Plotting, Print and Responses to Popular Culture: The Beginnings of the Sherlock Holmes Fandom in the Nineteenth Century

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ABSTRACT:

This paper posits a possible socio-literary moment in the emergence of the category of the 'fan', especially the fan of detective fiction in 19th century England. A convergence of factors, this paper would argue, both *textual* and material, shaped this emergence. In 19th century England, for the first time, technology in the form of popular *print culture* facilitated a popular surge of interest in the genre of detective fiction, which was sustained through certain *technologies of the text*. The textual and formal peculiarities of the detective story – the exploitation of narrative *desire* through 'plotting' (Brooks, 1984; Rzepka, 2005, 2010), the figure of the 'Morellising' (Ginzburg, 2003) detective himself – created a hyper-engaged reader in the image of the form itself: detail-oriented and intellectually competitive.

At the same time, the *material* conditions of serialised print fiction allowed readers to

participate in 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 2006) as they became aware of the existence of other readers due to the materiality of magazine circulation and subscriptions. These communities of dedicated fans consolidated themselves into what contemporary scholars call a fandom[1], further sustaining the exegetical reading practices and accretion of trivia that separates the fan from the ordinary reader. This paper is a brief attempt at charting the rise in the simultaneous creation of the fan and the rise of the Sherlock Holmes 'fandom' in the 19th century as a confluence of the textual technology of narrative and the material technology of print culture.

KEYWORDS:

19th century print culture, popular, magazines, detective fiction, fan, Sherlock Holmes, technologies of narration, plotting, form, imagined communities, trivia, fan practices.

This paper aims to trace the material and textual forces that converge in the nineteenth century around detective fiction, specifically around Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* stories, to give rise to fandom. These forces - a combination of print culture and the mass replication of a specific reading experience, the technologies of the text, specifically in the way that detective novels demand active 'plotting' (Brooks 34) and performative reconstruction - create the 'fan' as a distinct category. What are the

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[1] A fandom is a neologism created by fans and later adopted by academia; it is analogous to 'kingdom', i.e a community of fans that affirms the various practices and behaviours peculiar to being a fan, such as emotional investment, the swapping of theories about the text, the production of pastiche, and so on.

social and historical conditions in which a fandom[2] or an 'imagined community' (Anderson 48) of fans comes into being? How do these imagined comradeships further determine the ways in which contemporary society engages with and consumes popular culture? As an exemplar of the form of the detective novel as well as the rallying point of one of the earliest self-identified collective of fans, Conan Doyle's Holmes stories emerge as a textual and social signpost of the practices of fandom.

Detective fiction is arguably the only genre that allows fans to replicate its own form in the act of reading. Since its structure is based on an evidentiary paradigm[3] (Ginzburg 273), which rewards the scrutiny of minutiae, of clues, detective fiction demands immersive participation from the reader in a manner that is peculiar to this form, and is quite absent from other novelistic genres. In the subsequent section I will explore this particular reading experience that exploits narrative desire through 'plotting' (Brooks, 30). Narrative tension plays out in several coterminous arcs; firstly between the story of the crime and the story of the investigation[4], secondly between the act of reading for the plot and thirdly, between the reader and the detective. Finally combined with the formal imperative of providing equal opportunity to the reader to

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[2] As defined by the Oxford Dictionary, 'Fandom' is the state of being a fan of someone/thing. Fans of a particular person, team, fictional series... are also regarded as a community or subculture.'

[3] Ginzburg argues that a certain evidentiary model in the human sciences emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century that relied on the observation of negligible details rather than striking ones to reveal identity. Italian art critic, Giovanni Morelli, pioneered this method to identify lost painters, sometimes by the particular way they painted ears and toes; Sherlock Holmes "Morellises" by making meaning out of odd clues. Ginzburg finds Freud's methodology in constructing case studies to be similar.

[4] Todorov gives us a typology of the classic detective novel which always contains 'two stories' - the first, story of the discovery of the crime, and second, the discovery of the criminal or the story of the investigation.

outwit the detective figure, as Knox and Van Dine laid out in their rules (Van Dine 'Twenty Rules', 1928 and Knox 'Ten Commandments', 1929), detective fiction as a genre enables a fertile personal experience that triggers the transformation from reader to fan and, eventually, the creation of fandom.

The primary act of reading and imaginatively performing the movement of detection is echoed in the secondary act of accumulating information or trivia about the text itself, which, among fans of Conan Doyle is called 'Holmesiana'. This parallel body of information, speculation and cross-pollinated references mirrors the way a detective like Holmes would specialise in marginal facts that become essential to his work. This accretion of trivia is diagnostic of fan behaviour, in a way that is irrelevant for the casual reader: fans are a 'social group... insistent upon making meaning from material that is trivial and worthless' (Jenkins, 11). Additionally, it is *work*, conscious intellectual labour employing methods like close reading, cross-referencing and theoretical reconstruction that creates products like fanfiction and essays like "The Significance of the Second Stain" (presented by a member named Felix Morley at a Baker Street Irregulars meeting on January 9, 1942).

Van Dine notes "The detective story is a kind of intellectual game. It is more — it is a sporting event." (Van Dine, n.pag), implying that the kind of fan fervour it attracts unfolds across time, and manifests as play. As a sociocultural phenomenon, fandom (the word *fan* plus the suffix *-dom* as in kingdom) displays patterns of kinship and community that bear a strong resemblance to the political imaginings of nationhood

and nationalism. If seen as affiliation and belonging, fandom is reinforced by quasi-institutions like clubs and societies', whose practices such as organising, meeting, collecting trivia or writing fanfiction lends a material basis to these imagined comradeships by creating habits[5].

In short, this paper will attempt to trace the conditions that create the Sherlock Holmes fan in the nineteenth century; in this endeavour the simultaneous motive forces of print media, interpretive communities[6] and the technologies of the text itself emerge as the primary factors that bear investigation. I will refer to Arthur Conan Doyle's Holmes stories as a case study in fandom, and examining the ways in which Doyle, who often resisted Holmes' devoted fan following nevertheless pioneered generic innovations that responded to Victorian serial publication with astuteness. In contemporary times, when Sherlock Holmes is a popular culture icon and a staple in TV, film, theatre and textual adaptation, the impact of early fandom in forming a template of response to popular culture cannot be underestimated.

I. Technologies of Narration

What motivates the spontaneous, creative labour of fans? How does casual reading mutate into dedicated fandom? A crucial element in the movement from

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[5] Here, one could gesture towards Althusser's argument that ideology is actualised in the material practices of its conscious subjects, but although fandom is reinforced through habit, by no means should this be taken to draw an absolute equivalence between fandom and ideological apparatuses.

[6] This term owes its origin to Stanley Fish, who believes that interpretive communities are those that bring certain interpretive strategies to bear upon a text; however, interpretation is predetermined by institutions and their own interests.

primary exposure/reading to secondary obsession are the formal strategies of detective fiction that compel readers to read forward in order to sustain backward-looking webs of possibility, or reading ahead to look back with clarity. What is meant by backward-looking webs of possibility (which Charles Rzepka calls 'arrays',) is that the progression of the plot with the revelation of new clues compels the reader to return to the beginning and reconstruct the story with what has been newly learnt. As established by Peter Brooks and Peter Hühn[7], detective stories serve as 'the narrative of narratives' (Brooks, 25) by dramatising the relationship of the *sjuzet* and *fabula*[8].

> All narrative posits, if not the Sovereign Judge, at least a Sherlock Holmes capable of going back over the ground, and thereby realizing the meaning of the cipher left by a life. Narrative thus seems ever to imagine in advance the act of its transmission, the moment of reading and understanding that it cannot itself ever know. (Brooks 34)

In his larger argument Brooks is gesturing towards the detective fiction as the exemplar of hermeneutic narratives because it compels readers to purposively 'go back over the ground' in a manner that is incidental/accidental in other novelistic genres.

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[7] Hühn sees detective fiction as narratives of reconstruction, both literary and social. Detective fiction is 'a story about telling a story' - reconstructing the hidden story of the crime and the subsequent publication of the discovery - thus thematising narrativity itself as a problem.

[8] As identified by Tzetan Todorov, *sjuzet* and *fabula* translate to 'the crime' and 'the investigation', respectively; each detective story relies on the tension between these twin narratives, because one begins at the end of one story when the victim is dead, and through the second story one tries to arrive at the beginning of the first.

What the reader of detection desires at each step of the reading process is not its end, but its immediate continuation... Detection is not merely the piecing together of events, but requires that we cast backwards for as many threads as possible, and try to hang all newly-revealed, as well as metonymically conceivable, events on each of them. (Rzepka 'Reading' 27)

This motivates readers to read sequentially and cumulatively (ibid 23) quite in the spirit of Van Dine's 'intellectual game'. A survey of criticism of detective fiction, like the one undertaken by Heta Pyrhönen, reveals that a lot of critical scrutiny has been devoted to the explication of formal strategies, with different theorists coming up with techniques like such as embedded texts, fragmentation or phantom narratives. But these purely structuralist arguments risk seeing detective stories as static entities dedicated to their own constructive principles (Marcus, 245), anatomising the detective story without accounting for its unique relationship with fans.

The plot is merely the empty form of the text, awaiting deployment by imaginative reconstruction through the participation of the reader who, by creating his or her arrays, joins discrete events into a cohesive shape like points on a Cartesian plane. In the case of suspenseful stories this progression is interrupted, resisted and reversed by the reader's desire to prolong their immersion in the narrative.

If I emphasize plotting even more than plot, it is because the participle best suggests the dynamic aspect of narrative that most interests me: that which moves us forward as readers of the narrative text, that which makes us - like the

heroes of the text often, and certainly like their authors - want and need plotting,

seeking through the narrative text as it unfurls before us a precipitation of shape

and meaning, some simulacrum of understanding of how meaning can be

construed over and through time. (Brooks, 35)

Narrativity, when rendered elastic by the 'plotting' can explain how a very structured

form could be hospitable to transformative fan works. Some of the earliest pastiches

and parodies from *The Punch* and other sources are so numerous as to have been

published as multiple volumes[9] - if indeed a detective story began and ended inside its

own skeleton and possessed no afterlife, the Holmes fandom would be inexplicable. But

how is such a fertile personal experience juxtaposed against the absence of *Bildung*

within the detective narrative, a drive which he calls 'radically anti-novelistic' on

account of the thematisation of death, punishment and exorcism of unruly

individualism in all detective fiction (Moretti, 136-39)?

…(A)nd detective fiction's characters are inert indeed: they do not grow. In this

way, detective fiction is radically anti-novelistic: the aim of the narration is no

longer … the presentation of plot as a conflict and an evolutionary spiral, image

of a developing world that it is difficult to draw to a close. On the contrary:

detective fiction's object is to *return to the beginning.* The individual initiates the

narration not because he lives - but because he *dies*. (Moretti, 137)

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[9] *The Early Punch Parodies Of Sherlock Holmes* (2014), *Sherlock Holmes Victorian Parodies and Pastiches: 1888-1899* (2015), and *Sherlock Holmes Edwardian Parodies and Pastiches I: 1900-1904* (2015), by Bill Peschel.

It is necessary to engage with Moretti's observation of the lack of *Bildung*, but note that it is not a handicap that prevents reader participation in the case of serialised detective fiction like the Sherlock Holmes stories, because *Bildung* can be reintroduced through avenues like recurring characters, settings or narrative styles. I would argue that the establishment of recurring characters means that character development can be charted outside the frame of each individual story; in fact, the character development of Holmes through the beginning to his death, his return and his retirement is an arc that exists almost exclusively in the imagined links between each episode in the Conan Doyle canon as a whole, best 'plotted' by the emotional investment of his readers and fans.

What is also crucial to the rise of fandom is that over time, the practice of reading detective fiction trains readers to be hyper-aware of details, to fabricate stories within stories and feel a sense of equal opportunity in performative detection. One may speculate that the demand for internal narrative productivity (in the form of arrays) makes it easy for fans to transition to authorship by making *bona fide* companion narratives as fanfiction or pastiche. As we have seen, the closed structure of detective fiction encourages readers to extrapolate and fabricate within its own body. 'The reader reads to *invent*' (Rzepka, 23). *Bildung* is also recovered from the evaporation Moretti fears by the reader's fertile relationship with the text through invention; Rzepka's analysis can be extended to the possibility that the 'metonymically conceivable arrays of possibility' (26) are the unique *Bildung* offered by detective fiction. The difference from

other fictional genres being that *it is the reader who develops, changes and learns* from the reading experience perforce due to the modalities of a serialised narrative and the rapidly expanding literary registers enabled by Victorian print culture, which I shall elaborate in the subsequent section.

II. Material conditions of popular print and the phenomenon of 'fandom'

A constitutive factor in the rise of the Sherlock Holmes fandom is Victorian print culture, especially the unique publication format of newspapers and journals that were geared towards a readership that was familiar with various literary and epistemological registers. Martin Kayman and Ed Wiltse both note that while magazines like *Tit-Bits* or *The Strand* are traditionally seen as the last flourish of Victorian serial publication, they nonetheless syndicated a medium that synthesised a more easily-consumed form from 'three-decker' novel

> ...the short story failed to make as great an impression in Britain until the end of the century, held back by the success of the three-decker or serialised novel...The destinies of both the short story and the detective story were, then, closely related to the history of magazine publication...in the magazines aimed at the general public, works of fiction, literary or popular, were to be found, in varying proportions, alongside texts dealing with history and biography, travel and adventure, and information on contemporary society and public affairs. (Kayman, 42)

The modality of form is essential to the emergence of fandom; where we see the morphing of the episodic novel to the self-contained episode the short detective story is also where material traces of have been left of contemporary market pressure and reader expectations. Ed Wiltse observes how the Holmes stories perform a "vexed, complex discourse on productivity, seriality, and addiction, a discourse of, in Arnold's phrase, 'constant expectation' among the marketplace, the author, the reader, and the addict." (Wiltse, 106) Unlike serialised novels that could be counted upon to end, Sherlock Holmes stories were repeatable; a formula once established could be reiterated in each new issue thus creating an *infinite* chain of stories that were thematically similar yet discrete from each other. As Doyle himself said,

> 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. Clearly the ideal compromise was a character which carried through, and yet installments which were each complete in themselves, so that the purchaser was always sure that he could relish the whole contents of the magazine. I believe that I was the first to realize this and the Strand Magazine the first to put it into practice. (Doyle, *Memories and Adventures,* n.pag)

Doyle's anecdote helps us understand *The Strand,* an 'industrial'[10] form whose survival was contingent upon market forces, compelled response to flow the other way - from reader to text - essentially binding the reader to a itself with the establishment of a recognisable detective persona. It definitively capitalised on a discursive concern with crime and criminality that achieved ascendancy through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, publishing articles on locks and safes, tips on ensuring home safety, or interviews with the police[11] alongside detective fiction. In this regard Yumna Siddiqui, Christopher Prittard and Jon Thompson, among others, have noted how the figure of Sherlock Holmes formed an ideologically charged literary response to the anxieties of maintaining an empire, policing England's borders with forensic, criminological [12] anthropological knowledge and 'render(ing) the national space secure' (Siddiqi, 18). Of *The Sign of Four*, Thompson says

> Holmes' resolution of the compound mystery symbolically vanquishes the exotic but violent element of the Orient within Victorian England with his unemotional empiricism. By adopting conventions from adventure fiction, Conan Doyle is able to create a form that naturalises and hence supports English imperialism in India. (72)

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[10] Jackson refers to the periodical as a existing in 'industrial time', as a product of the 'industrialised' press.

[11] Jackson and Pittard both note the mixed forms and mediums, the combination of journalism, fiction and interviews, print and illustrations in *The Strand.*

[12] A good example of a criminological text that combines deep-seated racial prejudices, notions of anthropological 'atavism', psychology and medical knowledge to profile the types of criminals is Havelock Ellis' *The Criminal* (1890).

The Victorian publication industry consolidated various registers of scientific and social knowledge in a cross-pollinated genre that presumed readers' familiarity with a breadth of conventional registers - the mystery novel, romance and the adventure novel within a realist paradigm. One could say that the readers of *The Strand*'s Sherlock Holmes spoke the same *language*, by which I mean a certain discursivity encouraged by magazines (which solicited reader participation through contests, letters and original fiction[13]) that communicated to their urban readership only that which was most likely to interest them, a 'sense of the city reproduced in the journal' for aspiring, middle-class, commuting workers (Pittard, 4). This idea of a similar reading experiences owes itself also to Stanley Fish's work on 'interpretive communities', reader whose interpretive activities are not free but constrained by an allied network of institutional meanings and social conventions (Fish, 576-8). This constraint is not one that imposes a unilateral experience, but acknowledges contextual influences. Increasing formal innovations in crime fiction and the emergent disciplines of anthropology, phrenology and forensic science ensured that Sherlock Holmes was a figure who would feel half-familiar, the epitome of rational discourse and modernity who embodied a world made comprehensible by the action of scrutiny and knowledge[14], literary proof that any person could possess his powers if only they paid attention.

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[13] Jackson, 210-12

[14] See Saler for an analysis of how Holmes gratifyingly 're-enchants' rationalism by rescuing it from pure instrumentality: "The character of Sherlock Holmes, however, represented and celebrated the central tenets of modernity adumbrated at the time - not just rationalism and secularism, but also urbanism and consumerism. The

The emphasis on topicality and urbanity betrays a concerted effort towards creating a community of readers, which one could also arguably call a side-effect of print capitalism itself. Here we begin to see the textual and generic practices that create the fan. Print capitalism, as Benedict Anderson points out, has the ability to create a sense of community - the same sort of imagined comradeships that comprise nationality - because of the temporal and spatial distances it negotiates. Like nationalism, fandom too arises out of the mechanisms of print capitalism, which seeks to exploit the largest common pool of those speaking the same vernacular (or, in the case of Sherlock Holmes, the same literary interest) for profit, and unintentionally gives rise to a community of readers who have in common the very cultural product that is marketed to them.

> In the process, they gradually became aware of the hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people in their particular language-field...These fellow-readers, to whom they were connected through print, formed, in their secular, particular, visible invisibility, the embryo of the nationally imagined community. (ibid, 57)

While reading a new Sherlock Holmes story, each subscriber could feel himself or herself in temporal and social proximity other Londoners, much in the same way that 'print languages' gave rise to national consciousness (Anderson, 54-6) because this reading experience was mediated through a magazine that reinforced this communality

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stories made these tenets magical without introducing magic: Holmes demonstrated how the modern world could be re-enchanted through means entirely consistent with modernity" (603).

through advertising, participatory content and journalism. They would all be looking at the same Sidney Paget illustrations and be immersed in the same textual experience. Readers of Sherlock Holmes could easily locate other readers and make the text an object of discussion and obsession through the magazine, which is a logistical necessity in the formation of a fandom. As Henry Jenkins remarks about TV fans and the structural principles of fandom at large -

> Fandom involves a particular mode of reception. Fan(s) ...(bestow) texts with close and undivided attention, with a mixture of emotional proximity and critical distance. They translate the reception process into social interaction with other fans. Part of the process of becoming a fan involves learning the community's preferred reading practices. Fan criticism is playful, speculative, subjective. Fans are concerned with the particularity of textual detail and with the need for internal consistency (248).

The respective morphologies of national consciousness and fandom, while based on print capitalism, show striking similarities in the way that they are accessed through text. Fans, like the citizens of a nation, may never meet all their fellow members, but they possess a sense of 'deep, horizontal comradeship' (ibid, 51) nonetheless due to their shared reading habits. By their quest for internal consistency they insisted that a popular text was worthy of close reading - this attention created clubs and societies, such as The Baker Street Irregulars, and the production of essays of varying seriousness such as Ronal Knox's "Studies in The Literature of Sherlock Holmes" (1912).

III. Conclusion: A Paradigmatic Response

Enigmatic, bohemian and often taciturn, Sherlock Holmes provided the Victorian reader an embodiment of man as rational machine and protector of the nation even while he fell on the very boundary between conformity and transgression. Anna Neill remarks upon Doyle's description of his rational processes as that of a 'savage genius' possessed of a 'magic mind' (Neill, 620-2). Others, like Michael Saler, remark that

> While Holmes may have been a thinking-machine, he was also a *fin-de-siecle* aesthete who arose late in the morning, cogitated best when he was smoking tobacco (stored in a pair of Persian slippers) or playing his violin, and of course had his occasional recourse to cocaine. (Saler, 615)

The Holmesian personality is an immediately recognisable and marketable commodity because it possesses the aura that Walter Benjamin identifies as the 'essence' of the work of art (221); while Benjamin argues that this aura is disintegrated by mechanical reproduction, in an mechanically-enabled industry like publication aura can only reside in a work which is, in principle, reproducible. Sherlock Holmes can be accessed, re-assembled and appropriated through any of the multiple copies in which he exists. The modalities of Victorian print culture, so highly responsive to changing readerships and competitive markets, created the conditions for Holmes' persistent fame; Ward and Siddiqui's survey of the eighteenth and nineteenth century preoccupation with intrigue and mystery reveals the interaction between science or pseudo-sciences like phrenology

or criminology with larger concerns about national identity, 'the disintegration of social and moral order and the eruption of crime and violence'. (Siddiqui, 18) which primed detective fiction for mass appeal.

Arthur Conan Doyle was able to employ an astute mixture of a rationalist paradigm that is fundamentally empiricist while prioritising the minute and the trivial along with other styles ranging from the adventure novel to the gothic (one could think of *A Study in Scarlet* and *The Hound of The Baskervilles* as examples, respectively) to capitalise on the familiarity of the Victorian reader with a range of conventions. Sherlock Holmes was an instant hit, Saler quips, because anyone could plausibly *become* him. Readers could invest in the myth of Sherlock Holmes because he embodied the promise of a world made comprehensible through 'the scientific use of the imagination'[15].

The narrative structure of the detective story is highly conventional; as Todorov's deconstruction of the temporal dynamics between the story of the crime and the discovery of the criminal suggests, it concludes when the event that begins the narrative is explicated, but this does not mean that all reader engagement with the text is only mechanistic and determined - we see that the very strategies of narrative reward the performative reconstruction of detection in a manner that is both fruitful and addictive. The reader *is* the detective. He or she is given space within the gameplay of clue-and-

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[15] Conan Doyle, 'The Hound of The Baskervilles', 31.

puzzle to develop their own hypothetical arrays[16], learning, through the practice of plotting to open up the text to interpretative productivity. The Brookesian act of reading for the sake of prolonging immersion within the narrative creates readers who become fans, and Victorian periodicals like *The Strand* exhibit conscious attempts to create a self-identified community of readers who were loyal to the publication.

In the intersections of these motive forces, we see the emergence of an imagined community of fans who could communicate with each other, assemble themselves into informal societies which actualised fan practices through material production of transformative or pseudo-critical work. A structuralist analysis of formal techniques reveals the fertile ground upon which a relationship with the text could be founded and encouraged. Fandom as a set of practices is identifiable in the fans of Sherlock Holmes, and the half-ironic 'fetishisation' (Saler, 601) of a fictional character by adults has established Holmesiana as a legitimate paradigm of response to popular culture; one of the original fandoms, so to speak, and one which is a widespread contemporary phenomenon in film, TV and other media that producers and broadcasters aim to capitalise as profitably as Arthur Conan Doyle did with his creation. Paradoxically, *Bildung* is recovered by the actions of highly invested readers from the 'evisceration' of structure that Moretti warned against, but perhaps in his pronouncement that "...detective fiction does not found mass culture: it *prepares* it, by erasing the preceding

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[16] Rzepka, 'Detective Fiction'. 27

hegemonic culture" (155) we can see the way detective fiction's structural imperatives work to synthesise a sense of active play and fabrication that has become a template in mass-produced works that seek to compete with each other by offering the consumer something which is both half-familiar and indefinitely renewable. Sherlock Holmes is both the prototype of a popular culture figure (since he is one of the earliest) and the best example of one (since his persona still endures), thanks to the material and textual forces which developed and have retained a devoted fandom around him for the last century and more.

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