

Queering Holmes and Watson: How Observation Transforms Friendship into Love

Casey Coffee

University of California, Santa Barbara

Faculty Advisor: Kay Young

14 May 2018

“It was worth a wound—it was worth many wounds—to know the depth of loyalty and love which lay behind that cold mask. The clear, hard eyes were dimmed for a moment, and the firm lips were shaking. For the one and only time I caught a glimpse of a great heart as well as of a great brain. All my years of humble but single-minded service culminated in that moment of revelation.”

—Dr. John Watson in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s  
“The Adventure of the Three Garridebs”

## I. INTRODUCTION

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. John Watson are known by media consumers as friends, partners, and crime solvers. To a smaller group of fans, they are recognized as a pair in love. These fans interpret the relationship between Holmes and Watson as romantic rather than platonic, and they perform both pseudo-academic and truly academic analyses arguing for the validity of their interpretations. Such interpretations represent one manifestation of a history of scholarly and non-scholarly work that reads male friendships as erotic or romantic relationships, as in the case of Star Trek fan magazines of the 1960s and ‘70s that featured stories highlighting the sexual tension between Kirk and Spock.

Readers and viewers who develop such interpretations perceive an extraordinary intimacy in these relationships that goes beyond friendship into romantic love and erotic attachment. I will call these types of interpretations queer readings, although it should be noted that there are many more types of queer readings in literary studies and queer theory whose goals are very different. Here, however, the term queer readings will refer specifically to interpretations that claim that at least one member of a seemingly platonic fictional friendship possesses romantic feelings toward the other. These interpretations may or may not argue that the authors of the texts in question *intended* for the characters to be in love with each other. In either case, however, the interpretations carry a liberatory tone that revels in reading a classic, traditional, or mainstream work in a modern and unconventional and wonderfully queer light. Such a reading has become

increasingly common and increasingly accessible to readers both inside and outside of academic contexts.

Indeed, the most common and numerous of these readings appears in the form of fan fiction. The *OED* defines fan fiction as “fiction, usually fantasy or science fiction, written by a fan rather than a professional author, *esp.* that based on already-existing characters from a television series, book, film, etc.” (“fan,” n.2). Per this definition, when I refer to fan fiction, I am not speaking of the film and television adaptations of Doyle’s stories, though these may be thought of as a class of fan fiction. Here, I refer strictly to non-professional adaptation. And one marked inspirer of this adaptation is Sherlock Holmes. Each successive adaptation of Holmes and his companion seems, without fail, to engender its own queer readings.

So, what is it about Holmes and Watson that sparks such an outpouring of these readings? Of course, there are the obvious points, brought about by historical differences. Male friendships in the late 1800s were allowed a degree of intimacy that may seem positively romantic to twenty-first-century readers. Holmes’s practice of calling his companion, “my dear Watson,” and the more openly emotional and admiring language that nineteenth-century men were allowed in their friendships, stand out to modern readers, who see these aspects of friendship through a twenty-first-century lens that may mark them as romantic or erotic. But cultural and language differences cannot be the only reason for queer readings. Holmes, after all, refrains from most expressions of emotion even to Watson, and Watson is so obviously attracted to women that even his admiration of Holmes is easily explained away as mere friendship. And yet, the queer readings continue. Even adaptations set in the twenty-first century, where such language disappears entirely, inspire their own queer readings.

The BBC's television show *Sherlock* (2010–present), for example, is set in present-day London, and despite the show's lack of the language of nineteenth-century male friendship, queer readings of *Sherlock* run rampant. Fans of the show have not only produced thousands of works of fan fiction featuring Sherlock and John in various stages of romantic and erotic relationships, but have also self-published journals, newsletters, and informal works in the style of academic scholarship that perform complex, well-researched queer readings. For a point of reference, as of this writing the fan fiction website *Archive of Our Own* features 51,703 works of Sherlock Holmes/John Watson fan fiction in the BBC *Sherlock* fandom alone. If the search is widened to include Holmes and Watson in other adaptations as well, the count increases to 55,443 works. Each of these works is a queer reading in itself, most of them stemming from a television show that uses the language of contemporary London. The language is unmistakably distinct from Doyle's nineteenth-century language, with none of the intimacy and openness so clear in the famous epithet, "My dear Watson." I argue that queer readings of male friendships like Sherlock Holmes and John Watson's are the result, not of the cultural differences between male friendship in the nineteenth century and contemporary society, but instead, of readers' sensitivity to the role of observation in these texts. Observation plays a key role in Holmes stories, from Doyle's original works to the most modern of adaptations like *Sherlock*. This role goes beyond just searching for clues and solving crimes, extending further into our cultural unconscious, and there is something about Holmes and Watson that has brought the deeper meaning of observation to light.

I argue that the act of observation triggers recognition in readers of an eroticized relationship characterized by a surveyor and a surveyed, a relationship that Western readers and consumers have been unconsciously trained to associate with heterosexual and patriarchal

romantic dynamics, not platonic friendship. To understand the implications that the act of observation has in our culture, I must consider what others have theorized about it. For example, to understand what observation means in Western art, John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* is particularly revealing. Berger claims that social conventions dictate, in art as in life, that "*men act and women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at," and that in art "women are depicted in a quite different way from men...because the 'ideal' spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him" (Berger 47, 64). Berger also makes the distinction between the "*surveyor*" and the "*surveyed*" (Berger 46). In Berger's mind, the depiction of women in art implies a surveyor—in the form of the painter, who surveyed his subject while painting; in the form of the viewer of the finished painting, who is assumed to be male and surveys the woman depicted; and in the form of the woman, who surveys herself as she is surveyed by others. This relationship between surveyor and surveyed is erotic, and sometimes romantic, and the possibility of a platonic, nonerotic gaze is limited, if not nonexistent. Moreover, since Berger's writing in 1972, the relationship has become more flexible. Men are now objectified in media with the same intensity, if not the same frequency, as women. Women can now be considered surveyors, while role of the surveyed has expanded to include men as well.

If Berger is to be believed, the act of observation in Western media, and in the minds of consumers of Western media, is associated with a heterosexual dynamic of a surveyor and a surveyed (of opposite sexes). This dynamic is implicitly erotic or romantic, depending on context, because men and women are rarely depicted in any form of media as platonic friends free from the tension of sex or love. So, what happens when a male surveyor focuses his attention on a *male* surveyed, as is the case in male friendships like Watson and Holmes's? I

argue that a similar kind of romantic dynamic becomes visible to certain readers. Readers whose conception of romance and eroticism extends beyond male/female dynamics find themselves reacting to this relationship of surveyor and surveyed—which is so weighted with erotic significance—between two men, and reading it as they would a similar relationship between a man and a woman. In these cases, the meaning of observation extends beyond its nineteenth-century bounds and comes to encompass even more. I mean to show the array of effects that observation has on developing intimacy between characters like Holmes and Watson.

Before I claim that it is reasonable for readers to interpret that Watson and Holmes have the markers of an intimate, and potentially romantic relationship, I would like to have a firm definition for intimacy with which to work. In “Defining Intimacy in Romantic Relationships,” Barry Moss and Andrew Schwebel develop a comprehensive definition of intimacy in “enduring romantic relationships” as “determined by the level of commitment and positive affective, cognitive, and physical closeness one experiences with a partner in a reciprocal (although not necessarily symmetrical) relationship” (Moss and Schwebel 33). In order to make classification of relationships possible, Moss and Schwebel organize this definition into five different components: mutuality, cognitive closeness, affective closeness, physical closeness, and commitment (Moss and Schwebel 34-35). Romantic relationships are characterized by high positive levels of each component. Friendship is very similar, but contains a lower level of physical intimacy. Observation has a peculiar power to intensify many of these types of intimacies in Watson’s relationships with other people, and especially in his relationship with Holmes.

## II. QUEERING HOLMES AND WATSON

The detective Sherlock Holmes and his faithful companion and biographer Dr. John Watson may be one of the most famous couples in literary history, their popularity only growing since their creation in the nineteenth century. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle published his first Sherlock Holmes story in 1887 as a novel called *A Study in Scarlet*, its first chapter titled “Mr. Sherlock Holmes.” The chapter details Watson’s return to London from the Afghan War, and his first meeting with Sherlock Holmes. Watson and Holmes are both in search of lodgings in London, and Watson is immediately impressed by Holmes’s enthusiasm and intellect but also mystified by Holmes’s deduction that Watson has just returned from Afghanistan. Instead of being repelled by Holmes’s knowing something private about Watson that he has not been told, Watson seems to relish the puzzle, telling his friend Stamford, who introduced him to Holmes, ““Oh! A mystery is it?” I cried, rubbing my hands. ‘This is very piquant. I am much obliged to you for bringing us together. ‘The proper study of mankind is man,’ you know”” (Doyle 7). These words signal Watson’s priorities to the reader, and color our understanding of Watson’s motivations throughout the story. Watson has not just found an amiable friend and a potential flatmate. He has found a mystery, and from the image of Watson rubbing his hands together, it is clear that he enjoys this. He has encountered a puzzle in Holmes, and he means to subject him to further study.

Study he does. That very evening, Watson agrees to live with Holmes and moves his belongings into No. 221B, Baker Street. Watson soon begins his observation of Holmes in earnest:

As the weeks went by, my interest in him and my curiosity as to his aims in life gradually deepened and increased. His very person and appearance were such as to strike the attention of the most casual observer...The reader may set me down as a hopeless

busybody, when I confess how much this man stimulated my curiosity, and how often I endeavored to break through the reticence which he showed on all that concerned himself...I eagerly hailed the little mystery which hung around my companion and spent much of my time in endeavoring to unravel it. (Doyle 8)

Watson's defensiveness about his interest in Holmes, which he illustrates when he anticipates the reader's judgment of him as "a hopeless busybody," only calls attention to the unusual intensity of that interest. His repetition of "curiosity" highlights not only the mystery surrounding Holmes, but also its importance to Watson as an object of focus and attention. And his repetition of his "endeavoring to unravel [the mystery]" and the fact of "how often [he] endeavored to break through" lends a sense of activity and purpose to Watson's curiosity and attention [emphasis added]. He is not simply mystified by Holmes; he is actively "endeavoring" to solve the mystery of him, to understand him. And to understand, Watson must observe.

In the passage above, Watson figures himself explicitly as an "observer." He attempts to downplay the significance of this by claiming that even "the most casual observer" would be struck by Holmes. However, Watson's observation is not casual. It is systematic. Watson goes so far as to record his observations in the form of a list, which he titles, "SHERLOCK HOLMES—*his limits*" (Doyle 9). The list contains twelve points detailing the different types of knowledge and skills Holmes possesses and lacks. Watson is unable to draw a definitive conclusion from this list, eventually giving up and tossing it into the fire. But while it exists, the list stands as a curious testament to the unusual fervor of Watson's fascination with Holmes. As Watson himself remarks, "no man burdens his mind with small matters unless he has some very good reason for doing so" (Doyle 8). Watson has clearly taken to burdening his mind with the minutiae of Sherlock Holmes, but his very good reason for such a detailed study is never



explained. This makes it all the more remarkable, and it becomes a puzzle for readers to solve themselves. Some readers' solutions are queer readings.

Whatever the reason for Watson's study, the language of these passages portrays Watson's observation as explicitly active. It is purposeful and action-based, which figures it neatly as a parallel to Berger's spectator. Watson is a man who acts, even in the relatively passive and stationary process of watching another. However, the dynamic between Watson and Holmes, though similar to the dynamic that Berger examines between the nude women in paintings and the male spectators of those paintings, has some important differences. The most notable of these differences is that Sherlock Holmes, the "surveyed" in this relationship, is neither a woman, nor someone who simply appears. Holmes is not a passive object to Watson's active observation. This is clear even in the passage above describing Watson's observation. Watson is so fascinated because Holmes "stimulate[s]" his curiosity and "strike[s]" his attention. Holmes is just as active, if not more so, than Watson, and his activity revolves just as much around the act of observation. In fact, the significance of Watson's observation is only heightened by its parallel relationship to Holmes's observation in his detective work.

Observation and deduction are important themes in every Sherlock Holmes story. They have a special kind of weight, and that means that when Watson observes Holmes, his observations carry that weight as well. The observation/deduction paradigm so common to detective stories (since Doyle popularized Edgar Allan Poe's detective formula) even extends into the way that Watson articulates his study of Holmes. The language Watson uses to describe his observation mirrors this paradigm, as he explains that he "pondered over [his and Holmes's] short conversation...and endeavored to draw [his] deductions from it" (Doyle 9). And as Holmes

usually embarks on a step-by-step explanation of his observations and deductions after he solves a problem, so does Watson record his observations of Holmes for the reader to understand.

The fact that Watson's observations of Holmes must not only be recorded and decoded, but also published for the benefit of the reading public, heightens the admiration that Watson shows for Holmes. Though Doyle's use of Watson as Holmes's biographer may have emerged simply as a device used to justify Watson's writings and the narrative form that the stories take, it has a very powerful, if unintended effect. Watson feels compelled to record and publish accounts of Sherlock Holmes's deductive skills out of pure, unadulterated admiration and awe. This is the first marker of positive affective closeness between Watson and Holmes. Watson's admiration translates into liking and caring, an essential component of intimacy. And Watson makes it very clear in each of his stories that he likes Sherlock Holmes—that he finds him “extraordinary.” Not only is the word “extraordinary” frequently used to describe Holmes and his actions in more than one of Doyle's stories, but it is Watson's admiration of Holmes's extraordinary deductive prowess in the case he solves in *A Study in Scarlet* that prompts Watson to record it and publish it. He explains this even before he undertakes the task of writing, as he tells Holmes, “‘It is wonderful!’ I cried. ‘Your merits should be publicly recognized. You should publish an account of the case. If you won't, I will for you’” (Doyle 70). Clearly, Holmes is a singular experience, one so fascinating and extraordinary to Watson that he feels the urge to present it to the world for further adoration. Watson admires, glorifies, and idealizes Holmes for his exceptional mind, which shines all the brighter in its contrast to Watson's steady and stable character, which cannot even hope to achieve Holmes's intellectual power.

This kind of idealization presents itself frequently in cases of love. Sigmund Freud even devotes an analysis to it in his essay, “Being in Love and Hypnosis,” from *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. According to Freud, being in love often results in the following:

the phenomenon of sexual over-estimation—the fact that the loved object enjoys a certain amount of freedom from criticism, and that all its characteristics are valued more highly than those of people who are not loved, or than its own were at a time when it itself was not loved. If the sensual tendencies are somewhat more effectively repressed or set aside, the illusion is produced that the object has come to be sensually loved on account of its spiritual merits, whereas on the contrary these merits may really only have been lent to it by its sensual charm....The tendency which falsifies judgment in this respect is that of *idealization*. (Freud 73–74) [emphasis in original]

It is impossible to say definitively that Watson sexually over-estimates Holmes. While some of his descriptions of Holmes are physical in nature, most of his observation is aimed at understanding Holmes’s mental processes rather than admiring his looks. The phenomenon of simple over-estimation, manifesting itself in idealization, however, is much easier to prove. Watson’s accounts of the cases that Holmes solves are a testament to that. Holmes himself criticizes Watson’s first chronicle, *A Study in Scarlet* for its rosy view. He tells Watson, “You have attempted to tinge it with romanticism, which produces much the same effect as if you worked a love-story or an elopement into the fifth proposition of Euclid” (Doyle 76). Holmes is unhappy with Watson’s account, not because Watson tampered with the facts in order to romanticize the story, but because Watson did not make the facts the hero of his story. According to Holmes, ““the only point in the case which deserved mention was the curious analytical reasoning from effects to causes, by which I succeeded in unraveling it”” (Doyle 76). However,

Watson is not fascinated simply by the extraordinary fact that mysteries may be solved by analytical reasoning. He is fascinated by Holmes. In Watson's mind, the facts are not the hero of the story; Holmes is.

Though Watson's first-person narration of Holmes and his adventures makes the presence of observation in Doyle's texts very obvious, I must acknowledge that first-person narration is not a guarantor of queer readings of literary texts. There exists a plethora of literature written in the first person that does not inspire queer readings. And first-person narration has many other important effects on stories that have nothing to do with amorous intimacy or romantic relationships. However, most of these novels distribute their attention widely to encompass a series of events, more than they do a particular person. Watson's attention, in contrast, is disproportionately focused upon Holmes. Holmes is not the only object of Watson's observation. After all, Watson records descriptions of the appearances, words, and actions of a variety of characters in addition to the detective. But his observation of Holmes is unique.

While Holmes's cases are certainly interesting and take up a large part of Watson's narration, the ways that he records events and the ways that he records Holmes are very different. It is not the cases themselves that so fascinate Watson. After all, he never exerts any real effort to learn Holmes's craft of observation and deduction or to try to solve a case himself. He is consistently astounded by Holmes's deductions, despite his intimate knowledge of Holmes's methods. But his disinterest in honing his own skills and his preference for continuing to watch Holmes shows where his fascination truly lies. Holmes is the only puzzle that he ever exerts any effort to solve, and the only puzzle with which he meets any success. He is unable to deduce Holmes's occupation, true, but Watson knows Holmes better than anyone else.

The best way to characterize Watson's observational method—in contrast to Holmes's—is mind-reading. This is not a magical or supernatural kind of telepathy, but a concerted effort through Theory of Mind to read Holmes's body language, facial expressions, and sub-textual meanings in conversation. Ágnes Melinda Kovács defines Theory of Mind as “being able to take into account that people are guided by intentional mental states,” which allows us “to predict and interpret others' behavior” (Kovács). It is Theory of Mind that allows Watson to interpret Holmes's behavior and the mental states behind it. And Watson's skill at this kind of mind-reading strengthens quickly. At first, his deductions are tentative, and he hedges when Holmes tries to shrug off Watson's flattery, saying “I *thought* from his expression that [Holmes] was pleased” (Doyle 14) [emphasis added]. Five pages later, however, he has gained more confidence, and he can claim, “Gregson and Lestrade...evidently failed to appreciate the fact, which I had begun to realize, that Sherlock Holmes's smallest actions were all directed towards some definite and practical end” (Doyle 19). Watson begins to understand things about Holmes that even Holmes's long-term acquaintances cannot conceive of. Three pages after that, Watson brags, “I had already observed that he was as sensitive to flattery on the score of his art as any girl could be of her beauty” (Doyle 21). At this point, he has gained full confidence, reading past the façade Holmes tries to convey and well aware of the effect his flattering words will have on the detective.

In a remarkably short amount of time, Watson comes to *know* Holmes. He knows him so well that he can deduce Holmes's thoughts and emotions from his facial expressions and physical mannerisms. Even when Holmes tries to hide his emotions from others, Watson can tell that he is pleased or flattered. This kind of mind-reading lends intimacy to Watson's attention. Watson does not just want to record Holmes, he wants to read him, to enter his mind and understand it

fully. Though he does not frame it as such himself, he wants to achieve an intersubjective state with Holmes. Indeed, despite his inability to perform his own deductions and solve cases, Watson meets with relative success in his observations and deductions about Holmes. He provides the warmth of his own interpersonal skills to offset the cold logic of Holmes's analytical reasoning. With this skill, Watson gains positive cognitive closeness, another component of Moss and Schwebel's definition of intimacy, which they define as "the depth of awareness individuals have of their partner's cognitive world and the exchanges of cognitions they share" (Moss & Schwebel 33). This cognitive closeness might also be thought of as something like intersubjectivity—something achieved through what Daniel N. Stern calls "the intersubjective matrix," a "continuous cocreative dialogue with other minds" that emerges from mutual mind-reading and attunement to the minds of others (Stern 77).

While observation, idealization, or mind-reading alone could simply be the marker of a particularly strong friendship, when the phenomena combine, the romantic connotations that each carry come together into a particularly powerful suggestion of an amorous relationship. The power of this suggestion is notable in *A Study in Scarlet*, but it becomes almost impossible to ignore when it is placed in an explicitly romantic context in Arthur Conan Doyle's second Sherlock Holmes story. In *The Sign of the Four*, Dr. Watson meets his future wife, Mary Morstan, and his reaction to her bears striking similarities to his reaction to Holmes. The moment he first sees Miss Morstan, Watson's unique powers of observation and mind-reading come to the fore, as he notes her "outward composure of manner," but deduces from her trembling lip and hand that she shows "every sign of intense inward agitation" (Doyle 80). Watson replicates his ability to see past outward appearances to the inward emotions of Miss Morstan, a skill he first demonstrated upon Holmes. And before she even speaks, he goes so far as to say, "I have never

looked upon a face which gave a clearer promise of a refined and sensitive nature” (Doyle 19). This is when Watson first begins to show idealization for Miss Morstan. Watson appears to have written *The Sign of the Four* at some point after the events he recounts, at which time he is already married to Mary. Writing after the fact may bias Watson’s objectivity, because it is unlikely that he would be able to deduce a woman’s nature, not from the expression on her face, but from the set of her face itself. This is either a projection from a later version of Watson who is familiar with his wife’s “refined and sensitive nature,” or it is yet another manifestation of over-estimation, but in this case, an over-estimation that is explicitly physical, and likely sexual.

Watson’s over-estimation of Holmes differs obviously from his sexual over-estimation of Mary. When Watson first meets Holmes, he provides no physical description of Holmes at all, impressed as he is instead by Holmes’s extraordinary intellect and enthusiasm over his looks. For this reason, there is little if any evidence in the first two stories to show how Watson feels about Holmes’s physical appearance. The opposite is true for Mary Morstan. Watson describes Miss Morstan most often with physical descriptors, though he does venture to mind-read Mary in the same way he reads Holmes. He sums up his first impression of her, however, when he exclaims to Holmes, “What a very attractive woman!” (Doyle 82). As a result, Watson’s feelings for Mary fit neatly into Freud’s concept of being in love, “idealization” leading to “sexual over-estimation.” Though he comes to admire Mary for her bravery, humility, and kindness, Watson’s liking for her clearly begins on their first meeting, when all he truly knows about her is what he can see in her appearance. After she leaves this first meeting, he muses:

My mind ran upon our late visitor—her smiles, the deep rich tones of her voice, the strange mystery which overhung her life....What was I, an army surgeon with a weak leg and a weaker banking-account, that I should dare to think of such things. (Doyle 82)

Though Watson only knows what he can see of Miss Morstan, he holds what little he knows of her in his mind, and she preoccupies him, as Holmes does. He berates himself for even thinking about her, deeming himself unworthy before he can know her true worth. Just as Watson raises Holmes's deductive skills in comparison to his own inability to solve crimes, so does he raise Mary in comparison to himself.

Indeed, much of Watson's relationship to Mary Morstan can be read as a more explicit, eroticized version of the way that he relates to Sherlock Holmes. The explicit romantic relationship between Watson and Mary functions as a useful control in studying the relationship between Watson and Holmes. The first relationship is explicitly romantic, the second plainly platonic, and yet the similarities between them are striking. In the male/female relationship, Watson marks his romantic interest by paying close attention to Mary, admiring her physical appearance and personality, and attempting to understand her thoughts and feelings through mind-reading. He idealizes her and debases himself, holds her in his mind throughout the story, and records his knowledge of her in *The Sign of the Four*. Similarly, Watson watches Holmes closely, admires his intellectual abilities, and embarks on a close study of his mind. He devalues his own deductive competence, and records and publishes Holmes's doings as his biographer. The intent behind each of these relationships differs greatly, but for many readers, the effect is the same. And the power of this effect stems from its foundation in observation. Attention, mind-reading, admiration, and idealization are all made possible by the paradigm of the surveyor and the surveyed that Doyle built into Watson's narrative perspective.

I must point out that the dynamic that Berger articulates between the surveyor and the surveyed is not a positive one. The fact that "*men act and women appear*" in Western art is a problem (Berger 47). It is a result of oppression that consistently silences and objectifies women



while giving men agency and subjectivity. But the queer readings of the relationship between Sherlock Holmes and Dr. John Watson do not highlight an oppressive relationship wherein Watson objectifies Holmes in order to flatter himself. In many ways, he does the opposite, debasing his own deductive powers in favor of idealizing Holmes's, in the mode of Freud's conception of *idealization* in love. But, even though Watson is consistently incompetent when it comes to using observation and deduction to solve crimes, he shows his competence elsewhere, in observing and deducing Holmes. And there is a promising mutuality to the observation in the Watson and Holmes relationship.

Holmes is a master of observation and deduction, and while he does direct most of his attention to solving crimes, he shows his awareness of Watson in small but significant ways. This is clear in Watson's description of Holmes's curious violin practices:

Of an evening, [Holmes] would close his eyes and scrape carelessly at the fiddle...I might have rebelled against these exasperating solos had it not been that he usually terminated them by playing in quick succession a whole series of my favorite airs as a slight compensation for the trial upon my patience. (Doyle 10)

On another night, Holmes plays Watson off to sleep with a particularly soothing violin melody of his own creation. These moments stand out to readers because of their contrast to Holmes's normal behavior. Holmes makes a point of only retaining information that will be useful to his work (Doyle 9). However, in these moments of consideration, Holmes takes the time to hold Watson in his mind. He remembers his favorite songs, and he notices when Watson is exhausted and in need of sleep. Holmes attends to Watson's well-being, even when it has no bearing on a case. Holmes's attention is also a sign of positive affective closeness, which Moss and Schwebel define as "the depth of awareness individual have about their partner's emotional world" (Moss

& Schwebel 33). By meeting Watson's demonstration of affective and cognitive closeness with a demonstration of his own, Holmes shows that the depth of attention that Watson pays to Holmes is mutual.

This mutuality of attention holds great significance because it softens the oppressive connotations that Berger's surveyor and surveyed relationship would otherwise have for Holmes and Watson. In the eroticized gender binaries of the nude paintings in Berger's study, the surveyor's relationship to the surveyed is unequal and unhealthy. In the intellectualized, mutual paradigm of same-sex surveyor and surveyed that appears in Sherlock Holmes stories, that inequality is balanced in a variety of ways. The mutuality of attention complicates the power imbalance, placing them both in positions of surveyor *and* surveyed. Watson's admiration and over-estimation of Holmes also function to soften the inequality of the surveyor/surveyed relationship. Watson sees Holmes as an *agent* worthy of admiration, not an *object* whose purpose is to flatter his own self-image. Notably, this mutuality and attribution of agency is largely absent from Watson's relationship to Mary. This may be the reason why queer readings of same-sex friendships revel so much in a feeling of transgression. Heterosexual romance in the late nineteenth century was mandatory, conformist, and loaded with legal, social, political, and economic inequality. Same-sex romance was transgressive, illegal, and liberatory, in the sense that it held the potential for a truly equal romantic partnership. A reading of Watson and Mary with the same kind of transgressive properties would require an overhaul of the whole of Victorian society.

Moss and Schwebel's definition of intimacy complicates the surface-level simplicity of Watson's two relationships. They distinguish intimacy between romantic partners and friend this way:

Whereas romantic relationships involve high levels of all five intimacy components...the intimacy exchanged between friends differs from romantic intimacy, primarily in the depth of Physical Intimacy and possibly Commitment...as well as in the capacity to tolerate shifts in Mutuality. (Moss & Schwebel 34)

According to these definitions, Watson should share high levels of each component with Mary Morstan, and high levels of every component except physical intimacy (and potentially commitment and mutuality) with Sherlock Holmes. Because of the text's setting in the Victorian era, however, physical closeness has a limited presence in both relationships. Watson takes Mary's hand as he proposes to her, and Holmes sometimes takes Watson's arm. That is as far as Doyle takes physical intimacy. As far as the other components are concerned, Holmes and Mary seem to share high levels of each with Watson. Watson's commitment to Holmes appears to wane somewhat every time he marries, but it never disappears, emerging in full force in between his marriages. And mutuality of affection and attention is much more obvious with Holmes than with Mary, due to the imbalance of gender. Holmes and Watson achieve their cognitive closeness through observation and deduction, or mind-reading, of each other. And their affective closeness develops from positive first impressions to deep caring after years of living in close quarters and adventuring together.

### III. CONCLUSION

By Moss and Schwebel's comprehensive definition, Sherlock Holmes and Dr. John Watson share an intimate relationship. While Doyle likely meant that intimacy to be platonic, his stories have taken on a life of their own, transformed and recast by the changing cultural contexts in which they are read. The intimacy that is so essential to the relationship of this detective and

his biographer, in combination with the erotic dynamic of Watson's observation of and attention to Holmes, can be all the more easily interpreted as amorous rather than platonic. This is the result of a radically altered social consciousness in which same-sex desire has become a love that *can* speak its name. But it is also the product of a world in which attention means much more than it once did. In a culture inundated by technology, entertainment, and endless distractions, attention has become a precious commodity, more meaningful and more suggestive than it could ever have been in the nineteenth century.

Contemporary readers come to Doyle with a different toolbox of cultural norms and assumptions. This signals a crucial shift in the way that we read and demonstrates the radically different readings that can emerge from a single text over time. The technique of queer reading is certainly not perfect, and it often brings its own biases into interpretation. But queer reading may point to a path of revitalizing contemporary readings of classic works of literature. Queer readings of Sherlock Holmes can transform the place of observation in traditional intimacy from one of imbalance and inequality to one of potential reciprocity. Through readings like this, the dramatic changes that technology and social movements visit upon our social consciousness can refresh literature and make it more accessible, more transgressive, and more rich than ever before. After all, for John Watson to observe Sherlock Holmes might not have meant much to Doyle's readers in 1887. But to twenty-first-century readers, Watson's focused attention has the power to transform friendship into love.

## Works Cited

- Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 2008.
- Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan. *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 2015.
- “Fan, n. 2.” *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, January 2018,  
[www.oed.com/view/Entry/68000](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/68000). Accessed 20 March 2018.
- Freud, Sigmund. “Being in Love and Hypnosis.” *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*.  
 Translated by James Strachey, The Hogarth Press, 1949, pp. 71–80.
- Kovács, Ágnes Melinda. “Belief Files in Theory of Mind Reasoning.” *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2016, pp. 509–527.
- Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat, creators. *Sherlock*. Hartswood Films, BBC Wales, and  
 Masterpiece Theater, 2010–present.
- Moss, Barry F., and Andrew I. Schwebel. “Defining Intimacy in Romantic Relationships.”  
*Family Relations*, vol. 42, no. 1, 1993, pp. 31–337. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/584918](http://www.jstor.org/stable/584918).
- Stern, Daniel N. *The Present Moment in Psychotherapy and Everyday Life*. W.W. Norton, 2004.