

THE IMAGE OF SHERLOCK HOLMES IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH-AMERICAN FICTION

Alexey Germanovich Melikhov^{1*}, Olga Olegovna Nesmelova², Yuri Viktorovich Stulov³

^{1,2}Kazan Federal University, Russia, ³Minsk State Linguistic University, Russia.

Email: *melikhov.ag@gmail.com

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Abstract

Purpose: The article analyzes the image of Sherlock Holmes in the works of some of the contemporary authors. The great detective created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle had a major impact not only on literature but on the world culture as a whole. This image spawned a lot of works featuring similar characters or even himself long before the series became public domain, and after that point, the number of works featuring Sherlock Holmes raised drastically.

Methodology: The primary method is comparative analysis; we use it to compare the original image of Sherlock Homes with later versions

Result: As one would assume, the perception of the image is different from author to author and therefore is different from the original created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. In this article, we will analyze several works of fiction of contemporary authors (for example, Neil Gaiman and Mitch Cullen), the image of the great detective presented in then and compare it with the one from the original literature series. In conclusion we will discuss Sherlock Holmes as a modern archetype and its most prominent features.

Applications: This research can be used for universities, teachers, and students.

Novelty/Originality: In this research, the model of The Image of Sherlock Holmes in Contemporary British-American Fiction is presented in a comprehensive and complete manner.

Keywords: *Sherlock Holmes, A.C. Doyle, Postmodernism, Contemporary literature, Comparative analysis.*

INTRODUCTION

The Sherlock Holmes series by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle became a huge hit in a short span of time, making his author a living legend. Moreover, with time the popularity of Sherlock Holmes grew far larger than the figure of his creator. Some people perceived Conan Doyle as a real-life version of Holmes, sending him cases with a request to investigate. This process grew even further after the death of Conan Doyle. Sherlock Holmes lived and became even more influential with each passing year, eventually growing larger than detective genre, then larger than literature, then larger than culture, far larger even than remarkable life of his remarkable creator.

Stories about Sherlock Holmes had a great impact on the detective genre, but with time, the image of the great detective itself became as important for the world culture as the things it brought into the detective genre. Several years ago a court even made an exception for the public domain law in the USA for Sherlock Holmes and made it public domain a bit earlier considering the cultural impact of it ([Laurie & Leslie, 2014](#); [Antúñez, 2001](#)). In 2004, the prestigious Hugo award went to a story combining the world of Sherlock Holmes with the world of Lovecraft, Neil Gaiman's *Study in Emerald*.

Countless parodies, pastiches, inspired works or works with these characters have appeared in over than century of Holmes's existence, and many of them (especially later ones) are more concerned with the characters than the detective genre. Now he is more of a symbol

Some of the interpretations, particularly from the screen adaptations kike Sherlock BBC and the Soviet TV Series, started to live lives of their own, inspiring people to create works with interpretations similar to those.

Therefore, nowadays there are a lot of officially published works that feature Sherlock Holmes as a character. It's been more than a century after the publishing of Conan Doyle's stories. In this article we will analyze several works of contemporary writers featuring Sherlock Holmes as a character and will try to understand how at least a portion of modern writers perceives the classic image. Before that, we will name some of the most distinctive features of Sherlock Holmes.

METHODS

The methods used in this work are as follows:

- The primary method is comparative analysis, we use it to compare the original image of Sherlock Homes with later versions;
- Another method that was being used is the intertextual analysis, it "builds the semantic content" ([Zakirov et al, 2017](#)).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before we start analyzing the contemporary works about Sherlock Holmes, we will name some of the more distinctive

features of the original image created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

- The so-called "deductive method" (which is, in fact, an inductive method);
- Sharp and cold mind;
- Love for a slight "showing off" and praise;
- A strong sense of justice, for which he is ready to break the law;
- Addiction to drugs;
- Boredom without complicated cases;
- Friendship with Watson and Mycroft, inability and unwillingness to get close to people;
- Breeding bees;
- Playing the violin;
- Outstanding skills in acting.

Even though beekeeping is mentioned only in the last Sherlock Holmes story *The Adventure of Shoscombe Old Place*, this is quite a bright trait of the character, which has become one of the most recognizable features of the great detective. It is more unusual and interesting than drug addiction. Maybe this is the reason why so many authors try to explore it or at least include it as an important part of their Holmesian stories.

Another thing that should be noted is the fact that Conan Doyle's stories are considered to be influential for the detective genre. However, according to some of the modern classifications (for example, Petr Moiseev in his *Poetics of the Detective Genre* (Moiseev, 2017)), works of Conan Doyle cannot be perceived as "pure detective (mystery) fiction" because of strong adventure and dramatic elements. Some of the stories, like *The Five Orange Pips* (which is also considered by Conan Doyle as one of his best works (Doyle, 1927)), even lack the detective storyline whatsoever.

The last thing that should be noted is the fact that Arthur Conan Doyle's stories about Sherlock Holmes officially entered the public domain which means that copyright law no longer applies to it and any of the characters. There were adaptations and stories about Sherlock Holmes from different authors before, but they had to be approved by the Association of Conan Doyle and pay royalties to them. After entering public domain, more experimental and bold works about Holmes appeared (Chahine, 2018; Taubaye et al. 2018).

The first analyzed work is Neil Gaiman's *The Case of Death and Honey*, one of the two Holmes stories with fantastic elements written by Gaiman. *The Case of Death and Honey* reveals the secret of the famous beekeeping hobby of Sherlock Holmes. It turned out that the honey of the special Oriental bees is one of the ingredients for the elixir of immortality (Laurie & Leslie, 2014; Silaparasetti et al. 2017). Holmes eventually creates for himself and Watson, which surprises him greatly. His death turns out to be a dramatization, in order to not surprise people with his unchanging look. In order to avoid unnecessary attention, he uses his iconic skills of acting and makeup. Thus, the story has the meta-message that Sherlock Holmes is a character who will live forever, even if these stories will be created by other authors like Gaiman with his Holmesian series.

The image of Sherlock Holmes in this story is more mysterious than in the works of Doyle, even though the story is partly told from his perspective, as in the last story about Sherlock Doyle. This partly because for the most part of the story, we don't know his exact intentions, and partly because of the unusual "romantic" Oriental setting. Holmes is no longer inclined to show off, but it makes perfect sense because he is old here, older than in the original works. It also means that the reader would not expect a complete resemblance of the character in the story and original since they differ even by their age. It sets another expectation (Bakhshandeh et al. 2015; Lima et al. 2018).

At least one more book tells a story about elderly Mr. Holmes: *A Slight Trick of the Mind* by Mitch Cullen (Cullin, 2014). Interestingly, in one of the storylines of the novel, Holmes is also looking for the elixir of immortality, but the ending of the novel is exactly the opposite. Mr. Holmes, no longer able to walk without a cane, with a gradually fading memory, dies, reflecting on the events of his life and not finding a way to survive. He had been left alone long ago, Watson and Mycroft died many years ago. The story unfolds in three time periods: the story of a trip to Japan, where he was looking for immortality, the story of the case, which he remembered well because of one woman, and the story of the present time. In the history of the investigation there is a detective line, but not well-developed as if it was added more so that there is an investigation in the Holmes book.

In general, *A Slight Trick of the Mind* will not change much if you forget that this is Sherlock Holmes. The sad story of the once great genius, before a lonely death looking back to life, could well have been not about Sherlock Holmes. An attempt is being made to deconstruct the image - Holmes is old, his mind and body let him down, he is completely alone, by the end of his life problems of interacting with people bring more pain. It is a deliberately slow narration full of descriptions. But it is not entirely clear whether minor discrepancies with the original are intentional or not. For example, here Holmes refers to Watson by name and does not smoke pipes - and these were very noticeable features of the original image. The

novel is primarily about death, old age and loneliness, Sherlock Holmes here, of course, deals with bees and uses the deductive method a little bit, but on the whole, even given a different age resembles the original image vaguely, and the detective story is very simplistic. If the *Case of Death and Honey* by Neil Gaiman, due to the short form, is a rather impactful statement that doesn't have to be deep, *The Slight Trick of the Mind* doesn't have enough ground for the novel related to Holmes.

This problem is rarely found in continuation works and pastiches, the authors of which try to recreate the spirit of Conan Doyle's works as accurately as possible. However, they have other problems.

There is a concept often used in the analysis of fantasy and horror works - "uncanny valley". It denotes the feeling of anxiety or fear that a person feels when looking at an object or being that is similar to a human, but is not one. The closest example is humanoid androids. In general, the appearance rather authentically reproduces the human, but some minor details diverge, and this causes subtle anxiety, fear.

Approximately the same happens with Sherlock Holmes in, for example, *Sherlock Holmes and King's Evil* by Donald Thomas. This is a fairly high-quality styling for the works of Doyle written to entertain fans of the original series who want to continue reading their favorite books. But the more noticeable when reading small inconsistencies, discrepancies with the image and original works. Holmes seems to be true to himself, but accidentally he gets too patronizing, says something too snarky or too petty ("It seems," said Holmes to me from the corner of his mouth, "that the housemaids here have been as careless as in most establishments when it comes to the matter of dusting. I daresay I should be so myself, in their situation. A good deal too much fuss is made about dust—which settles again almost as soon as it is brushed off." (Thomas, 2010)) or tries to persuade someone with too many words. Such trifles accumulate and create a feeling of clever fake, rather than an independent work, and interpretation.

Oddly enough, even the numerous "crossovers" (works that unite worlds of different works) of the Doyle universe with the Lovecraftian universe make a more organic, natural impression. Probably it is because of the different expectations we discussed earlier.

The most famous of these works is *A Study in Emerald* by Neil Gaiman, the short story for which he received the Hugo Award. This is a rather free retelling of *A Study in Scarlet*, where Lovecraftian myths about Cthulhu are embedded in the plot of the original. The mood becomes a poetic, gloomy and mysterious, and the fact that the story is originally designed as a newspaper of the early 20th century with a characteristic advertisement of circus performances sets the layer of irony that tunes the perception of the story as a literature game (Gaiman, 2003).

It must be said that the mystification device is also used in Laurie R. King's *A Monstrous Regiment of Women*, the second book of her series of "light" mysteries about the investigations of a student of Holmes, whom he later marries (Laurie, 2014). In the preface, the author assures that the books of the series are manuscripts sent to her in a mysterious box by the author, who continues to write to her. This, like the general "light" attitude and many quotations, again changes the reader's expectations so that he does not fit in with the fact that Holmes is much livelier and more emotional than in the original. However, at the same time, the book explores topics of religion and feminism and is quite a strong detective novel that is hidden under the layer of the game.

SUMMARY

In this article, we named several distinctive features of the image of Sherlock Holmes from the original works of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Then we analyzed several modern works featuring Sherlock Holmes as one of the main characters, such as *A Case of Death and Honey* by Neil Gaiman, *A Slight Trick of Mind* by Mitch Cullen and some other. The goal of the analysis was to determine some of the modern interpretations of the classic image. The results are presented in the conclusions.

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, a consulting detective Sherlock Holmes is no more. He became an immortal being that transcended time, cultures and languages. Like Don Juan, he became something more than just a character or just an image. Now he's a vaguely shaped vessel whose undefined form by default evokes certain associations and can be filled with many different meanings and characteristics. There are far less adaptations and "continuations" that stick close to the original now that it was before. One can say that the reason for that is the fact that Sherlock Holmes entered public domain. Probably partly yes, the lack of any restrictions led to more experimental and bold works coming up, but then again, the most popular adaptations of late are experimental at their core, like Sherlock BBC which significantly "updated" the formula and *A Study in Emerald* that offered an interesting combination of two famous fictional worlds. It can be used as evidence of the ongoing transformation of the image of Sherlock Holmes.

While the popularity of Sherlock Holmes grew with years, it grew the number of people who know the image from one of the adaptations, from the original or from the source. It creates different associations with the popular image, and, as a result, it becomes more shapeless. Sherlock Holmes is still associated with "deduction" and detective work, but it even grows distant from the detective genre, as can be observed in several works analyzed by us (*A Slight Trick of Mind*, *The Case of Death and Honey*, for instance). Yet in all works analyzed in this article the figure of Holmes feels big and

important, usually there is no strong postmodernist deconstruction of the image even in *A Slight Trick of Mind*. He is still a genius, a figure that feels important, even if he is old and lonely, it lacks “Impulse of total denial, characteristic for post-modern” (Frolov & Salakhova, 2016), not “post-modernistic schizophrenic discourse” (Breeva, 2014). Albeit arguably some of the postmodernist elements can be traced in many of the mentioned works, but we don’t think they belong to some sort of “post-postmodern” (Bobileva et al, 2017) genre too.

Yes, the old image of Sherlock Holmes grows more and more distant, but so many cultural associations and vagueness of the image in the current mass culture gives more freedom to authors inspired by the classic works of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, especially if they set the expectations of the reader’s right. It is a natural process of the evolution of an iconic image in mass culture. To some extent, he can be perceived as a new archetype of the mass culture like Robin Hood (a noble thief that robs rich and gives away to poor) or Don Juan (a popular “romantic” lover). Then what does the Sherlock Holmes symbolize in the minds of many? It is not just “calm justice” or “detective fiction”, It’s more than that. He became a symbol of a great detective – a mysterious genius, but still human, not a coldblooded machine. The original explore this side of his personality, but not too in-depth, so it can be the reason why in two of the analyzed works Holmes is old, and in one of them he marries. Two of the very human characteristics.

Of course, the works we analyzed are just a small part of all the Holmesian fiction that came out before it becomes public domain or after, but from our point of view, they still present an interesting view on the ever-changing yet same at the core Sherlock Holmes.

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