

A review of the adaptation of arthur conan doyle's sherlock holmes by steven moff...

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Sherlock Holmes as an Adaptation

The mysteries of Sherlock Holmes have inspired many adaptations, all different in their attempts to bring Arthur Conan Doyle's characters and stories to the screen. Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss' adaptation, *Sherlock*, first began airing on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in 2010, and is a modern retelling of familiar and unfamiliar plotlines. Yet the stories aren't all that's been changed. Sherlock Holmes as a character has been changed, and although each adaptation has taken their liberties with Sherlock's character, *Sherlock* seems to pander most to the expectation of what the audience wants. Moffat and Gatiss incorporate multiple tactics of Joe Harris' model of 'Forwarding,' following the acts of borrowing and extending, yet this forwarding is done in a way which alienates the original text, dishonestly appropriates from the original, and bends to the anxiety of the pressure of relatability. Ultimately as an adaptation, *Sherlock* maintains many positive elements through the writing, acting, and cinematography, however it is not a successful adaptation through the failure to properly translate Sherlock's personality in a satisfying manner to the screen.

Doyle created Sherlock as a character void of the common emotions used to create relatability. These emotions include those of happiness, sadness, disappointment, kindness, love, and so on. John describes Sherlock, explaining, "It was not that he felt any emotion akin to love for Irene Adler. All emotions, and that one particularly, were abhorrent to his cold, precise but admirably balanced mind" (Doyle 1). Yet, a lack of these emotions can mean a lack of relatability for the audience. If the character does not

maintain emotions they feel they can relate to, even with unfamiliar situations, then creators may worry about a lack of interest for the audience. This worry prompted the use of borrowing in Sherlock, yet a lack of use of the terms which were borrowed. Borrowing, as explained by Joe Harris, is interpreted as the usage of a term in the manner which another creator has used said term (Harris 45). Borrowing can be both for terms and ideas, and Sherlock attempted to use borrowing to connect the modernized version with the old, while also creating relatability.

The idea which Sherlock borrows is “Sociopath,” when Sherlock self describes himself, stating, “I’m a high-functioning sociopath. Do your research” (Sherlock 2010). Sherlock borrows the idea of the character being void of emotion, and yet instead of showing it through the writing and acting, jumbles it into the snippy line delivered by Sherlock. The compressing of this is due to the fact that Sherlock Holmes is most certainly not a sociopath on Sherlock. Throughout the show, Sherlock demonstrates concern, empathy, sadness, and kindness. So many different instances, such as when Sherlock displays guilt over embarrassing Molly Hooper at the Christmas party, or when he displays strong anger and protectiveness over Mrs. Hudson when she is attacked, show no lack of emotion. The borrowing of the idea of Sherlock being a sociopath, yet the lack of display of this term is a combination of the anxiety Moffat and Gatiss felt to remain true to the original text, yet modernize the show for viewers and enable a reliability with Sherlock. However, the result is disappointing. Instead of remaining true to the text while also modernizing it, Sherlock creates a false pretense of

similarity to the original text, and the usage of the term sociopath seems like a forced sprinkle of reference to Doyle's writing. The inability to properly and convincingly follow through with the borrowing of Doyle's ideas creates the impression of the creators lying to the viewer. Instead of being honest about the show's differences when it comes to Sherlock, Moffat and Gatiss attempt to hide these differences with inaccurate references to the original work.

In addition to borrowing ideas, Sherlock extends the work of Doyle.

Extending is explained by Joe Harris as adding in new elements or having a new and different take on the concepts of other texts (Harris 39). As the name implies, extending offers a continuation of the idea, picking up where the author left off. This is critical for understanding Sherlock Holme's as a character. While the original character of Sherlock could accurately be described as a sociopath, the Sherlock on the modern tv show could not, and this is not only illustrated by Sherlock's display of emotions, but by his ability to develop as a character. Sherlock began as moderately unemotional to John, and in addition, showed no strong emotional attachments to others. However, the introduction of John into Sherlock's life opens Sherlock up to the ability to create a strong emotional bond. This is displayed through a slow progression throughout the show, beginning with Sherlock's panic over John being threatened by Moriarty, to Sherlock's constant emotional distress in the third series over John's departure as of marriage (Sherlock 2015). This extending of Sherlock as a character, however, is risky, and although the character development on it's own as an original piece is done well, there is a consequence. As Harris describes it, one must not go too far with

extending another text, for the risk is that the creator will ‘misappropriate’ the ideas, and thus alienate itself from the original work (Harris 50). This is exactly the trap that Sherlock falls prey to. In the attempt to extend Sherlock’s character and development him to such a great extent, his character becomes nearly unrecognizable to the original. By extending him too far, Sherlock alienates Doyle’s writing and creates an uncomfortable discrepancy for the audience.

Sherlock as a character is a well-crafted one. The poor use of borrowing and extending does not create a poor character, instead the true flaw is that Sherlock is not a standalone character. The viewers cannot simply separate the original from the new, and provide an illusion for themselves that Sherlock is a stand alone work. As Harold Bloom explains in his essay on *The Anxiety of Influence*, “Just as we can never embrace (sexually or otherwise) a single person, but embrace the whole of her or his family romance, so we can never read a poet without reading the whole of his or her family romance as a poet” (Bloom 95). Bloom is drawing the comparison between that of a relationship which is never singular between the two people, and that of a poem, which is never only the words on the page. The writing connects to all of the author’s influences and past connections, and just as the reader cannot separate the writing from the influence, so can the viewer not separate Sherlock from the original. Due to this, the foundation of Sherlock’s personality on Sherlock is in itself uncomfortable. The alienation of the original text does not separate the original and the new, but instead

presents the new as a version that went off the rails of the foundation Doyle created.

As a character, Sherlock's Sherlock Holmes is a well written and relatable one. However, Sherlock is not an original character, and the manner in which Moffat and Gatiss translated Sherlock to the TV show was poorly done. By borrowing the idea of Sherlock lacking emotions and compressing it into one term of identifying as a sociopath, the creators attempted to rectify the extreme gap between the 'mechanical' Sherlock of Doyle's writing and the emotional and relatable Sherlock which they created. By adding in the forced reference which did not carry through to the writing and acting, they gave the impression of dishonesty to the viewer, in addition to a very clear discrepancy in their writing. Not only was this discrepancy made clear through Sherlock's emotions, but through his character development, something which does not occur for a sociopath. Through a too drastic extension of Sherlock's character and his development, Moffat and Gatiss completely alienate the original text, something unsatisfying for an attempt at an adaptation. While they succumb to the anxiety and pressure of making a character relatable, perhaps it was unnecessary to do so. The tales of Sherlock Holmes are written from the perspective of John Watson, who canonically does maintain emotions. To instead focus the relatability primarily on John's character, Sherlock would have been able to remain more true to the text while also keeping viewers interested and extending other aspects of the stories for originality. However the manner of getting to originality, a balance must still be maintained between the old and the new

so that the original work of Doyle is not alienated, and there is no dishonesty within the created work. This balance is an example which applies to adaptations as a genre, and not only Sherlock Holmes. The example Sherlock has made in missteps with an adaptation can be learned, and thus not repeated in other adaptations.