

## Sherlock Holmes and the Case of the Hermeneutic Circle

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*"It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts."*

— Sherlock Holmes in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's "A Scandal in Bohemia"

Having inspired an astounding 254 adaptations over the last hundred years or so, Sherlock Holmes received a Guinness World Record in May 2012 for being the most portrayed literary human character in film and TV (beaten only by Dracula, who fell into a different category on account of his not quite being human). The wildly popular British series *Sherlock* that began in 2010 starring the now-beloved Benedict Cumberbatch along with American adaptation *Elementary* featuring Lucy Liu as Joan Watson and of course Robert Downey Jr.'s slightly more steampunk Sherlock in the 2009 and 2011 films are the latest chapters in the history of Sherlock Holmes adaptations. And it's probably fair to say that a solid proportion of the shows you will find on prime time television these days are roughly adaptations of Sherlock Holmes' murder mystery/brilliant detective format. These new adaptations continue to be fresh and compelling, filled with potential for character exploration and adventure, at least for those of us who aren't disillusioned with the murder mystery genre by now.

Despite his attempt to finish off Sherlock Holmes and move on with his career as a writer, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle had started something that would become much bigger than himself. After he cast Sherlock off a waterfall to his death in 1893's short story "The Final Problem," Conan Doyle couldn't keep Sherlock dead very long. Popular demand and the promise of mountains of cash motivated Conan Doyle to officially bring Sherlock back to life in a series of short stories between 1903 and 1904 that would be published as The Return of Sherlock Holmes in 1905.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, when he created Sherlock Holmes, stumbled upon a character that resonated deeply with the readers of his day and that we still find enormously compelling in the 21st century. What is it about Sherlock that continues to captivate us?

According to Sherlock Holmes himself, the way to solve a mystery properly is to gather all the data first and then deduce a conclusion in order to avoid twisting the facts to support your prejudgment about what they might mean. In this way, Sherlock sounds like the ultimate hero of modern science who knows how to chase down cold, hard, unbiased objective truth. But the problem with this is that we can't help but theorize before we have all the facts. So in spite of himself, I think there's more to Sherlock.

Part of what makes Sherlock Holmes so enjoyable is that a mystery plays with our intuitions and prejudgments. We often begin trying to make sense of the story with an idea or an intuition of what we think might have happened and why. As the story progresses, our intuitions are tested against the clues and are either confirmed or discarded. As all the pieces fall into place, we understand what happened more completely and more clearly than before or, if we're really good, our intuitions are confirmed. In a certain way, when we let ourselves enter into a mystery,

we discover our own prejudices and biases as the story unfolds. Maybe the reason we enjoy a good mystery is because it is an exercise of self-discovery that unearths our presuppositions.

What I've just described is beginning to sound suspiciously like how Hans-Georg Gadamer describes the hermeneutic circle in his book *Truth and Method*. Drawing on the work of his mentor Martin Heidegger, Gadamer explains that all of us go into a text with an idea about what it says, or a prejudgment of what we think we will find there. So if you want to really engage with a text, as you work your way through it you begin to replace your prejudgments with ones that are more faithful to what you actually find written (*Truth and Method* 269). Without this sort of prejudgment, though, you wouldn't know where even to begin your interpretation of what you read. So in a weird way, our biases help us understand texts, as long as we're open to the possibility that we might be "pulled up short by the text" in a way that challenges those initial biases (*Truth and Method* 271). The challenging of our prejudgments forms a circle in which we initially interpret a text in terms of our prejudgments, are pulled up short by the text itself then rethink our prejudgments. And then we go around again and do the same with our new or modified prejudgments. So it seems that Gadamer would say that Sherlock doesn't have his own method quite right; we *have to* theorize before we have all the facts because we couldn't make sense of the facts without a theory to measure them against.

So I think a good Sherlock Holmes mystery will always be a satisfying hermeneutical challenge for us as readers or viewers. We bring our prejudgments to the clues we meet at the outset, and Sherlock guides us through a process of confirming or discarding these prejudgments as we discover more clues, a process that allows us to come to realize either the brilliance of our intuitions or the unreliability of our biases. This seems similar to Gadamer's hermeneutic circle: we go in with a prejudgment, examine the clues, then rethink our prejudgment by confirming, discarding, or modifying it. We do this again and again until the pieces start to fall into place, and the facts begin to come into focus.

Just as each new case for Sherlock Holmes functions like a text that calls for interpretation, each mystery for us is a text that invites us into an exercise of hermeneutics. As Sherlock unearths clues and draws conclusions, he pulls us along with him as he reveals and conceals information, and guides us through a process by which we are able to measure our prejudgments against the clues of the case. So perhaps Sherlock is not just a hero of modern science, armed only with the powers of reason and deduction; he is also an instructor in the art of hermeneutics.

Before we proclaim Sherlock Holmes the hero of hermeneutics, however, we should notice an important difference between Gadamer's hermeneutics and Sherlock's deduction. Sherlock thinks that considering all the data lets him get to the bottom of what really happened, whereas Gadamer might not be so optimistic. Gadamer sees the process of interpretation as infinite; we never definitively get past our interpretations to the bottom of a text. Sherlock, on the other hand, wants to nail down the reality behind the clues. While Gadamer's approach does require us to let go of this notion that we can get reality nailed down, it doesn't make detective work obsolete. The hermeneutic circle still allows us to move toward more suitable interpretations and draw reasonable conclusions. So Sherlock's work is not simply cold, hard deduction from the facts as he says it is; it is applying hermeneutics to the clues. And as Sherlock performs hermeneutics we are drawn into the mystery where we traverse the hermeneutic circle ourselves.