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Brody Challinor  
*College of DuPage*

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# An Analysis of the Perennial Big-Screen Representations of the Famed Detective, Sherlock Holmes

by Brody Challinor

(English 1154)

In the 1939 movie, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, Conan Doyle's famous detective [Basil Rathbone] finds himself up against his greatest nemesis, Professor Moriarty, [George Zucco] whom he must fight on two different fronts; protecting a young lady and her brother from the deadly implications of a series of cryptic notes, while simultaneously protecting the Crown Jewels. This portrayal of the character was released to a backdrop of a world in tension, hitting theaters on the first official day of World War II, once Nazi Germany invaded Poland. In sharp contrast to its predecessor, however, the 1979 *Murder by Decree* pitted Holmes [Christopher Plummer] against what some might call the 'phantom' menace of a fictionalized Jack the Ripper, following hot on the heels of both the Watergate scandal as well as the American feminist movement. Finally, known to most if not all people today, we have the Guy Ritchie directed 2009 edition, starring none other than the Iron Man himself, Mr. Robert Downey Jr. In it, Holmes [Robert Downey Jr.] sends the evil cultist Lord Blackwood [Mark Strong] to the gallows, only to have him seemingly come back from the grave – all whilst having to deal with the loss of Watson, [Jude Law] who has found the woman of his dreams, and shall soon be moving on. Each movie paints its own picture of the culture of the time through their depictions of Holmes's relationships with the people and socio-political landscape that surround him.

Something that hasn't changed much over the years is the relationships Holmes has had both with Scotland Yard, as well as with the governing class. In *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, Holmes is portrayed as smarter than the police by far – while simultaneously, Professor Moriarty's 'ultimate crime' is to steal the Crown Jewels – meaning that Holmes is needed to protect the Crown!... Jewels, that is. Yet, in *Murder by Decree*, the police and government are linked through the sinister character of Sir Charles Warren, [Anthony Quayle] who bars and blocks Holmes's progress several times throughout the movie, until the conspiracy eventually reaches as high up as not just the Home Secretary, not just the Prime Minister, but the Duke of Wales. In *Sherlock Holmes*, Blackwood's cult has its tendrils spread throughout the government, with, among their ranks, another corrupted Home Secretary. However, even as Lord Coward [Hans Matheson] issues the warrant for Holmes's arrest, the police trust Holmes enough to warn him of the warrant in advance, and, when they do capture him, give him the tools to carry out his plan, - namely, the key to escape his handcuffs. There is one line from Mr. Rathbone's incarnation that stands out in particular which can describe Holmes's general view of the police and government officials throughout all three films: "The nose of the police dog, although long and efficient, points in only one direction at a time". (*The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*). In 1939, the police were chasing up the wrong tree in suspecting Jerrold Hunter [Alan Marshal] – while government, on the other hand, as I will soon explain, seems to have been relegated to a sole, symbolic role: that of the Crown Jewels. In 1979, the antagonistic government officials worry themselves into their single-minded frenzy which causes them to indirectly cause the murders; and in 2009, the metaphorical nose was harnessed to the leash of Blackwood's corrupt followers, who attempted to jerk it in Holmes's direction.

As one might guess, however, there is a reason for all the differences in the Holmes-to-government relations, be they subtle or not so much. In *Murder by Decree*, during a post-Nixon world, where would a good mystery movie be without some government conspiracy? Nowhere – which is why Holmes is set against the British officials in the way that he is. *Sherlock Holmes*, on the

other hand, is a different animal altogether. Conceived in the waning years of the Bush administration – when much of Cheney and co.’s dirty deeds were coming to light – many people were worrying that the American government was characterized by corrupt and partisan biases;<sup>1</sup> in recognition of the modern-day events and political environment, this Holmes merely operates just beyond the boundaries of common law, ejecting the corrupt officials from power instead of ferociously attacking them, as Holmes’s previous incarnation did.

A little more dynamic than his relations with the government and police, is Sherlock’s relationship with the villainous figures of each movie. *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* clearly highlights how much Holmes admires Moriarty’s intellect – once having Holmes idly muse about how much he’d love to get the chance to dissect Moriarty’s brain. *Murder by Decree*, sets Holmes eventually against a subset of government officials, as well as the movie’s fictionalization of ‘Jack the Ripper’. Alfred Hitchcock had proven with his own 1960 and 1972 movies, *Psycho* and *Frenzy*, respectively, that having a serial killer antagonist could have a lot of resonance in that day and age. However, he is not given satisfactory moments of triumph against either foe. The character who committed the crimes that got attributed to Jack the Ripper dies before he can stand trial for his horrible crimes, and even before the audience knows his name(?); also, in the end, the government officials get off the hook merely because Holmes stays true to his word. *Sherlock Holmes*, similarly to its predecessor, repeats themes stated in previous paragraphs – a large part of the Holmes-to-villain relationship has to do with veins of corruption running through the government. However – Blackwood wasn’t Holmes’s only problem in the film; in the background, always lurking in the shadows, was... Moriarty. [Jared Harris... sort of.<sup>2</sup>]

One could argue that the Holmes from *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* symbolizes the actions that the filmmakers thought the United States should take in terms of WWII going forward; after all, once Moriarty is freed at the beginning, Holmes lets him make the first move. From that point on, Moriarty makes for a fairly good symbolic representation of Nazi Germany. After all, his whole plan revolves around engaging Holmes on multiple fronts at once; not to mention that Moriarty’s plot to take one of Britain’s most symbolic physical possessions could easily represent fears of Germany eventually trying to take over Britain. In *Murder by Decree*, the physical confrontation with the pseudo-Jack-the-Ripper, and Holmes’s verbal confrontation with the government officials were both very apt metaphors for the events surrounding Nixon’s exit from power; after all, none of those villains faced trial for the crimes that they committed. In *Sherlock Holmes*, though, while Blackwood himself doesn’t exactly seem to have quite as potent a parallel, it is, in fact, Moriarty who seems to represent a underlying public fear of the time; his ‘dark malevolence lurking in the shadows just out of sight,’ seems oddly reminiscent of America’s fears regarding Osama bin Laden prior to his death.

One relationship of Holmes’s that has changed radically over the years is his treatment of women – along with their entire portrayal, as a gender, throughout all three movies. *The Adventures*

<sup>1</sup>Ironically, not that long after the film’s release, the idea of a radical group of zealously religious political representatives rearing their heads all at once to exert their influence wouldn’t be an enormous leap of the imagination anymore. Tea Party, anyone?

<sup>2</sup>Before the release of the 2011 sequel, *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows*, the voice of Moriarty in the 2009 predecessor went uncredited. After the sequel’s release, all copies of the film from then on have the character’s lines dubbed by Jared Harris, who plays Moriarty in the sequel; yet to this day, it has never been revealed who actually played Moriarty the first time.

of *Sherlock Holmes*, for example, had Holmes caring for Ann Brandon, [Ida Lupino] who, in the face of danger, did the following: fainted twice, screamed at least three times, and twice or more, told Holmes she was willing to do, and I quote: “Anything you say.” (*The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*.) Not exactly a woman who is filled to the brim with agency. In *Murder by Decree*, women are victimized, but usually to forces that, on a case-by-case basis, do seem plausibly out of their individual leagues. However, it is the mistreatment of Mary Kelly [Susan Clark] that galvanizes Holmes to take his accusations as far as he does; and it is certainly quite interesting to note how the intensity of the horror caused by “Jack the Ripper’s” beastly murders would match up, compared to the grotesque serial killings and domestic violence that was coming to light both in the time that the movie was set, and at the time during which the movie was made. *Sherlock Holmes*, though, goes above and beyond in terms of strong female characters. Irene, while she did require one moment of aid along the way, she still outsmarted Sherlock near beginning and end, most obviously in how she drugs him and leaves him handcuffed to a hotel bed, covered by naught but a pillow. Then again, near the climax, she draws Holmes away from the radio device so that Moriarty could get his hands on it. Truth be told, Irene Adler [Rachel McAdams] isn’t the only woman who outsmarts Holmes in the movie. Mary Morstan, [Kelly Reilly] Watson’s bride-to-be, pulls several power plays on Holmes – asserting that Watson is her man, and that nothing Holmes can do is about to change that. Some out there might say that because Mary and Irene were not original characters made by the movie’s writers, they therefore do not elevate the film’s level of feminism. I believe this to be an error in judgment – for the movie’s creative team was not bound towards those characters or their portrayals. They didn’t have to portray Mary or Irene the way that they did, nor did they have to portray them at all. Mary’s portrayal is a distinct modernization – meaning that at some point, someone, somewhere along the chain of command made a conscious decision for her to appear that way. (The 2011 sequel ups the ante even more, where it is Mary that works with Scotland Yard to bring down Moriarty’s empire while the boys are off trying to catch the man himself.) The reasons for the differences between these works are pretty simple, seeing as how, on the whole, they merely correspond to the trending enfranchisement of women today.

The one thing that has changed the most radically over the years is the portrayal of Holmes’s ‘bedside manner,’ and most specifically, his relationship with Watson. Holmes, over the years, has evolved from a usually-kind, eccentric-yet-insightful professorial figure, to a slightly-odd but intensely-caring gentleman, to a compulsive and egocentric savant. Watson, over the years, has evolved from being a good-natured, bumbling idiot – who, oftentimes, has more pudge than personality – to being a only-slightly-bumbling sidekick, with a bit more backbone than before, to, at last, being Holmes’s equal. Their relationship, over the years, has evolved as well; in 1939, Watson [Nigel Bruce] most often just stood in for the audience so that Holmes would be made to explain his plans to ‘us’ – in ‘79, we can easily tell that Holmes cares deeply for Watson, [James Mason] and vice versa, but Watson hasn’t quite come to terms with some of Holmes’s quirks, especially his social ineptitude. In the Downey Jr. & Law edition, however, the duo is brought into the era of the ‘buddy cop’ movie which has become such a successful trope.

...And so it is that we have ourselves an analysis of the perennial big-screen representations of the famed detective, Sherlock Holmes. Between his relations with the government and police, the relationships he shares with each movie’s villain[s], his treatment of women, and his relationship with Dr. John Watson, there’s almost never a single element that stays quite the same; and this isn’t even getting into the TV representations, like the BBC *Sherlock*, or CBS’s new *Elementary*. But, in answer to the question being asked – how and why are each iteration of the hero so different?

It’s elementary, my dear readers.

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