explicit and Mature works can have sexual content, while Teen and General Audiences cannot.

Sherlock Holmes fandom

This paper will mainly reference *Sherlock Holmes* fanfiction. While BBC *Sherlock*⁵ is certainly not the only active fandom, it is a prime choice for study because of its century old fan history, connections between the canon and fandom, and relative age in that there is enough data and works written so that trends have been established. Much of earlier scholarship has focused on Star Trek, arguably the first modern fandom, as well as long-running television series *Supernatural* and J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, the last of which is a force unto itself in the world of fanfiction, particularly as the books were released. The majority of stories written about the Sherlock Holmes fandom evoke *BBC Sherlock*, a television series written by Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat that stars Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman. The original canon by Arthur Conan Doyle (ACD) is cited as such and referenced as a distinct fandom with its own conventions, and the characters are molded to reflect the Victorian characterization. These are the most popular depictions, but there are also stories for the other portrayals, (see image below) like the popular Granada Television *Sherlock Holmes* from 1984, or the Robert Downey Jr./Jude Law movies (2009) made by Guy Ritchie.

⁵ Mark Gatiss, Steven Moffat, and Stephen Thompson, *Sherlock* (London: BBC One, 2010).

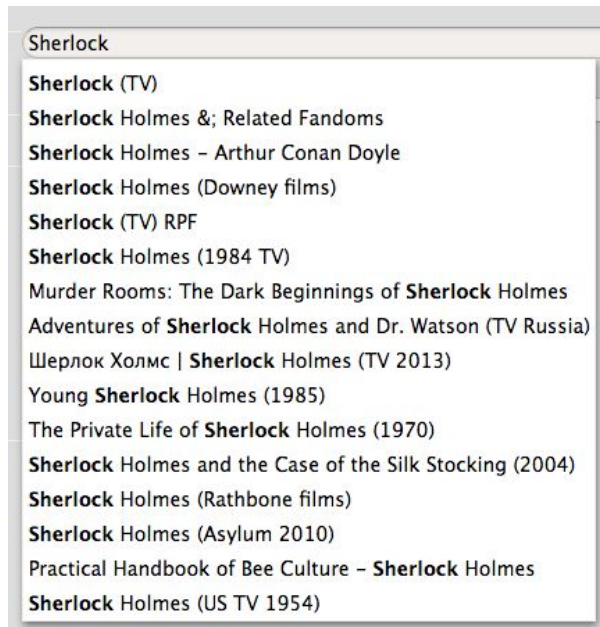


Fig. 2. Screen capture of AO3’s “Sherlock” fandom search results, demonstrating the variety of source material within the overall fandom.

Doyle’s works were, even in his time, reflective of fan input. When he attempted to kill off Holmes in Reichenbach Fall, the outrage was so intense that he had to bring the famed detective back from the dead.⁶ His personal ambivalence (bordering on neglect) toward these works is fairly obvious, and they are filled with many and varied continuity errors. He often resisted their success, saying that “his other literary output was his “real work”: “All these books had some decent success, though none of it was remarkable.”⁷ However, the setup for these serial works is ideal for fanfiction, for, as critic Ed Wiltse points out in his “Holmes and Seriality,”

What was generically unique to the Holmes stories in their moment

⁶ Ed Wiltse, ““So Constant an Expectation”: Sherlock Holmes and Seriality” in *Narrative*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1998, 108.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 109.

is their blend of interconnectedness and independence. While complete in itself, each story contains, like the genetic code in a cell, the formula for the complete series: a mystery and solution, the Holmes-Watson relationship, . . . and Holmes's method, often first demonstrated on a trivial domestic problem and then applied to the case at hand⁸ (108)

This, it can be said, is also true of fanfiction, which has its own tropes and structure, and subsequent reader expectations.

Fanfiction writers often mine these original works for elements and characters to round out their own plots. For example, Victor Trevor, an old school friend in the original works, is repurposed in *BBC Sherlock* fanfiction often, generally as an ex-boyfriend of Sherlock. Sebastian Moran is another book-bound character who is named often as an associate of Moriarty's, but who hasn't been seen in the BBC version (yet).

BBC Sherlock is in itself a fanwork of sorts; a modern alternate universe of Doyle's original canon, with the characters living in a modern day London. Instead of being injured in India, John fought in Afghanistan; instead of writing articles, he runs a blog as a recommendation by his therapist for treatment of his post traumatic stress disorder. Sherlock's characterization differs mainly in his outright claim of being a "high-functioning sociopath," and as a result he is depicted in fanfiction with various levels of empathy or mild autism. A few (notably female) characters seemingly invented by the writers are Sally Donovan, a police

⁸ Ibid., 108.

sergeant under Detective Inspector Greg Lestrade. She is set up as a mild antagonist because of her irrational hatred of Sherlock, or “the freak,” as she often refers to him. Molly Hooper is a pathologist in the morgue who is introduced as pathetically smitten with Sherlock. She was intended only for the first episode but has been kept on, making some gains in terms of character development.

BBC Sherlock, much more than other shows, creates huge gaps to be filled by fans. The structure of the show is 1.5 hour episodes, three to a season/series, and sometimes there are literal years between seasons (of which there are now four). Given that most cable TV shows have at least 20 40-minute episodes per season, it’s really no wonder that fans left to their own devices for so long will make their own content.

Internet and Sources

The majority of the work I will reference here was found on *Archiveofourown.org*, generally referred to as AO3. This is currently the most popular site for posting fanfiction, though sites like *Fanfiction.net*, started in 1998, and *Wattpad* (2006) also host stories. Fandoms tend to prefer different archives, with some correlation to when the peak moment of activity occurred. The pie charts below demonstrate the relationship between the year that fandoms began their activity and which platform hosts the majority of their works.

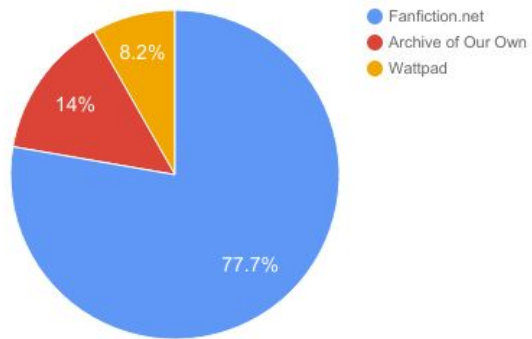
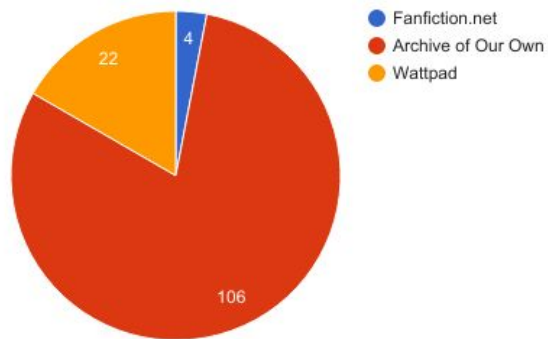
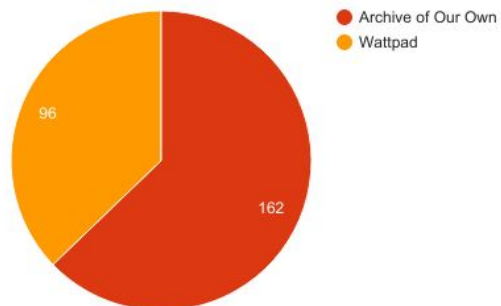
Harry Potter (1998) Fanfiction**Sherlock Holmes (2010) Fanfiction****Supernatural (2005) Fanfiction**

Fig. X: Proportion of works for three major fanfiction fandoms, on the top three hosting websites. Harry Potter is chiefly on the early site fanfiction.net, while Sherlock Holmes and Supernatural, another long-running and vocal fanbase, rely on AO3 and Wattpad.

AO3 offers a distinctive tagging system and elaborate search algorithm, as well as a more straightforward ratings system for content warnings (example shown below). This allows for readers of a particular type of work to find them more easily, and to avoid content that could be potentially harmful. The rating gives an indication of how much sexual content or violence will be present in the fic, while “Archive Warnings” allow the identification of particularly triggering content, such as major character death or rape, so that readers can decide what they feel comfortable with; this is especially relevant as these communities are especially aware of mental health concerns. The tags section, while giving an indication of content, more importantly acts as a set of disclaimers; relationships are prominently tagged, in many different forms (ie. Pre-relationship, established relationship, Friends-to-lovers, and future). The tags can also give information about the style of writing; for example, this story has the tag “beware the non-linear narrative.” This creates a version of meaning that differs greatly from the experience of a text that the reader goes into blind. On the opposite side of this, an author can decide either not to put any tags, or can choose not to use warnings. These options create a tension and suspense that is greatly exaggerated to the reader who is accustomed to certain foreknowledge.

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/601000) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/601000>.

Rating:	General Audiences
Archive Warning:	Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Sherlock (TV)
Relationship:	Sherlock Holmes/John Watson
Character:	Sherlock Holmes , John Watson , Greg Lestrade , Molly Hooper , Mycroft Holmes
Additional Tags:	AU College , Fluff , Texting , AU , Johnlock - Freeform , Teenlock , Humour , mentions of drug use , Dialogue , All Dialogue Fic
Stats:	Published: 2012-12-20 Completed: 2014-01-22 Chapters: 25/25 Words: 46637

A Finger Slip

by [Pawtal](#)

Summary

"You may be the most interesting person I've ever met."

"We haven't met."

"A minor detail."

All dialogue AU in which John sends a text to the wrong number by mistake. Little does he know the person he just texted will impact his life more than he could have imagined.

Fig. 3. Example of story tags on AO3 that are shown before any work⁹

Given that AO3 writers do not generally have a reputation that precedes them, the tagging system works as a means of setting expectations of the type of work to follow. Much as the experience of reading a Jane Austen novel will differ from reading George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, fanfiction can often run the same emotional gauntlet. Establishing warnings at the beginning changes how the work is read and meaning is created.

I also reference tumblr.com (hereafter Tumblr), a social media website that acts as a blogging ground for fans to communicate, share theories, and post fan art, be it images or stories. These typically link to AO3, unless it's a short "ficlet" that can be easily read within a blog post.

⁹ Pawtal, "A Finger Slip" on *Archive of Our Own*, 2014.

Some blogs are specifically made as an archive of links to certain types of fanfiction, narrowed by fandom or ship. The online medium of modern fanfiction is uniquely adapted to allow the world of fandom and fanfiction to flourish. Most importantly, it is free to publish in and interact with. The lack of official commitment to read or write it makes the process a very low risk endeavor. No monetary investment is needed, so there is no obligation to continue to be a part of that community. Even further, there is no obligation to be part of the community at all; one can passively read or publish works without speaking to anyone else on the site. If a consumer purchases a book, there is a heightened expectation of the quality and there is less forgiveness of flaws.

Chiefly, however, the importance of fanfiction lies in its lack of mediation. There is no barrier, or conversely, impetus, for a writer to post fanfiction for free on the internet. This allows for an unprecedented view of the process of media consumption and subsequent thoughts and desires of these fans as they work to satisfy what they find wanting after exhausting what is officially available. This is in stark contrast to the traditional publishing system, in which the final copy goes through many filters, the companies have their say, and in many cases it comes down to what will sell copies.

Authors of fanfiction are also able to post these ideas at a very low personal risk because of the anonymous nature of Tumblr and AO3. Authors who post photos or personal information, even their names, are in a significant minority; additionally, ideas or works can be amended or removed at will. The only filter imposed upon writers is the potential censure of fellow members of their community, and even this is mediated by the filtering system of tags that makes it so the reader knows upfront if the story will have a pairing or content they don't want to read.

Immediate responses—sometimes shared even mid-broadcast—allow for fans to post and form their own ideas.

My last technical note is in regard to fanfiction authors and their pronouns. I will use the author's AO3 "handle" as their name. Unless authors have noted pronouns in their "Bio" section, I will use the non-specific 'they' to refer to them; this is especially important because in *Tumblr* and fanfiction culture misgendering is taken very seriously.

II. MEANING GAPS

So why do fanfiction writers spend their free time in this pursuit? Why do readers and bloggers choose these works over more traditional forms of media? I argue that the function of fan writing, what makes it so satisfying and engrossing for a portion of the population, is its unique capacity to answer the questions that the official story leaves out. There is room for arbitration in the translation from images on the screen, to ideas on blogs, then finally as crafted fanworks; this is where development of meaning occurs.

Theorist Wolfgang Iser contends that as readers consume a text, the meaning is being formed from what is missing, rather than what is portrayed.¹⁰ Fandom creates a space where communities can debate the varying meanings that fans from different backgrounds have assigned to those gaps. In the form of shipping, the gap that is being answered is the nature of the relationship between two characters. What did Sherlock mean when he says “Girlfriend...no, not really my area?”¹¹ We never see John’s bedroom; what if it doesn’t exist? What happens when the cameras are off at 221B?

Iser claims that “central to the reading of every literary work is the interaction between its structure and its recipient.”¹² The text itself simply “offers ‘schematized aspects’ through which the aesthetic object of the work can be produced.”¹³ In other words, the source material is a sandbox that these fanfiction writers play in to produce, literally in this case, an illustrative

¹⁰ Vincent B., Leitch, ed., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* 2nd ed., (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010).

¹¹ Gatiss and Moffat, “Study in Pink.”

¹² Leitch, “Wolfgang Iser,” 1524.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1524.

object, crafting meaning from the creative project of breaching gaps within the given structure. Critic Megan Abrahamson claims in her investigation of Tolkien and fanfiction that “if the act of interpreting a text is the first step, then writing down these interpretations, either in metacommentary or narrative form (or drawing them, or producing any other form of fanwork), is not significantly any more transgressive than the initial, internal act of interpretation.”¹⁴ In particular, these communities are filling gaps in ways that are not necessarily in line with dominant social systems, which are more likely to get airtime and advertising from production companies that are generally run by white, straight, men with normalized experiences that seek “safe” content at best, or are promoting an agenda at worst. These incentives, some fans believe, go counter to what characterization may indicate, and may account for the differences between what is filmed and what “would” happen.

Pierre Levy writes in *Collective Intelligence*, his analysis of fan spaces, that “unanswered questions will create tension within cosmopedic space, indicating regions where invention and innovation are required.”¹⁵ The invention and innovation cited by Levy are in this case the fanfiction works that answer the questions directly asked by the source material and indirectly by the questioning of heteronormativity that is prevalent in mainstream media. Henry Jenkins III, pioneering theorist of fan studies and fanfiction, explored the early fanzines” of Star Trek

¹⁴ Megan B. Abrahamson, "J. R. R. Tolkien, Fanfiction, and 'The Freedom of the Reader'" in *Mythlore: A Journal Of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, And Mythopoeic Literature* 32, (2013), 58.

¹⁵ Pierre Levy, *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, Mass: Perseus, 1997) 52.

communities, developing emerging notions of fans as “cultural scavengers”¹⁶ and “politics of reading.”¹⁷ These regions are precisely the mining sites for fanfiction writers, because “for the fan, reading becomes a kind of play, responsive only to its own loosely-structured rules and generating its own kinds of pleasure.”¹⁸ The act of interpretation is the actual work being accomplished in the consumption of media, demonstrating the mental work being achieved in the minds of these fans. In summation, literary works the message is transmitted in two ways, in that the reader “receives” it by composing it. This process is articulated in the form of fanfiction.

Iser claims that “as the reader passes through the various perspectives offered by the text, and relates the different views and patterns to one another, he sets the work in motion, and so sets himself in motion, too.”¹⁹ The ‘relation’ step Iser mentions here is what differentiates a fan in this circumstance. While some viewers may passively watch and accept the given meaning, a fan goes beyond the surface to question the characters and the world they live in, viewing it as an endless, 3D space rather than a flat, linear plot. “What is missing ..this is what stimulates the reader into filling the blanks with projections. He is drawn into the events and made to supply what is meant from what is not said.”²⁰ Fans interact with the implied worlds of these works, rather than passively assuming textual or authorial authority that could limit the scope of the story.

¹⁶ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2013) 174.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁹ Leitch, “Wolfgang Iser,” 1524.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1527.

Marginalized readers will group together when they “transform personal reaction into social interaction”²¹ and identify common ways of filling that gap, for “contact therefore depends upon our continually filling in a central gap in our experience.”²² Not insignificantly, the almost overwhelming majority of fanfiction authors/readers are female and/or members of the LGBT community. Cisgender, heterosexual men, who are already generally the focus and chief-intended audience, don’t see a gap for increased representation—all they have to do is turn on the TV to see their stories in the media. Instead, here it is the subalterns of the mainstream media system who have created a separate system, outside of normative media. BBC *Sherlock*, in particular, doesn’t have a single episode that passes the Bechdel Test, which, although limited, gives a general approximation of the fairness of gender portrayals by whether two female characters speak to each other about something other than a male character. The phenomenon of gender swapping is a key demonstration of this reclamation of representative power.

John-now-Joan faces unique challenges when recast as a woman or transman, upsetting the security of these normalized readings and explores the character, rather than limiting their roles to their gender. This is in stark contrast to the show, which, as noted by writer Sophie Gilbert, can often take “an intriguing female character and used her to propagate stale gendered archetypes.”

²³ In this way, fanfiction takes these champions of the dominant ideology and imagines a queer world, one where women and queer folks can be depicted with the same strength and nuance of character as the famous and oft-depicted Sherlock Holmes.

²¹ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 175.

²² Leitch, “Wolfgang Iser,” 1524.

²³ Sophie Gilbert, “The Troublesome Women of Sherlock” on *The Atlantic*, 2017.

This is not to say that many fanfiction stories don't still pursue heterosexuality, or even Warner's "repro narrative" of marriage and children (babies can be found, adopted, or, memorably, even cloned). There can, however, also be expressions of more taboo lifestyles, which are typically only represented for shock value or affirmation of the contrast to acceptable life narratives. Bondage/Dominance/Sadism/Masochism (BDSM) dynamics and polyamorous relationships, for example, get a significant amount of expression in these works that extends beyond the bedroom into the practicalities of day to day life. In short, Jenkins claims that "for the fans, what is desired is precisely a future that offers homosexuality without homophobia,"²⁴ and here fanfiction writers are generally able to fill that gap in a positive way, using escapism to a place where Sherlock can get his blogger without any of the tired social obstacles set in place for other, less accepting communities.

This "persistent queer fantasy of a space beyond the closet doorway"²⁵ is accomplished in a liminal space while waiting for this productive work to continue its slow progress on increasing acceptance in the general population. But the ability for alternate lifestyles to coexist with privileged positions is only an option for meaning in the minds of certain viewers/readers. This speaks to Michael Warner's notion of the publics and counterpublics, in which "some publics are defined by their tension with a larger public."²⁶ Fanfiction as a genre in itself, which is "structured by alternative dispositions or protocols,"²⁷ fulfills the need for queer narratives by

²⁴ Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York: New York U, 2006) 91.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

²⁶ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2010) 56.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

functioning as a queer genre that works outside of established consumerism, independent of the capitalist structures that tell shoppers what they want to buy; it is working “to elaborate new worlds of culture and social relations in which gender and sexuality can be lived.”²⁸ This entertainment, which is generally made for women, by women, is offered at no charge and with no incentive on either side. This is potentially why queerbaiting (discussed below) is so looked down upon, because it is perceived as an attempt to become part of the queer narrative for the money it can bring from the visible readership, rather than actually participating in representation and risking losing more conservative viewers.

Creative activity, Levy suggests, will shift from the production of texts or the regulation of meanings toward the development of a dynamic environment, “a collective event that simplifies the recipients, transforms interpreters into actors, enables interpretation to enter the loop with collective action.”²⁹ We see this in action on these collaborative platforms, where fans can work together to probe the text and voice these concerns. It’s a space where “the members of a thinking community search, inscribe, connect, consult, explore. . .it also serves as the site of collective discussion, negotiation, and development.”³⁰ Increasingly, these concerns are being heard by the creators—for better or worse.

“Queerbaiting” is the term used in fandom for when a show seems to hint at a queer relationship but never makes it a formal declaration, ostensibly in order to lead on the viewers without taking any actual “risk” of scandal. This is propagated by gaps created by the show

²⁸ Ibid., 57.

²⁹ Pierre Levy, *Collective Intelligence*, 138.

³⁰ Pierre Levy, *Collective Intelligence*, 141.

itself. Multiple examples of this wink/nudge are found in just the first episode, “A Study in Pink,” which establishes the context of the show. “Evidence” often cited by Johnlock shippers begins when the 221B landlady Mrs. Hudson starts her running gag that she thinks John and Sherlock are together romantically, declaring that “there’s another bedroom upstairs, if you’ll be needing two bedrooms.”³¹ Later, Sherlock’s brother asks John, “Since yesterday you’ve moved in with him and now you’re solving crimes together. Might we expect a happy announcement by the end of the week?” Even on a stakeout at the restaurant, the owner tells Sherlock (who doesn’t respond—nudge) that “anything on the menu, free for you and your date. . .I’ll get a candle for the table, it’s more romantic.”³² From these first instances, the idea is planted, and everything that happens afterwards only serves to widen the gap exponentially when it does not become validated, for “what is missing. . .stimulates the reader into filling the blanks with projections. He is drawn into the events and made to supply what is meant from what is not said”³³ (Iser 1526). Going further, “communication in literature, then, is a process set in motion and regulated, not by a given code, but by a mutually restrictive and magnifying interaction between the explicit and the implicit, between revelation and concealment”³⁴ (Iser 1527). Fanfiction documents this communication, demonstrably filling in what is implied or concealed by the original work. The show’s attempts to retroactively restrict the responses to chosen magnifications, however, are not always successful.

³¹ Gatiss and Moffat, *Sherlock*, “Study in Pink.”

³² See note 31 above.

³³ Leitch, “Wolfgang Iser,” 1526.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1527.

Supporters of Johnlock are divided over the difference between those two verbs—*implied* and *concealed*. Those who believe that Johnlock is being purposefully *concealed* by the creators call it the Johnlock Conspiracy, and they espouse “the belief that the frankly astounding amount of homoerotic subtext on the show is intentional, and that the writers have been setting up the detective and his blogger as a couple from the start.”³⁵ Extensive “metas” (posts analyzing the show) have been created, as “Johnlock shippers have taken a tip from their favorite detective and turned to their own powers of observation.”³⁶ Fans who believe it is *implied*, however, don’t think the writers are actually saying it at all, but rather the fans suggest that it’s an option, either within characterization or just fun to think about. This is actually a very divisive and contentious issue in the Johnlock fandom spaces, as interpretations rely on seemingly irreconcilable theories of meaning.

As Iser claims, “The reader. . . can never learn from the text how accurate or inaccurate are his views of it”³⁷; this leaves a significant amount of space for discussion and controversy, as each side vies for the higher ground, wielding condemning interviews (of which there is no shortage) and evidential clips as their weapons. It comes down to Roland Barthes’ “Death of the Author”, and the question of how paramount is the author/creator’s opinion over those of those performing the interpretation of the work. If Barthes is correct and the “the whole of enunciation is an empty process, functioning without any need for it to be filled with the person of the

³⁵ V Lyn, “The Johnlock Conspiracy” on *ReelRundown*, 2016.

³⁶ See note 35 above.

³⁷ Leitch, “Wolfgang Iser,” 1524.

interlocutors,”³⁸ then potentially, the meaning of Johnlock can occur without the input of the showrunners.

³⁸ Leitch, “Roland Barthes,” 1323.

III. FILLING MEANING GAPS

Whether or not there is a conspiracy afoot, the viewer's identity must already be set up to fill the gap of their relationship in that way. Certainly, not everyone who watches *Sherlock* comes away determined that the men are romantically attached, or that *any* men are attached (there are infinite other popular queer ships, from Sheriarty (Sherlock and Moriarty) to Mystrade (Mycroft and Lestrade). Communities on more heteronormative websites display increased resistance to this viewing; the Johnlock Conspiracy could not have been formulated on Pinterest, for example. As the showrunners have found, "a text cannot adapt itself to each reader it comes into contact with,"³⁹ and it will invariably come into contact with these communities that will interpret the gaps that way—in this instance, homoerotically—and take their "joke" further than they would like. This invokes Jenkin's notion of fans as the "rogue reader"⁴⁰ who complicates assumptions made on the part of the creators of what meaning will be deduced from the depicted images on the show. Rather than accepting what is shown, the readers form their own meanings around the canon as presented, by "fixing" it, reacting en masse, or embracing their own unique skill set.

As Jenkins describes, these fan writers inherently "redefine the text"⁴¹ in the process of protecting the characters "against the abuse from those who created it and who have claimed ownership over it."⁴² This is seen in the phenomenon of the "fix it fic" category, which takes the new canon (from a recently released book or episode) and undo any actions that work against a reading of the characters' romantic attachments, without altering the canon as it stands. The

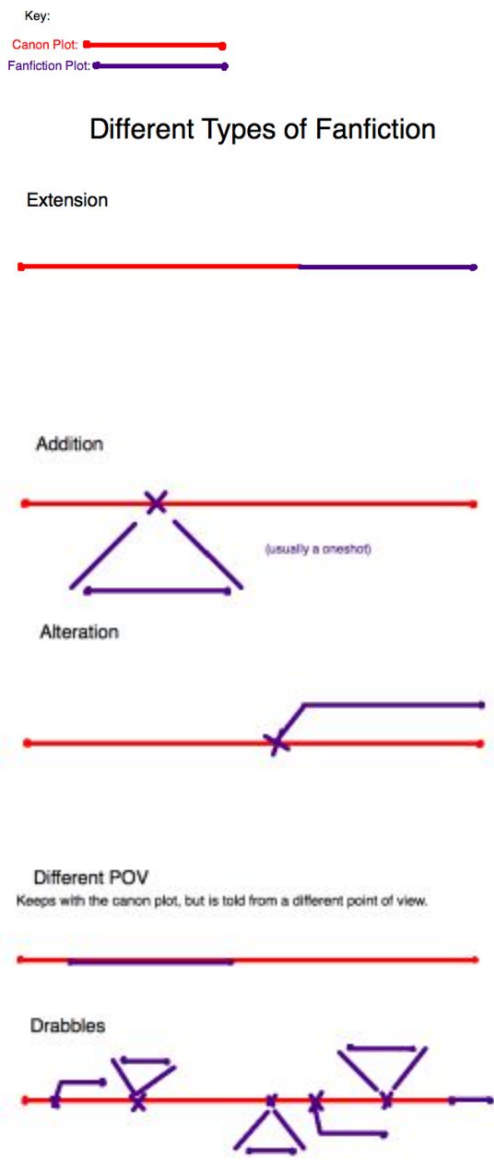
³⁹ Leitch, "Wolfgang Iser," 1524.

⁴⁰ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 183.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 196.

corrections reveal an underlying judgment that there is a right or wrong when it comes to the canon content as it has developed, and communities form around who agrees with whom. This is as opposed to a canon divergent or alteration story, which simply rejects whatever canon it finds irreconcilable. The graphs below demonstrate the varying relationships of fanfiction material to the original canon.



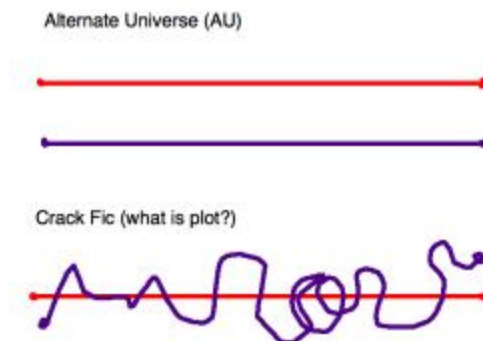


Figure X: Illustration of Different Types of Fanfiction made by Tumblr user Goodboydummy. Each of these correlations represents a distinguishing relationship to the canon plot as depicted in the original material. A “fix it fic” would qualify as an extension, but only until the next season is released. Many “traditional” works would qualify under these as well; for example, James Joyce’s *Ulysses* is an Alternate Universe fanfic of the *Odyssey*, while Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a Different POV. Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is an Addition Fic, with a self-insert character and real people (RPF).

For example, much was needed to “correct” the “damage” done to the canon by the introduction of Mary Morstan, John’s fiancée, during series 3. This fix can be as subtle as he and Mary separating or her dying naturally—easy enough as this is what occurs in Doyle’s canon—or as major as her becoming the antagonist. In the long fanfiction story titled “The Edinburg Problem,”⁴³ written after the conclusion of series 3, author snorklepie neatly takes care of the Mary problem in just a few lines, at the same time reaffirming John’s commitment to Sherlock:

Since the Mary debacle and John’s subsequent move back to Baker Street, Sunday mornings had been different. There was no

⁴³ Snorklepie, “The Edinburg Problem” on *Archive of Our Own*, 2015.

question of girlfriends for John, at the moment at least. Finding out that his ex-wife was an assassin had perhaps made him a little wary of romantic entanglements. Especially so when he found out that she was not, strictly speaking, retired even after they were married. And particularly so when he found out that the child she was carrying was not his.

After the last awful crushing blow and the final night of tears and recriminations in the house at Crouch End, John had found himself on the steps of 221b clutching a hastily packed bag and pressing the doorbell with shaking fingers (Chapter 1)⁴⁴

With John back at 221b where he “belongs,” the narrative can safely continue without any lingering concerns of interference, at least on that front. To many Johnlock supporters, Mary is much more of a concern than the villain, Moriarty. This effort expended is revelatory of the investment made by particular readers in a certain meaning, and a strong reluctance to let that interpretation go, despite the odds, or canon, or feminist views that would generally like to see more women on TV in strong roles.

In “The Reichenbach Fall,”⁴⁵ the third episode of series two based loosely off of Doyle’s “The Final Problem,”⁴⁶ fans from either century had much to cope with. Sherlock, in trying to defeat Moriarty, appears to John and the world to jump to his death off of the roof of St. Bart’s

⁴⁴ Ibid., Chapter 3.

⁴⁵ Gatiss and Moffat, *Sherlock*, “Reichenbach Fall”

⁴⁶ Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* (Las Vegas, NV: Thomas & Mercer, 2012).

Hospital. While readers of the original serial fiction reacted in outrage, eventually forcing Doyle to resurrect their hero, *Sherlock* fans knew there would be a resurrection, but not how it would occur. Theories abounded, from his actually hitting the ground to a trampoline sidewalk, and many of the works written during the hiatus between series two and three reflects this tumult. In fact, this can be seen in the beginning of series 3 when, in a bit of fanservice, various scenarios are played out on screen as varying theories posed by an obsessed group of in-show, meta fans of Sherlock the detective.⁴⁷

In this way the timing of the show releases generates its own communities and activity by way of large increases in fan writing in desperation to reconcile this lack. For example, on AO3 the ‘Post Reichenbach Fall’ tag contains 6304 stories. In stark contrast, the ‘Post His Last Vow’ tag for stories about the end of series three (where Moriarty is hinted to return, but there’s no mortal peril) only has 589 stories. Of course, this doesn’t mean that fanfiction wasn’t being written, but rather that it wasn’t written as a plot reaction to the new material. The Johnlock tag on AO3 shows 1,908 works published in the two months following the “Reichenbach Fall” airing, but the two months post “His Last Vow” has a respectable 1,523 works. Productivity may have fallen (around 31%), but the drastic drop in canon response indicates a larger trend at work.

A fanfic titled “Finger Slip,”⁴⁸ while certainly not representative of the majority of

⁴⁷ Gatiss and Moffat, *Sherlock*, “The Empty Hearse.”

⁴⁸ Pawtal, “A Finger Slip” on *Archive of Our Own*, 2014.

fanfiction, epitomizes the recognition that this community has the ability to create their own meanings by filling in what is not shown. In this all-dialogue fic, the lines of mainly text messages are only differentiated by font stylization provided in a key at the beginning of each chapter. Banking on the reader’s willingness and ability to picture the characters in whatever way they prefer, this format recognizes that these readers are especially adept—and perhaps even prefers—substituting their meaning of choice for any gaps in the story. Below is the beginning of the work, to demonstrate the barebones format navigated by the readers.

October 19th

Chapter Summary

At least I won't be the one savaged to death tonight with a petri dish.

John : *Sherlock* : Greg

Friday 19th October 2012

(Fri 3:24pm)

I'm at the store now, is there anything you want me to bring over for tonight?

(Fri 3:25pm)

I wasn't aware anything was happening tonight. But if you must come over, bring some petri dishes. I've run out.

Fig X: Screenshot from the first chapter of “Finger Slip” by AO3 user Pawtal, demonstrating the dialogue indications of the format. There are only different styles and a timestamp to structure the reading.

Roland Barthes' semic code is in play here, allowing the avid reader of slash fanfiction to create intelligibility without explicit detail. Authors tend to stand in certain camps regarding characters, based on nuances in interpretation and personal biases. Readers are able to "construct personalities out of the notions the text offers"⁴⁹ (293) because they have mastered the semic code of fanfiction. Fan studies critic Cornel Sandvoss explains in his article "Death of the Reader?" that "all encounters with textual structures thus require ideational activity that inherently ties a text to its reader" (Sandvoss 21), but fanfiction, due to its multimedia surfacing, calls on a significant amount of activity on the part of the fan doing the reading, because the "hypertextuality of the Internet forces the reader/user into the active construction of the text's boundaries."⁵⁰ All that is needed is a "notion," in this case just a name, and that is sufficient for meaning in these works.

There is an assumption that readers have encountered many variations of Sherlock and John and no longer require a description of the details: they've seen the show and read many different descriptions of these beloved characters. "Individual texts at the point of production are part of a wider web of textual occurrences and the meanings derived from them"⁵¹ (Sandvoss 23). Readers already know how how Sherlock "noisily cleared his throat" and how John fails when "forced his mouth to stay in a straight line."⁵² Even in fanfiction with a more traditional format there is not usually an intense description of each character unless it is part of the

⁴⁹ Leitch, "Roland Barthes," 293.

⁵⁰ Cornel Sandvoss, "The Death of the Reader?" In *Fandom: identities and communities in a mediated world* (New York: New York UP, 2007) 23.

⁵¹ See note 50 above.

⁵² Snorklepie, "The Edinburg Problem."

narrator's realizations, since this is assumed knowledge. In individual stories, if the characterization is extreme enough, then it is often noted in the tags. Sherlock's brattiness is not always assumed (he is sometimes cruel, sometimes aloof, sometimes predatory), but users can read this story with the understanding that they can impose their preferred "type" of Sherlock. Other examples of common tags are 'Mycroft is a twat', 'BAMF!John', and 'Mary is not nice.' By allowing readers the agency to choose their own adventure and explore their favorite characterizations, fanfiction crafts a meaning-making experience unique to the genre.

IV. CREATING NEW GAPS

"There is nothing new under the sun," said Holmes. "It has all been done before."

from the "Curious Adventure of the Drs. Watson," Chapter 4

Fandom, having filled the relationship gap with A loves B, now creates its own gaps to be filled. Yes, they will fall in love. But how do they fall in love? How do they fall in love in space? Or in medieval times? Which Hogwarts houses would they be sorted into? What does Molly think?

Fanfiction is intertextual within itself as a genre because it is built from communities of writers who support each other and their stories during the entire process, from vague notion to edits, publishing, and even illustrating. It is self conscious in its formation, for the emphasis is on the relationships between authors and readers, and the recognition that often those roles are reversed. "Fans, by virtue of their close relationship to and rereading of their fan texts, actually develop critical interpretive power over a text similar to that of a scholarly reader."⁵³ Fanfiction is unique in that it enacts upon itself the same process that is undergone in response to published works. This creates a perpetuating cycle that is a microcosm of the similar ways in which all writing is in response to what has come before it. Fanfiction has amplified this, speeding up the process so that in the space that modern fanfiction has been written (around 20 years), an entirely documented genre has developed. This is what critic Daniel Punday describes as the "new media narrative"⁵⁴ and the shift in focus to the "cultural context for producing and disseminating the story" (19). I will apply his theory to the more contemporary evolution of fandom and fan

⁵³ Abrahamson, "J. R. R. Tolkien, Fanfiction, and 'The Freedom of the Reader,'" 57.

⁵⁴ Daniel Punday, "From Synesthesia to Multimedia" in *New Narratives: Stories and Storytelling in the Digital Age*, (Lincoln, Neb.: Bison, 2012) .

writing interactions on the social media site Tumblr.

Fandom is self aware that its work is based off of others', so sharing is built into the system, with the caveat that there are proper attributions. Jenkins writes that "consumption has become a collective process,"⁵⁵ as can be witnessed on websites like Tumblr, which are built to connect fans and share ideas. Line Nybro Peterson notes that "the emphasis on sharing is a factor that impacts the way fans talk and engage in conversations."⁵⁶ There is at least one list of user-submitted story prompts ("kinkmeme") available for each fandom. Here, users can, either anonymously or not, share something that they would want to see written—their own creation of a gap in the story. Ideas expressed by one person and adopted by others become "fanon," (a distinction from canon) and these are perpetuated in other works. No work is in a vacuum, but this is especially notable with this self-aware group of writers that generally knows it is reliant upon what came before it, since it relies most formally on a previously created world. Each person's "personal mythology"⁵⁷ comes into play when interactions are how "collective meaning making"⁵⁸ occurs. For many fanfiction authors the community itself creates meaning in these works through support from reviews and understanding of works and trends in the community as a whole, as well as the tendency to happily build off of each other's stories.

Additionally, unique plots from one fandom are "translated" or adapted to the context of

⁵⁵ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York U, 2006).

⁵⁶ Line Nybro Peterson, "Sherlock Fans Talk: Mediatized talk on tumblr" in *Northern Lights*, vol. 12, (2014) 91.

⁵⁷ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 3.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

another fandom, as long as the original source is cited. For example, the “A Finger Slip” story mentioned earlier is based on a story from the *Glee* television show fandom, as the writer disclaims in the introduction provided below.

IMPORTANT: The original idea for this fic is not mine, iknowitainteasy on livejournal wrote a Klaine fic called Little Numbers, which is amazing and ten million times better than this. You should go read it, regardless of whether you like Klaine. It's just a brilliant story. Anyway, it inspired me to think about what the Sherlock version of Little Numbers might be, and thus this was created... I hope it's somewhat entertaining.

Here's the link to [Little Numbers](#). Check it out ^-^

Fig X: Disclaimer by AO3 user Pawtal concerning the origin of the idea for their story.

This is so prominent that there is structure within AO3 for that purpose: Each story has a section at the end titled “Works Inspired by,” where art and continuations of that specific subset of the story universe are documented; in this way borrowing isn’t considered plagiarism, but rather is encouraged. Joint storytelling is another way in which the lines of authorship become blurred in this genre. Some authors choose to write with others, and this is noted on the byline. Even more literally, users sometimes organize events where a story prompt is given and participants each write a given amount of the story, attempting to create a cohesive arc between the 10-15 participants.

On Tumblr, certain authors are known for their “prompt-fills.” When they want to write something, they ask their followers for prompts. The writer then answers the prompt to the specifications. In the example below, Tumblr/AO3 user Jenna221B supplies a bridge in the gap of John’s continuing PTSD created by an anonymous submission.

Anonymous asked:

ooh, can you write something where a noise (or whatever) startles John and he's back in the war, just for a short moment bc Sherlock pulled him back to the present? :)



Also on ao3 [here](#)

It doesn't happen very often, not nowadays.

One day John can feel something building but he isn't quite sure what it is. It feels like a pressure from within, a looming headache, an itchiness in his eyes. It's odd. He thinks it's just tiredness.

But then, when he and Sherlock are just on their way to the supermarket, John figures it out. Logically, he knows it was a bus that zoomed past them, the engine rattling. But, he suddenly hears the distant sound of gunfire.

He stops dead in the pavement, and barely notices Sherlock faltering beside him. He feels very hot, shirt sticking to his back.

"John?"

John blinks. He can still look at where Sherlock is, that's still something at least. But, behind Sherlock is the background of a desert, an unforgiving sun.

"You've got sand in your hair," John says, detached.

“Sorry?”

John scrubs at his eyes but the image remains the same. “I think,” he begins, and his knees start to sag. “I think I need to sit down for a bit.”

But Sherlock is already supporting him, leading him to a wall. “Well, I’ll join you, then,” he says.

John tries to breathe through the suffocating air.

Sherlock grips his hand. He starts saying the most random of things, listing the nearest tube stations to them, all the different lines, and squeezing his hand repeatedly, grounding John in location. London. London. London.

The air cools. He can breathe.

Sherlock’s face in front of him, a crease in his forehead. “Better?” He holds his hand out.

John smiles and takes the hand, and lets Sherlock pull him back up. “Home,” he says simply, and they walk on.

Send me an ask completing the sentence “I wish you would write a fic where...”

#Anonymous #johnlock #johnlock ficlet #johnlock fanfic
#johnlock drabble #I wish you would write a fic where #jenna answers
#my writing

52 notes Apr 27th, 2017



Fig. X: Example of prompt fill from tumblr user jenna221b, demonstrating the format of anonymous creation of gaps, and communities working together to fill it in a writing exercise.⁵⁹ This shared authorship is also incorporated through the prevailing practice of using “beta” readers, a “peer-review” process where “fans seek out advice on the rough drafts of their nearly

⁵⁹ Jenna221B. “Prompt Fill” on *Tumblr*, 2017.

completed stories so that they can smooth out ‘bugs’ and take them to the next level.”⁶⁰

Tropes that become popular through community efforts allow for meaning from deviations in the structure of the story. For example, “Coffeeshop AU” and “fake relationship” are two popular tropes that are replicated across fandoms that imply their own sets of meaning. The reader’s understanding of the story would not be formed without the experience of having read the other coffeeshop AUs that came before it. The tone and time frame are established, and labelling it as such inherently asks questions of how these characters would fit into that mold.

Question of Authorship

What we see here is not the elimination of authorship, but rather the loosening of the author’s grasp over that creative material so that there is more space (and content) for everyone. “As we expand access to mass distribution via the Web, our understanding of what it means to be an author—and what kinds of authority should be ascribed to authors—necessarily shifts.”⁶¹ As Abrahamson notes, when Tolkien makes himself responsible for populating all of the gaps, even those unforeseen, he “takes on the Herculean task entirely himself, where he might have had a perfect opportunity to leave Middle-earth to others to flesh out in more detail.”⁶² Ideas become another part of the “network” in Roland Barthes’ “metaphor of the text,”⁶³ rather than pure extensions of authorial intent.

⁶⁰ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 179.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁶² Abrahamson, “J.R.R. Tolkien, Fanfiction, and ‘The Freedom of the Reader,’” 57.

⁶³ Leitch, “Roland Barthes,” 1329.

In some cases the concept of authorship is revoked completely, either because the user keeps their profile so nondescript that they cannot be detected in their physical lives, or that they choose to post it truly anonymously. In either case, what is written won't follow these authors off of the internet, so that there is minimal recrimination for writing tabooed subject matter.

Crossing Media

Fluidity between images, text, and beyond comes naturally when there are multiple media formats used to form meaning from the work: Punday's "multimodality." Jenkins writes that "convergence represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content."⁶⁴ Jenkins noted in 2006 that fans' "fascination with fictional universes often inspires new forms of cultural production, ranging from costumes to fanzines and, now, digital cinema."⁶⁵ By this point a decade later, this cultural production is occurring almost directly alongside the official works, and the lines of where the textual object ends and begins are becoming more blurred.

Sherlock, for example, uses staged promotional images, video, and the "blog" that mirrors John's in the show.⁶⁶ In response, fandom's two most popular ways of manifesting meaning are text (in "meta," (analysis of the source material) and fanfiction) and images. Manipulations (manips) of images are another common way of overlaying slash meaning onto the original images provided. Stills or images from the source material are combined with other images or edited; "In this sense, Tumblr offers an opportunity to relocate from the consumption

⁶⁴ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 3.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁶⁶ <http://www.johnwatsonblog.co.uk/>

of media text to fan-made media production as a key element.”⁶⁷

Gifs, moving images that take up much less space and are easier to manipulate than videos, are another popular means of dissecting the source material. Meaning is crafted from the grouping of certain scenes and the drawing of parallels.

One of the central affordances of gifs is that they do not have sound. This is a constraint, because gif-makers must add text to each gif to get the message or dialogue across, but it’s also an opportunity, because it offers the option of rewriting the story or making crossovers with other narratives, while maintaining a seemingly flowing dialogue⁶⁸

This is not to say that there aren’t videos, songs, playlists, or cosplay (costumed interactions) of the characters. “A Finger Slip” even has raised money toward the creation of a web series. All of this works in response to the “multi-surfacing” of media that occurs in the source material, and fans respond in kind. “New media, then is multimedia both because it combines media with different sources whose relationship is manipulable, and because these media objects depend on the computer. . .through which we encounter them.”⁶⁹

Fanfiction works in imitation of traditional publishing formats by mimicking the conventions. The story information provided at the beginning functions similar to a standardized book jacket cover, telling the potential reader what they need to know to decide if they want to read the story. The number of “kudos” given is a means of weighing the popularity of a certain

⁶⁷ Peterson, “Sherlock Fans Talk: Mediatized talk on tumblr,” 91.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁶⁹ Punday, “From Synesthesia to Multimedia,” 21.

work, as it shows how many unique visitors read the story and “enjoyed” it; much like the function of pull quotes from reviews or an “Oprah Book Club” sticker. By downloading the pdfs of these stories and reading them on an e-reader, fanfiction becomes essentially indistinguishable from a traditionally published book. There are even audiobooks (podfics) created for some works. Popular works often have book covers created for them (example below), and these tend to feature at the beginning of the story.

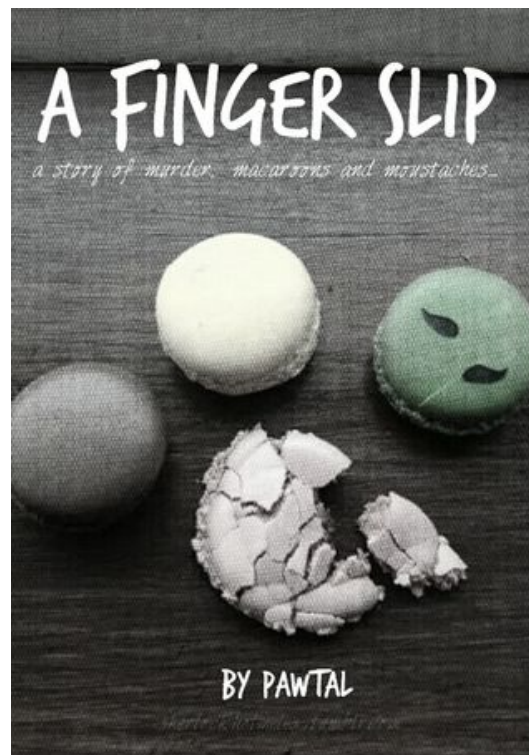


Fig X: Book cover made by tumblr user sherlock-holmeless for “A Finger Slip.”

Illustrations are also created and can be embedded throughout. The piece, unlike a physical book, can be updated when new art is created for it.

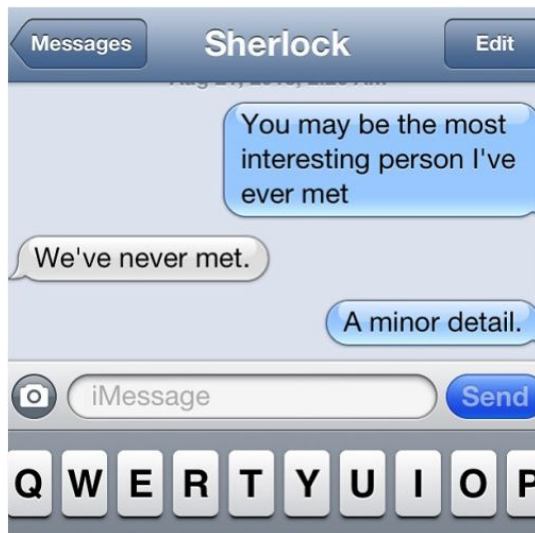


Fig X: Visual imagining of an episode from fanfiction “A Finger Slip”, demonstrating the cross-media illustrations created by fans. This is also used in the BBC version as a type of screen overlay during scenes where Sherlock or John are using their phones.

In this way reading becomes interactive for other readers and rereading becomes part of the process, as changes are continually made that alter the meaning-making experience. In works posted as written, chapter by chapter, some authors use the comments as a way of interacting with the readers. For example, they may play a game of who can guess an allusion made, or take requests of what people want to see happen next in the story.

By harnessing the crossing of genres and media accomplished by the original works, fanfiction is able to close the distance between publications and internet-based fanworks. Punday defines fanworks as “hybrid textual object in which play is coupled to narrative experiences drawn from other media”⁷⁰ (Punday 30). The product is a process of continual overlapping and interplay within the fanworks and newly created authorized content. This creates a scenario in which meaning is formed not just from the singular textual object, but also its combinations with

⁷⁰ Punday, "From Synesthesia to Multimedia," 30.

other texts, images, etc., further to the “meaning objects” the digital world is still developing.

V. INTERTEXTUALITY BEYOND FANFICTION

“This was not *his* Sherlock.”

from the “Curious Adventure of the Drs. Watson,” Chapter 3

(emphasis added)

When fanfiction calls into questions notions of authorization to perpetuate works, it also drags any other adaptations of Doyle’s works into the fray. This can be witnessed by comparing the application of the same barebones plot and its adaptation to three different genres: the original works by Doyle (hereafter ACD), the BBC *Sherlock* television show’s modern version, and the depictions of both of these captured in fanfiction. “Hound of the Baskervilles” in ACD (1902),⁷¹ or “The Hounds of Baskerville” in BBC’s *Sherlock* (2012),⁷² is adapted in the fanfiction story by ShinySherlock titled “The Curious Adventure of the Drs. Watson” (2014).⁷³ In this alternate universe, John Watson from the BBC *Sherlock* version is magically switched with the John Watson from the original stories, highlighting the differences—and similarities—in characterization between the two versions, at the same time as new(?) meaning is created through the “shipping” of the main characters.

In Doyle’s story, Holmes and Watson go to Devonshire to investigate the circumstances surrounding the death of the senior Baskerville on behalf of his son. The death is being ascribed to an old wives’ tale—a gigantic hound that haunts the local moor because of an ancestor’s indiscretions with an area woman. In the retrospection of Watson’s journal, the duo wades

⁷¹ Doyle, *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*.

⁷² Gatiss and Moffat, *Sherlock*, “The Hounds of Baskerville.”

⁷³ ShinySherlock, “The Curious Adventure of the Drs. Watson.”

through country gentility, disguises, and rumors to uncover the rascal in pursuit of the Baskerville inheritance.

The television version has the duo investigating the modern version of the old wives' tale—rumors circulating around the bioengineering experiments going on at Baskerville military base. In particular, there is an increased focus on the mental health concerns for Henry, who is being plagued by his childhood trauma of the hound. Trading inheritance for tourism income and scandal for a documentary, BBC *Sherlock* creates a modern analogy that plays on the insecurities of the current climate.

ShinySherlock's fanfiction story establishes upfront the sourcing for the work, as shown in the image below.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Sherlock (TV) , Sherlock Holmes - Arthur Conan Doyle , Sherlock Holmes & Related Fandoms
Relationships:	Sherlock Holmes/John Watson , Sherlock Holmes & John Watson
Characters:	John Watson , Sherlock Holmes , Sir Henry Baskerville , Louise Mortimer , Dr. Mortimer , Barrymore (Sherlock) , Mrs. Barrymore , Mrs. Hudson , Jack Stapleton , Beryl Stapleton , Selden
Additional Tags:	ACD Canon References , Book: The Hound of the Baskervilles , Episode: s02e02 The Hounds of Baskerville , Bodyswap , sort of, Alternate Universe - Character Swap , Alternate Universe , Alternate Universe - Victorian , Victorian Sherlock Holmes , victorianlock , Time Travel , Alternate Universe - Time Travel , Magic , Magical Artifacts , Love , Friends to Lovers , Canon-Typical Violence , yes there will also be sexy times , Animal Death , Canonical Character Death , it's a romance adventure horror story sort of , with some sci-fi/magical elements , Kissing
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2014-12-17 Completed: 2015-06-22 Words: 40883 Chapters: 14/14 Comments: 430 Kudos: 1551 Bookmarks: 507 Hits: 20281

The Curious Adventure of the Drs. Watson

ShinySherlock

Summary:

What if ACD Watson and BBC Watson switched places . . .
"Imposter!" Hands clenching the lapels of John's coat, Holmes shoved him anew.
"Yes!" John agreed, nodding, and then grimacing. "Sort of!"

Fig. X: Story information for “The Curious Adventure of the Drs. Watson,” demonstrating the tagging system at work setting expectations for the work to follow and establishing the origin of the story within the fanfiction plot.

The gap creation is outright stated in the provided summary: “What if ACD Watson and BBC Watson switched places?”⁷⁴ The character is split from the onset, calling into question the ability to call the latter ‘Watson’ at all. “Sort of Imposter” defines the outcome of the piece, and indeed self-reflexive fanfiction in general. Are fan-created (television show version included) iterations of these characters ever a true copy, or merely imposters of the original intent? What privileges certain creations over others?

In this particular work, the author uses canonical support to buttress their reading version of the television adaptation. For reference, the word count in Doyle’s story is 59,046, while ShinySherlock’s clocks in at 40,0883. Some dialogue in the ShinySherlock’s work is quoted directly from the original story. A useful example is the following quotation from ACD canon:

“‘I’m not easy in my mind about it.’

‘About what?’

‘About sending you. It’s an ugly business, Watson, an ugly dangerous business, and the more I see of it the less I like it. Yes, my dear fellow, you may laugh, but I give you my word that I shall be very glad to have you back safe and sound in Baker Street once more’⁷⁵

The context in the fanfiction, with the Victorian characters already being in a romantic relationship, does not necessitate any further additions; therefore the passage is able to stand as it is in the fanfiction story. This works to prove how the characterization in the television series differs from the original works, for the “modern” John is startled by the sentiment and emotion

⁷⁴ ShinySherlock, “The Curious Adventure of the Drs. Watson,” Chapter 1.

⁷⁵ Doyle, *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, 152.

demonstrated by the original Holmes.

“Can I even call him Sherlock? He glanced at the man who walked beside him, whose arm was linked with his own. Though his physical characteristics seemed identical to his Sherlock, this one’s mannerisms, his speech--his regard!--were enough unlike his Sherlock that John began to catalog their differences. In his mind, he made a decision to start calling this one “Holmes,” just as he was being called ‘Watson’⁷⁶

Writing in his journal after his first day in the past, he catalogues the change:

“What I know:

--It is 1889.

--I’m in England. Dartmoor.

--I’m on a case.

--For Sherlock Holmes.

--Holmes is not my Sherlock but he’s very similar.

--Both are exceedingly clever, both consulting detectives, both show-offs.

--Holmes seems older than you. Kinder.

--Holmes is more appreciative. Affectionate, even.

--You don’t worry so much (at all, really) about my need to eat or sleep.

⁷⁶ ShinySherlock, “The Curious Adventure of the Drs. Watson,” Chapter 3.

--You don't tell me "I want you back home safe."

--Or link arms with me in the street.

--Or kiss me.

So. Yeah. That's different.⁷⁷

What ShinySherlock is noting here is the stark difference in characterization from the original Holmes to the BBC's Sherlock. The ACD version of the story sees Holmes calling Watson "dear" more than 20 times, in addition to being openly sympathetic and attune to other people's needs. The borderline autistic Sherlock played by Cumberbatch rejects feelings as unnecessary. The modern version of John, additionally, epitomizes the concept of "no homo", shying away from anything that could be considered queer, as discussed previously.

The differences in audiences also contribute to this distancing from the reader/viewer. ACD's works are meant to be Watson's published journals documenting his time with Holmes, while "Curious Adventure" is written as the story from John's point of view, in addition to being crafted for a certain type of reading counterpublic.⁷⁸ Critic Michael Warner explains that this creates a distinction between the narrative audiences; since the journal is meant for the general public once it is published, there is a distancing between the narrator/writer and the content.⁷⁹

Additionally, the Victorian versions are afforded a certain amount of privacy in that the label of "gay" or "bisexual" were not yet in use, and as such the stigma was not the same.

⁷⁷ ShinySherlock, "The Curious Adventure of the Drs. Watson," Chapter 4.

⁷⁸ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2010) 56.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

Existing sans identity allows them to live without a link to their public selves⁸⁰ (Warner 26). For the most part their relationship is obscured by the common practices of homoeroticism and male companionship that dominated in the time period. It is exactly the impossibility of their lives in the eyes of the public that allows them to be “together” in the liminal privacy of 221B Baker Street, and why being “out” in modern times is cause for greater distress.

So.

Victorian England.

With a Sherlock Holmes who was not exactly his Sherlock
Holmes.

As a John Watson who was not exactly him.

Subconsciously he rubbed his fingers over his upper lip, wondering what else separated him from Holmes’ Watson. A moustache, yes, but also, apparently, a willingness to be kissed by Holmes⁸¹

(Chapter 3)

Writing in the journal, John enumerates the differences between the modern-day Sherlock and the Victorian version; what he sees as differences, however, are only misconceptions, as he later finds out. Both Watsons are still the same person, because in this world their feelings are universal and cross the boundaries of medium and time.

‘Are we telling people that we’re together now?’

‘We’ve always been together,’ Sherlock said, answering John with

⁸⁰ Ibid., 26.

⁸¹ ShinySherlock, “The Curious Adventure of the Drs. Watson,” Chapter 3.

kisses⁸²

Fanfiction answers the call for developed characterization by giving more focus to inner narrative than is afforded in other formats. Some works alternate point of view or have an epilogue with scenes from the point of view of the other (or another) character. This is particularly in contrast to the hindsight of Doyle's third-person past-tense, which has the effect of distancing the reader from the characters and the events taking place. On the television series the viewer in third person still only sees what flows with the plot aimed toward action/mystery, rather than the feelings and inner lives of the characters. This creates the gap of the expectation of increased characterization. The first person point of view and increased introspection generally employed in fanfiction allows for all of our questions (about at least one character) to be answered. Choosing a ship designated the general idea of how this will play out. Fanfiction is a shift in focus from the other versions, for this work is able to relate the underlying mystery while homing in on the personal perspectives involved.

On the surface level, in both adaptations there are changes in characters for modern senses of inclusion. Dr. Mortimer, for example, is portrayed on the show as a woman of color, rather than the white upper-class male of the book. The servants for the Baskervilles, the Barrymores, are eliminated in the modern television portrayal. The fanfiction story casts the servant Barrymores as people of color, and the couple is given significantly more narrative weight, featuring in more scenes and with greater depth than afforded in Doyle's work.

Taking leave of Barrymore had been the hardest. Other than

Holmes, of all the people John had met in this present, John had

⁸² ShinySherlock, "The Curious Adventure of the Drs. Watson," Chapter 13.

felt the strongest kinship to the stoic butler, whose intelligence and loyalty had kept both Henry and John not just safe but well-cared for throughout the entire ordeal. He would not soon forget the determination in the man's eyes when they had gone together out onto the moor, nor the firm but caring hand that placed a blanket about John's shoulders and propelled him upstairs when he had returned from it.

This differs greatly from the scrutiny that is imposed on them by ACD's story. Fanfiction is able to increase the roles for people of color and women with its greater awareness of testing the limits of characterization.

The use of pre-existing characters and storylines also probes the intertextual question of to what extent is the original context necessary for contrast and meaning making. The television show generally stands on its own, without depending on any reader knowledge of the ACD canon. It differs enough from the original story, however, for the mystery not to be immediately apparent by those familiar with the plot already; this works in keeping with the need for drama and suspense on the show. Fanfiction, however, inherently requires a different set of interpretive skills on the part of the reader, in that they are expected to have foreknowledge of the immediate source material. ShinySherlock writes at the onset of their work that

This fic mashes up the Sherlock ep "The Hounds of Baskerville" with ACD's novel *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Some plot points and some direct quotes from both are used throughout, but lots of changes as well. (You don't need to have read any ACD for this to

make sense, but hopefully it would add a layer of fun to it)⁸³

The work assumes familiarity with the television series, hence that particular story is not depicted in full. Going one (or more) steps back to the original stories, however, is not necessary. Both of the adaptations impose their telling within the gaps of Doyle's broad narrative, altering the characters slightly each time by the varying focus on different aspects of their character and audiences. Or, perhaps an even more meta example would be something like "In Any Version of Reality", in which fanfiction author alisvolatpropiis depicts the interactions of five different portrayals of the couple in question, drawing from the various characterizations in her own works.⁸⁴ The contrast created by situating two, three, or four iterations of these characters alongside one another yields a much more exhaustive character study, which is an overall goal of fanfiction. Isn't that level of deduction as to someone's character what the famous master of deduction would have wanted?

⁸³ ShinySherlock, "The Curious Adventure of the Drs. Watson," Chapter 1.

⁸⁴ Alisvolatpropiis, "In Any Version of Reality."

CONCLUSION

It is becoming increasingly important to understand the complexities of fan worlds and fan writing as literature and images/video continue to transcend their boundaries, making the distinction between what we see and what we read—not to mention what we think about what we see and read—fuzzy at best. From *Hamilton*, a “real person fic” in musical form of a biography, to *50 Shades of Grey*, a BDSM alternate universe fanfiction of the Twilight series (with the names changed), popular culture has become inundated with covert fanfiction, demonstrating a universal need to mine the stories we encounter for further meaning.

Reader response theory demonstrates that readers can own their personal meaning derived from a work, and websites such as Tumblr and AO3 allow for communities of meaning making. Within these communities, intertextuality becomes the chief mode of interpretation as ideas and visions are shared and developed cooperatively, shedding some of the notions of authorship as we know them.

With increasing numbers of people identifying somewhere on the queer spectrum of LGBTQIA+, media is unfortunately slow to reflect this. Despite Iser’s “Death of the Author”, the presence of queer authorship is becoming more and more demanded; readers don’t want performance, but rather the actual experience of being queer—which, as we know, doesn’t just involve the clichéd “coming out” storyline or tragic endings so commonly (and insistently) portrayed in books and on TV. Queer lives are normal lives, and the normalization within fanfiction allows for reclamation of identity for certain readers.



Fig. X: Tumblr post by user gentleviking exhibiting a common attitude toward safe spaces while world building in fanfiction.

Whether or not it is what we want young adults to be reading, that is what is happening. Writers/readers of fanfiction are creating worlds that reflect what it is they want to see in the world, what perhaps they are being denied by mass media. The crossroads we are approaching is whether to prescriptively condemn it, or descriptively understand it; I argue that becoming versed in the why and how of this phenomenon will help us better recognize the gaps between ourselves and what we want the world to be.

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