



## The Evolution of Sherlock Holmes in Visual Media

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### Abstract

Sherlock Holmes is the iconic literary creation of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. He has acquired prominence of late with the series named 'Sherlock' featuring Benedict Cumberbatch. The paper will trace the resolution of Sherlock Holmes right from the time it started making an appearance on the big-screen.

**Keywords:** Sherlock Holmes, movie adaptations, Basil Rathbone, Jeremy Brett, Robert Downey Jr., Benedict Cumberbatch.

Sherlock Holmes is a pop-culture icon, the legendary detective who is the inspiration of many such characters. He is one of the most eccentric yet likeable protagonists. His amazing deductive skills are matched by none. His stunning detections are seen in his stories such as the *Engineer's Thumb*, *The Blue Carbuncle*, *The Red-headed League* to name a few. Who can forget his soldier's cap, checked deerstalker, Roman nose, startlingly grey eyes and his gaunt, sparse figure walking down Baker's street? His catchphrases are equally popular, like "elementary Watson", and "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable must be the truth". His detective methods, though unconventional were almost supernatural. He is the ultimate detective, the super-sleuth of all times. Sometimes he worked alone with his uncanny skills and at times, he worked with Dr. Watson. His arch-nemesis Moriarty even has a popular indoor-game named after him.

Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, many films, like movie noire, silent films and black and white adaptations have been produced. Some movies have put a comic spin on the sleuth like the movie 'Sheerluck Holmes'. But the most sensational of these creations are Basil Rathbone's, Jeremy Brett's, Robert Downey Junior's and Benedict Cumberbatch's. Two of these adaptations were movies and two were teleseries. There are equally obsessive fandoms and followings for each of these actors' portrayal.

In Teleseries, the picture of the tall, lean and aristocratic looking Holmes comes to mind. Brett was an inspired choice, critics say. The 19<sup>th</sup> century was brought to life in the Granada TV series. The 19<sup>th</sup> century was brought to life in the Granada TV series which ran for 41 episodes from 1984 to 1994. Although he was afraid of being typecast, Brett appeared in 1989 in 'The Secret of Sherlock Holmes' directed by Patrick Garland. He says, "Holmes" is the hardest part I have ever played than "Hamlet" or "Macbeth". Brett had also played Dr. Watson on stage opposite Charleston's Holmes in the 'Crucifer of Blood',





making him one of the only four actors to play both Holmes and Watson. He did extensive research on the great detective and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. He studied in Eaton and was a member of the college choir. Brett almost resembled the obsessive and depressive character of Holmes himself.

Basil Rathbone as Sherlock Holmes was regarded as the Holmes of his generation. The series became a major hit, one Doyle was actively involved in. With his trusty sidekick, Watson, played by Nigel Bruce, the show brought about a revolution in the way Watson was perceived by the reading public. The movie adaptation of Watson was drastically different from the canon. But for years, Watson, had been side-lined and neglected to offer more screen-space to Holmes. But Bruce's portrayal of Holmes as a bumbling, clumsy buffoon rendered a comic relief to the sombre aura and calculated gravity of Rathbone.

When *The Twentieth Century Fox*, the producers of the box-office hit series of the 40s fell out with the estate of Doyle and stopped producing, the *Universal Studios* brought the rights and started televising Rathbone fighting the Nazis. But like so many other actors who played Holmes, Rathbone became frustrated with the series in 1946, saying that his "first picture was, as it were, a negative from which I merely contrived to produce endless positives of the same photograph". Playing Holmes seemed to have this effect upon writers even like writing Holmes had the effect upon Doyle. Doyle claimed that the pale, gaunt face haunted him and stopped him from producing serious literature and decided to end him in 'The Final Problem' but acceded to public clamouring that Holmes be resurrected by bringing him back in 'The Adventure of the Empty House'. Brett started to affect the character of Holmes so much in real-life too that people around him thought that he had gotten too much into the character. He started becoming moody and self-absorbed and even started using drugs. Towards the end of the tele-series which only ran for ten years, one can observe that Brett had aged considerably- his cheeks sagged, his eyes were lack-lustre and he seemed to move with a dull impetus around the set. Maybe the strain of being typecast did that to him.

The most recent Box-Office hit and movie-saga starring Robert Downey Jr. must certainly be mentioned. This series too was set in Victorian England but the movie radicalized Holmes and made him one of those sensational, truly incredible creations like Iron Man. Basically, Downey reprised his role as Tony Stark, this time, under the guise of Holmes. It was like Iron Man suddenly deciding to become a super-brilliant detective. The rendition was a poor, tacky but brilliantly eye-catching one and it shot Holmes again into the limelight. It made Holmes a cash-cow, spawning tele-series and movies like 'My Dear Mr. Holmes', 'Elementary', and 'Sherlock' all in a matter of years. But most fans agree that Hugh Laurie's 'Dr. House' was a more original production of Holmes than this series.

It all started with a 2009 British-American neo-noir mystery period action film based on Sherlock Holmes. It was directed by Guy Ritchie and produced by Andrew Kosove, Broderick Johnson, Susan Downey and Dan Lin. The film went on general release in the United States on December 26<sup>th</sup>, 2009 and became a hit worth \$524 million. It firmly established a canon and a fandom. It was generally well-





received except by true Holmesians but one critic gave a rather scathing review. A. O. Scott of the New York Times noted that the director's film was "to make cool movies about cool guys with cool stuff" and that the film was basically, "a series of poses and stunts" which were "intermittently diverting" at best. Downey's portrayal made the creation more bizarre than eccentric. He came across as showy and pompous and behaved like a whiny, attention-seeking, petulant child that his deductions did little to relieve his character-flaws. Jude Law as Watson was more bearable than Downey but even he failed to pay even the slightest respect to the original namesake. His idea of Watson was a brash, astonishingly handsome young doctor with a pronounced British accent who constantly quipped and gave childish amusing repartees to the whacky Holmes.

The next best-known TV hit was obviously Cumberbatch's Holmes which went even more farther from the original by being set in the present day. Holmes no longer wears deerstarkers and uses outdated revolvers. He is a smart-looking, lean young man with overly-moussed hair who wears trendy shawls and uses an iphone to text Watson. This is the most popular one by far, making Holmes quite the rage. Some female fans have even taken to calling themselves "Cumberbitches" to show their love for this series. It has fans all over the world. This was the series which publicly made fun of the intimacy between Holmes and Watson, suggesting homo-erotic undertones. His most famous catchphrase is "I am not a psychopath, Anderson. I am a high-functioning sociopath".

Cumberbatch's extra-terrestrial looks, his high cheekbones, his intense eyes and his exceptionally basal voice have made him perfect as Holmes. He has a natural restraint about him which keeps him from overplaying the role, or overdoing the whimsicalities and oddities of the character. He was an actor's actor born on 1976, educated at Bramble type School in West Sussex and became an arts student in Harrow School. He was involved in many Shakespearean works at school and made his acting debut of Titania, Queen of the fairies in one such production when was 12. Cumberbatch's drama teacher called him, "The best schoolboy actor" he had ever worked with. Critical responses have been highly positive, with him being nominated for several awards including BAFTA's, Emmys and a Golden Globe.

This seems to by far the most critically-acclaimed as well as commercial-hit involving Sherlock Holmes in recent years. But without the insane appeal of the character, there would never have been so much productions and adaptations about a literary persona created in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the all the credit should originally go to the mastermind behind Holmes, Joseph Bell, the man Holmes was actually based on and of course to the legendary writer, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, in Toto.

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