# Sherlock Holmes Crosses Borders

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Who needs frontiers? Increasing resistance to globalization leads to a renewed interest in the idea of "*good* frontiers." For instance, Regis Debray[1] has written on the need to reassess and revalorize frontiers, suggesting a response to contemporary anxiety about the loss of identity. The relevance of the concept of frontiers in the context of storytelling is the subject of this essay. Such frontiers do not only concern the boundaries between countries. While rooted in the "geographic metaphor," they offer reflections on a whole range of conceptual, dynamic, and generic issues.

The Sherlock Holmes narrative, in its multiple guises, is a useful locus for investigation. Two main types of borders can be delineated in these narratives: on the one hand, actual and well-marked frontiers (based on the geographic metaphor, explained in the next section) extending from space to time, characters, and genres. On the other hand, moving borders between two poles that form a series of dynamics, such as good and evil, nostalgia and hybridisation, abstract deduction and forensics based on material clues. In the first category, frontiers do not move and are meant to be crossed, whereas borders of the second type move around a fixed object or narrative. In the Holmes example, Sherlock will travel in space and time and across genres, but new authors and new readers will also use his stories according to moving criteria which help regenerate the narrative. In many respects, the original Holmes canon did not imply the range of dynamics produced much later by new narratives, such as *film noir* or American forensics of the *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* type.

[1] Régis Debray, *Éloge des frontières*, Paris: Gallimard, 2010.

## Frontiers of the First Type: Adaptations and the Geographic Metaphor

In fiction, geographic frontiers are easy to ignore for those who have a strong, well-defined identity, such as Sherlock Holmes. Such strongly identified entities as the Holmes pattern will travel through space and time and help build worlds of their own. In a way, familiar stories echo familiar places: we come back, we enjoy their unchanged settings, but we live new moments that revive details in our minds and question our own evolution. As we import the geographical metaphor while speaking of stories, we find that words are to be compared with maps (both are abstract signifiers), and that a world outside (real or imaginary) is their signified territory. It is clear that, in the case of Great Britain, the abstract borders coincide with the island's physical shores, and we already know that maps can refer to either an imaginary or a real territory.

The geographic metaphor concerns fixed borders and a moving formula within the games of adaptation. The name "Sherlock Holmes" has become a fixed label that points to a familiar and fictitious territory, often dealt with as if he were not a fictional character (see for example, the museum in Baker Street). Such names generate borderlines and imply a set of rules and elements within them. Their "maps" will import new elements from beyond the border, whereas some typical elements will be exported out of the original territory. In both movements, strong identity (of the territory or of the travelling unit) is required. Reference to Conan Doyle's stories is notably absent in Linda Hutcheon's remarkable defence of adaptation, and yet her concluding observation is apposite: "In the workings of the human imagination, adaptation is the norm, not the exception."[2]

The nineteenth century offered various canonical narratives organized around a famous character (for instance, Frankenstein, Dracula, Sherlock Holmes), and establishing a map made of diegetic units, motifs, and themes I shall call the *norm*, keeping the word *canon* for the set of forty-six short stories plus the four novels. This norm (a set of rules), included in the canon (the Doyle original stories), can be organized into a formula (a creative set of devices) which, in its turn, generates endless variations.[3] However, it is at least possible to use the formidable corpus as a starting point from which to suggest a general "grammar" of the Holmes offspring in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and to attempt to map and establish the borders between several types of narratives and narrations. In so doing, I shall borrow from Linda Hutcheon's book the tool she calls a "meme." A meme (after Richard Dawkins) is a "minimal unit of cultural transmission" or, even more simply, the basic unit of imitation (Hutcheon 2006: 31). In Laurie King's novel *The Language of Bees*[4] (2009), for example, Holmes is transported in time and space: "My husband sighed but he made no attempt to defend or justify his son's act" (King 2009: 182). The narrator is Mary Russell, a clever and pretty twenty-four-year-old American woman. The husband is Sherlock Holmes, who is sixty-three in 1924. And his "son" – Damian, born to Irene Adler – is the suspect-to-be in this story. The Californian writer uses part of the canon and the formula, but she transposes them by transgressing temporal (1924) and spatial limits (her previous story was set in the US), and by adding characters and events around the accepted set of Doyle characters (for example, Holmes and Mycroft). Above all, the style of the Californian novelist is a florid pastiche of nineteenth-century novel writing.

[2] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, London: Routledge, 2006, p. 177.
[3] See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sherlock_Holmes: "The Guinness World Records has consistently listed Sherlock Holmes as the 'most portrayed movie character' with 75 actors playing the part in over 211 films. Holmes's first screen appearance was in the Mutoscope film *Sherlock Holmes Baffled* in 1900, albeit in a barely-recognisable form." I found the article useful as a compendium of "Holmes general wisdom."
[4] Laurie King, *The Language of Bees*, New York: Bantam Books, 2009.

## Towards a Typology of the Holmes Stories

*The Language of Bees* was published in 2009. I shall take this year as a sign of the vitality of the myth and as a sample for a starting point, since it saw almost all types of rewriting and adaptations of the Holmes tradition. Here is a short list of this micro corpus:

Novels

Laurie R. King, *The Language of Bees*, "The New York Times Bestseller," 2009.

Gilbert Adair, *And Then There Was No One*, Faber & Faber, 2009.

Films and TV series

Harry Bradbeer, *Enola Holmes*, 2020 (123 minutes), with Henry Cavill (Holmes) and Millie Bobby Brown (his sister Enola).

Bill Condon, *Mr Holmes*, with Ian McKelen, 2005 (103 minutes). Novel by Mitch Cullin, "A slight Trick of the Mind."

Allan Cubitt (screenplay), *Sherlock Holmes and the Case of the Silk Stockings*, BBC, 2005, with Rupert Everett as Holmes (97 minutes).

Robert Doherty, *Elementary*, series from 2012 to 2019, 154 episodes (42 minutes), with Johnny Lee Miller.

Bruno Heller (scriptwriter), *The Mentalist*, 2008–2011, Warner Brothers TV series, with Simon Baker as Patrick Jane (50-minute episodes).

Steven Moffat, *Sherlock*, *a New Sleuth for the Century*, BBC, 2010, with Benedict Cumberbatch as Holmes, (three 90-minute episodes).

Guy Ritchie, *Sherlock Holmes*, 2009, Warner Brothers film, with Robert Downey Jr. as Holmes (123 minutes).

The Wikipedia item cited earlier provides a helpful list of the typical units I call memes: places, times, objects, attitudes, events. These memes now belong to the common knowledge shared by most readers and sketch the original map on which the canon is inscribed. Let me recall a few of them: the canonical Holmes belongs to a well-defined *space* (London, Baker Street, the Docks, the Moors, and later the Sussex Downs), and *time* (late-Victorian Britain and the Commonwealth); he lives and works with Dr Watson, who tells his stories after the fact, but insists on their limited accuracy; Holmes's looks and clothes have been fixed in *A Study in Scarlet*[5] and in the original illustrations by Sidney Paget;

[5] *A Study in Scarlet*, Chapter II: "Holmes was certainly not a difficult man to live with. He was quiet in his ways, and his habits were regular. It was rare for him to be up after ten at night, and he had invariably breakfasted and gone out before I rose in the morning. Sometimes he spent his day at the chemical laboratory, sometimes in the dissecting-rooms, and occasionally in long walks, which appeared to take him into the lowest portions of the City. Nothing could exceed his energy when the working fit was upon him; but now and again a reaction would seize him, and for days on end he would lie upon the sofa in the sitting-room, hardly uttering a word or moving a muscle from morning to night. On these occasions I have noticed such a dreamy, vacant expression in his eyes, that I might have suspected him of being addicted to the use of some narcotic, had not the temperance and cleanliness of his whole life forbidden such a notion. As the weeks went by, my interest in him and my curiosity as

Watson sees him as a Bohemian, whatever this may mean at the time; his familiar objects metonymise his tastes and habits and are to be seen in his museum: cigars, syringes (the 7% solution), pistols, sword, magnifying glass and so forth. The list is obvious and constitutes the formula itself.

His attitudes too are acutely described: starving himself, bored in a haze of smoke, silent or diving into action, fighting, hiding then coming back in disguise and so on. But the basic narrative implies a mystery to be solved by induction, and an analeptic narration by Watson based on a threefold set of signs: forensic Holmes observes and reads clues; Watson observes and reads Holmes; the reader deciphers Watson's unreliable narrative. Among the other fundamental narrative elements in the canon, most criminals have a connection with past horrors and sufferings; many stories conjure up exotic, distant countries and mysteries; Holmes himself articulates a positivist inductive method with esoteric magic visions of the world, and his stories repeat the shadow of his symmetrical arch-enemy Moriarty in the background. Most importantly, the Holmes canon seems to introduce the idea that, beyond the English gentleman's eccentricity, there is a price to be paid for genius. Most post-Holmes sleuths will have both their Watsons (and Lestrade) and a whole set of weak points: age for Miss Marple; ridiculous pride for Poirot; looks and social status for Columbo; dead wives for George Gently, Lewis, or Patrick Jane; divorce for Wallander and Morse, and so on. The only exception might be happy Barnaby in his idyllic Midsomer England, obviously reminiscent of Miss Marple's Saint Mary Mead.

## Narrative Modes

Once this simplified list of memes is recalled under the label Holmes (this is the map suggesting a territory), the question is now: what types of variations do they suggest, what moves within and beyond these borders (when you metaphorically draw a line around the groups of *memes*) and what trespassing or transgression occurs? In considering these variations, the principal polarities within the Holmes territory should be borne in mind. These include:

Analeptic narration/instant action

A taste for "gothic" mysteries/positivist forensics

A weakened persona/a Genius sleuth

Holmes's obsession with accuracy/unreliable Watson

The starting point is the written canon itself (26 stories, plus 4 novels): an illustrated text, told by Dr Watson. This written material can be adapted on the stage or filmed. Adaptations can take liberties with time and space, but they can also verge on pastiche. Typically, Jeremy Brett's impressive BBC collection varies the length of its episodes in proportion to the originals, either short stories (short films) or novels (90-minute films). The obvious intention is twofold: to be as faithful as possible to the

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to his aims in life, gradually deepened and increased. His very person and appearance were such as to strike the attention of the most casual observer. In height he was rather over six feet, and so excessively lean that he seemed to be considerably taller. His eyes were sharp and piercing, save during those intervals of torpor to which I have alluded; and his thin, hawk-like nose gave his whole expression an air of alertness and decision. His chin, too, had the prominence and squareness which mark the man of determination. His hands were invariably blotted with ink and stained with chemicals, yet he was possessed of extraordinary delicacy of touch, as I frequently had occasion to observe when I watched him manipulating his fragile philosophical instruments."

original, and to regenerate it for our times. But the *narrator* becomes the film itself, even though we are only afforded Watson's partial knowledge. Most attempts to recapture Watson's voice are marred by the rich amount of information afforded by a single filmic picture. For instance, Billy Wilder's *Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* starts with Watson's manuscript and Watson's unreliable voice-over. But although his voice comes back regularly, the spectator trusts what he sees as an "objective" vision of the diegetic world. Most canonical adaptations (for example, those of Basil Rathbone or Peter Cushing) take more liberties with the original than the Brett version. Incidentally, TV series and longer films share the *serial* model, since a Holmes novel is based on a set of repeated, already accepted *memes*.

A second type of variation, near pastiches (written and filmic), respects the canonical formula but adds new items and information. This is not unlike exploring the same territory, but more closely and with a different intention. Note here that there is no chronological progression among the different modes of narration. Total freedom was possible early in the century (viz. Buster Keaton's *Young Sherlock*), whereas near pastiche was written as late as 2009: a prime example here would be an invented short story inserted in Gilbert Adair's novel. When the protagonist – Adair himself – reads a story he had written, called the *Giant Rat of Sumatra* (Adair, 58–87), all the readers know this is a story Watson had promised to tell. This is more than a mere pastiche – it might have been a canonical text working here like Pierre Menard's *Don Quixote*. Allan Cubitt's (2005) *Sherlock Holmes and the Case of the Silk Stockings*, a 90-minute BBC film with Rupert Everett, offers another meticulous exercise in pastiche. But faithfulness accepts difference: interestingly, where Brett seems to be always shouting, Everett constantly whispers.

The third type of variation involves additions: filling gaps and answering questions. There is a variety of additions based on what could have happened before the canon (*Young Sherlock Holmes* or *Murder Rooms*, in which young Conan Doyle takes his model from a Dr Bell, played by Ian Richardson), after it (*The Language of Bees*) or within a mysterious interval Watson did not describe (after the Reichenbach Falls episode, Holmes disappeared: *The 7% Solution* tells of his meetings with Freud in Vienna). Billy Wilder's *Private life of Sherlock Holmes* is meant to offer two explanations for the Detective's misogyny: 1) could he be gay? 2) he was not, but was in love with a German spy. Such additions are well known in films with their prequels, sequels, and parallel stories. All these examples respect the basic memes within plausible time and space borders, with the debatable exceptions of Holmes's youth and old age, but they add new events. The twentieth century offers many examples of such amplifications, with Dracula, Spiderman, and more recently, Batman (from Burton to Nolan). We note here that Holmes is less interesting as a tormented character than as an active mind. If he acts more than Christie's sleuths, he thinks more than comic book characters of the Superman type.

The fourth category involves variations. In such cases, the geographic metaphor changes significantly: frontiers and landscapes are different, but the traveller is meant to keep them in mind while making comparisons with a new version of the memes. In fact, shifts in space and time were to be expected as soon as the canon built a sufficiently strong norm. Holmes had to go to the USA (with Mary Russell) and to be transposed into the twenty-first century (in the *Sherlock* BBC series). In a symmetrical move, Ritchie's Hollywood Holmes remains in a cyberpunk nineteenth century London, but he also deeply alters his character. Ritchie's film is obviously a mixture of canonical allusions and shifts in narration and tone. For example, he plays with Holmes's so-called bohemian attitude, which he grossly exaggerates, making him dirty, ill-shaven, and clownish while Holmes's addictions (wine, alcohol, and drugs) and potential violence (boxing bare-fisted) become almost grotesque. This version is digitally filmed, and the greenish colours highlight its artificiality, even if it refrains from the *Van Helsing* type of excesses of the same period (in which Frankenstein meets Dracula).

This brings us to questions of import and export. Ritchie's film, for example, keeps most of the canon while twisting it completely. In a way, one could say that he imports the Holmes formula into Hollywood. In contrast, one may suggest that some TV series borrow a few memes from the canon without naming their protagonist Holmes and create a space and time frame which is quite different. The British screenwriter Bruno Heller explicitly recycled the Holmes formula into a new story – *The Mentalist* – in which several memes are preserved even though there is no specific mention of the Holmes label itself. Heller exports them to Los Angeles in 2010: Patrick Jane is a brilliant sleuth but he is rendered powerless by his low status in the police and his personal story (his wife and son had been killed by a Moriarty figure, John Le Rouge). Like Holmes, Patrick Jane works with a Lestrade-Watson figure, in this case, a policewoman called Lisbon.

In the last variation of the geographic metaphor, everything (narration, focus and tone, fixed frontiers and travelling memes) seems to be retained, but the reader will focus upon point-of-view and mood: in other words, same landscapes but different travellers and different contexts. The Holmes canon, like most similar myths of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was very soon parodied, in what seems to be the normal sequel to success. Parody is one of the several narrative moves of adaptation establishing a new relationship between the text and its reader, well exemplified by Buster Keaton and Gene Wilder (in the Mel Brooks tradition). The 1980s saw a flourishing of variations of this type, with Billy Wilder's *Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*, Tom Eberhardts's *Without a Clue* or Nichol's *The 7% Solution*. They share a nostalgic approach, and they concentrate on the consequences of Holmes's *persona* rather than on the narrative patterns of the original. First-person narratives in novels are more easily accepted than in films, where they hint at self-conscious narration: Mary Russell simply says: "It's him, I said ungrammatically."[6] But films, too, can make explicit the shifts through the narrative voice itself. Of course, Wilder's Watson immediately sounds unreliable with his old-fashioned precautions and his caricature of a clue (how deep was the *parsley* found in the butter on a hot day?). Or, in *Without a Clue*, Holmes's and Watson's personas are exchanged, the Doctor being the real genius and Holmes a drunken actor posing as the Detective. As a result, what Michael Caine's Holmes says sounds suspicious and full of *double entendres*.

Gilbert Adair's *And Then There was No One*, aims to be the ultimate postmodern retelling of the myth. As his sleuth protagonist says: "postmodernism is dead, it's so last century … it's as hopelessly passé as Agatha Christie herself" (Adair 2009: 254). The book is not a novel but "an entertainment" with the author himself as narrator and protagonist. The Holmes label and *memes* (a museum and a Festival in Switzerland) are only a pretext. The author-protagonist meets his Marple-like sleuth who detects him as the murderer. The novel ends when the author-narrator-protagonist-murderer Adair falls into the Reichenbach Falls and dies. This aims to be the ultimate story with the author as villain, killed by his own sleuth.

## Moving Borders of the Second Type

I shall conclude with a different metaphor, borrowed from graphs and computers: moving borders of the second type. Most dynamic oppositions between two poles call for a *moving cursor*, mostly pointing at the situation of a group or a person at a particular moment. For instance, the canon suggests a balance between Watson and Holmes, the doctor and the detective. But Holmes uses two

[6] Laurie King, ibid, p. 327.

techniques of investigation which integrate these two poles: he borrows the doctor's empirical search for material clues *and* the literary speculation of the game player. Both poles (abstract deduction/empiricism) coexist in him, and one has to look at his followers in the twentieth century to realise that they are likely to attract different trends of stories, from intellectual *deduction* (Miss Marple) to empirical *forensics* (*CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*).

The Holmes canon already included a whole range of such oppositions (calling for the moving cursors at work when one considers new stories). Countless variations would later produce what may be considered to be mythical tensions between the poles, a few examples of which I shall suggest here: a) The Golden Age of the British *whodunnit* (1930–1940) emphasized the opposition between a couple of detectives borrowed from the Watson/Holmes pattern whereas American crime stories generally relied on teams or the police organization. Nevertheless, the idea of a team had already been suggested by Holmes's "irregulars," and the limit was made obvious by the opposition between two types of twentieth century stories. b) More significantly, the whole conception of Good and Evil implied by the Holmes stories is revisited later: evil is meant to be as total as possible in the whodunit, since it holds the whole pattern together, whereas most American *noir* or later TV series accept complex motivations, doubtful issues, half-responsible madmen, or miserable fools. When Poirot meets an exception with an excusable motive (in *The Hollow*, the murderer acts like an impulsive Nemesis, and is supported both by the other women victims and by Poirot himself) he lies to the police. This is where our moving *cursor* may be useful: it enhances the complexity of the stories and turns them into philosophical questions. The whole net of twentieth century intertextual stories thus retrospectively enriches the initial pattern born of the Holmes canon. c) This leads to the writer's attitudes and the two main poles of rewriting the Holmes stories: nostalgia versus hybridization. Each new version of the canon and each new story connected with it will be positioned between these two poles of centrifugal imagination versus a more centripetal rewriting. Thus conceived, borders are a means of producing new fiction, new approaches and new moods.

## Conclusion

*Why* do we read these stories and *what do we read them for*? There is obviously something lazy and complacent in our love for the Holmes offspring and the comfort of these familiar figures. The stories are both well-known and new, not unlike a place we have already visited with other friends, with a touch of nostalgia, particularly in Billy Wilder or the Brett saga. To speak of fetishism in this context would probably be an exaggeration, but we are aware that any canon may be overrated: we remember the *heritage* debate which led to the BBC being accused of escapism to the lost world of Aristocratic Britain during the Thatcher period. Obviously, Holmes's London was, however, no bed of roses. On the other hand, repetition of the familiar canon calls for parody and bathos, mostly in the mock-museum way of Mel Brooks. The Holmes stories were among the first to introduce the modern habit of mixed genius and ridicule which has become the norm in crime fiction.

*What do we read them for*? Repetitions play with frontiers in time, closure, and the use of stories: as Richard Dyer noted about pastiches, they "[enable] us to know ourselves affectively as historical beings"[7] (Dyer 2007: 10). The overlapping periods enlighten each other. More important, the canonical story is no longer closed, for it is always possible to reinvent a new variation: the clear-cut

[7] Richard Dyer, *Pastiche*, London: Routledge, 2007, p. 10.

borders comfort us, and we know the detective will always succeed in the end, but new doors open to new places and new questions. In the end, revisiting the well-defined territory of Holmes proves both comfortable and profitable if it opens on a "lecture *actualisante,"*[8] that is to say, a proximising and reviving use of the texts.

[8] Yves Citton, *Lire, interpréter, actualiser. Pourquoi les études littéraires?,* Editions d'Amsterdam, 2007, p. 265.