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Intertextual Adaptability of the Character of Sherlock Holmes from Literature to Film Production

This study explores the theme of intertextuality and adaptation between literature and film on the basis of Sherlock Holmes, the 19th/20th century character conceived by Arthur Conan Doyle. It shows how the character has been adapted from literature into the cinematic domain on the basis of three modern TV series, including *Dr. House* (Heel & Toe Films/Fox, 2004), *Sherlock* (Hartswood Films/BBC, 2010), and *Elementary* (Hill of Beans/CBS, 2012). Sherlock Holmes, who first appeared in 1887, was originally featured in four novels and 56 short stories. However, since that time Holmes has been adapted for over 240 movies exploiting enormous popularity of this character in a variety of settings. The paper analyzes prototypical, basic features of Sherlock Holmes underlying its intertextual adaptability. As discussed in this study, there are four prototypical features of Sherlock Holmes, i.e. (1) outstanding powers of perception combined with intellect; (2) unconventionality in social behaviour; (3) helpful partner; and (4) ability to use scientific achievements. The paper demonstrates that Sherlock Holmes conceptualized in such a basic manner can act as successfully in modern cinematic productions as it did in the late 19th century literature.

key words: Sherlock Holmes; Arthur Conan Doyle; detective story; science of deduction, unconventional methods of investigation

This article elaborates on the adaptability of the character of Sherlock Holmes and on his reinvention in three modern TV series: *Sherlock*, *Elementary* and *House M.D.* In 2004 David Shore, the creator of the hit series *House M.D.*, about a doctor who solves medical cases, which refers to the stories about Sherlock Holmes, has initiated the craze for film versions of the detective's adventures. The eight seasons of the American production with the British actor Hugh Laurie in the leading role has gained immense popularity and has attracted the attention of other screenwriters to still intriguing stories of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Thus, soon there have appeared on the cinema screens two full length films of Guy Ritchie – *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) and *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011) – and on the TV screens two modern series, productions of BBC and CBS – *Sherlock* (2010) and *Elementary* (2012). Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat, the creators of *Sherlock* and Robert Doherty, the creator of *Elementary*, just like David Shore, changed the scenario and set the main protagonists in modern times but simultaneously they kept the original concept of the leading character. There are more and more adaptations of the adventures of Sherlock Holmes, who in some way evolves but, at the same time, preserves some typical, perhaps necessary, traits. In this study I attempt to focus on this evolution and try to enquire into what features of the hero cannot be changed as they compose the figure of Sherlock Holmes.

The first association that comes to mind when one thinks of Sherlock Holmes would probably be the silhouette of a detective clad in a deerstalker cap who smokes a pipe, walks with

a stick, plays the violin and is, of course, a master of scientific deduction. This image is mainly ascribed to Sherlock Holmes, although it is Poe's Dupin that is considered the pioneer among the gentlemen with meerschaum pipes and deductive skills. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was a fervent admirer of Edgar Allan Poe, to whom he "ascribed the monstrous progeny of writers on the detection of crime" (Chapman). There is no doubt that Poe's fictional detective, Chevalier August Dupin, became an inspiration for Conan Doyle in creating the figure of Sherlock Holmes, the protagonist of 56 short stories and 4 novels. The connection between the two sleuths is marked by Watson's words: "You remind me of Edgar Allan Poe's Dupin. I had no idea that such individuals did exist outside of stories" (Doyle 18).

Poe is the initiator of many traits which are typical of a detective story. His most significant invention is without a doubt the creation of the amateur detective and his assistant, the narrator of the story, who is not as brilliant and cunning as the main hero. The writer formed the basic narratological structure of a detective story, which involves the news of a baffling crime, its description, the investigation, the unexpected solution of a mystery, and the unmasking of the perpetrator. Apart from these elements, one can also enumerate such features of Poe's literary detective as the nature of a loner, a recondite turn of mind, a condescending attitude towards the police, outstanding deductive skills and even lack of interest in women, traits which Sir Arthur Conan Doyle replicated and gave to the protagonist of his stories (Chapman).

However, as time elapsed, the image of Sherlock Holmes, inspired by Poe's Dupin, has altered. Modern TV series present a sleuth living in the modern world. The deerstalker cap has disappeared (at least in *Elementary* and *House M.D.*), and the pipe has changed into a cigarette. London, the city where the adventures of Sherlock Holmes originally take place, is no longer the first choice of the directors of some TV series: CBS's *Elementary* is set in New York, and *House M.D.* in New Jersey. Only BBC's production, *Sherlock*, takes place in the British capital.

Another element that, apparently, can be taken away from the protagonist is his profession and name, although not entirely. Sherlock Holmes remains Sherlock Holmes, the world's one and only consulting detective in both *Sherlock* and *Elementary*, but in *House M.D.* he takes the name of Dr Gregory House and is a diagnostician. Therefore, the consulting detective translates into the consulting doctor who, instead of solving criminal cases, deals with medical mysteries. As for the name, it has not changed that much. The word "Holmes," pronounced /həʊmz/, resembles in articulation the word "home," /həʊm/, which is the synonym for "house." Also, the names exhibit a similar position of the vowels "o" and "e"; ShErLOck HOlmEs – GrEgOry HOusE (Mamatas 111).

It should not be surprising that the figure of Dr Gregory House is based on the fictional detective, Sherlock Holmes. As Nick Mamatas notes in his article, there are, in fact, a number of parallels between the two characters when one takes into account all the seasons of the series. In "Whac-A-Mole," there appears an envelope with an inscription "The Game's An Itchy Foot," while for Holmes it is characteristic to say, "The game's afoot!" (Doyle 527). Just like Holmes, House is nearly killed by a man named Moriarty (Holmes's mortal enemy) in an episode entitled "No Reason." Moreover, both Holmes and House are drug addicts. Holmes is addicted to cocaine, and House to vicodin. Even House's address resembles the famous Baker Street 221B. The episode "Hunting" shows that the number of House's place is also 221B. What is more, both the detective and the doctor have a constant issue with the law and both have only one friend, **John Watson** and **James Wilson**, respectively, both of whom were married more than once and care a lot about the protagonists, trying to help them overcome their addiction to drugs. Both protagonists also share a flat with their best friends and both have a walking stick, with which they sometimes hit their opponents (Mamatas 112). Finally, in a way similar to that in which

Sherlock Holmes arranges his death in “The Final Problem,” House pretends to be dead in “Everybody Dies,” the very last episode of the TV series.

House M.D., similarly to *Elementary* and *Sherlock*, is a study of the figure of Sherlock Holmes transferred into the twenty-first century. The series presents the reinvented, evolved version of the literary character. Although the protagonist does not play the violin any more (in *House M.D.*), leaves London (in *House M.D.* and *Elementary*) and adopts a different name (in *House M.D.*), he is still gifted with deductive skills and he suffers from what his friend Wilson calls “Rubik’s Complex” – an obsessive need to solve every intriguing mystery: “You know how some doctors have the Messiah complex; they need to save the world? You’ve got the Rubik’s complex; you need to solve the puzzle” (*House M.D.*, “DNR”). Therefore, what remains is his outstanding powers of perception combined with an astounding intellect, unconventionality in social behaviour, a helpful partner and the ability to make use of scientific achievements. These are the necessary components of this literary figure which help to identify Sherlock Holmes.

In all the three TV series under discussion, Sherlock Holmes is portrayed as a creative individual with unique traits, one who has a revolutionary attitude towards the principles, moral code, laws and mores which are usually followed by the rest of his co-workers. Holmes’s constant issue with the law, breaking into people’s houses, deceptions and lies (in the case of House fabricating prescriptions and not wearing the typical white outfit) shows him as a nonconformist with regard to the rules of Scotland Yard (and of the Princeton-Plainsboro Hospital).

His rebellious nature influences his unorthodox methods of investigation, which are one of the crucial elements of the stories about Sherlock Holmes and their adaptations, and it is impossible not to mention them. Although the protagonist is generally known for his deductive skills, he uses miscellaneous creative and effective techniques at work. For example, he is keen on working “under cover.” His disguise and acting are the vehicle for gathering new information. This is perfectly illustrated in one of the episodes of BBC’s *Sherlock*, “Scandal in Belgravia” in which Holmes disguises himself as a priest and pretends to be mobbed only to get access to Irene Adler’s apartment.

Apart from that, Holmes frequently uses methods that are commonly disapproved of and often illegal. One of them is, of course, the break-in technique, which may be justified on utilitarian grounds: from this perspective wrong deeds may be vindicated if they help to do greater good and avert serious damage. The break-in method facilitates the sleuth’s unmasking of the criminal (and when it comes to House, it helps to identify the disease), preventing misfortune (Abrams 69). In order to get more new clues which can be useful for solving the case, Holmes also tends to mistreat corpses. Before he has had the chance to get to know the detective, Watson hears from his acquaintance, Stamford, about Holmes’s “passion for definite and exact knowledge,” which is expressed in such eccentricities as “beating the subjects in the dissecting-rooms with a stick to verify how far bruises may be produced after death” (Doyle 14), a phrase quoted in the first episode of *Sherlock*, “A Study in Pink.”

There is a certain scheme in the way Holmes enquires into every mystery. At first, he analyzes the clues, using his deductive reasoning and then excludes the solutions that do not fit until he is left with only one option, which must be correct. He follows the rule that says: “when you have excluded the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth” (Doyle 90). This scheme is well pictured in filmic adaptations of the adventures of Sherlock Holmes, even in *House M.D.*, which is rather loosely based on the books of Conan Doyle. In cooperation with his teammates, the doctor also analyzes the symptoms of the disease, creates a

list of possible afflictions and then carefully narrows it down and chooses the most probable answer and the most apt method of treatment.

The remedy for a problem sometimes occurs to Holmes's mind during an unconscious processing of information. Hence, it is possible that Holmes's habit of playing the violin shown in *Sherlock*, or attending meetings for drug addicts in *Elementary*, or even watching soap operas and taking a nap during office hours in *House M.D.*, is an integral part of the hero's success.

What makes Sherlock Holmes unconventional in social behaviour is his nature of a loner. Except for his sidekick John Watson (in *House M.D.* it is James Wilson and in CBS's *Elementary* Joan Watson), he has no friends. The emotional relation between him and Watson is relevant in the protagonist's life, because his best friend, who "by cunning questions and ejaculations of wonder could elevate Holmes's simple art, which is but systematized common sense, into a prodigy" (Doyle 635), is the first reviewer of the detective's opinions and a sort of a link to the real world. Hence, the presence of this character is crucial – he prevents the protagonist from self-destruction.

Holmes would also not be Holmes without his misogynist approach to women. Originally, Sherlock found relationships and matrimony more of a hindrance at work than a key to bliss. Such an attitude is manifested in his discrediting females and perceiving them as irrational. His lack of interest in females is well presented in BBC's *Sherlock*. The only woman that draws the hero's attention is Irene Adler, who is the only one that manages to outwit him.

In *Elementary* and *House M.D.* the protagonist's misogyny is depicted in a slightly different way. In both cases it is a consequence of previous relationships and is significantly more marked than in the BBC's series, for House and CBS's Sherlock frequently meet with prostitutes and treat women instrumentally. They do not restrain themselves from sexual intercourses with females, as they find sex a natural physiological need. It is essential that in *Elementary* Watson is a woman, for she is the only female (but for Irene Adler, Holmes's ex-girlfriend) whom the consulting detective actually respects. The CBS's Sherlock does not hurl abuses at women, however. He is not this kind of a misogynist. House, on the other hand, is constantly churlish and unpleasant towards everybody, regardless of their sex. He insults those who have had the bad luck to meet him face to face, and makes disgusting sexual allusions to women. He behaves like this even towards the women he cares for – his ex-wife and his superior, Lisa Cuddy (the counterpart of Irene Adler in *House M.D.*).

House is more of a parody of the literary Sherlock Holmes, as he takes the distanced approach to people that is typical of Holmes to extreme proportions. The TV series is filled with the doctor's acidity. There is hardly any episode in which he does not insult people around him. In "Unplanned Parenthood," he even calls his boss's two-year-old daughter an idiot because she ate a coin: "She opened up a Chinese food bag to eat money. What an idiot."

Just like House, the protagonists of BBC's and CBS's series are rude to those with whom they have contact. Their comments, filled with sarcasm and irony, usually make their co-workers feel self-conscious and unintelligent, "Dear God, what is it like in your funny little brains, it must be so boring" (*Sherlock*, "A Study in Pink"). When CBS's Sherlock meets Joan Watson for the first time, he refers to her as "a helper monkey" and "a personal valet," dismissing her as another person less intelligent than him (*Elementary*, "Pilot"). The arrogant behaviour of Sherlock Holmes is presented in all three of the TV series based on Sir Conan Doyle's stories as the literary Sherlock Holmes also does not treat his partners in investigation with much respect. He often talks about Scotland Yard officers with irony: "There is no crime to detect, or, at most, some bungling villainy with a motive so transparent that even a Scotland Yard official can see through it" (Doyle 43). The hero seems to perceive the policemen as unintelligent. The solitary

exception is George Lestrade, about whom he says to Watson: “he is as tenacious as a bulldog when he once understands what he has to do” (Doyle 43).

Taking into account Holmes’s complicated character and demeanour, one can draw the conclusion that he suffers from Asperger’s syndrome. Difficulties in maintaining social interaction and accepting changes as well as engrossing oneself in obsessive interests are the symptoms of this disorder (Gillberg 631-38). Such a diagnosis could explain Holmes’s tendency to keep almost everybody at a distance, his lack of interest in women and his habit of beating corpses with a stick.

The hero’s harsh attitude towards others may result from his arrogance. His opinion about his own profession is very high. The sleuth perceives himself as the last resort for unsolvable crimes, as he finds himself more intelligent than and superior to other professionals: “I’m a consulting detective . . . Here in London we have lots of government detectives and lots of private ones. When these fellows are at fault, they come to me, and I manage to put them on the right scent” (Doyle 18). He puts an emphasis on the fact that he is a “consulting detective,” and not a “private detective,” which means that he is extraordinary. Similarly, the television alter egos of Holmes also brag about their profession, “I’m a consulting detective, the only one in the world. I invented the job... It means whenever the police are out of their depth – which is always – they consult me” (*Sherlock*, “A Study in Pink”). In “Control,” House tells openly that he is “the big poobah” and “the go-to guy.”

Self-admiration is in these cases wholly justified, as the hero notices details that others tend to overlook, often because he is an expert in certain areas. Just like the literary Sherlock Holmes, the BBC and CBS Sherlocks are authorities in the knowledge of human anatomy, botany, chemistry and different types of tobacco or cigarette ash. As for House, the protagonist specializes mainly in rare diseases.

Holmes is, without doubt, a troubled but ingenious character. This combination of features seems to be connected with Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of “Übermensch,” the notion translated as the “Overman” or a “Superman” (Goldblatt 42). “Über” signifies “over” in the sense of high position in hierarchy and may suggest elevation. Holmes’s loneliness and pain are his “elevation,” for they allow him to climb to levels unattainable for ordinary mortals (Goldblatt 48). They are connected with his deductive skills and the ability to solve mysteries. According to Nietzsche, the Übermensch is a higher living being, higher than man: “Man is a rope, fastened between animal and Superman” (qtd. in Spinks 120). Holmes’s marvellous ability of deduction singles him out from the society he lives in and marks the fact that he is extraordinary. In the episode of *House M.D.* entitled “House vs. God,” Watson compares House’s skills to almost divine qualities, which puts him again on the top of social hierarchy, above other doctors and ordinary members of community.

Apparently, outstanding deductive skills along with such traits as the nature of a loner, a sceptical attitude towards the police and misogyny are the necessary elements for Sherlock Holmes to be the Sherlock Holmes. However, all of these features were already to be found in the figure of August Dupin. The stories about Sherlock Holmes replicated these traits and gave rise to a literary tradition, which was, in turn, later continued by Agatha Christie and her Hercule Poirot, which shows that, apparently, the evolution of the fictional detective is still in progress. Conceived by E.A. Poe, C. Auguste Dupin, the pioneer among the gentlemen with meerschaum pipes and extraordinary moustaches who solve criminal cases thanks to their high intelligence, was the basis for Sherlock Holmes, who in turn became an inspiration to such screenwriters as Mark Gatiss, Steven Moffat and Robert Doherty in reinventing the character of Sherlock Holmes and to Shore in creating the figure of Dr Gregory House.

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