A STUDY IN SERIALITY: SHERLOCK HOLMES AND THE EXPERIENCE OF SEMI-DEPENDENT NARRATIVE SEQUENCE

A Thesis Presented

by

Christopher J. Surprenant

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to understand how and why collections of stories like those in the Sherlock Holmes canon by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle can be read with little context, even though they are part of a greater, ongoing narrative. The discussion begins with a brief history of the serial form’s popularity in the early nineteenth century, and then brings the discussion to the complicated terminology of “serial” and “series.” A revised framework is then introduced that places literature on a spectrum I propose that includes the terms independent, semi-dependent, and dependent narratives. I then introduce a theoretical framework grounded in reader-response criticism where I place the Holmes canon and name it as part of a semi-dependent narrative structure. I then explore texts that exemplify this structure before concluding how this framework can be applied not only to written literature, but to audio and visual work that has developed in the twenty-first century.
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INTRODUCTION

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century publications of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories present readers with a variety of intertwined narrative arcs that produce different understandings of the events that unfold within each case. These varied experiences are based on what preexisting knowledge individual readers bring to each entry in the canon. Conan Doyle’s stories were related to the then-popular serial publication format, but different because of their self-contained plots. Serials, in the strict sense of the word, were released in episodes or installments, and they were filled with vivid characters and complex storylines to thrill and entice readers into consuming more and more content. This format relied on a regular distribution schedule and allowed publishers to dictate when first-run readers would receive the next installment of their favorite story. The success of this format relied on plotlines that remained incomplete at the conclusion of a given installment (the so-called cliffhanger) as well as plotlines that remained deeply connected to previous episodes. However, given the fact that these stories originally appeared in magazines and periodicals, access to previous installments was not guaranteed. Thus, this strict serial format remains limited in regard to reader access. If there is an attempt at any point to access these deeply interconnected narratives beyond the first installment, such unlucky readers who began at a place other than the beginning would need to rely on available context and inferences to fill in their knowledge gaps and progress through the narrative. Access to the latest installment was not always guaranteed to contemporary readers, and this speaks to the more temporary state of periodicals and magazines.

To remedy this narrative, the “series” was introduced as a more malleable form, popularized, as Conan Doyle suggests in his 1900 interview with Tit-Bits, with the introduction
of his famous detective, Sherlock Holmes, in his 1887 novella *A Study in Scarlet* (A Gaudy Death). The Holmes canon consists of 60 stories by Conan Doyle, and is centered around Sherlock Holmes and Dr. John Watson, but each adventure acts as a complete, singular textual entity. As self-contained narratives, they become more accessible to a wider audience while maintaining the interest of readers who were already familiar with both characters and their histories. The 60 stories act as a complete history, and I believe that a single entry in the canon acts as a reflexive meta-history in which the story sometimes references earlier cases in which Holmes was involved. Rather than just an episode, these single entries into the canon have created a shared past with each other. With these types of narratives, it is much easier to describe *what* is happening in these stories rather than *how* and *why*. The reading experience of stories like those in the Holmes canon produce a reading experience different from what occurs when reading a single-volume or multi-volume sequence of stories. This discussion requires a specific understanding of terminology, and while it will be laid out more fully in the coming pages, it will be useful to have a working understanding of how I am using the vocabulary. Rather than use the word “text” in lowercase, I will use the words “story,” “case,” or “entry” to mean a unit of literature in the Holmes canon, regardless of whether the narrative is in short or long form. The word “work” and the uppercase “Text” will be used to specifically reference a theoretical space informed by the work of Roland Barthes and his essay “From Work to Text.” These differentiations will be in place to avoid confusion of generic terminology and theoretical applications to further my discussion of seriality. While seriality is itself a broad term, the ambiguous area of a narrative that does and does not rely on time has been termed a “flexi-narrative” by Robin Nelson in the television world, but the term does not fully gesture to how the structure functions (24), particularly in literature where the form can trace its ancestry. Rather, a
vocabulary must be developed that is grounded in not just what is happening with these types of narratives, but also it should include theoretical and historical support to explain both why and how this form functions. Acknowledging Joseph Frank’s conception of “spatial form” in Modernist literature where plot and chronology are deemphasized, I propose to enter under this guiding principal terms that acknowledge the theoretical and spatial gestures that stories like those in the Holmes canon make toward privileging the reader’s experience, rather than relying on strict chronology and sequence to make meaning (Frank 225). This is not a strict adherence to Frank’s theory, but my discussion will be based on the assumption that chronology and sequence in the Holmes canon can be downplayed or even ignored by readers. By acknowledging a narrative structure that both does and does not rely on context, an examination of the Sherlock Holmes stories will illuminate how spatial and temporal experiences of literature differ from reader to reader, and how such an experience is used not only in written literature, but in mediums spanning the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries.

**HISTORY AND BACKGROUND**

The popularity of serialization in literature was declining in the late nineteenth century with newer fictional formats becoming more widely available, such as the one embodied by the Holmes canon (Wiltse 106). In their seminal work *The Victorian Serial*, Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund provide an extensive history and analysis of the form, tracing its initial popularity back to Charles Dickens’s 1836-1837 serial novel *The Pickwick Papers* (2). Serial literature and its cousins cannot be discussed without mention of Dickens because, as Hughes and Lund express, he was the first author to attain widespread success and popularity with the form (2). His
The Pickwick Papers, was published in 57 installments, and each installment was meant to build upon the previous while offering the chance for new readers to join in the pleasure of reading. The success of The Pickwick Papers is credited with popularizing the genre, particularly because of Dickens’ success with the form for over thirty years in which those who bought and read books increased exponentially (Patten 51). While Patten notes that publishers were distributing work in parts prior to Dickens, the process was haphazard and yielded few impactful results. However, the success of The Pickwick Papers was not immediate, and it took three installments and the introduction of the genial Sam Weller to capture audience attention to offset Pickwick’s more bustling, fastidious character. By the time the fifth installment was printed, The Pickwick Papers increased to a run of 40,000 copies where it would stay for the duration of the 57 installments. Such an increase in popularity was due to the serial’s unique relationship with advertising, Chapman and Hall’s refinement of their distribution techniques, and Dickens’ intuitive relationship with his audience and his narrative (Hayward 24).

While there is an extensive history behind the advertising that accompanied serialized narratives, the more elusive, complex relationship that these stories have with their audiences is just as compelling. The Pickwick Papers is certainly part of the broad definition of a serial, but it shares more traits in common with Conan Doyle’s Holmes canon. This kinship can be observed in multiple areas of both the Holmes canon and The Pickwick Papers, but it seems to be most evident in the presentation of characters. Samuel Pickwick, the ringleader of the the Pickwick Club, is described in almost every installment as a benevolent, fastidious, honorable, and aging man. I made a subjective count of descriptors throughout The Pickwick Papers, based on my own impression of Pickwick’s character, of when Dickens was describing Pickwick, and I estimated that there are 591 phrases used to describe him throughout the entire narrative. Words
such as *compassionate, philanthropic, and earnest* are applied to him throughout the entirety of the novel. Dickens uses other similar words to describe Pickwick in such a way that condenses the essence of the character into each installment while simultaneously building on each installment with new supporting actions from Pickwick that build on the reader’s understanding of him, and thus he produces a nuanced character that has an “amiable countenance” in the third installment, a “melodramatic” personality in the sixteenth installment, and a “healthy and delightful” disposition in the fifty-fourth installment. These characteristics are somewhat different, but that is precisely the point. Depending on where a reader enters the narrative, Pickwick is presented differently. In this way, over the course of each installment, new readers are permitted to access the ongoing story. Pickwick serves as an orienting figure toward which readers are pulled so that they may begin to understand the context of the story going forward.

While *The Pickwick Papers* and other serials appear to have a benevolent bent toward the reader, it is impossible to dismiss it as just that. The serial is often noted for its parts rather than its whole, but it is also scrutinized for the way in which it incited a tawdry love affair between capitalism and consumers. Hughes and Lund note that “the assumption of continuing growth and the confidence that an investment (whether of time or money) in the present would reap greater rewards in the future were shared features of middle-class capitalism and of serial reading” (4). There is an inexplicable tie to profit that fills a publisher’s pockets. Hayward notes that in the early days of the serial’s popularity, “the final task facing early publishers was, then, to develop the newly accessible market for their commodity. By lowering prices, emphasizing illustrations and sensational elements, and increasing variety of both form and content, publishers created readers within the largest demographic groups: the rising middle and working classes where readers had essentially not existed before” (22). The serial allowed those who would not
otherwise be able to afford the then-popular three-decker novel a chance to enjoy literature for as long as they could pay for a monthly installment. The ornate, bound editions of literature belonged either to members of an elite class or to lending libraries, making many stories unavailable to a wide audience for an extended period time (Law 33). The lack of accessibility to literature among lower classes created an imbalance of availability of entertainment. However, an ongoing story that could be purchased in parts, or in a sense financed, and permitted those without enough disposable income to purchase in increments. This would ease the burden on bank accounts and allow a whole new class of people to enjoy their leisure time. While they were not necessarily focused on who was reading as much as they were focused on the profit that could be made, publishers found the serial form particularly palatable because “the sales of one part could pay for the publication of the next...But unlike the novel in the drawing room which involved a one-off purchase or a subscription to a lending library, the new business model was predicated on repeat purchase” (King 41). If the story was compelling enough, a publisher had the opportunity to commission further installments because of previous work and could continue to make a profit. As a form, the serial depends on a symbiotic relationship between readers and publishers. Advertisers would place notices in a serial, the publisher would then make a profit from the advertiser and the sale of the installment to a reader, the reader then consumes both the narrative and the advertisements after paying for the installment, and the whole cycle begins again. While this sounds like a relatively benign relationship between advertiser, publisher, and the public, the serial works specifically because of its ambivalence toward a satisfying ending that compels readers to continue on and purchase the next installment to satisfy the need for a resolution.
The critique of a serial as a capitalist form that many have made does not, however, express the pleasure that fulfills the reader. Hayward takes up Hughes and Lund’s historical approach to the form and shifts it toward the reader. She acknowledges the practical, profit-driven side of seriality, but she also explores the ways in which readers interacted with such stories. Focusing on the original publication format in installments (rather than the collected stories we often read today), Hayward writes that “the intersections between the range of worlds Dickens created were significantly strengthened in the original reading context by the fact that more readers of the novel discussed each part with others, collaboratively reinterpreting and predicting plot twists” and suggests that there was an “active pleasure” of reading within these communities (54). In this way, a serial is a living entity with a lifespan. It is born at the first installment and dies with the last. In Hughes and Lund’s view, the heyday of the Victorian serial that relied on advertising and capitalism also “subscribed to a notion of personal development running from infancy through maturity, and ending in old age” (4). The serial was a form that reflected the values of the time in which it flourished. The rise of leisure time, the rise of the middle-class, and all the values that were associated with the cultural moment were embodied in the format of the stories that were read on a monthly basis. The emphasis on linear development is one that meshes with the development of knowledge. In this way, knowledge becomes the guiding factor of serial literature and its associated counterparts. Knowledge of the world that is created in a serial exists linearly in that as one reads from one sequential installment to the next, one gains a more nuanced understanding of the context of the storyline. Keeping with Hughes and Lund’s metaphor of personal development, the notion of learning more with time is literally conveyed through the serial format because the narrative is linear and guides the reader toward an inevitable conclusion. Of course, this phenomenon is specific to the original serial
publication, not the collected volumes that came afterward. A single volume permits the reader control whereas a multi-volume serial publication is released on the publisher’s schedule. For all of this discussion on the needs of the publisher and the needs of the author as a producer, the view of Hughes, Lund, and Hayward seem to prove correctly that the serial is a product of mass consumer culture.

While they do not take the position that the serial is a form without aesthetic merit, this was widely the position that many took in the nineteenth century, dismissing it as cheap fiction to be read and discarded by the masses (King 30). As it turns out, the serial form made a lasting impact on the canonical literature. Dickens is far from the only serialized novelist to be a part of that elite club. As a distinct form, the serial represents a lasting relationship with readers, but its evolution and decline toward the end of the nineteenth century was symptomatic of something else. Often characterized for their rich descriptions of lived experiences, the realist tradition became the hallmark of many novels seeking to express the lived experiences of a developing middle class. Expressive, emotive descriptions came to characterize realist narratives, but such a mode of writing was later considered to be the work of hacks catering to a “debased popular taste” by critics at the fin de siècle (Arata 128). While certainly not true of all work, critics were reacting to narratives that appeared to devalue the craft behind writing that could produce beauty in art. Arata writes that “the commitment to craft, to art for art’s sake, was not a retreat from reality, but an effort to engage it critically through a momentary standing apart from the world. Indeed, the artist’s desire to create beauty could be inseparable from a desire to change the world” (128). Rather than creating fiction that was easily forgotten or disposed of because it lacked any artistic value, critics of the time began to question what art could do, and whether it had lost its way. Arata describes the artistic mood of the time as one that became increasingly
concerned with form, craft, and technique instead of relying on subject matter express beauty (126-127). In this way, true beauty could only be expressed through a mastery of technique.

This mastery of technique is precisely what I identify as the agent that permits Sherlock Holmes to exist far beyond his original run in the *Strand*. Conan Doyle was not simply writing a detective story. A detective story would be simply the subject of Conan Doyle’s work, but it does not express the craft behind the Holmes stories. Doyle is still writing in a format that meshes with capitalist desires, but he is able to drive sales of his work in a way that provides greater accessibility than a typical serial would do. In an interview with the popular publication *Tit-Bits* in 1900, Conan Doyle expressed the ways in which he decided to craft the early stories of the Holmes canon, noting that a true serial would not have been in the best interests of his readers because of accessibility to ongoing plotlines.

It occurred to me, then, that if one could write a serial without appearing to do so - a serial, I mean, in which each instalment was capable of being read as a single story, while each retained a connecting link with the one before and the one that was to come by means of its leading characters - one would get a cumulative interest which the serial pure and simple could not obtain. In this respect I was a revolutionist, and I think I may fairly lay claim to the credit of being the inaugurator of a system which has since been worked by others with no little success (A Gaudy Death).

While Conan Doyle has an air of arrogance toward the end of this statement, it is indicative of the uniqueness of the form, if not a truly aesthetic innovation. The Holmes canon finds itself more akin to the term “series” rather than serial, providing a less constricted way of interacting with his work. Conan Doyle, as a writer, values his readers and the way that they
experience and consume their entertainment, and with this newer form he allows them readers
more access to his creations through their form. Artistically, he recognizes the limits of the
preexisting serial form in order to build on them to create something new. Conan Doyle’s newer
form permits access to a wider audience and allows the greatest amount of people possible the
pleasure of reading in a way that strict, context-dependent serials could not. This is not meant to
be a lengthy discussion about the finer details of each individual story Conan Doyle wrote and
their artistic merits, but rather it is meant to highlight what I see as his participation in the literary
movement of the fin de siècle that emphasized artistic craft.

The argument can be made that the Holmes stories are copies of each other with only
names and locations changed. They may appear to be cut from a mold in service to appealing to
“debased” popular tastes, but such a critique does not account for what these narratives actually
do for the reader. Conan Doyle’s interview explains his reasoning behind his method of
publication, and the stories themselves exhibit something beyond entertainment, instead
participating in the aesthetic revolt against positivism, materialism, and scientific naturalism
(Saler 605). Rather than completing a story with an ending that locked away a criminal, Holmes
often uses his own judgement to decide if he should let a perpetrator walk free, as it happens in
“A Case of Identity.” At the end of this story, Holmes concludes “If I tell her she will not believe
me. You may remember the old Persian saying, ‘There is danger for him who took the tiger cub,
and danger also for who snatched a delusion from a woman.’ There is as much sense in Hafiz as
in Horace, and as much knowledge of the world” (Conan Doyle 238: 1). This is one of multiple
instances in which Holmes exercises his own judgements in service to the greater good,
subjective as it might be, and acts outside of the expectations set by authorities. Rather than
relying on established norms, Holmes acts with feeling informed by reason, rather than blindly
accepting instructions from outside powers, or, as Saler calls it, “animistic reason”; in this way, Holmes does not simply observe evidence surrounding him, but rather invokes imagination to inscribe meaning upon evidence (Saler 605). As a character, Holmes embodies the renegade aesthetic of fin de siècle artists, as well as in format through Conan Doyle’s own artistic innovation grounded in a quest for accessible, widely-read fiction. This seems at odds with “art for art’s sake,” but rather the Conan Doyle’s choice of form is itself a break from well-established literary forms.

THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Seriality, as a term, is open to a variety of malleable definitions. This is evident even in theoretical guides such as the Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory, in which the serial form is defined as “the segmentation of a narrative into instalments that are released sequentially, usually with a time lapse between the release of one installment and the next.” However, it is further defined as having a distinct form in which “narrative works at the levels of both individual instalments and of the serial as a whole” (527). This definition becomes problematic because it does not consider those stories that fall into the even murkier territory of what the definition refers to as the “episodic series,” and such a definition looks at the texts at a single installment level, rather than the installments existing to serve a larger, more complete narrative. If one is asked about the plot Anthony Trollope’s 1857 novel Barchester Towers--published in three volumes--or about the plot of Thomas Hardy’s 1894-1895 serialized novel Jude the Obscure, a single volume or installment does not express the breadth of action or knowledge acquired. Rather, one is forced to make inferences around plot and structure, and in that sense,
the installment or volume is “self-contained,” but the actual story remains incomplete. The words “serial” or “serialized” should be applied only to first-run publications. For a visual, a serialized story is made up of parts that can be grabbed off of a shelf. A single episode may be read, but the plot in these narratives remains incomplete at the completion of a single volume or installment. However, a serialized story is still a story, and stories are meant to be experienced by readers. In this sense, a reader is immersed in the form of a serialized story without necessarily being conscious of its effects. To view the Holmes canon as simply a related corpus of stories does not take into account the fact that they must be and have been experienced by readers in a variety of ways. It is necessary to view these types of stories in a way that explicitly studies the serial as an object, as well as the implicit study of the reading experience created by the nature of the serial.

To begin to understand this phenomenon, I began to think about how Roland Barthes utilizes the terms “work” and “Text” in his essay “From Work to Text.” Barthes’s discussion of the differences between the two terms becomes crucial to this discussion when Reader and Researcher are positioned against each other as simultaneously existing entities. Barthes describes the “work” as something concrete and occupying a physical space like a bookshelf, whereas the “Text” is a methodological field, or a place in which limitless possibilities and intertextuality are displayed (57). While Barthes refers to works and Texts in a more broad and abstract sense, I find a literal visual of his theory useful to begin considering stories like those in the Holmes canon as part of a larger network of cultural units that exist on an even plane with all other cultural touchstones that can influence an interpretation of narrative. I will only capitalize the word “Text” when referring to this theoretical space described by Barthes. Similarly, “work” will be used only in conjunction with a discussion of the “Text.” The stories that make up the Holmes canon, as works, were originally published in magazines, collections, and standalone
novels from *A Study in Scarlet*’s 1887 publication in *Beeton’s Christmas Annual* to the last Holmes novella *The Valley of Fear* in 1915 (Freeman ix-xi: 1). When referring to the Holmes canon as a collection of “works,” it becomes useful to think about the stories and novellas as physical objects we can touch. At one point, they were standalone stories existing in periodicals before they were collected into *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892), *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (1893), *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* (1905), *His Last Bow* (1917), and *The Case Book of Sherlock Holmes* (1927). The novellas were serialized in periodicals such as the *Strand*, much in the same way that the short-stories were released one a time in similar publications. However, these stories occupy the strange place of being related, yet unrelated, continuous, and yet finite in their relation to each other. Conan Doyle’s *The Sign of Four* can be read and studied as its own entity, particularly for its treatment of British/Indian relationships. “The Five Orange Pips” is a separate story in all plot and action, but it brings up similar questions about race. While both stories invite critical attention as separate pieces, they are not necessarily considered to work in conjunction because of their self-contained narrative presence.

Taken together, I am considering all of the Holmes stories to make up an extended story world, rather than considering each story to be its own single unit. The Holmes stories have markers of generic detective fiction in that they all lead the reader toward an unambiguous conclusion, giving them the characteristics of “works” instead of a “Text,” but actually they are more Textual than they first appear. Each story is open to interpretation or inquiry that goes beyond the firm narrative conclusions. Works such as *The Sign of Four* and “The Five Orange Pips” have firm endings, but the treatment of race in both works can still be the subject of critical debate. In this way, the Holmes canon can be viewed as a “Textual,” allowing one to consider the experience of reading the canon as a field of inquiry that can only be entered into by the
reading experience of consuming parts or the whole of the canon. Barthes weaves together the two descriptive modes of “work” and “Text” in such a way that speaks to a serial publication’s relationship with time and space, arguing that “the Text is experienced only in an activity, a production. It follows that the Text cannot stop, at the end of a library shelf, for example; the constitutive movement of the Text is a traversal [traversee]: it can cut across a work, several works” (59-60). The Holmes canon contains individuals works, and those works compiled together create the Text. When considering the Holmes canon of 60 stories, I am suggesting that they be looked at collectively because of the canon’s intertextual nature. This intertextual nature is more deeply theorized by Richard Saint-Gelais in his work *Fictions Transfuges: La Transfictionnalité Et Ses Enjeux*, or *Transferred Fictions: Transfictionality and Its Stakes*, in which he suggests that fictions are bound not by their original contexts, but rather they are expanded upon beyond their original iterations by author or imitator into additional narratives (7-16). Indeed, the character of Sherlock Holmes has transformed in film and television adaptations from Basil Rathbone’s movie house iteration of the character in the 1930s to Benedict Cumberbatch’s role on the television series *Sherlock* in the twenty-first century. The term “Text” can then be used as a metonym for the collected Holmes stories and novellas in the canon, and it not only exemplifies Barthes’s discussion of intertextuality, and also creates a space for research into Holmes stories that fall outside of the canon, such as film adaptations or contemporary pastiches.

This concept is perhaps best-illustrated by identifying the force of the work compared to the force of the Text. Beginning with the first appearance of Sherlock Holmes in *A Study in Scarlet*, the reader is presented with a certain set of facts, that is, identifiable markers in the narrative that all readers can agree exist, such as Watson’s title of doctor or Holmes’s home at
221B Baker Street. At length, the reader is first introduced to a man who earned a medical degree from the University of London in 1878 and took a position as an assistant surgeon attached to the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers. It is not until six paragraphs later that the man is revealed to be named Watson (Doyle 7-8:1). Watson, the reader learns, is searching for a place to live, and his old friend Stamford reveals that he knows someone who is also searching for a place, someone who is “a little queer in his ideas—an enthusiast in some branches of science…a decent fellow enough” (Doyle 8). As all of this background is continually revealed, the reader eventually learns that the other man seeking a set of rooms to share is named Sherlock Holmes. These opening passages of *A Study in Scarlet* reveal an origin story of a relationship between Holmes and Watson.

However, because we have the knowledge of history on our side, we know that 59 more works were to be produced. Following the publication of *A Study in Scarlet* was the 1890 publication of *The Sign of Four* (Freeman ix:1). While the former began in a way that simply introduced the reader to Holmes and Watson, the latter begins in medias res and assumes a tone of familiarity. Conan Doyle begins writing that “Sherlock Holmes took his bottle from the corner mantelpiece, and his hypodermic syringe from its neat morocco case. With his long, white, nervous fingers he adjusted the delicate needle and rolled back his shirt cuff” (Doyle 99). Readers, whether or not they are familiar with Holmes, will find this surprising because it is a jarring character trait that was not touched upon in *A Study in Scarlet*, an already lengthy account of Holmes as a character. Watson’s dialogue interrupts this scene and it is revealed to the reader that Holmes regularly indulges in cocaine and morphine. Based on the opening paragraphs alone, the opening of *A Study in Scarlet* presents a fastidious, intelligent, eccentric individual that straight-laced Watson must contend with in his living quarters, whereas *The Sign of Four* still
presents this friction between the two, but adds the previously unknown and unexplored addition of Holmes’s cocaine and morphine habits. As works, they can operate independently of each other. They can be read, studied, and critiqued on their own. But with this in mind, Holmes’s character appears differently in *A Study in Scarlet* than it does in *The Sign of the Four* because of the added layers of characterization in the subsequent stories. However, it is this continuity that emphasizes the importance of reading the canon as one complete set. Without reading all entries, the full characterization of Sherlock Holmes is incomplete if the canon is viewed as a singular narrative/Text. The Holmes works become a Text upon *The Sign of Four*’s publication because the experience is expanded beyond the inciting incidents of *A Study in Scarlet*. History is established by its predecessor, and such knowledge can be brought to *The Sign of Four* to influence how it is received. There is a temporal bridge forged between the two works that create a layered understanding of Holmes as a character and the Text as an experience that cuts across several works.

Barthes admits that the notion of the Text can become complicated because of its connotation of limits. He argues, however, that “The Text is not coexistence of meanings but passage, traversal; thus, it answers not to an interpretation, liberal though it may be, but to an explosion, a dissemination” (59-60). The Holmes texts have, in many ways, been not only interpreted, but disseminated across criticism and in fiction. They have taken on lives of their own beyond their original canonical iterations. Viewing the Text as a place of possibilities of interpretation and meaning, rather than intentionality, is what permits the Holmes canon to exist, even further beyond the definition of one work that Barthes suggests. While a singular work may also be a Text, the Holmes canon is uniquely poised to express Barthes’s concept and broaden our understanding of how the Holmes canon and others like it can come to exist. Barthes writes
that every narrative “belongs to the intertextual, which must not be confused with a text's origins: to search for the ‘sources of’ and ‘influence upon’ a work is to satisfy the myth of filiation” (61-62). In this construction, there is no strong connection to an original narrative, but rather only influences that have affected other narratives. The works that comprise the Holmes canon can, in some ways, be said to have an origin, but it becomes obscured and arbitrary with the introduction of the additional stories. There is no denying that Conan Doyle’s stories were published in a given sequence governed by time, so to call *A Study in Scarlet* an origin story is not totally incorrect, however, when we reframe the corpus as singular Text entity, this sequence is not strictly applied. The nature of the stories like those of the Holmes canon is one that does not adhere to order in its strictest sense.

Referring to the narrative cohesion between *A Study in Scarlet* and *The Sign of Four*, there are undoubtedly signs that signal that *The Sign of Four* takes place after *A Study in Scarlet*. As Holmes discusses his career with Watson, he notes that “The work itself, the pleasure of finding a field for my peculiar powers, is my highest reward. But you have yourself had some experience with my methods of work in the Jefferson Hope case” (Doyle 100). Had a reader read *A Study in Scarlet*, the allusion to Jefferson Hope would recall the earlier adventure and the ways in which Holmes’s skills and personality traits brought forth a solution. However, to a reader whose only experience with Holmes is *The Sign of Four*, the name signifies differently. Rather than acting as point of reference that readers of the earlier story will remember, Jefferson Hope signifies Holmes as an established detective who has engaged in this type of work before. Without the full context of what occurred in the Jefferson Hope case, this mention creates credibility for Holmes that he has not necessarily earned. The uninformed reader is then compelled to accept Holmes’s credentials as truth. Watson does recall the actual title of the story
a few lines later, but even so, there is only a slight chance that the title *A Study in Scarlet* would mean anything beyond a fictional callback to an earlier case. There are many “ifs” in this construction, but that is precisely what the Holmes canon and Barthes’s conception of the Text illuminate. There are multiple unique perspectives that exist with any given work. The Holmes canon as a Text, however, becomes self-referential and intertextual as publication of the Holmes stories and novellas continue. Each story or novella exists as a singular work, but when the corpus is viewed as a singular entity in and of itself, the works complete an intertextual entity that is not strictly related to any particular origin. The origin of Holmes and Watson, along with Doyle’s authorial intentions become irrelevant because of the serial, episodic form of the canon. There is no one central textual reference of the Holmes canon to which each episode can be traced back, thus permitting a non-sequential reading of the works.

In this way, sequential time does not matter. The actual publication of each individual work may be plotted on a timeline, but when the reader becomes immersed in the universe that Conan Doyle created, the episodic nature of each story or novella warps time in a way that alienates the reader from the author, and thus alienates the author from the text. This is particularly evident in the time that elapses between Holmes’s “death” at Reichenbach Falls in “The Final Problem” in 1891, and his 1894 resurrection in “The Empty House” because Conan Doyle wrote *The Hound of the Baskervilles* between them and set it 1884. Conan Doyle makes no mention of Holmes’s death in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, but rather situates all actions prior to the events at Reichenbach Falls, allowing his creation to live on between the beginning and apparent end of his character. While *The Hound of the Baskervilles* takes place before “The Final Problem,” each of these three stories were released in a sequence that reveals Holmes’s death, his life before death, and his return. “The Final Problem” and “The Empty House” occur
sequentially, with the action of latter occurring three years after the former. *The Hound of the Baskervilles* circumvents this timeline and instead functions as a story independent from the prescribed chronology of the early stories.

With the chronology of events warped by the publication of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, there now exists a unit within the Holmes canon that can be read without regard to sequence or ending. While there is no rule that says entries into a series cannot be set prior to a chronological series of events, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is notable because it is an unexpected, temporary resurrection of Holmes. This entry is only in place because of the demands from Conan Doyle’s audience. All events in the stories thus far have led up to “The Final Problem,” so with *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, the chronology is interrupted. Barthes makes the argument that Text can be read without what he calls the “father’s signature” in that it is to be consumed without authorial intentions becoming known to the reader (61-62). While Barthes suggests that a distance is created between the author and the Text, he also makes the concession that the author’s intention may only inhabit the Text as a “guest,” or as one of the endless meanings that can exist. In this way, the author’s intention is valid, but it is one of endless interpretive acts that inhabit the Text. The Holmes canon already expresses a destabilized center because of its episodic, self-referential format. As the center of the Text becomes more obscure, so too does the individual who created it. This becomes complicated with Barthes question about who “executes” a work because he suggests that only the critic can engage in this particular act of reading (62-63). I disagree with Barthes on this point because he contradicts himself earlier when he suggests that there is no difference between casual reading and cultured reading, even though he privileges the critic as a cultured reader (62). For any reader, an act of reading becomes an act of interpreting and act of criticizing, cultured or otherwise. Stanley Fish
operates in a similar frame of mind, but he writes that “the reader’s activities are at the center of attention, where they are regarded, not as leading to meaning, but as having meaning (474). If the focus of a Text is to shift away from the intention of the author, as it already has in many contemporary critical circles, then the author is irrelevant. What matters, in this case, is what the audience required, and that requirement came in the form of more Holmes stories. For the Holmes canon, its destabilized nature allows Conan Doyle’s intentions (the sequence in which he develops Holmes as a character) into the Text as “guest,” but this timeline that he created becomes obscured not just by the format of the stories, but also by the demands of others when he later decides to publish additional stories.

As stories meant to be consumed by an audience, the readers of the Holmes stories are worthy of study in their own right in the ways that Fish suggests. Barthes focuses on the ways in which the Text structures meaning, but Fish argues that the reader is ultimately the one who structures the Text, writing that “it is the structure of the reader’s experience rather than any structures available on the page that should be the object of description” (467). Fish’s argument helps to illustrate the tension between considering the Holmes canon both implicitly and explicitly. The reader’s experience of the Holmes canon is one of fragmentation, one that traverses across works in order to shape the Text, as Barthes’s theory implies. This is an explicit experience of seriality in that the stories were published separately and occupied a physical space. However, that explicit, tangible reading experience is then underscored by an implicit experience that is unique to an individual reader in Fish’s view. The argument that Fish presents is grounded in the assumption that every individual will have a unique experience with any given work, and thus he suggests that “what is important is not the information itself, but the action of the mind which its possession makes possible for one reader and impossible for the other” (475).
His expression of the possible versus the impossible plays a crucial role in determining how a reader interprets a story and further illustrates the malleability of the and deceptive definition of what is happening in the Holmes canon. Fish illustrates a reader’s knowledge through an analysis of Milton’s *Comus* and the introduction of the villain, the mention of wine, and the word “misuse.” In Fish’s construction, he writes that “in almost any edition of this poem, a footnote will tell you that Bacchus is the god of wine. Of course, most readers already know that, and because they know it, they will be anticipating the appearance of “wine” long before they come upon it in the final position” (475). The reader brings individual knowledge to every story, and that knowledge, along with formal aspects of the stories and structures of intention do not exist independently; instead, they are each part of an individualized interpretive act (479). These units that comprise interpretation become useful considering Barthes’s discussion of the transversal nature of the Text, and when the two are used in tandem, a clearer lens for research of fictional bodies of work like the Holmes canon emerges.

Barthes’s transversal Text is embodied through Saint-Gelais’s concept of *transfictionality*, or the occurrence when “two (or more) texts...share elements such as characters, imaginary locations, or fictional worlds...it uses the source text’s setting and/or inhabitants as if they existed independently” (Transfictionality 612-613). This term works to describe what is happening within the canon, but it explicitly states that source material is ignored in subsequent stories. The broader implication of this concept suggests that, at a basic level, characters, locations, etc. can exist in other stories beyond the place of their original inception. For example, modern readers of Conan Doyle’s stories are accustomed to seeing the aspects of the canon taken up and reshaped in different mediums. Irene Adler from “A Scandal in Bohemia” became one of the central figures in Guy Ritchie’s 2009 film adaptation *Sherlock*
Holmes, even though she exists for any considerable length of time in one story. The character of Watson was also reimagined in CBS’s procedural drama Elementary, transforming from the Englishman John Watson to the Asian-American female doctor named Joan Watson. Positioning the character of Sherlock Holmes against these criteria, he can be observed as existing within one story, a few stories, or all of the stories within the canon. However, the degree of his transfictionality depends on what the reader brings to a story and what is then experienced through the act of interpretation, as well as the number of stories that are read if Fish’s construction of a reader’s experience is correct. What becomes apparent is the way in which Sherlock Holmes may exist to an individual by way of only one story, or even a singular cultural experience that has nothing to do with the canon. Instead, as Erica Haugtvedt discusses, “the persistence of fictional characters across installments, adaptations, and extensions--their transfictionality--means that their referential names signify across disparate, differently authored, and temporally separated texts; therefore, we cannot assume that every fictional character--especially a transfictional character--is a Nobody” (415). In the case of Conan Doyle’s Holmes, his character is authored by the same person across stories within the canon, but the transfictional nature of Holmes remains because he is not confined to one, singular textual moment. Instead, he is conceived in A Study in Scarlet, makes several appearances before and after his “death” at Reichenbach Falls in “The Adventure of the Final Problem,” reappears in “The Adventure of the Empty House,” and faces his final case in “The Adventure of Shoscombe Old Place.” Those stories are just four out of the 60 total stories that complete the Holmes canon, but Sherlock Holmes operates differently in each of them. While readers then and now could read each of the stories as they were released in sequence, they could not anticipate the ways in which time is bent throughout the canon to accommodate Conan Doyle’s own desire to create future Holmes
adventures, nor could they anticipate where on the fictional timeline the subsequent stories would fall within the world of Conan Doyle’s Holmes. In that respect, Sherlock Holmes is not simply one character inhabiting one story. He is equally many characters as much as he is one character, and this is shaped by the malleability of the time of the canon, particularly because of its serialized format.

**REVISED TERMINOLOGY**

The malleability of the serial format is what makes it particularly difficult to describe both *how* and *why* events transpire in these types of narratives. The word “serial” implies a publishing sequence and that there is a degree of context necessary to understand the parts that comprise a whole. The Holmes canon is a case particularly useful to examine the webs of meaning that are created between serial and series, and much of their conflated meanings. Much of the criticism even surrounding the Holmes stories, for example, describes the canon as a series, when they were published as serials. They could be described as being a series published serially, but the closeness in terminology does not adequately express how time works within in each format. Part of the conflation comes from a publishing form in conflict with artistic decisions. Instead, what becomes more useful is to think beyond a publisher’s intentions and an author’s artistic choices. Conan Doyle created a different type of publishing format, but it is without a truly explanatory name. With this in mind, I propose that narratives exist on a continuum that expresses the degree of context needed to understand the narrative in its entirety. The Holmes stories can be placed along this continuum, and the scale can range from what I call the *independent*, *semi-dependent*, and *dependent* narrative structures. The *independent* narrative
refers to a single narrative that is released in one complete volume that can be read at a pace
ddictated by the reader. A publishing schedule has no bearing on this particular mode because the
volume is released all at once as a singular textual object. On the furthest end of the spectrum is
what I term the “dependent” narrative. This is a narrative that is released in parts with a linear
storyline that begins with the first installment and develops over the several parts/episodes and
concludes with the publication of the final installment. The dependent narrative is one that is
ddictated by a publishing schedule, such as a daily, weekly, or monthly release date. In this
construct, it is necessary for previous installments to be read prior to consuming the most recent
episode because there is a degree of knowledge and history that must be present in order to fully
interact with plot lines. Falling between independent and dependent narratives is the “semi-
dependent” narrative, termed so because of its similarities to both independent and dependent
narratives. A semi-dependent narrative is released in parts, but those parts contain plotlines that
are self-contained and resolved at the conclusion of an individual episode. In this way, the
importance of order and sequence are diminished, allowing each individual episode the
opportunity to be read out of order. This is not to say that all episodic fiction of this type exists in
such a way that history and prior knowledge does not matter, but rather this scale of context
dependency allows for narratives to freely move about this continuum in the way that the
limiting words of “serial” and “series” do not. A story or collection of stories may exist in a
semi-dependent structure, but knowledge of the story or stories, and even enjoyment, might be
increased by reading the stories in a way that is more closely related to the consumption of
dependent context narratives.

This reading strategy becomes particularly evident in the opening of “The Adventure of
the Blue Carbuncle.” The story begins with Watson calling upon Holmes, as he often does, and
Holmes bringing a new case to his attention. As the chronicler of Holmes’s adventures, Watson begins to gesture toward a history that readers would not fully be aware of without reading earlier cases. Watson notes that “of that last six cases of which I have added to my notes, three have been entirely free of any legal crime” (291). This statement, while organic to the discussion in which the two men are engaging, serves to present the notion that the Holmes stories are not simple, formulaic whodunits. Instead, Watson’s statement emphasizes not only the ways in which Conan Doyle upends genre conventions, but also suggests that Holmes is a man who confronts the world with his own sense of justice. In his response, Holmes reiterates that “you allude to my attempt to recover the Irene Adler papers, to the singular case of Miss Mary Sutherland, and to the adventure of the man with the twisted lip” (291). The cases that Holmes lists refer to the earlier stories of “A Scandal in Bohemia,” “A Case of Identity,” and “The Man With the Twisted Lip,” respectively, in which each case had the unintended outcome of Holmes either being outsmarted or permitting the perpetrator of the crimes to walk free. Holmes’s response to Watson does not necessarily answer questions about these cases for the reader, but rather suggests that they be read, too, to more deeply understand how and why Holmes acts the way he does. Reading “The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle” with the knowledge of the earlier cases gives it continuity that is otherwise lost without reading the earlier stories, but meaning is not lost with the only reading it as a singular entry. Continuity is gestured toward with this particular case, but it is not an absolute necessity to gain access into the world of Sherlock Holmes.

To further explain the ways in which these semi-dependent narratives influence the reader, it is also helpful to consider the fact that plenty of stories exist beyond their original canonical iterations. Conan Doyle’s Holmes canon includes sixty stories, but these original
stories with their characterizations of Holmes and Watson, along with tangential characters and plotlines are explored in by other authors. In this way, there is a hierarchy of creation, beginning with basic, recognizable units, such as Sherlock Holmes and Watson, 221B Baker Street, and Holmes’s varied skill and knowledge sets. These exist in the largest overarching branch of a “universe.” Canonical authors create this space, and it is ever-expanding. The canonical author may add any number of stories into this universe, and they are original creations specific to one author. Further complicating this setup is the fact that stories are taken up by additional artists to expand on what has occurred in the original stories. This then transfers the canonical stories from a universe into the smaller unit of a “world,” leaving the universe to act as the largest unit encompassing smaller worlds that are the creation of multiple artists. Using core traits from the canonical stories, these additional stories are able to expand upon original plotlines and relationships. These new additions into the universe exist on a spectrum including translations of a canonical stories into another language, adaptations of a story into another medium such as film, pastiches that are meant to be faithful to canonical stories in tone but are not created by the canonical artist, and fan-fiction stories that exercise varying amounts of creative license with the core elements of a universe. In the case of Holmes and Watson, “given enough time, the ‘universes’ of fan fiction—as if responding to laws of motion or evolution—will expand into new areas of the imaginary until even the original stories are dwarfed by the industrial-paced productivity of their derivatives” (Poore 159). While Poore’s discussion centers around popular and fan works of the Holmes canon, the larger implication here is that the semi-dependent structure that I propose invites a discussion of how these stories work if they are not bound to strict beginnings and endings.
With these technical aspects supported by a reader-response theoretical position, the “why” and “how” of what’s happening Holmes canon can be explained. Structurally, the Holmes canon is Textual in Barthes’s conception of the term. That is, the Text is transversal, and it cuts across multiple works within the canon. With this transversal of meaning cutting across multiple works, the canon takes on the quality of a semi-dependent narrative, which then reduces the importance of context and linearity across the works that comprise the Holmes Text. With sequence and frequency of consumption of these stories left up to the reader’s discretion, the combinations of reading experiences are limitless, and thus permits any number of reader experiences and new entries into the Holmes universe.

**STUDY OF THE TEXTS**

What, then, is it like to read the Holmes canon? This discussion of the textual phenomenon found in semi-dependent narratives is grounded in the reader’s response to these stories. With Barthes’s conception of “work” and “Text,” along with Fish’s assertion that every reading experience is a valid one, I offer my own experience of reading *A Study in Scarlet*, *The Sign of Four*, “A Scandal in Bohemia,” “The Final Problem,” *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, “The Adventure of the Empty House,” “His Last Bow,” and “The Adventure of Shoscombe Old Place.” *A Study in Scarlet* is important as the first Holmes story, as well as its function as an origin story for both Holmes and Watson’s characters. *The Sign of Four* is significant as the second entry in the Holmes canon wherein a history is already established with Holmes and Watson. “A Scandal in Bohemia” is the first shift from Conan Doyle’s use of novella for Holmes into his use of the short-story. “The Final Problem” will be discussed because of its significance
as the first of Holmes’s last adventures. *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is important for two reasons: it revives Sherlock Holmes after an extended hiatus, but takes place prior to “The Final Problem,” and it signals a shift back to the novella format Conan Doyle originally employed. “The Adventure of the Empty House” retains significance because it actually brings Sherlock Holmes back from the dead. “His Last Bow” becomes important because it is the last of the chronological stories in which Holmes appears. “The Adventure of Shoscombe Old Place” is the last Holmes story to be published, however, it takes place prior to the events in “His Last Bow.”

Focusing on the ways in which these eight stories function illuminate how the phenomenon of the semi-dependent narrative sequence occurs. Barthes and Fish offer a theoretical perspective of “why,” and these readings will offer the “how.” Together, a theoretical perspective with a practical application will offer into how form influences a reader’s interaction with the elusive nature of semi-dependent narratives.

What first becomes problematic with the first Holmes entry, *A Study in Scarlet*, is its inability to be properly categorized. It is often referred to as a novel, even though it is shorter in length, making it more similar to a novella. While this seems to be a trivial distinction, the differences become important when thinking about what a story does for the reader. In the case of the Holmes canon, the length of a narrative dictates what can be done within the confines of a page limit, thus influencing how much information the reader learns about the events that are unfolding. Conan Doyle sets this, to a degree, but he is afforded more space to expand on his ideas in the novella form instead of the short story form. It would become superfluous and cumbersome to include the origin story that opens *A Study in Scarlet* with every additional entry into the canon. The longer stories permit more exposition, but the short stories remain focused on action rather than deep, extended character development. Instead, characters traits and
relationships are explained through speech and gesture. *A Study in Scarlet* as a novella, makes a formulaic gesture toward the short-story format that Conan Doyle later employs.

Reading *A Study in Scarlet* with the intention of critiquing it as a first-time reader, this discussion is a combination of viewing the texts object and close readings of the material. The first part of the novella is titled “Being a Reprint from the Reminiscences of John H. Watson, M.D. Late of the Army Medical Department.” From this brief description of what is contained, I would assume that the following material is a diary entry or something more akin to epistolary fiction, and that the primary actions will involve Watson. Upon reading the title of the first chapter, “Mr. Sherlock Holmes,” this means very little beyond an odd first name and a seemingly average last name to Conan Doyle’s original first-run readers. The opening pages give a rich background of Watson’s medical training, army service, and wounds he endured. Watson writes that “I was so weak and emaciated that a medical board determined that not a day should be lost in sending be back to England” (Conan Doyle 7:1). We learn that Watson had “kith nor kin in England” and was strapped for cash when the reader is introduced to his old friend Stamford with whom he catches up. Stamford is sympathetic to Watson’s situation and suggests that he meet his friend, an eccentric named Sherlock Holmes, so that they could share the expenses of an apartment together (Conan Doyle 8:1). At the moment, there is very little that indicates a mystery or an adventure will take place. However, Stamford’s descriptions of Sherlock Holmes pique the interest not only of Watson, but of the reader as well. He is described as “a little queer in his ideas,” a “first-class chemist,” having “amassed a lot of out-of-the-way knowledge.” (Conan Doyle 8:1). Immediately, the character of Sherlock Holmes becomes one with quirks and depths that intrigue both Watson and the reader.
While the interaction between Watson and Holmes continues with Watson amazed at Holmes’s abilities, *A Study in Scarlet* offers an extended reflection on the characteristics of both of the men and how they came to know each other. The opening chapter serves as a way to orient the reader toward two unfamiliar characters who will undoubtedly experience some sort of event that draws them closer together. After all, something beyond a meeting of two different personalities should occur over the course of fourteen chapters. *A Study in Scarlet* is notable for its form for a couple of reasons. In his introduction to the first volume of *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, Kyle Freeman describes the formulaic nature set by a *A Study in Scarlet* as something that is often repeated by Conan Doyle, but it is actually a strength that “contributes to a that sense of solidness we get from this world in which logic triumphs over superstition, and where justice in one form or another is meted out to violators of the social order” (xxii). When it was originally published in *Beeton’s Christmas Annual*, it was published as a singular, complete narrative, broken up only by chapter markers and a separation into two distinct parts. The first part can be described as the action of the adventure involving the mystery at hand involving a case of jealousy and revenge, whereas the second part provides background and inciting incidents that help to explain the conclusions Holmes draws in the first part. The second part ends with the narrative coming back to Holmes and Watson discussing the events of the case, where Watson realizes that the police will take credit for solving the crimes. Learning of this, Watson declares that he will be the one to write down all of the particulars so that the public will know the truth. This is something that Watson mentions as his motive for recording the cases in many of the later stories, so the device becomes recognizable as Holmes continues his work.

There is no mention of *A Study in Scarlet* having any sequels at the time it was originally published, so it functions as an independent narrative sequence. The action in the novella is
contained to one published, extended episode. There is nothing to be read before or afterward, at least as far as the original audience would be concerned. What is contained in covers of the 1887 issue of *Beeton's Christmas Annual* is just a story with a beginning and an end--at least until three years later in 1890 when another novella, *The Sign of Four*, was published in *Lippincott's*. Publication of another Sherlock Holmes story creates a continuity between both novellas, making passing references to *A Study in Scarlet*.

What occurs, then, in *The Sign of Four*, is an instance of *transfictionality* as a result of this narrative cohesion. Sherlock Holmes and John Watson exist not in one sphere, but in two, and as a result, a universe is created that expanded beyond the narrative’s original world. Conan Doyle, as an author, expanded the Holmes canon. Repetition of his characters across the novellas and the stories allow Holmes and Watson to exist in different places and times within the universe that Conan Doyle created. With that in mind, transfictionality seems particularly suited to help describe what is happening in the semi-dependent narrative structure characteristic of the Holmes canon because such a structure is not necessarily concerned with time and sequence in the way that dependent and independent narrative sequence depend on order. Considering the Holmes canon as a non-linear narrative with multiple entry points, this is evident in the later case of “The Adventure of the Copper Beeches” in which Holmes reflects on his earlier work. He notes that “the small matter in which I endeavored to help the King of Bohemia, the singular experience of Miss Mary Sutherland, the problem connected with the man with the twisted lip, and the incident of the noble bachelor were all matters which are outside the place of the law” (378:1). This phrase is an almost direct callback to the same phrasing in “The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle” in which Holmes names the same instances in reference to earlier stories. Without the context of the earlier stories, the cases mentioned signify a past that is unknown to
the casual reader, but a past that such a reader must take as truth. However, a reader who has read all of the cases up until this point is aware of how each of the victims and culprits in the crimes listed affected Holmes and Watson, and such a statement in this story provides continuity between all of them, giving the informed reader a sense that each case exists within the same sphere of context. Giving the reader a sense that all of the actions within the Holmes stories exist within the same sphere also requires a stylistic choice of creating characters that can evolve and be impressed upon by their surroundings. To gesture back to *The Sign of Four*, Holmes’s drug habit exists in the same context of “The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle,” yet it is not mentioned in latter case at all. This is a habit this assumed to occur in the background to the informed reader, and it is not a habit at all in the mind of the uniformed reader because no context suggests it. The informed reader knows that Holmes’s habit concerns Watson, but to the casual reader of the Holmes stories, this aspect of their relationship is not at all obvious.

With an informed reader, the relationship between the two men is obvious with Holmes being the one who feels that he is in control no matter the circumstances, whereas Watson attempts to use caution and discretion to temper Holmes’s actions. In this sense, the relationship is a stable continuation of what occurs in *A Study in Scarlet*. However, the introduction of the drug habit to a new reader does not permit them to understand the degree of Holmes’s genius in the same way that an informed reader understands it. As a new reader, it is impossible to realize that Holmes is more complex than the opening lines of *The Sign of Four* suggests. His initial characterization is one of drug user, not genius. The drug habit is not mentioned in the same detail in additional stories in the Holmes canon, save for a few passing references, which then suggests that this particular character trait shapes the ways in which readers view him as a character specifically within the confines of *The Sign of Four*. While “drug-created dreams” are
referenced in “A Scandal in Bohemia,” for instance, the actions surrounding his morphine/cocaine habit and the concern that it causes Watson are not made nearly as explicit (188:1). If *The Sign of Four* is the only Holmes story that one reads, then such a reader is informed with a trait specific to that story, but not to others, thus offering a unique, singular view of Holmes as a character. Such a view would undoubtedly be similar to other readers of other stories within the canon, but this suggests that any discussion about Holmes is colored by the amount of information any individual learns about him, even his drug habit. The drug habit is one instance in which the decentered nature of the semi-dependent narrative permits experimentation. Holmes enjoys cocaine in one story, and then only smokes a pipe in another. This is possible in the dependent narrative as well, but the experimentation with characterization is not as easy to conceal because the dependent narrative is meant to be read in its entirety.

This trend of information relegated to one particular story within a semi-dependent narrative becomes even more obvious in the first short-story of the Holmes canon, “A Scandal in Bohemia,” when Watson introduces Irene Adler in relation to Sherlock Holmes abilities of deduction. Watson describes Holmes as “the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has ever seen, but as a lover he would have placed himself in a false position. He never spoke of the softer passions, save with a gibe and a sneer” (187:1). In the previous two entries into the canon, there is not a single gesture towards Holmes’s interest in romantic relationships. If “A Scandal in Bohemia” is the only story that one reads from the canon, the opening paragraph does an excellent job of summing up Holmes as a person, insomuch as “grit in a sensitive instrument, or a crack in one of his own high-power lenses, would not be more disturbing than a strong emotion in nature such as his” (187:1). Conan Doyle is an expert at condensing direct characterization in a few lines through Watson’s description, because the
remainder of the story is concerned with plot points. There is a fair amount of background given so that a reader without any prior knowledge of Holmes understands his character and the way he views the world. Within two pages, the reader is made aware of Holmes’s persnickety ways, Watson’s marriage, a brief description of their relationship, his drug habit, and finally the beginning of the mystery to be solved. Over the course of the sixty stories in the canon, Conan Doyle masters the art of brevity, limiting his explanation of the symbiotic relationship between Holmes, Watson, and their clients. The personalities of the two men are what remain interesting and drive the plot forward during times of less action. “A Scandal in Bohemia” acts as Conan Doyle’s first foray into short fiction with Sherlock Holmes, and it is the story that allows readers to get a little closer to the cold, introspective, eccentric detective by revealing his relationship with Irene Adler. Like his cocaine habit, Irene may be an experiment in developing Holmes as a character, but as an entry into the Holmes canon, she adds another layer of complexity once her story is read.

While Irene Adler is positioned to be one of the only people to outsmart Sherlock Holmes at the end of “A Scandal in Bohemia,” she is never mentioned again beyond passing references to the case in “A Case of Identity,” “The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle,” “Five Orange Pips,” and “His Last Bow.” Watson presents her as a mysterious, potential love interest for Holmes, and she is described in depth in such a way that reveals Holmes’s softer side. While Irene Adler duped him, Watson notes that whenever Holmes is compelled to refer to her, “it is always under the honorable title of the woman” (205: 1). This honor and affection Holmes seems to have for a potential romantic interest is not present in any of the other canonical stories. Without having read “A Scandal in Bohemia,” the reader is without the knowledge of Holmes’s affectionate side. What “A Scandal in Bohemia” achieves when it is read apart from the canon is effectively
rounding out Holmes as a true-to-life character. Without this case, Holmes appears to remain a celibate bachelor interested only in his work.

Over the course of twenty-five entries in the canon, Conan Doyle develops his portrait of Sherlock Holmes up until the entry of “The Final Problem” into the canon. Freeman notes in his publication timeline of the Holmes stories that the 1893 printing of “The Final Problem” was meant to be the end of the adventures of Sherlock Holmes because he felt that the character was preventing him from producing meaningful literary work (x:1). While many of the entries up until this point have included enemies of Holmes, “The Final Problem” introduces Professor James Moriarty. Describing him to Watson, Holmes declares that “if I could beat him, I could free society of him, I should feel that my own career had reached its summit” (558). Within two pages, the tone of the writing, and even the title suggests that the work of Sherlock Holmes will be complete at the story’s conclusion. Watson pays homage to Holmes and his “singular gifts” in a somber remembrance address that recalls the pair’s first case in *A Study in Scarlet*, as well as their previous case detailed in “The Adventure of the Naval Treaty” (557:1). In “The Final Problem,” Watson’s report acts as an obituary as he intends to show how talented Holmes was as a detective while correcting the facts of his interaction with Moriarty that existing reports missed. While “The Final Problem” traces Holmes’s final case against his arch rival, this entry serves to conclude what was learned and cherished by readers about the famed detective. With intertextual references to previous cases such as *A Study in Scarlet* and “The Adventure of the Naval Treaty”, distraught statements by Watson about the death of his friend, and the final assertion that Holmes was someone Watson regarded as “the best and the wisest man” that he had ever known, this story neatly ends the adventures of Sherlock Holmes in the same way that the stories began.
Or does it? The Holmes canon, with its semi-dependent narrative structure, permits time to exist in a nonlinear plane, and thus enabled Conan Doyle to produce a follow-up work to “The Final Problem” with 1901-1902 novella *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, serialized in *The Strand*, after a seven-year hiatus. After pressure growing pressure from readers and his publishers, Conan Doyle released *The Hound of the Baskervilles* in attempt to both pacify his audience and to seize the opportunity of telling the tale that he described as “a real creeper” (Freeman xxxii). However, this was presented as an old case that Watson had detailed prior to the events in “The Final Problem.” With this in mind, Conan Doyle managed to set parameters around his stories. That is, the canonical universe of Sherlock Holmes had a firm ending once he was presumed to have drowned at Reichenbach Falls in “The Final Problem,” but by setting another case before the demise, the semi-dependent structure of the Holmes stories allows this fictional universe to expand without much regard to time or sequence. Conan Doyle employs this tactic in later additions to the canon, particularly when a presumed-dead detective makes a startling reappearance.

A year after the reminiscence of Dr. Watson in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, rumors began to circulate that Sherlock Holmes would once again begin to appear in the pages of popular periodicals. In an August 31, 1901 interview, Conan Doyle reported that “I know that my friend Dr. Watson is a most trustworthy man, and I gave the utmost credit to his story of the dreadful affair in Switzerland. He may have been mistaken of course. It may not have been Mr. Holmes who fell from the ledge at all, or the whole affair might be the result of a hallucination” (Notes of a Bookman). This interview is cited as the instance in which Conan Doyle hints at bringing back the famed detective, not necessarily of his own volition, but rather from the mounds of letters from heartbroken readers, or perhaps because he simply could have used the
income (Freeman xxiii). It is at this point that readers were treated to another set of Holmes stories, and thus *transfictionality* is embodied within the semi-dependent structure. The Holmes canon, when viewed in its entirety, transforms from a collection of works into the more multidimensional Text. Interpretation is not limited to one story, but rather across many stories as both self-contained and connected narratives, and is further magnified by who reads what story, what order, number of stories, etc. Conan Doyle’s role as the author becomes one of producer, not meaning-maker. That is, he exists purely to craft the framework onto which his readers will ascribe endless meanings and interpretations. With the 1903 publication of “The Empty House,” when Sherlock Holmes finally makes his reappearance in disguise, Watson remarks “Is it really you? Can it indeed be that you are alive? Is it possible that you succeeded in climbing out of that awful abyss?” (Conan Doyle, 2: 8). This reveal indicates Conan Doyle’s awareness of his audience and their needs, and he thus responds to them by creating narrative continuity between the “The Final Problem” and “The Empty House” to reorient readers to the long-absent detective. While this may be an overly generous observation, Conan Doyle’s return from an extended ten-year hiatus to pen a continuation of the life of Sherlock Holmes is a testament to the power of the transfictionality within a semi-dependent structure.

While Holmes’s death and resurrection are purposely crafted to bring back the character into the public eye, the two remaining Holmes stories in the canon that spell the end for the detective are remarkable for their distinct lack of satisfying conclusions. It is at this point that the stories in canon become more Textual than work-like. They exist in a middle-space because of their semi-dependent structure. In “His Last Bow,” the titular story to the collection of the same name published in 1917, Holmes and Watson have been apart for some time, but they are reunited at Holmes’s request to solve a case involving German spies prior to WWI. Both men
have changed in appearance, with Holmes now sporting a goatee and Watson looking noticeably older, but their relationship remains as fresh and as energetic as ever (Conan Doyle 488: 2). The style of the story is noticeably different in that it is told from an omniscient perspective rather than Watson’s first-person reflections common among all the other entries in the canon. For someone who has read the canon, this mode is an odd choice given the history that Conan Doyle has been able to establish among his readers. However, when read randomly among any number of the stories within the canon, “His Last Bow” only acts as a final conclusion specifically because of its placement among chronological events within the canon because of its 1914 setting. Even the title, “His Last Bow,” remains ambiguous and does not refer to anything in particular within the narrative. Holmes’s last comment to Watson at the story’s conclusion is that “I have a check for five hundred pounds which should be cashed early, for the drawer is quite capable of stopping if he can” (491: 2). Rather than include any summary of Holmes or Watson, or even a reflection on the events that have transpired since A Study in Scarlet, Conan Doyle chooses to end the narrative in medias res. The implication here is that life will go on as it always has for Holmes and Watson. Without the history of the earlier entries that avid readers will have acquired at this point, “His Last Bow” acts as another transfictional narrative that takes place within a semi-dependent structure. With transfictional setups within this specific structure, history and knowledge become a central point to express and understand finality. With less of each aspect, sequence and time become less important, thus allowing canon entries to be read in any order of the reader’s choosing. In this sense, the reader is privileged because structure and sequence do not matter.

The reliance on any time of linear narrative is further abandoned with the addition of several more entries into the Holmes canon, ending with the last canonical story, “The Adventure
of Shoscombe Old Place.” While this particular entry is the last story to be published in a periodical, it comes without warning to the reader that it will be the last time that Conan Doyle brings his detective to life. It is not until the stories are published together in the collection *The Case Book of Sherlock Holmes* in 1927 that readers are offered an obituary of sorts to the great detective in the preface.

I had fully determined at the conclusion of *The Memoirs* to bring Holmes to an end, as I felt that my literary energies should not be directed too much into one channel. That pale, clear-cut face and loose-limbed figure were taking up an undue share of my imagination. I did the deed, but fortunately no coroner had pronounced upon the remains, and so, after a long interval, it was not difficult for me to respond to the flattering demand and to explain my rash act away. I have never regretted it (Conan Doyle 492-495: 2).

Conan Doyle’s admission that he brought Holmes back because of the demands placed on him by his audience speaks particularly to his place as an author. The early Holmes stories began as an experiment in detective fiction inspired by the work of Edgar Allan Poe and Emile Gaboriau, but Conan Doyle added more and more adventures into the canon, they became entrenched in popular culture and demanded by audiences (Freeman xxi-xxii: 1). This demand by audiences compels Conan Doyle to become obscured as an author, and instead his importance and his intentions fade, further placing the importance and value of the reader’s experience over authorial intention.

As is the case with the earlier Holmes stories, the action picks up with Sherlock Holmes and Watson conversing and focusing on minute details in such a way that suggests that they have always done so. The story is a mystery that has become the standard entry of the Holmes canon and proceeds with questions, obstacles, and answers in formulaic fashion. The story concludes
with a reflection on Holmes’s clients rather than a reflection on his work from Watson, or even from Holmes. Much in the same way that “His Last Bow” provides the avid reader no firm conclusion, “The Adventure of Shoscombe Old Place” operates as a transfictional entry within the universe that Conan Doyle has created, and it does not adhere to any type of linear placement beyond the concrete timelines established by a publishing schedule. As the true final entry in the periodicals, “The Adventure of Shoscombe Old Place” is remarkable precisely because it unremarkable. It does not end with Holmes’s death like Conan Doyle’s first attempt to end the stories in “The Final Problem,” and it is even less remarkable than “His Last Bow” which signals the end of Holmes in the title, but not particularly in content. “The Adventure of Shoscombe Old Place” simply wraps up another Holmes story without signaling what is going to happen to Holmes and Watson. The same can be said for “The Retired Colourman,” the last entry in the collected works of The Case Book of Sherlock Holmes, in which the last lines seem to recall the lack of credit Holmes receives in his work of aiding police investigators. Holmes dismisses his own dismissal, stating “You can file it in our archives, Watson. Some day the true story may yet be told” (662: 2). While “The Retired Colourman” provides a stylistic bookend to the Holmes canon, it is just as indifferent to ending the stories as “The Adventure of the Shoscombe Old Place” and “His Last Bow.” Considering each story in the semi-dependent category, these “last” stories do not necessarily require an ending because the narratives are, for the most part, self-contained.

Without an ending that sums up the actions of the main characters, it would be easy enough to read all of the Holmes stories, but then read “The Final Problem” and exclude “The Empty House” altogether. While such an order provides an “end,” there readers cannot deny existence of “The Empty House” as far as the fact that it exists as a published entry in the canon.
This forces Holmes to exist in a cycle that cannot be completed. With the loose connections and intertextual references drawn over the course of the entire canon, the semi-dependent structure of the Holmes stories permits both access and exclusivity to readers of any level of experience with any of the original entries.

**FUTURE STUDY**

While the Holmes canon provides a case study to explore the continuum of context dependency, it is far from the only narrative or medium that invokes the semi-dependent structure I have observed with Conan Doyle’s stories. The Holmes canon began at the fin de siècle and culminated in the midst of the Modernist movement, situating it perfectly among shifting attitudes toward form in literature. The narratives that occur in the Holmes canon may be standard in their presentation of plots and structures, but their existence in this realm of semi-dependent context works in such a way that those standard forms are questioned. If strictly linear formats are beginning to blur with literary products similar to the Holmes canon, then they are totally blown apart with writers like Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and Sherwood Anderson, among others. Woolf’s Clarissa Dalloway existed in several short vignettes prior to her 1925 publication of the novel of the same name. Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus is first introduced in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in 1916 before reappearing in *Ulysses* in 1922. Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* was released in 1922 and composed of several interrelated stories that could be read with or without the context of the others. Each of these authors created what Michael Goldberg has termed the “synchronic series,” in the Modernist short story, and he has noted the Holmes stories’ similarity to the form. Rather than attempting to name each type of fiction that is
created, the narrative structures are best discussed on a continuum because of the sequence’s malleable nature. This continuum is a concept that has applications beyond literature and into the mediums of radio, film, television, and modern phenomenon of binge-watching, and by privileging the reader’s experience of these stories over the forms that they take, the critic can begin to observe how and why a narrative can raise the question of: what happens next?
Works Cited


