“Dear Mr Holmes”: Ironic and Naive Belief in Fan Letters to a Fictional Detective

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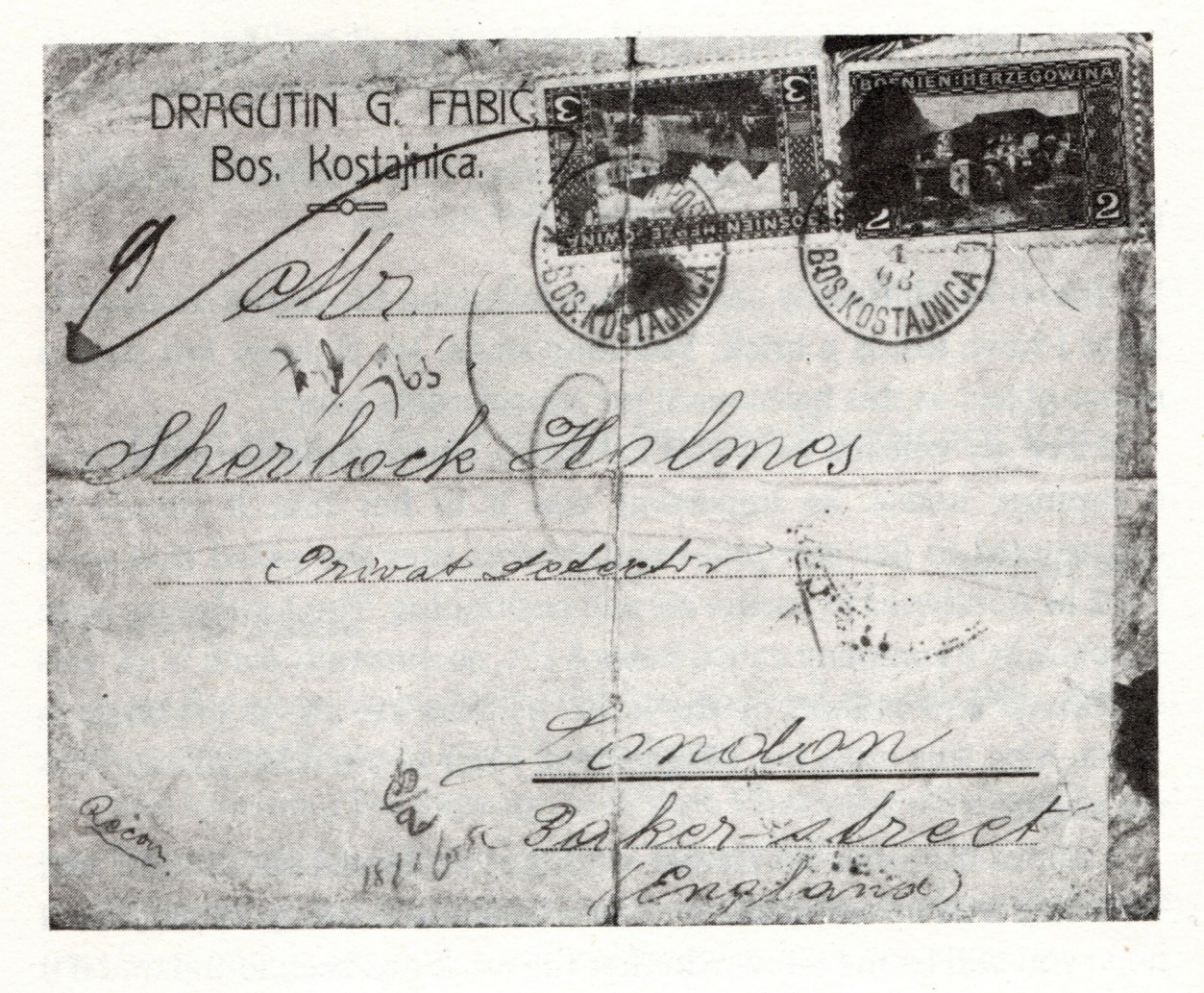

MA Thesis
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Image: A letter addressed to Sherlock Holmes. Retrieved from *Letters to Sherlock Holmes*, edited by Richard Lancelyn Green, Penguin Books, 1985, p. 204.

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INTRODUCTION

> Dear Mr Sherlock Holmes,
>
> My teacher told me that you aren't real. I hope she is lying because I watched all of your movies and spent lots of money on your books. I would be very disappointed if this is true. Please write back and let me know — even if you have to send it by *grave mail*!
>
> Thank you,
>
> Belinda Sauthreaux (Green 56-57)

This short letter written by a young fan is only one of the many pieces of diverse fan mail that 221B Baker Street has received over the years (Green 7). The letters, often addressed to Sherlock Holmes himself, demonstrate that the character of Holmes has been living on the border between fiction and reality from the moment when he first appeared in print. In fact, the majority of letters compiled in *Letters to Sherlock Holmes* (1985), edited by Richard Lancelyn Green, questions the detective's true existence, either in a sincere, naive way, or in a more playful, self-aware manner, as in Belinda's letter above. While other Victorian fictional characters, such as creations by Charles Dickens, had been extraordinarily popular with readers before, they were mostly popular because readers could both enjoy and sympathise with them (Saler, "Clap If You Believe" 601). Holmes's popularity stems precisely from the fact that he is so far from the mundane world, which makes it all the more curious as to why some fans, genuinely or playfully, regard him as real.

Despite being eccentric and uncommon as an individual, Sherlock Holmes stands as the first notable fictional character who reached a status where some readers (of all ages) address him as a real person. In fact, the entire detailed fictional universe around Holmes, from other

characters to his cases, has been embraced as a world with which fans engage as though it is real (Saler, "Clap If You Believe" 601). In this thesis, I argue that both the initial serial publication of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's stories in *The Strand Magazine* and *Tit-bits* and the way Doyle employs and transforms literary realism in his stories have contributed to the way in which Holmes transcends the borders of fiction. Additionally, the fan letters addressed to Holmes as collected in *Letters to Sherlock Holmes* both evidence and illustrate the fact that fans actively seek to engage with the detective character, either in a naive or an ironic and self-aware way, and that the analysis of the relation between the readership and this fictional character substantially increases our understanding of early fandom.

In general, Doyle's detective has received his fair share of academic attention during the past century. Previously, academics have studied to what extent the Holmes stories contain elements of Victorian realism, specifically focusing on geographical or scientific contexts, and on urban realism and accuracy (Langbauer 128; Rothfield 130-131; Agathocleous XX; Beyerly 154). Particularly the works on urban realism focus on the main setting (London) and the reflection of late-Victorian urban experience, everyday life, and imperialist sentiment in the Holmes stories. However, they rarely speculate on how the portrayal of these themes in the stories may have impacted upon the reader's perception of Holmes' world. Additionally, the serial publication of Doyle's stories and their reception has been explored in a series of critical studies. For instance, Jonathan Cranfield and Ed Wiltse have analysed the appearance of several Holmes stories in *The Strand Magazine* and argue that this means of publication must be taken into account when studying serialised pieces of literature ("Arthur Conan Doyle" 25; 105-122). They further argue that the major part of periodical studies focuses too much on early Victorian periodicals, like Dickens, and undermines or disregards the value of *fin-de-siècle* serial publication (Cranfield, "Arthur Conan Doyle" 25; Wiltse 106). Moreover, the fan phenomenon around Holmes has been studied in more recent years in the field of fan studies:

within this field, Holmes' readership has generally been accepted as the first substantial example of literary fandom (Saler, "Clap If You Believe" 601; Cranfield, "Sherlock Holmes" 69). These works focus on Holmes literary societies as well as early precursors of modern fanfiction, and generally consider the fan mail addressed to 221B Baker Street as instances of playful roleplay (Cranfield, "Sherlock Holmes" 68). Finally, it is notable that some (early) critics partake in the so-called Great (or alternatively 'Grand) Game, where they playfully engage with Holmes as a character, suggesting that he exists outside the stories. For example, Dorothy L. Sayers in her book of essays, *Unpopular Opinions* (1946) analyses the stories and speculates about Holmes' college career, asking which college he may have attended, what kind of subjects he studied, etc. (134-147). Sayers analyses Holmes as if his life extends beyond the pages and stories: almost in a way a historian might speculate on the unknown past of a real person. According to Michael Saler, scholars like Sayer may have been inspired by the publication of scholarly "biographies" about Holmes and Watson in 1932 (*As If* 106). Sayers' research illustrates that the Holmes phenomenon, i.e., approaching a fictional character as if they were real, applies to general and academic audiences alike.

Unlike previous studies, which mostly separately considered literary, contextual, and reader-response approaches related to Sherlock Holmes, I will engage in a comprehensive analysis that merges insights from all three fields. This thesis will consider the publication context of the stories in *The Strand Magazine*, the works themselves, and the way readers respond to Holmes in their letters. While the existence of fan letters has previously mainly been used to illustrate Holmes' popularity, I will consider their contents in greater depth and examine what they reveal about the way fans regard the Holmes universe.

In order to analyse how Holmes and the fictional world around him attained the status of the 'real', the term and genre of realism is unavoidable. However, it has been said that the Holmes stories involve a seemingly paradoxical mixture of the realistic and the romantic:

according to Michael Saler, Doyle "reacted against the dominance of literary realism by artfully combining the empiricism and apparent objectivity of the realists with the imaginative fabulations of the early nineteenth-century romantics" ("Clap If You Believe" 611). As it seems that both (late-)Victorian realism and romance fiction are relevant genres in studying Holmes, I will attempt to give a ground definition for both genres in the following paragraphs.

Since Victorian realism is a very broad and extensive genre, I will use Pam Morris' explanation of the term as a starting point. In her book *Realism* (2003), she emphasises several of its characteristics. Mainly, she opposes the genre to idealism, saying the following: "Realist plots and characters are constructed in accordance with secular empirical rules. Events and people in the story are explicable in terms of natural causation without resort to the supernatural or divine intervention" (3). This definition, although still relatively broad, is in accordance with detective fiction, in which the detective uses logical reasoning to find out the source and cause of the crime. Moreover, Morris argues that a frequent plot component of realistic fiction is the so-called "struggle of an idealist against the hampering materiality of the social world" (3). Additionally, she stresses that literary realism is rooted in the Enlightenment and that it is inarguably related to rational thought, mass culture, social (in)justice and the idea that "it is possible to communicate about a reality beyond the writing" (6-10). All in all, realism at its foundation is rooted in the idea of logical and natural cause and effect and is inherently related to social matters, both in its literary depiction of social (in)justice and its circulation in mass culture.

However, romanticism is similarly central to the analysis of the Holmes stories. Yet Stephen Arata calls Doyle in essence a romance writer, and says that the genre of late-Victorian romance is a reaction to realism, which by the late 19th-century was increasingly associated with women writers such as Jane Austen and, especially, George Eliot (178). According to Arata, late-Victorian romance fiction is characterised by an "emphasis on plot and action", a

"predilection for exotic or even frankly fantastic settings", and an "exuberant disregard for 'reproducing actual life'" (182). In other words, he says that the "late-Victorian romance shuns the messiness of ordinary, present-day life in pursuit of the eternal and the ideal" (183). On the surface, realism and romance stand in opposition to each other, and yet, as will more thoroughly be explored later, the Holmes stories seem to exhibit elements of both approaches.

The three Holmes stories this thesis will focus on are "A Scandal in Bohemia" (1891), "The Final Problem" (1893) and *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1901-1902). They all first appeared in *The Strand Magazine*, the first two texts as standalone stories while *The Hound of the Baskervilles* was serialised into 9 instalments. Additionally, I will briefly incorporate a discussion of *A Study in Scarlet* (1887); even though it was not published in *The Strand Magazine* but in *Beeton's Christmas Annual*, it remains the story in which Doyle's great detective makes his literary debut and therefore analysis of it is both pertinent and revealing.

These particular stories will be used for a variety of reasons. First of all, "A Scandal in Bohemia" is the very first Holmes story that appeared in *The Strand Magazine*, making it a first impression worth studying. Second, "The Final Problem" is the short story in which Doyle kills off Holmes, which left readers shocked and upset. Third, Doyle brings Holmes back in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* after popular demand, which illustrates the impact of his readership. Additionally, *The Hound* is also a story that is known for straddling the border between reality and the supernatural, which makes it an fascinating source for studying elements of realism and romance.

In order to analyse the phenomenon of Sherlock Holmes, I will incorporate several theoretical analyses of detective fiction, as well as critiques of realism, and the insights of fan theory. Firstly, Stephen Knight's books *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (1980) and *Towards Sherlock Holmes: A Thematic History of Crime Fiction in the 19th-Century World* (2017) are central to any discussion contrasting Holmes with earlier literary detectives.

Typically, Holmes is considered the first famous literary detective, but Knight shows that he had many English, French and American precursors and that he was the product of a longer tradition of early detective and crime fiction (9). In order to study why Holmes in particular gained such popularity, I will on occasion refer to *Form and Ideology* as well as *Towards Sherlock Holmes*.

Additionally, I will employ Pam Morris' aforementioned explanation of the genre of realism in order to analyse realistic elements in Doyle's stories and how those elements contributed to the reception of Holmes. Specifically, I will study whether the Holmes stories can be considered realistic and whether Holmes became more real for readers because of the realistic elements in the stories, or, contrastively, because the detective gave his readers a sense of escapism.

Another important concept that this thesis will incorporate is the idea of the 'suspension of disbelief', as introduced by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and the related distinction between what Michael Saler calls "naive" and "ironic" believers. Suspension of disbelief is generally defined as the idea that consumers of a fictive work temporarily set aside the knowledge that this fiction is not real in order to fully immerse themselves in the fictional world ("Suspension of disbelief"). Additionally, fans of a work of fiction may be divided into naive believers, often children, who genuinely believe in a product of fiction, and ironic believers, who partly rely on the suspension of their disbelief to fully enjoy a work of fiction (Saler, *As If* 110). Saler argues that ironic belief is stronger than mere suspension of disbelief: rather than simply setting aside their disbelief, ironic believers willingly pretend to believe in works of fiction (As if 110). The distinction between naive and ironic belief, although difficult to discern in letter writing, is relevant for studying the fan mail addressed to Holmes as it may hint at the intention of the letter writer (e.g., the letter may be a genuine inquiry or a form of roleplay).

Furthermore, I will use and reflect on the idea of modern re-enchantment, which Michael Saler elaborately discusses in his book *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality* (2012). Saler rejects the familiar notion that modernity and enchantment are incompatible. He argues that early fantasy books in particular build upon the concept of modern re-enchantment: they "secure the marvels that a disenchanted modernity seemed to undermine, while remaining true to the tenets intellectuals ascribed to modernity at the time, such as rationality and secularism" (*As if* 7). Although he focuses on fantasy fiction, Saler's book includes a chapter on Holmes: Saler considers him the first character to capture the fancy of readers through modern re-enchantment to the extent where he gained an active following of ironic (and naive) believers (*As If* 6). This theory is relevant to this thesis because it illustrates how the success of the Holmes stories is inevitably linked to their time period and how the rise of early fandom may be attributed to a balanced mixture of modernity and imagination.

Finally, this thesis will build upon the concept of participatory culture, which has been productively explored by Henry Jenkins since the 1990s. Jenkins rejects the stigmatised image of the obsessed fan and argues that fans are not only consumers of media, but also actively engage with it in a critical way and produce content of their own which in turn add to said media (*Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* 1). Additionally, being a fan and scholar himself, Jenkins argues that since the late 1990s the barrier between academics and fandom has gradually become more vague or porous (*Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* 4). Although Jenkins focuses on contemporary fan studies, this gradual merger between what may be considered high and low critical engagement is particularly relevant in relation to the Holmes phenomenon because Holmes' audience stretched across social classes and fans and scholars alike engaged with the Holmes as ironic believers (Saler *As if* 114-116).

In the first chapter of this thesis, I will discuss the publishing context of the three aforementioned Holmes stories, looking at their first appearance in *The Strand* and incorporating secondary sources to give a brief idea of the late Victorian periodical and the effect of the genre on readers. In Chapter 2, I will analyse the content of the three stories, whether they can actually be considered realistic, and how they may have influenced the phenomenon of Holmes as a 'real' character. In the final chapter, I will examine fan letters as found in *Letters to Sherlock Holmes* as well as letters addressed to the Metropolitan Police between 1895 and 1923, discussing their content and arguing how they reflect the way Holmes was received by the audience.

CHAPTER 1 — SHERLOCK HOLMES AND THE PERIODICAL

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's stories were initially published in serial form or as a sequence of standalone short stories in *The Strand Magazine*. *The Strand* was published by George Newnes and, along with his weekly *Tit-bits*, strongly influenced the way Sherlock Holmes was received by his readers. Additionally, paratextual material on the Holmes universe and writing contests, particularly found in *Tit-bits*, encouraged an interactive readership and formed the foundation for the early Holmes fandom. This chapter will delve further into the late-Victorian periodical, the magazine context of the first publication of "A Scandal in Bohemia", "The Final Problem" and *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, and the ways in which both *The Strand* and *Tit-bits* were essential in making Holmes popular and 'real' with his audience.

The Late-Victorian Periodical

The Victorian periodical, often widespread and cheaply produced, represents an age of increasing literacy amongst all classes and a higher availability of social discourse. According to Kate Jackson, "[the periodical text] represents an active and dynamic process of communication, a mechanism of exchange between the popular press and the popular mind. It functions as social discourse rather than as direct social statement" (201). Therefore, the periodical can be considered an early notable way to approach a mass audience and simultaneously stimulate them to engage with what they are reading.

Additionally, the late-Victorian periodical seems particularly entwined with the detective genre. According to Samuel Saunders, who has researched detective fiction in relation to the periodical, the Victorian period involved a public debate on the efficiency of the police force, a discussion frequently brought up in periodicals (1). However, he argues that it was not until the 1870s and 1880s, when the Metropolitan Police was involved in various scandals and proved unsuccessful in catching Jack the Ripper, that the dissatisfaction with the police reached its peak and the fictional private detective, or amateur detective, grew in

popularity instead (196). Therefore, there seems to be a notable link between the political and social debate in (late-Victorian) periodicals and the evolution of detective fiction.

Additionally, brevity characterises fiction in the late-Victorian period. According to Peter Keating, single-volume novels displaced the common three-volume novel later in the century, and the growing importance of periodicals both encouraged shorter fiction and specialisation in a certain genre (Ch. 6). As periodicals had limited space and gaps to fill, short texts seemed particularly fitting for this mode of publication. Moreover, the rise of short fiction encouraged the development of genres that suited this format, such as the ghost story and detective fiction, which require a limited length to build up suspense or arrive at a solution (Keating Ch. 6). Again, the rise of the detective genre, and the short story as a whole, seem assuredly related to the popularity of periodicals.

Newnes, Doyle, and The Strand

George Newnes, publisher of the weekly magazine *Tit-bits*, introduced the monthly *Strand Magazine* in January 1891, and due to his clever editorial strategies, proved successful at making *The Strand* a highly popular magazine. For instance, by incorporating a wide variety of texts, both fictional and factual, Newnes hoped to appeal to a wide audience: while *Tit-bits* focused on a largely informal, upper working-class audience, *The Strand* was more directed at a middle-class audience (Brombley 49-50). Additionally, while *The Strand* presented itself as a new, progressive periodical, it stayed true to the appearance of older magazines (Saunders 2015), thereby becoming appealing to both progressive and conservative readers. Newnes thus managed to attract a wide, cross-class audience with his magazines.

In general, *The Strand* published a wide range of material, ranging from interviews and general advice to short stories and social criticism. This meant that fictional material found in *The Strand* was contextually entwined with texts of other genres, and was, by its mere publication, associated with non-fiction. Jonathan Cranfield studied the publication context of

The Hound of Baskervilles and argues that "serials were tied to the changing patterns of the world both through their association with all sorts of nonfiction writing, but also in terms of the changing experience of the readers themselves" ("Arthur Conan Doyle" 4). Specifically for the serial, comprising multiple parts, the historical situation as well as the magazine context in which a part appeared affected the way readers received it.

Moreover, the format of the Holmes stories influenced the magazine's popularity alongside the detective's. In his book *Memories and Adventures*, Doyle shows that he knows the formula of a successful running series:

> Considering these various journals with their disconnected stories it had struck me that a single character running through a series, if it only engaged the attention of the reader, would bind that reader to that particular magazine. On the other hand, it had long seemed to me that the ordinary serial might be an impediment rather than a help to a magazine, since, sooner or later, one missed one number and afterwards it had lost all interest. (95)

In this passage, Doyle recognizes that a series with short, separate stories but continuous characters and settings, would attach a fixed audience to the magazine. According to Ed Wiltse, "Doyle's new genre, which enabled readers to join in at any point during the series with a significantly smaller investment of time and money than a novel required, took this communal experience of culture to a new level" (108). The collaboration between Doyle and the periodical thus seemed designed to attract an audience that would continue to read the magazine, and at the same time made the community of readers open and accessible for new readers who could join the ongoing stories anytime.

The magazine context of the stories

In order to study the way the three Holmes stories were first read, one must take into account the texts that appeared before and after them in the magazine. This section will put the stories

into their periodical context, examining the nature of the non-fiction and fiction amongst which they appeared in *The Strand*. Although there was also an American version of *The Strand*, published between February 1891 and February 1916, I will disregard those editions and focus on the original publications in the British magazine.

The first Holmes short story published in *The Strand Magazine* —"A Scandal in Bohemia"— appeared in the July edition of 1891 and introduced the character of Sherlock Holmes to the wide audience of *The Strand*. Like most other editions, it contains a blend of fiction and non-fiction. For example, the magazine starts out with an article on how to make proper tableaux vivants, or living paintings, taking on an advisory role (Jul. 1891 2-8). Additionally, there is a column with celebrity portraits called "Portraits of Celebrities at Different Times of their Lives" (Jul. 1891 39-45), an illustrated interview with Cardinal Henry Edward Manning (Jul. 1891 52-60), and a critical piece on "The State of the Law Courts" (Jul. 1891 84-92), which is part IV of an ongoing column in *The Strand*. Additionally, there is an article on an early 19th-century army regiment, recently known for transporting themselves on bicycles (Jul. 1891 31-38). The magazine ends with a fictional story for children called "The Knight and the Artist" about Emperor Charles V of Spain (Jul. 1891 103-108). The topics of these texts all illustrate the magazine's miscellaneous nature and show that Newnes tried to please readers of all ages and backgrounds, and simultaneously tried to make discourse on subjects such as the law more accessible for middle and lower classes.

Moreover, the *Strand*-edition containing "A Scandal in Bohemia" features some ambiguous texts which seem to lean on the border between fact and fiction. For instance, a text titled "Sister Gabrielle: A Reminiscence of Max O'Rell During the War, by His Wife" is largely factual, but written in a way that is reminiscent of a novel:

> Touched and saddened, our traveller turned down the steep street to the lower town. More than ever he wondered what had been the history of the brave, beautiful woman who had nursed him seven years before.
>
> Turning the corner of the Place Chateaubriand, he ran against a man.
>
> "*Pardon, monsieur!*"
>
> "*Pardon, monsieur!*" The exclamations were simultaneous. Looking up, the two men recognised each other.
>
> "Ah, my dear Doctor!" exclaimed my husband.
>
> "*Sapristi*, my dear Lieutenant! What are you doing in St. Malo?" (Jul. 1891 49).

Both the fact that the female narrator tells us what is going on inside her husband's head in the second sentence here and the use of direct speech seem more in line with storytelling rather than non-fictional journalism.

The second story I will be discussing, "The Final Problem" was published in December 1893. The prominent and established appeal of Holmes is instantly visible, as the story appears at the very beginning of the magazine, starting with a striking drawing of Sherlock Holmes and Professor Moriarty at the Reichenbach Falls with the caption "The Death of Sherlock Holmes" (Dec. 1893 558). The story is followed by a biographical article on the Sultan of Turkey (Dec. 1893 571-582), a text titled "From Behind the Speaker's Chair" about the House of Commons (Dec. 1893 583-589), and an article on the exploration of the North Pole region (Dec. 1893 614-624), amongst others. This number still features the column on celebrity portraits, which indicates it was a popular feature and illustrates the rise of celebrity culture. Furthermore, the fiction in this edition seems mostly a form of adventure or romance fiction: there's a story titled "Alfonso and Gregorio or the Burning Land" about adventures in Brazil (Dec. 1893 658-673). Additionally, this number features the story "A Literary Coincidence" by E.W. Hornung, which is about a novelist, his everyday life and his work (Dec. 1893 681-692). This once again seems

to be a story hesitating between fiction and fact: the protagonist reads somewhat like a persona of an author taking on the role of a character. Once again, this edition has a wide range of different texts, and fact and fiction are sometimes hard to discern from one another.

Finally, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, which was published in nine parts, and marked the return of Holmes, appeared several years later from August 1901 until April 1902. In between these years, Doyle wrote several stories and articles for *The Strand*, none of them about Holmes. Eventually, after high demand by the fans and his editors, Doyle wrote *The Hound*, which is supposed to be an older story taking place before Holmes death (Lycett 279). What is instantly striking about the publication of *The Hound* in *The Strand*, is that each part is the very first text in the magazine. This again suggests the prominence and popularity of Holmes as a character, even after eight years of absence.

Alongside *The Hound*, *The Strand* in these months also features H.G. Wells' serial novel *The First Men in the Moon*. Jonathan Cranfield argues that these two stories, both leaning towards the increasingly popular genre of romance fiction, illustrate a change in *The Strand*'s nature: influenced by the Exposition Universelle of 1900, "*The Strand*, that avatar of late-Victorian analepsis, reordered its traditional ideological foundations to embrace futurity in the light of developing historical, political and cultural trends" ("Arthur Conan Doyle" 3). While *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is reminiscent of the Gothic, with its focus on the legend and the old Baskerville estate, its confrontation between Holmes's scientific mind and the superstition of the locals does seem to correspond to *The Strand*'s gradually growing interest in scientific development. *The First Men in the Moon* fits this changing attitude towards the future even better, considering it is an early work of science fiction.

Notably, the edition in which the final instalment of *The Hound* is published also features an article titled "Making a Policeman", written by H.J. Holmes (Apr. 1902 386-391), on the selection process and education of Metropolitan police officers. Considering that the late

Victorian era, as mentioned before, featured social debates on the efficiency of the police, it is somewhat surprising to see an entirely different tone in this Edwardian article. H.J. Holmes calls the Metropolitan policeman "a living monument of civility, kindliness, and good temper" (Apr. 1902 387), contrasting highly with the critical approach of earlier Victorian periodicals as outlined by Saunders. Admittedly, this edition is from 1902, about 20 years after the period Saunders focuses on, but he also explains that "[*The Strand*] did its best to present a more politically-flattened view of the police than some of its contemporaries, in line with the idea that the magazine was designed to be entertaining, and thus tried to avoid politics as much as possible" (217). While the magazine was not as radical as some other periodicals may have been, it did engage in discussions on law, law enforcement, and other social matters.

All in all, the texts among which Holmes appears form a fascinating and varied context for these detective stories. Some texts blend the factual with the fictive and the layout of the texts, which is generally the same throughout the magazine, makes it hard to discern fact from fiction at first glance. It seems that the magazine itself, which contains both reality and fiction, additionally affects the way readers receive a certain text.

An interactive readership

Another aspect of the periodical that was essential for the popularity of Holmes and the growth of what would become the Holmes fandom, was the fact that magazines allowed for a certain degree of interaction with readers. According to Katharine Brombley, while Newnes restricted the publication of official Holmes material to *The Strand*, he actively used his weekly *Tit-bits* to promote the stories, to encourage fan-writing through contests, quizzes and letter columns, and to keep the illusion alive that Holmes was real by publishing texts that implied so (53). In doing so, *Tit-bits* in part became a platform for paid fan-writing and parodies on Holmes, forming a foundation for early fandom culture and becoming a magazine where readers could ask questions about the Holmes universe. The very first Holmes parody appeared in *Tit-bits* as

early as December 1892: it was titled "The Adventures of Shylock Oams: The Sign of Gore"—a joking wordplay on *The Sign of the Four*—and its author, Mr. F.W. Freeman, won two guineas for it during a *Tit-bits* contest (McClellan, "Tit-Bits"). The fact that *Tit-bits* allowed for a certain degree of interaction between author, editor, and reader and became a place where paratextual writings on Holmes came together made it a more extensive form of publishing than the traditional novel.

The interactive nature of *Tit-bits* is highly in line with Henry Jenkins' idea of participatory culture. He defines the concept as follows:

> The term, **participatory culture**, contrasts with older notions of passive media spectatorship. Rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands. (*Convergence Culture* 3)

In short, it means that consumers of media are no longer mere consumers, but active participants who interact with and influence the media they consume. In spite of the fact that Jenkins focuses on fandoms from the 1960s onwards and emphasises the importance of modern technology, such as the internet (*Fans, Bloggers and Gamers* 1), it seems that *The Strand* and *Tit-bits* together were early, physical precursors of contemporary fan and fanfiction websites. *The Strand*, providing the main material, combined with *Tit-bits*, to form a place for discussions, questions, and writings by fans and thereby provided a communal platform for readers. As Kate Jackson sums up, "the audience of *Tit-Bits* actually became writers, through being contributors, competitors and correspondents, and they gained a sense of identity from the process of creating the text" (211). The success of Holmes, and his large following of fans, can thus partly be attributed to the strategies employed by Newnes' magazines.

As Newnes had both *The Strand* and *Tit-bits* at his disposal, Holmes's readership spanned across classes and gave all readers the opportunity and place to become ironic believers in his existence. According to Michael Saler, "belief in imaginary beings" had previously been associated with children and the lower class, and with naivete or unintelligence ("Clap If You Believe" 606). However, in the second half of the 19th-century, various psychological, scientific, and philosophical findings on the subjectivity of reality and our imagination validated the existence of ironic belief and made it gradually less stigmatised (Saler, "Modernity" 141-142). Accordingly, around the *fin de siècle*, "the middle classes became gradually less wary of exercising their imagination" and "they experienced fewer cultural prohibitions against pretending that imaginary worlds were real, and their creators irrelevant, if not fictional themselves" (Saler, *As If* 6). Although Saler's words are somewhat generalised and open to dispute, his theory is useful for understanding that there was a certain, gradual change in attitude towards ironic belief. *Tit-bits*, feeding into the idea that Holmes was real with their content on the Holmes universe, thus became a platform where ironic belief was encouraged and could be explored.

The early Holmes fandom, encouraged by Newnes's collaborative use of *The Strand* and *Tit-bits*, would gradually attract readers of a higher social standing that would evolve into an elite group of critics and fans that all participated in what they called The Great Game. Roberta Pearson describes the phenomenon of The Great Game in the following paragraph:

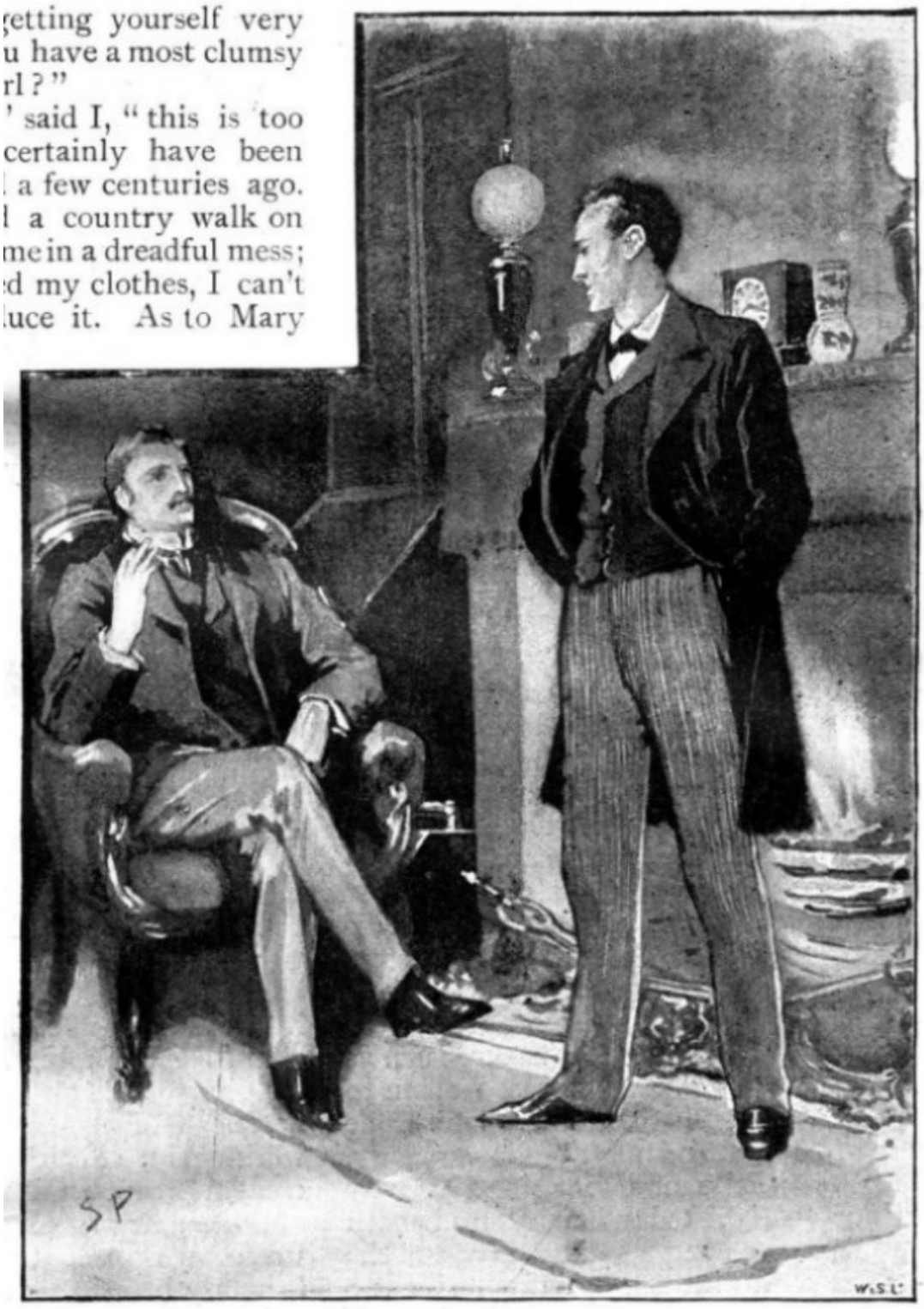
> The Great Game entails writing commentaries upon the Holmesian canon predicated upon two fundamental precepts: firstly, Holmes and Watson were real people and, secondly, Watson wrote the stories and Doyle was merely his literary agent. Rather than accepting that the canon's many contradictions and gaps result from Doyle's writing hastily to deadline without much concern for continuity, the Great Game's practitioners reason from those fundamental precepts, supplementing their analyses with historical

> information concerning the Victorian, Edwardian and interwar periods during which Holmes and Watson had their adventures. (232)

In other words, The Great Game is a playful yet academic way to analyse the Holmes stories. Many of these analyses, especially during the 1920s and 1930s, actually appeared in high-brow periodicals, such as *Cambridge Review*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *Oxford Magazine* and *The Saturday Review of Literature* (Donley qtd. in Pearson 233). As mentioned before, Dorothy L. Sayers with her *Unpopular Opinions* (1946) is a famous example of a participant of The Great Game. On the whole, the idea that Holmes was intriguing to readers of a magazine and academic critics alike and that both parties ironically believed Holmes to be real, shows just how universally appealing the detective and his adventures are.

How the periodical shaped Holmes

From the very beginning onwards, Doyle's Holmes stories in *The Strand* were accompanied by drawings by Sidney Paget, which not only gave Holmes a face but also made him an iconic, recognizable character. Holmes's characteristic hawk-like face and Watson's moustached complexion can already be seen in the first drawing of them in "A Scandal in Bohemia" (fig. 1).



"THEN HE STOOD BEFORE THE FIRE."

Figure 1: Watson and Holmes in "A Scandal in Bohemia", drawn by Sidney Paget.

Source: *The Strand Magazine*, vol. 2, no. 7, Jul. 1891, p. 62.

Furthermore, the first drawing of Holmes with his deerstalker hat, which became undeniably associated with the character, appeared in "The Boscombe Valley Mystery" (*The Strand*, Oct. 1891 401). Doyle himself said that Paget "illustrated the stories so well that he made a type which the whole English-reading race came to recognize" (qtd. in Saler, "Clap If You Believe" 611). Indeed, Holmes's association with a pipe and deerstalker have made him a world-wide recognizable icon. Although the earlier publication of *A Study in Scarlet* in *Beeton's Christmas Annual* of November 1887 also featured four illustrations (by David Henry Friston), these drawings failed to become as iconic as Paget's. The yearly appearance of *Beeton's*, as opposed to *The Strand*'s monthly publication, may have played a part in this. The fact that each appearance of Holmes in *The Strand* was accompanied by multiple drawings, ensured that readers continued to be faced with the image of the detective, made him recognizable on the rising mass market, and made him a suitable character for parodies and adaptations.

Additionally, Newnes found a clever way to maintain the official image of Holmes, while simultaneously encouraging interaction with fans. As mentioned before, *The Strand* was restricted to official Holmes material, written by Doyle, while *Tit-bits* actively kept alive the illusion that Holmes was real by supplementing additional (fan) material about the Holmes universe, such as letters and parodies. This way, Newnes could somewhat regulate what was written about Holmes in *The Strand*, keeping the magazine tied to the character, while still encouraging an interactive sort of readership through *Tit-bits* (Brombley 51). In other words, he maintained control over the Holmes canon, but at the same time promoted the stories and encouraged fans to interact with said canon.

Moreover, the periodical made the Holmes stories, through its monthly publication, part of people's routine. According to L.K. Hughes and M. Lund, periodical publishing allowed the reader to equate their reading time to the time in the stories: "a work's extended duration meant that serials could become entwined with readers' own sense of lived experience and passing

time" (qtd. in Leighton & Surridge 66). While Hughes and Lund apply this theory to serials only, and not to short stories, the stories with Holmes and Watson as fixed characters can be considered in a similar way. With mentions of various dates and past events that have not occurred in previous stories, they build upon the idea that time has passed beyond the story: that the story continues beyond what the reader gets to read.

Furthermore, the rise of celebrity culture in the late Victorian period and discussions on celebrities in *The Strand* appear to have influenced Holmes's own popularity. Ann K. McClellan suggests in her article "Tit-Bits, New Journalism, and early Sherlock Holmes fandom" that this rise of celebrity culture correlated with and strengthened the emergence of early fandom. More specifically, the periodical could "tie readers' obsession with celebrity to their disparate storytelling and advertising formats" (McClellan, "Creating Transmedia Fan Engagement" 175), which affected Holmes's popularity to the extent where he became a celebrity himself (McClellan, "Tit-Bits"). Considering the fact that both celebrity culture and fandom culture involve a certain devotion at their core, either to real or fictional people, it is reasonable that the two would have emerged around roughly the same time and sometimes may even have overlapped, blurring the line between fact and fiction. Indeed, Doyle himself describes how Holmes and Watson were treated as real-life celebrities by some fans:

> That Sherlock Holmes was anything but mythical to many is shown by the fact that I have had many letters addressed to him with requests that I forward them. Watson has also had a number of letters in which he has been asked for the address or for the autograph of his more brilliant confrere. (*Memories and Adventures* 100)

Since the characters of Holmes and Watson appeared in a periodical which also discussed real celebrities, and the growth of celebrity culture gradually effaced the distinction between reality and appearance (McClellan, "Creating Transmedia Fan Engagement" 175), it comes as little

surprise that some readers thought their favourite detective and his doctor companion were actually real.

All in all, Holmes's initial success was the product of various circumstances. The wide reach of Newnes's magazines, the short story format of most Holmes stories, and Sidney Paget's drawings of Sherlock Holmes were all features that affected the character's popularity. Moreover, because of the successful balance between official Holmes material in *The Strand* and an interactive readership encouraged by *Tit-bits*, Newnes himself laid the foundation for early fan discussions. The next chapter focuses on how Doyle presents Holmes in his stories and how he created a world of fiction that became real in the minds of his readers.

CHAPTER 2 — THE HOLMES STORIES

While the previous chapter shows that the publication context of the Holmes stories played an important role in the creation of Holmes as a fictional celebrity and the early Sherlock Holmes fandom, the content of the stories themselves is equally, if not more, vital in analysing the phenomenon of Holmes. First of all, this chapter examines how generic elements of detective fiction and the figure of the detective, as highlighted by Stephen Knight, allowed for Holmes to become a figure readers look up to. Second of all, this chapter will focus on how Sir Arthur Conan Doyle presents Holmes to his readers in "A Scandal in Bohemia", "The Final Problem", *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and *A Study in Scarlet* and how this depiction may have led readers ironically to believe in the character. Third of all, I will discuss how Doyle shaped the world of Holmes to the extent where readers could immerse themselves in it, blending fiction and reality. Fourth of all, this chapter will discuss how Doyle combined parts of literary realism, such as empiricism and rational reasoning, with romantic elements, creating a fictional world that, according to Michael Saler, fitted the standards of modernity yet was still able to enchant readers ("Clap If You Believe" 603).

The literary detective

In order to study why Holmes became such a real figure for most readers, I will discuss certain aspects that are both fundamental and intrinsic to the literary detective that Holmes represents. Specifically, I will here draw upon Stephen Knight's theories on detective fiction as a basis to illustrate how the nature of the genre and its archetypical sleuth allowed for an immersive reading experience.

Central to detective fiction is the idea that the detective guides the reader through the story and represents order in a web of chaos, becoming a figure of security and hope. Knight explains that the amateur detective in particular, working independently from governmental

authorities like the police, proved to 19th-century readers that resolution could be achieved by an individual rather than any larger authority (*Towards Sherlock Holmes* 156). The fact that the detective is capable of finding order in chaos made them "a culture-hero bringing comfort and a sense of security to millions of individuals" (Knight 28). In other words, the prototype of the individual detective is bound to be a figure readers trust and admire.

Furthermore, Knight suggests that Holmes is the first literary detective to truly embody this figure of a rational, subjective, individual. Holmes represents an age "when author and audience could believe in the subjective individual as a basis of real experience and could see collectivity as a threat, when rationalism was more than a tool of inquiry and had become a way of dominating the whole world" and "when professionalism, specialisation and rigorous inquiry replaced the values of affection and mutual understanding" (Knight, *Form and Ideology* 28). Representing all these values, Sherlock Holmes thus became a figure that was potently appealing to his contemporary readers.

Additionally, detective stories, unlike any other literary genre, invite the reader to investigate along with the protagonist and speculate about the story's outcome, thereby making the reader more of a collaborator or rival than a mere spectator. As Peter Hühn describes in his article "The Detective as Reader: Narrativity and Reading Concepts in Detective Fiction", the reader takes on a role that is almost competitive with the detective (458). Additionally, it is the author's task to ensure that the detective is always one step ahead of the reader, who would otherwise figure out the story of the crime far too soon (Hühn 464). The genre of detective fiction thus allows the reader to participate in the game of detection while simultaneously presenting the main detective as their leading figure.

Another primary aspect of detective fiction that is relevant with regard to the Holmes phenomenon is its interest in the everyday, particularly how normal, seemingly meaningless objects and clues turn out to be filled with hidden meaning. The idea that there is a hidden

narrative—a past crime—that interweaves the everyday invites not only the detective character himself but also his reader to look beyond the ordinary meaning of things (Hühn 454). In other words, detective fiction pushes its readers to seek the deeper layer beyond what is there on the surface, making the normal extraordinary.

Holmes and his precursors

In the very first Holmes story, Doyle immediately establishes Holmes's place in the canon of detective fiction by having him discuss his literary precursors. In Chapter 2 of *A Study in Scarlet*, Watson compares Holmes to Edgar Allan Poe's detective Auguste Dupin, leading to an in-text discussion about fictional detectives who are essentially Holmes's French precursors. Specifically, they mention the characters Dupin and Émile Gaboriau's Monsieur Lecoq, neither of whom Holmes holds in very high regard. He is of the opinion that Dupin is a "very inferior fellow" who "had some analytical genius, no doubt; but was by no means such a phenomenon as Poe appeared to imagine" (*The Complete Sherlock Holmes* 12). Additionally, Lecoq is simply dismissed as "a miserable bungler" (*The Complete Sherlock Holmes* 12). The fact that Holmes here ridicules these earlier detective characters suggests that Doyle is trying to establish Holmes as a more superior detective.

Moreover, by having his characters discuss fictional characters, Doyle implies that Watson and Holmes are part of our own world rather than fictional themselves. Watson says the following about Holmes: "You remind me of Edgar Allan Poe's Dupin. I had no idea that such individuals did exist outside of stories" (*The Complete Sherlock Holmes* 12). By adding the second sentence, Watson essentially raises Holmes out of the realm of fiction, suggesting that Dupin and Lecoq are fictional while Holmes is not. Holmes is implied to be the individual, genius detective who exists outside the stories.

Ironically, the character of Holmes may not have existed if it were not for these precursors. According to Stephen Knight, Poe's Dupin is "the first instance of the genius

detective which [would] be basic to the development of Sherlock Holmes and many later figures" (*Towards Sherlock Holmes* 14-15). Doyle himself admits in his *Memories and Adventures* that both Dupin and Lecoq had been important characters for him when he came up with the figure of Holmes: "Gaboriau had rather attracted me by the neat dovetailing of his plots, and Poe's masterful detective, M. Dupin, had from boyhood been one of my heroes" (74). This sentence indicates that Doyle was fond of these French and American authors and that their detectives had been on his mind while he was creating Sherlock Holmes. Stephen Knight sees another connection between Holmes and the French crime fiction tradition: he uses a quote from the Holmes story "The Adventure of the Greek Interpreter" to demonstrate that the detective's French ancestry—Holmes says his grandmother was the sister of a French artist—may be a link to how Doyle was inspired by French fictional detectives (*Towards Sherlock Holmes* 45). While Holmes is thus looking down on these detectives from the American and French tradition of crime fiction, his creator was fond of them and likely drew inspiration from them for his own detective.

Holmes through Watson's words

By introducing Watson as the first-person narrator, Doyle puts Watson in his own shoes, creating the illusion that Watson is the original, real writer of the stories. Watson himself refers to the act of writing down Holmes's cases in various stories, such as at the beginning of "The Final Problem": "It is with a heavy heart that I take up my pen to write these the last words in which I shall ever record the singular gifts by which my friend Mr. Sherlock Holmes was distinguished" (*The Complete Sherlock Holmes* 438). Additionally, *A Study in Scarlet* starts off with the declaration that the first part of the story is "a Reprint from the Reminiscences of John H. Watson, M.D., Late of the Army Medical Department" (*The Complete Sherlock Holmes* 3). This strategy is continued throughout the stories and reinforces the idea that they are based on Watson's actual recollection and that they feature real people and occurrences. In fact, as has

already been mentioned, literary societies like The Baker Street Irregulars (1934) and The Sherlock Holmes Society (1951) and various biographers of Holmes and Watson purposefully ignore Doyle as the actual author (Pearson 232), calling him Watson's literary agent, which is characteristic of the before-mentioned Great Game among elite literary fans of Holmes.

Apart from acting as a narrator and the fictional author of the adventures, Watson is an essential character for the reader because he makes Holmes's method comprehensible. Specifically, he is on the same level of knowledge as the reader, which requires Holmes, who is always one step ahead, to explain his methodology. As Gero Guttzeit puts it in his analysis of Watson as narrator, "Watson is a representative of the writer, a foil to Sherlock Holmes, and a double of the reader" (82). The third role here becomes apparent when one looks at the many dialogues between Holmes and Watson, in which Watson is usually the character who asks the questions the reader is thinking, i.e., the questions to follow up on Holmes's rapid thought process. For example, in "The Final Problem", a somewhat nervous Holmes appears on Watson's doorstep:

> "I have been a little pressed of late. Have you any objection to my closing your shutters?"
>
> The only light in the room came from the lamp upon the table at which I had been reading. Holmes edged his way round the wall and flinging the shutters together, he bolted them securely.
>
> "You are afraid of something?" I asked.
>
> "Well, I am."
>
> "Of what?"
>
> "Of air-guns."
>
> "My dear Holmes, what do you mean?" (*The Complete Sherlock Holmes* 439)

Watson here inquires after Holmes's unusual behaviour, finding out that he is being tailed by Professor Moriarty's men. Holmes's doctor companion is thus an important figure for the reader because he roughly has the same knowledge about the situation and he is the reason Holmes explains his method of thinking.

Moreover, as the supposed author of the stories, Watson turns Holmes's factual analyses into literary adventures. A frequently-quoted passage in *The Sign of the Four* (1890) involves Holmes accusing Watson of romanticising their cases:

> "Detection is, or ought to be, an exact science, and should be treated in the same cold and unemotional manner. You have attempted to tinge it with romanticism, which produces much the same effect as if you worked a lovestory or an elopement into the fifth proposition of Euclid."
>
> "But the romance was there," I remonstrated. "I could not tamper with the facts."
>
> "Some facts should be suppressed, or at least a just sense of proportion should be observed in treating them. The only point in the case which deserved mention was the curious analytical reasoning from effects to causes, by which I succeeded in unraveling it." (*The Complete Sherlock Holmes* 76)

Here Holmes states that, if it were up to him, the written account of their adventures would have been stripped of all storytelling and character description, involving only his bare, empirical findings. Watson's narration not only makes their adventures appealing to readers of fiction, but also humanises Holmes and his surroundings. Doyle himself said that the stories heavily rely on Watson's somewhat romanticised retelling: "[Holmes] is a calculating machine, and anything you add to that simply weakens the effect. Thus the variety of the stories must depend upon the romance and compact handling of the plots" (*Memories and Adventures* 108). In other words, Doyle presents Watson, who is often Holmes's polar opposite, as an essential factor in making Holmes and their cases enjoyable, and perhaps even readable.

In general, Watson describes Holmes with admiration for his intellect, yet he does not shy away from naming the detective's flaws. "A Scandal in Bohemia", for example, starts out with a passage on how Watson believes Holmes to be unfit for love:

> All emotions, and [love] in particular, were abhorrent to his cold, precise, but admirably balanced mind. He was, I take it, the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has seen; but, as a lover, he would have placed himself in a false position. (*The Complete Sherlock Holmes* 145)

Additionally, Watson describes Holmes as eccentric, having a "Bohemian soul" (*The Complete Sherlock Holmes* 145). Tanya Agathocleous argues that the depiction of Holmes draws upon the image of a stereotypical aesthete: his bachelor status, his keen observing eye, and his deep contemplations "deliberately [evoke] the radical empiricism of the nineteenth-century Aesthetic Movement" (124). On the whole, Holmes seems to be an unusual and striking character: an eccentric Victorian, at times more machine than human, who managed to capture the fondness and imagination of many late-Victorian and Edwardian readers.

A world of fiction made real

The world of Holmes, which mostly centres around London of the 1880s and 1890s, would have felt very familiar to late-Victorian readers. The many details Doyle added to his stories, ranging from references to historical events and mentions of specific dates to extensive descriptions of streets and railway time tables would continuously have placed them in our world and added to the illusion that Holmes was part of reality. One specific element of the stories that has become as famous as Holmes himself is his address, 221B Baker Street. According to Mary Katherine Evans, the address, of which the number was fictional in itself, has been attracting fans for decades: she on many occasions even terms it "a pilgrimage site", emphasising that the fan devotion to Holmes is comparable to that of religious devotees (1498). Indeed, Holmes's home—also his consulting practice— is central to the story as it is often the

place where the detective meets his clients. Many stories, such as "A Scandal in Bohemia", start out with Watson and Holmes in the apartment, having a discussion, when they are interrupted by an approaching client (*The Complete Sherlock Holmes* 147). Additionally, the address places them in the centre of the city that their readers know and reinforces the idea that they could live in our real world.

Furthermore, Doyle adds various references to past occurrences—past cases that readers have not heard of—which suggests that time continues for the characters beyond what is told by Watson. For instance, in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Holmes approaches the manager of a messenger office, named Wilson, and reminds him of a previous case they both worked on, asking once more for assistance (*The Complete Sherlock Holmes* 656). These references to unknown cases make Watson's narrative more compelling and suggest that his retellings of their cases are only a part of their complete adventures. Additionally, these snippets of unexplained information about Holmes' world "[provoke] the reader to speculate about the imaginary world, in the process becoming more involved" (Saler, *As If* 33). In other words, these mentions of past events that are unknown to the reader do not only make Watson's narrative more realistic, but they also give a putative density to the world of the stories and provide the reader with material about which they can speculate.

Questioning belief

Just as Holmes as a literary icon stands on a border between reality and fiction for some readers, the stories themselves are concerned with the distinction between the factual and the imagined. *The Hound of the Baskervilles* in particular often questions what is and is not real, and opposes the intellect and rationality of Holmes to the superstition and imagination of the locals believing in the legend of the hound. When Dr Mortimer arrives at 221B Baker Street and shows Holmes the old manuscript of the legend of the Baskervilles, Holmes says that the manuscript and its story is only of interest "[t]o a collector of fairy tales" (*The Complete Sherlock Holmes* 642).

In fact, Holmes does not seem very intrigued or convinced by the case until Mortimer shows him the recent newspaper reporting on Lord Baskerville's death: upon seeing the paper, "[Holmes] leaned a little forward and his expression became intent" (*The Complete Sherlock Holmes* 642). Indeed, it is only when he sees modern, factual evidence of the crime that Holmes becomes truly interested in Mortimer's story.

Additionally, Mortimer expresses how he, as a doctor, is hesitant to admit that he finds some truth in the legend because it would harm his reputation as a learned, rational man, which concerns a stigma similar to that around believing in the fictional. Mortimer explains that he did not give the coroner the full account of Lord Baskerville's state of mind shortly before his death because "a man of science shrinks from placing himself in the public position of seeming to indorse a popular superstition" (*The Complete Sherlock Holmes* 643). As mentioned before, belief in the imaginary or fictional was before the late 19th century heavily linked with children, lower classes, and the unintelligent, and certainly not something an educated man would want to be associated with (Saler "Clap If You Believe" 606). However, Saler argues that the Holmes stories actually helped reduce the stigma around ironic belief in works of fiction because their modern nature "helped to legitimate the idea that Western adults could indulge their imaginations without losing their reason" ("Clap If You Believe" 616-617). It seems that *The Hound of the Baskervilles* plays with the opposition between truth and belief, and draws upon the social stigma that educated people will be taken less seriously if they admit to believing in the imaginary. Simultaneously, the Holmes stories helped diminish the stigma around believers in the fictional and imaginary, as evidenced by the early Holmes fandom.

Views on realism and romance in the stories

As mentioned before at the beginning of this chapter and in the introduction, it seems that a combination of both realistic and romantic elements made Holmes a popular character and

made him feel real with his readers. Holmes seems eccentric enough to be a romantic hero who enchants the imagination of readers, yet his surroundings are realistic enough to make him feel real. However, scholars vary in their opinions on the extent to which the Holmes canon can truly be considered realistic and romantic.

Catharine Belsey, for instance, argues that the stories are built on the idea that everything, no matter how mysterious, is grounded in logic: "the project of Sherlock Holmes stories is to dispel magic and mystery, to make everything explicit, accountable, subject to scientific analysis" (111). Additionally, she says that this theory ensures the stories are realistic at their core: "The project also requires the maximum degree of 'realism' — verisimilitude, plausibility. In the interest of science no hint of the fantastic or the implausible is permitted to remain once the disclosure is complete" (112). It appears she does not necessarily refer to the literary genre of realism here, but rather to realism in the sense of what is within the natural laws of our world, i.e., what is possible and probable. In this sense, Belsey's theory can be applied to the detective genre in general: after all, in order for the detective and the reader to figure out the story behind the crime, it must be grounded on logical explanations and rational reasoning.

Similarly, Pam Morris emphasises that detective fiction itself is rooted in realism because the detective genre highlights what she calls The Truth Effect. Morris explains that realist works of fiction often convey a universal truth and that humans strive to find truth and order amidst "the chaos of existence" (109-110). The Truth Effect, essentially, entails that a realist story starts out by subconsciously planting a certain question (or questions) in the reader's mind, urging them to discern certain clues throughout the tale, and promising a satisfying resolution or truth at the end (Morris 110-111). Similarly, detective fiction starts out with a mystery that needs to be unravelled in order to arrive at the truth:

> It is the strong desire for order which keeps us turning the pages, hurrying onwards to the resolution of all mystery and confusions promised at the conclusion of the tale. For this reason the detective story is often seen as the narrative of narratives in that it is the genre which reveals most explicitly the quest for truth impelling all fictions. (Morris 110)

In other words, the detective genre, like literary realism, is concerned with the eventual arrival of a certain truth or resolution.

Other academics have argued that Doyle actively attempts to distance himself from early Victorian realism and that the Holmes stories are, in essence, romances. Stephen Arata, for instance, names Doyle as one of the many late Victorian authors who "embraced the romance as an antidote to the contemporary novel, which they saw as having been corrupted to the verge of extinction by realism and its preoccupation with social issues" (182). Even though Arata is referring to Doyle's complete oeuvre here and not just the Holmes stories, Doyle's inclination to distance himself from the realistic novel shines through in the Holmes stories, which tend to feature an almost miraculous kind of reasoning on Holmes's part.

Finally, there are middle-ground stances that prioritise neither the realistic nor romance value of the Holmes stories. In fact, Michael Saler argues that it is precisely the combination of empirical realism and romantic adventure that makes Holmes and his cases so captivating for his audience: "Sherlock Holmes became a modern icon partly because he utilised reason in a manner magical and adventurous" ("Clap If You Believe" 653). In other words, the Holmes stories showed their late-Victorian and Edwardian audience that modernity and science did not have to rule out enchantment and wonder. In *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Holmes himself also calls his way of thinking "the scientific use of the imagination" (*The Complete Sherlock Holmes* 653), indicating that rational thought and imagination were not necessarily incompatible. Saler further says that the character of Holmes showed his contemporary readers

that "rationality itself was beholden to imaginative insights and desires", which "made indulgence in the imagination more permissible for adults" ("Modernity" 142). The Holmes stories themselves, or rather their balance between rational realism and wonder, thus encouraged readers to dwell in their imagination and ironic belief.

Realistic details and romantic stories

One aspect of literary realism that Doyle is challenging is its interest in the ordinary and the everyday. Holmes's method of deduction heavily relies on the perception of everyday objects. In other words, the Holmes stories are interested in how the ordinary can reveal the mysterious: Holmes deduces clues from everyday objects and habits, figuring out people and cases on the basis of empirical logic and cause-and-effect. For instance, in "A Scandal in Bohemia", Holmes deduces just from Watson's shoe that he has a clumsy servant and that he must have changed his outfit after he got wet from the rain (*The Complete Sherlock Holmes* 146). Lawrence Frank calls Holmes's method "a new version of common sense that seemed to defy the everyday experiences of their readers" (4). Although Holmes uses common sense and logical reasoning to examine the everyday, the way he does it is puzzling to other characters. Tanya Agathocleous argues that his method feels magical not because of his genius, but "because they involve a leap of logic" (128) that other people miss. Doyle thus employs everyday objects and situations in his stories only for his detective to read them in a way that is romantically out of the ordinary.

Moreover, the eccentric Holmes could not be further from the archetypical lower class realist character. Instead, his unusual intellect and his ability to solve each case, no matter how puzzling, give him the air of a romantic hero who is always one step ahead of the reader. According to Stephen Knight, the fact that Holmes is intellectually superior to most readers is precisely what makes him captivating:

> The captivated readers had faith in modern systems of scientific and rational enquiry to order an uncertain and troubling world, but feeling they lacked these powers themselves they, like many audiences before them, needed a suitably equipped hero to mediate psychic protection. (*Form and Ideology* 67)

As Knight describes here, Holmes becomes the intelligent, almost superhuman saviour that people look up to because he brings order and explanation to a chaotic world.

Furthermore, "The Final Problem" is notably different from the other stories, diverging from the familiar client-case storyline: it is one of the few stories that does not involve a specific case and it therefore seems to move away from the detective genre. Instead, this short story, with its dramatic confrontation between the hero and the villain, is closer to a romance. As Stephen Arata says, late Victorian romances tended to have an "emphasis on plot and action" (182), which is certainly true for Watson's account after Holmes's supposed fall down the Reichenbach:

> A few yards from the end the soil was all ploughed up into a patch of mud, and the branches and ferns which fringed the chasm were torn and bedraggled. I lay upon my face and peered over with the spray spouting up all around me. It had darkened since I left, and now I could only see here and there the glistening of moisture upon the black walls, and far away down at the end of the shaft the gleam of the broken water. I shouted; but only the same half-human cry of the fall was borne back to my ears. (*The Complete Sherlock Holmes* 448)

The dramatic discovery that Holmes is no longer there, likely pulled to his demise by the fall after a struggle with Professor Moriarty, leaves a distraught Watson with no reply but the romantic song of the waterfall.

Notably, the most romance-like Holmes stories of the four this chapter considers — "The Final Problem" and *The Hound of the Baskervilles*—take place outside of the familiar

streets of London. In “The Final Problem” Holmes and Watson rapidly leave for the continent, ending up in Austria, while *The Hound of the Baskervilles* largely takes place on the moors of Dartmoor. Even though romances tend to take place in more exotic, faraway destinations, the fact that Holmes and Watson—who are virtually part of the image of London—leave the city, give these stories a different atmosphere. Agathocleous argues that this additional distance between the setting of the novel and the location of the audience—most likely middle-class Londoners— added to the feeling of unfamiliarity and romance (123). By having certain stories take place outside of the familiar city, Doyle distanced them from the familiar, realistic setting of the city.

All in all, Watson’s narration, the realistic details in the Holmes stories, and the way Doyle employs both empirical realism as well as romantic storytelling have aided in making Holmes not only a popular character, but also one that could be real in our world. Two theories that are particularly relevant in this chapter are Michael Saler’s argument that Holmes managed to re-enchant a modern audience because he uses his scientific reasoning in a way that feels marvellous and Knight’s theory that readers look up to Holmes because he has the intellect to find order in everyday life. The next chapter, which features fan-mail addressed to Holmes, further zooms into the experiences of readers and the way they relate themselves to Doyle’s stories.

CHAPTER 3 — HOLMES AND HIS FAN LETTERS

After having considered the publication context of the Holmes stories as well as the stories themselves, I will now pay specifically close attention to the fan mail that 221B Baker Street has received between 1904 and the early 1980s. These letters do not only illustrate that Holmes has a large fanbase, but also that fans immersively engage with the fictional Holmes universe as though they are part of it. Additionally, I will incorporate reports from The Metropolitan Police from between 1895 and 1923, which mainly concern letters asking after Holmes's existence and residence. These serious inquiries in particular show that Holmes's status as a fictional character was often unclear even in his early days and that many contemporary readers wondered if he were actually a real person.

Specifically, this analysis serves to answer the following question: What exactly drives these fans to write and address letters to a fictional character? This chapter will examine some of the patterns and preoccupations revealed in these letters, additionally focussing on a selection of individual letters that are particularly unique or otherwise notable. Moreover, I will consider other cases of ironic belief and letter-writing to fictional characters that have previously received academic attention.

The context of Letters to Sherlock Holmes

In *Letters to Sherlock Holmes* (1985), Richard Lancelyn Green has curated a representative selection of letters addressed to 221B Baker Street. Green divides his book into three parts: "Early Correspondence", "From the Abbey House Archives", and "Current Correspondences". The third part by far contains most letters and, although they do not have a specific date, were most likely composed in the early 1980s. Considering that Green's book was published in 1985 and that more recent letters are so far unavailable, I will discuss fan letters written between 1904 until the early 1980s.

From 1932 until the 1990s, all letters addressed to 221B Baker Street would be answered by The Abbey National Building Society on 219-229 Baker Street, considering that number 221B officially did not exist. In fact, Abbey National used to employ a secretary dedicated to these Holmes letters until the late 1980s and keenly kept alive the illusion that Holmes was real (Green 7). Some of their responses are included in Green's collection as well and will be mentioned in this chapter.

Early fan mail

The early letters in Green's selection, ranging from 1904 to 1913, are worthy of close attention as they both give an impression of Doyle's contemporary readers and show how readers from the very beginning onwards engaged with Holmes like he was a real celebrity. For example, a letter by W. Herrod from 1904 offers to help Holmes with his hobby of beekeeping: "I see by some of the morning papers that you are about to retire and take up beekeeping. I know not if this be correct or otherwise, but if correct I shall be pleased to render you service by giving any advice you may require" (Green 15). Herrod is referring to newspaper articles that appeared in 1904 when Doyle announced Holmes would officially retire and take up bee-keeping in the countryside (*The Telegraph* 10). Indeed, Herrod's playful offer of help to a fictional character suggests an early case of ironic belief. Similarly, a letter by M. Gunton in 1904 asks if "'Mr Sherlock Holmes' require[s] a housekeeper for his country cottage at Xmas" (Green 15). While the apostrophes around Holmes's name suggest that Gunton acknowledges their own pretence, their inquiry seems to indicate otherwise. The combination of this acknowledging hint within and the seemingly genuine, naive inquiry accurately represents the ironic game many of these writers are playing.

Moreover, Holmes's status as a celebrity becomes even more apparent in two early letters asking for the detective's autograph. A letter from 1904 by Charles Wright asks for Holmes's signature, adding the following postscript: "not being aware of your present address,

I am taking the liberty of sending this letter to Sir A. Conan Doyle, asking him to be good enough to forward it to you" (16). This letter illustrates an early instance of the Great Game that Holmes fans are playing, where Doyle is considered a mere literary agent or associate of Holmes, rather than his actual creator.

Additionally, while some of the early correspondence is addressed to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, these letters appear to associate Holmes's keen detection skills with the author himself, blurring the line between author and character. For example, a letter from 1905 offers Doyle the mystery of an old treasure chart (Green 18-20) and another letter from 1913 asks Doyle's personal assistance in a Polish Murder trial (Green 20-21). Saler suggests that Doyle was often likened to his fictional detective in this way: "As celebrities Doyle and Holmes were thus linked, and often confused, in the public mind, especially as Doyle himself attempted to solve several highly publicized crimes" ("Clap If You Believe" 613). Indeed, Doyle took it upon himself to analyse real-life crimes, such as a series of cattle mutilations in 1903 known as 'The Great Wyrley Outrages' (Lycett 315-316), assuming a role akin to that of Holmes and feeding into the idea he and Holmes were not far removed from each other. The fact that creator and character were often mixed up further blurs the line between the two and reinforces the illusion that Holmes was an actual person.

Metropolitan Police reports on Holmes's authenticity

As early as 1895, the Metropolitan Police began receiving letters asking about Holmes's address and whether he was a real person, highlighting the fact that Holmes's fictionality was disputed by some fans from the very beginning onwards.

The majority of the letters are from foreigners who wrote in their own language, which indicates that the language barrier may have played a role in their reception of Holmes as a character: unfamiliar with the English language, they have mistaken him for real. For example, a report from 21 November 1894 reads that one Herr Paul Reichards from Leipzig asks in

German whether Holmes is a real person and, if so, whether the police can forward the letter to Holmes's address (MEPO 2/8449). According to Saler, the British press would often emphasise the foreign nature of these naive believers in Holmes, reflecting the idea that naive belief was mostly associated with foreigners and not something a sensible British person would partake in ("Clap If You Believe" 610). Although both the archives of The Metropolitan Police and Abbey National feature many letters from abroad, various British letters about Holmes's existence prove that naive belief was certainly not restricted to foreigners.

Unlike the later Abbey National, the police did not partake in the pretence that Holmes was real and firmly denied his existence in their replies. Most letters were forwarded to George Newnes, but some were answered by a police clerk. For instance, one inquiry after Holmes's existence received the following reply: "With reference to your letter of the 17th instant, I am directed by the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis to acquaint you in reply that no person named 'Sherlock Holmes' has ever existed outside the pages of fiction" (MEPO 2/8449). Naturally, the police had no reason to pretend Holmes was real, which is forgivable if we consider that Doyle consistently portrays the police force as incompetent and inferior in his stories.

Notably, one Russian letter from 1917, inquiring after Holmes's assistance, is simply dismissed as the work of an insane person. Timothy Bogdarenko, as the translation of the letter reads, asks that his "biblical and philosophical prophecies" regarding World War I are taken seriously and that Mr Holmes, or the police force, "assist [him] in the revelations of the eternal procession of the Laws of Nature" (MEPO 2/8449). The police deems Bogdarenko "apparently insane" and "mentally unsound", and says he probably "[suffers] from delusions" (MEPO 2/8449). According to Jonathan Cranfield, fan behaviour in the late 18th and 19th century was similarly associated with insanity and fanaticism (*Fan Phenomena* 67). The report on

Bogdarenko's letter illustrates that there may still have been a certain level of stigma around extreme Holmes fans in the early 20th century.

Questioning belief in Holmes

Like the early inquiries received by the police, many letters directed at Holmes in *Letters to Sherlock Holmes* address the question whether he is real (or, alternatively, still alive), which shows either the wavering naive belief of younger fans or the playful approach of ironic believers. For example, the young Pam Wright asks Holmes in her letter whether he was ever alive, or whether someone was simply using his name and invented the stories (Green 56). The question in itself is ironic: it suggests a certain level of doubt about Holmes's existence, yet the girl believes sufficiently in said existence to direct the question at Holmes himself.

Another letter from 1967 illustrates how writings in the style of The Great Game may affect the way readers perceive Holmes. One Marian Jarvis writes the following:

> I was very interested in the article in the *Telegraph* colour supplement, and, as an avid reader of the Sherlock Holmes stories, I would be interested to know more about him. Although the article made it clear that he never existed as a real person, I was very puzzled to read a book by W. Baring-Gould that gives evidence that Holmes *did* exist. (Green 41)

Jarvis is referring to *Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street* (1962) by William S. Baring-Gould, a biography of Holmes written as though he were a real person. This letter shows how (academic) texts on Holmes, written in the style of The Great Game, may create a snowball-effect that causes other readers to doubt their belief in the detective.

Moreover, other ironic letter-writers emphasise that while Holmes may not be real in person, his image has left an eternal impression on his readers. For example, a college student from Oxford states the following in their letter: "I am under no delusions as to the 'existence'

of Sherlock Holmes as some people who write to your address seem to be — I *know* he exists (in spirit if not in body)" (Green 208). The last phrase here indeed suggests that the writer is playing on the idea of naive belief, emphasising Holmes's spirit and the way he remains alive in the imagination of fans. Similarly, Holmes is said to "have eternal life" and is called " the most immortal man in history" (Green 59; 61), both of which acknowledge Holmes's lasting impression on his fans.

Holmes, the childhood hero

Virtually all letters to Holmes express a certain fondness and admiration for the detective, depicting him as a hero and asking for his advice. This kind of admiration is particularly evident in the letters written by children. Although the age of the writer is sometimes difficult to discern, some are more evidently written by a young fan: either they mention their age, school class, or their diction and sentence structure suggests their youth. According to J.A. Appleyard, children in particular tend to turn to heroic characters "to satisfy the need to imagine oneself as the central figure who by competence and initiative can solve the problems of a disordered world" (59). Indeed, many children ask for Holmes's advice on how also to become a detective and indicate that they themselves have been trying to use his science of deduction. An example is a letter from one Kimberly Hemphill, who says she is thinking of stepping into Holmes's footsteps as a consulting detective and asks Holmes "what advice [he would] give to a young person considering this line of work" (Green 143).In other words, these letters illustrate how Holmes has become a figure that people of all ages and genders look up to and aspire to emulate.

Physical evidence

Another notable characteristic of Green's selection of letters is that many ask for a keepsake of Holmes, usually an autograph or photograph, which confirms that readers regard him as some

sort of celebrity. According to Catherine Brombley, the collection of famous autographs originated in the Romantic period with the rise of the notion of the artistic genius and relied upon the idea that a person's handwriting represented their character, and thus a part of themselves ("A Case Study"). In the case of Holmes, who is, of course, fictional, the requests for physical memorabilia additionally seems a wish for evidence of his actual existence. For example, a letter by the young Larry Collins says that he has a bet with a friend on whether Holmes is actually real and he asks for an autographed picture to prove Holmes's existence (Green 57). Whether letters like these concern a naive believer or an ironic one, they all are in pursuit of some sort of physical memento of Holmes. According to Allison Booth, physical relics related to Holmes as well as the physical apartment of 221B Baker street "realize the words of Doyle's texts" (5): they make his fictional universe tangible.

While many letters asking Holmes for an autograph seem grounded on the naive belief of children, the content of various letters suggests that ironic believers also inquire after personal memorabilia of the detective. The aforementioned Charles Wright, for example, clearly acknowledges Doyle's existence in his letter from 1904 (Green 16), suggesting he is aware of Holmes's fictionality and that he is playing a double-minded game. Catherine Brombley argues that the mere chase for the autograph is actually the end-goal for the ironic letter-writers: they are aware Holmes is fictional and that they will therefore not receive a genuine autograph, yet the mere act of asking for one is satisfactory for them ("A Case Study"). She specifically analyses Wright's letter and concludes that "Wright seeks the reassurance of his fantasy that will allow him to continue to play with the conventions of belief systems and systems of collecting" ("A Case Study"). The act of asking for an autograph is satisfactory for the writers because it is the closest they can get to actually receiving an autograph from Holmes.

Letters with a critical note

Even though most pieces of fan mail seem to have been written by children, there are various letters with a critical note on Holmes's method and the stories themselves. The writers of these letters participate in The Great Game by treating the characters as though they are actual people. One letter by R.C. Hope seems particularly critical of Holmes and his adventures: they write that "the stories in many cases are clearly fiction" and that "any competent detective-inspector could easily show the numerous errors both in your reasoning and in your techniques for the apprehension of miscreants" (Green 99). Even though Hope criticises the validity of Holmes's method and various other factual errors in the stories, they address the letter to Holmes himself. Additionally, Hope mentions Holmes's supposedly faulty address:

> I'm aware that 'Baker Street' in itself was a piece of fiction for obvious reasons. My own deductions indicate either Tollington Park or Westbourne Terrace as your address. It could certainly not be in Baker Street W I, which, then as now, was an expensive area and not a place in which persons of limited means could find an apartment with service. (Green 100)

Again, Hope does not discredit Holmes's existence, but suggests that his address was simply wrongly (or misleadingly) noted by Doyle, Holmes's 'biographer'. In other words, even though Hope takes a critical stance against various elements in the stories, they still write as though Holmes is real, partaking in The Great Game.

Questions about the detective

Letters to Sherlock Holmes is filled with fan-mail asking about Holmes's habits, preferences, and history, which suggests a keen curiosity to know about the character beyond the stories themselves. For instance, there are questions about his parents, his flat, and his cocaine addiction (Green 64; 75; 88). The fact that readers want to find out previously unknown facts about Holmes confirms the idea that readers view him as a solid, detailed character whose

presence and reality means that there is more there than can be found in Doyle's texts themselves. Jonathan Cranfield describes this phenomenon as "the perpetual belief that reading the text alone will not satisfy a voracious and obsessive readership" (*Fan Phenomena* 69). Another letter ironically tells Holmes the following: "I would like to know more about you, although I have learnt much from Mr Conan Doyle" (Green 55). This sentence illustrates how Holmes has become more than a figment of Doyle's imagination: the character has outgrown his creator and exists not only on the pages of his books, but also in the imagination of their readers.

Readers as clients

One particular feature of many of these fan letters addressed to 221B Baker Street is that the letter-writers often take on the role of the client. As mentioned before in Chapter 2, the client role is part of the fixed formula of the Holmes stories, yet is always played by a different character, which means that anyone could take the place of the client (Cranfield, *Fan Phenomena* 73). In other words, the structure of the stories themselves provide the reader with a possible role to play or a way to insert themselves into the stories without contradicting or interrupting the main Holmes canon. Their letters can playfully be considered the start of yet another story within the seemingly endless list of Holmes stories.

While some inquiries seem trivial—like the retrieval of lost household object—other letters speak of disappearances and even murders. It is difficult to distinguish between letters of a genuine or pretending nature, or whether they are some sort of desperate last resort or a mere form of roleplay. For instance, a letter from the American G.M. Murphy involves a sincere plea for Holmes's assistance:

> Dear Mr Holmes,
>
> Having been a devoted fan of yours for many years and having followed your exploits with nothing less than an addiction, I now find it necessary to write to you to ask for

> help. It concerns my missing nephew who has supported me and been the only joy of my old age. Lord knows, I have tried all avenues of approach to locate the boy, but all attempts have failed. So, having exhausted the regular means, I am putting my plight before you for your most worthy consideration. If you could but take the small bit of time necessary to locate my twenty-year-old nephew and bring him back in touch with me, it would heap upon you my greatest thanks. Please inform me of your decision in this matter as it will mean a great deal to an old man. (Green 158)

Murphy's intended aim with this letter is ambiguous: his letter seems genuine yet the fact that he is an adult makes it unlikely that he is a naive believer in Holmes. Maybe he is merely assuming the role of a wronged client. Murphy mentions that he "ha[s] exhausted the regular means" (Green 158) and turns to the fictional instead.

Another particular client-letter in Green's selection by Robert A. Burger more explicitly plays on the fact that Holmes is fictional: "I would like to contact you on business of a most confidential and dangerous nature. Only you can help me as Shaft and Mannix have already turned me down" (149). This letter contains a tongue-in-cheek reference to the fictional American detectives John Shaft and Joe Mannix. In adding this reference, Burger associates Holmes with these other fictional characters and thereby simultaneously acknowledges his own pretence.

Another factor that makes the client-role appealing for readers is the fact that Holmes is dependent upon his clientele and often gives them the attention they seek. As Cranfield puts it, the client characters in the Holmes stories are met with a "*frisson* of excitement when Holmes's attention becomes focused upon their otherwise dull lives for a brief time with violent intensity" (*Fan Phenomena* 73). Taking on the role of the client in their letters, readers may be expecting a similar kind of attention, if only for a brief moment.

Strikingly, Richard Lancelyn Green has given many of these letters titles that are reminiscent of the style of Doyle's titles, making them sound like stories that could have fitted into the Holmes canon. In this way he too plays The Great Game. Various examples are "A Knight in Indonesia" (48), "The Odessa Plaque Proposal" (70-71), "The Silver Spring Summons" (133), "The Sign of the Two" (137). The concise titles pointedly resemble those of Holmes stories, such as *The Sign of the Four* (1890) and "A Scandal in Bohemia" (1891).

The impersonation of Holmes characters

Another chapter in Green's collection of letters features letters where the writers impersonate canonical characters from the Holmes universe: the letter-writers do not simply take on the role of the universal client, but instead pretend to be an existing character and engage in some sort of roleplay. For example, The Abbey National has received a telegram from West Germany, supposedly written by Watson himself:

> DEAR HOLMES,
>
> GLAD TO HAVE CASE - YOUR ASSUMPTIONS WERE RIGHT - JEWELS GONE - STATUE GONE - FORMULA STOLEN - POLICE INCAPABLE - PROF. DR HANS MEIER KIDNAPPED - ME TOO! - WHAT SHALL I DO? - IMPATIENTLY AWAITING FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS - (STOP)
>
> WATSON (Green 107)

This letter-writer indeed takes his letter one step further by impersonating Holmes's loyal companion as though he is busy on a case abroad. These early forms of roleplay, i.e., collaboratively writing from the point of view of certain fictional characters, are not merely playful approaches to letter-writing, but also illustrate various interpretations and views readers have of these characters. Lynn Duffy, who has analysed roleplay and cosplay within the more recent Sherlock Holmes fandom, concludes that roleplay is "a fertile site for engagement with criteria for valid interpretations and adaptations of the fictional characters" (Duffy 107). In

other words, these letters are not merely amusing cases of people pretending to be fictional characters: they also show how invested readers are in these stories and how they believe fictional characters would behave and act.

Another particular letter takes the impersonation of Holmes characters to a new level: the writer pretends to be Holmes himself, corresponding to his secretary, and in doing so takes on a playful and almost post-modernist approach. For example, they write the following:

> Just recently I was informed that my address is fictitious, a figment of Arthur Conan Doyle's imagination, and that I am non-existent. If this is true, then disregard this letter and those of anyone else inquiring about me. (219)

The irony in this person's pretence is evidently more layered than any of the other letters: they are pretending to be Holmes while simultaneously addressing the debate on his existence, purposefully creating a paradoxical attempt at roleplay.

The importance of Holmes's address

Even though Holmes's address was fictional at the time the stories were first published—Baker Street did not have a number 221 in Doyle's time, let alone a 221B (Green 9)— the street over time has become unequivocally associated with the detective, and therefore has become a famous point of contact for fans. One letter from Indonesia illustrates this fact precisely, indicating that the addresses of other authors are not as accessible or well-known: "I also like to read the James Bond series (Ian Fleming) and Agatha Christie, but I never meet their address" (Green 48). In other words, the fact that Holmes lives at a specific address, which has been known from *A Study in Scarlet* onward, not only placed him in our real world, but also gave fans a place to send their fan-mail to.

Letters about Holmes's fan mail

Several letters refer to the letter-writing itself and either self-consciously acknowledge their own pretence or purposefully distance themselves from letter-writers that engage in ironic belief. For instance, a letter from West Germany expresses confusion at the idea of addressing Holmes like a real person, but simultaneously sarcastically engages in that very same act:

> Dear 'Mr Holmes'!
>
> I read in a magazine about you and your work. I saw in the report a few letters of people who are write [*sic*] to you. First I didn't believe what they had written to you! What a nonsense! For example, a man writes he had lost his tie-needle and Sherlock must find it! Poor Sherlock Holmes! Is it really true that those people have written such letters? I can't understand that grown-ups can be able to so behave themselves like a child! And that they guess 'Mr Holmes' live [*sic*]! You must become crazy when you read such letters, or not? I get train [*sic*] if I read such ones! (Green 221).

The salutation here can be seen as mocking rather than the result of naive or ironic belief. Additionally, a letter from the early 1980s by Kathryn Kleinhaus from the United States expresses "[amazement] at the number of gullible Americans who believe that Sherlock Holmes is a real person" and says that "in any case, had he ever been real, he would surely be dead by now" (Green 221). Both these cases illustrate that certainly not all readers of the Holmes stories wanted to be associated with participants of The Great Game.

Moreover, some fans are curious to know about the person who is answering Holmes's fan mail. A letter from Kenneth S. Latham, for example, maintains the illusion that Holmes and Watson used to be real, and inquires after the secretary:

> I am aware that the famous and singular, professional but unofficial detective, Sherlock Holmes, and his trusted and devoted assistant, Dr Watson, no longer live at this address, and that the address in fact no longer exists. (...) If this letter is read by someone other

> than Sherlock Holmes: Who, why? Please take a few minutes to answer these questions. What has become of Holmes, Watson and Doyle the literary agent? (Green 223)

Unlike contemporary letter-writers, who address their letters directly at Holmes, Latham acknowledges that he is aware of the fact that there is someone else behind the letter replies.

221B answers

Similar to many letter-writers, the secretaries of The Abbey National who replied to the letters participated in the Great Game by pretending to be Holmes's secretary, keeping alive the illusion that the detective was real. Most replies are short and concise for the sake of consistency and explain that Mr Holmes, now retired, is busy beekeeping in Sussex (Green 7). Indeed, in order to remain true to the stories themselves, the Abbey National clerk could hardly come up with elaborate answers for each letter.

However, one reply to an earlier, archived letter is more detailed than the others. In a letter from 1957, one Esa Helasuvo inquires about the artist who painted Hugo Baskervilles's portrait in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. They ask Holmes whether he knows the artist who painted Hugo Baskervilles's portrait and seem to have addressed their letter to The Sherlock Holmes Journal, published by the British Sherlock Holmes Society (Green 34). The editor of the *Journal*, at the time Edward Chichester, 6th Marquess of Donegall, replies as follows:

> It is not known for certain who painted the portrait of Hugo Baskerville from which Holmes recognized the kinship of Stapleton to the Baskervilles. It is, however, fairly safe to deduce that, as the family portraits at Baskerville Hall included a Reynolds and a Kneller, it was the tradition of the Baskerville family to be painted by the best-known artists of the time. There is therefore little doubt that the portrait of Hugo Baskerville, painted in the 1640s while he was serving the cause of Charles I, is the work of Franz Hals, the famous Dutch artist. (Green 35).

Chichester's reply is speculative in nature and, being a member of the Sherlock Holmes Society of London, written in the style of The Great Game.

Other cases of fictional letter-writing

There are few other extensively recorded cases of fans writing letters to fictional characters as though they are real: these cases post-date Holmes and are mostly evident in the late 20th century. For instance, Bill Adler's collection *Kids' Letters to Harry Potter: From Around the World* (2002) illustrates the enchanting effect of J.K. Rowling's famous wizard on his young readership. These letters and interviews mostly involve the naive belief of children and are meant to show the impact the *Harry Potter* series has on the imagination of children and their love for reading (Adler ix). However, unlike Green's collection, Adler asked children for letters rather than compiling pre-existing sources.

Additionally, letter-writing amongst fans has been analysed. For example, Lincoln Geraghty studied the contact between *Star Trek*-fans in the late 20th century and how fans of fictional universes use interactive letter-writing to cope with hardship and trauma, specifically concerning the Vietnam War (1003). Although these letters are not directed to any of the fictional characters from the 1960s television show, they do illustrate that themes like loss and war in fictional universes aid fans in understanding reality, therefore making the works of fiction feel more real (Geraghty 1019-1020).

Another major fictional creation that has gathered a large following of ironic believers is J.R.R. Tolkien's world of Middle-Earth, which was created according to his concept of a Secondary World. Tolkien argues that in order for a fictional world to be believable, it has to be structurally, historically, and scientifically accurate according to the natural laws of said world ("On Fairy Stories"). As long as readers get the impression that they are reading about a world that could hypothetically exist on its own, readers can mentally inhabit that world and thus believe in it ("On Fairy Stories"). Saler too discusses Tolkien in his discussion on Modern

Re-enchantment, mentioning that Middle-Earth, like Holmes's world, brought imagination and rationality together: Tolkien incorporated the rational and apparently documentary apparatus of genealogies, cartography and detailed history within the enchantment of fantasy (*As If* 159). Even though *Lord of the Rings* does not easily allow for letters to be written to its characters (after all, Tolkien's world of Middle-Earth exists separate from our own), fans of Tolkien are, much like Holmes's fans, heavily invested into this world of fiction.

Modern takes on letters to fictional characters

The idea of receiving a letter from a fictional character still seems appealing to fans nowadays. For example, there are (online) stores where fans can order custom letters, supposedly written by their favourite character, such as the web shop *Sincerely Theirs*. The reciprocation from a fictional character is said to bring comfort and satisfaction to the reader ("FAQ"). While the letter-writers to 221B Baker Street would not receive a letter from someone pretending to be Holmes, initiatives like *Sincerely Theirs* show that fictional correspondences are still much sought after.

Additionally, there is an online service called "Dear Holmes" where one can sign up to receive sets of murder mysteries, which are posted "Victorian-style" by mail ("Frequently Asked Questions"). The sets contain letters written from the perspective of a client and the recipient is addressed as Mr Holmes. According to the *New York Times*, "Dear Holmes" is successful and "admirably [echoes] Sir Arthur's style and tone" (Biersdorfer). This interactive initiative shows that the nostalgic letter combined with the idea of stepping into Holmes's shoes is still appealing for present-day fans.

Finally, the secretary position at Abbey National that was devoted to answering Holmes fan-mail has left an imprint of its own: the phenomenon inspired author Michael Robertson to write a series of novels called *The Baker Street Jurors*, which follows said secretaries and the mysteries they encounter. Robertson recalls he was instantly captured by the phenomenon of

the Holmes letters when he heard about it in the 1980s, and proceeded to write his stories around the job at Abbey National (Picker 44). Robertson's story indicates that Holmes himself was not only a source of literary inspiration, but the phenomenon of his devoted fan letters as well.

All in all, the letters sent to 221B Baker Street over the years provide a representative indication of how fans sought to interact with Holmes. The unique aspect of Holmes's letters is that people of all ages partake in The Great Game: while his correspondences mainly consider children, there are various letters written by adults that address Holmes as if he were a real person. The intent of the ironic letter-writers varies, but most of them seem fundamentally grounded on the idea that their interaction with 221B Baker Street reinforces the reality of the fictional world they are writing about. By writing to Holmes, they mingle the real with the fictional to create a satisfactory, imaginary middle-ground where the detective truly exists. Additionally, the requests for autographs and photographs add to the idea that the mere act of writing a letter is already satisfactory for the readers and brings them closer to their fictional hero.

CONCLUSION

This thesis primarily aimed to study the phenomenon of Sherlock Holmes, focussing on why some fans, naively or ironically, regard him as a real person. With Michael Saler's theory on ironic and naive belief in fictional worlds as a basis, I studied the nature of letters that have been addressed to Holmes over the years. Apart from analysing the large amount of fan mail, this thesis strived to answer which circumstantial factors in the publication of the Holmes stories as well as the content of the stories influenced the way Holmes was perceived by his audience.

First of all, the publication in *The Strand* and the additional material in *Tit-bits* proved to have been a successful formula for Doyle. The periodical did not only appeal to a fixed audience, but also provided a place where paratextual material on Holmes came together and where fans could write Holmes material themselves, specifically in the shape of story contests and quizzes (Brombley 53). Moreover, the format of the stories themselves, which mostly consists of short stories published in one edition, but with fixed characters and settings, ensured that readers could enter the world of Holmes at any given time—missing one edition would not affect the way readers experienced following-up stories (Wiltse 108). Additionally, Holmes's appearance in *The Strand*, which features both fact and fiction, as well as the rise of celebrity culture, blurred Holmes's own status as a fictional character (McClellan, "Creating Transmedia Fan Engagement" 175). Eventually, the fanbase that originated from *The Strand* readership would evolve into a more elite audience of Holmes fans the concept of The Great Game, where Holmes's universe was analysed academically, yet in a way that approached Holmes and Watson as though they were real people who existed outside Doyle's stories (Pearson 232). Moreover, the way readers could interact with the Holmes canon in *Tit-bits* shows an early example of Henry Jenkins's concept of participatory culture, in which avid fans become

participants in the creation of content rather than mere spectators or consumers of said content (*Convergence Culture* 3).

Second of all, Doyle employs in his Holmes stories both the realistic setting of contemporary London alongside Holmes's almost fantastic method of reasoning, making the stories both recognizable and marvellous for his readers. By using Watson as a narrator and supposed author, the stories additionally get the air of real-life memoirs and give Holmes the opportunity to explain his deductions, which is essential for the reader who would otherwise not be able to follow the detective's reasoning (Guttzeit 82). Moreover, Holmes's universally known address 221B Baker Street, although initially fictional, places Holmes in the city of London with which many of his readers were familiar and gave them the impression that he could live in our real world (Evans 1498). Additionally, Doyle's various in-text references to past cases and other historical events, which have not been mentioned in other stories, create the illusion that the world of Holmes continues beyond what Watson is writing down about their cases and additionally provides the reader with snippets to speculate further about (Saler, *As If* 33).

Even though the extent to which the Holmes stories can be considered romances or works of a more realistic nature is debatable, the stories indubitably feature elements of both genres. While the Holmes stories inherently are built on logic and do not allow for any possible illogical doubt at their conclusion (Belsey 112), the way Holmes arrives at said conclusion is almost marvellous: Holmes's method, although rational, logical, and realistic on the surface, becomes enchanting to the reader because of the unexpected leaps in the way he reasons (Agathocleous 128). Michael Saler too emphasises this idea and largely attributes Holmes's success as a character to the fact that he uses modern notions like empirical reason in a manner that is captivating and adventurous in the eyes of readers ("Clap If You Believe" 653).

Thirdly, with both the context of the publication and the stories themselves in mind, I proceeded to analyse the letters in *Letters to Sherlock Holmes*, alongside a number of letters from The Metropolitan Police archive. While this phenomenon has been addressed before (Saler, "Clap If You Believe" 601; Cranfield, "Sherlock Holmes" 69), this analysis intended to dive further into the nature of the fan mail, seeking notable patterns while also considering some exceptional individual letters. The early letters in Green's selection as well as the letters in the police archive illustrate that Holmes's existence has been the subject of discussion from his very beginning onwards. Moreover, many of these letters explicitly mention the question whether Holmes is real, and additionally seek to acquire some sort of physical evidence that the detective is real, such as an autograph (Brombley, "A Case Study"). Furthermore, many of these letter-writers take on the role of the ever-present client in their letters, inserting themselves into a character role that is part of the fixed structure of the Holmes stories (Cranfield, Fan Phenomena 73). Other letters partake in a form of roleplay by impersonating characters from the Holmes universe, displaying not only a mere playful approach, but also a unique insight into how readers interpret said characters (Duffy 107). Ironic believers, who likely do not expect an actual reply or physical relic from Holmes, seem to gain a feeling of satisfaction from the mere act of addressing Holmes, as it is the closest they can get to actually interacting with the detective (Brombley, "A Case Study").

This analysis did not take into consideration cinematic and theatrical depictions of Sherlock Holmes since I wanted to study the character at his literary core, but further research may elaborate on the physical depictions of Holmes in film and play—especially since Doyle himself believed that the detective's realistic quality partly stemmed from his depiction in plays (*Memories and Adventures* 101). Regardless, the eternal figure of Holmes will continue on living in the minds of his believers—naive and ironic ones alike.

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