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Queer-baiting on the BBC’s Sherlock

Addressing the Invalidation of Queer Identities through Online Fan Fiction Communities

by Cassidy Sheehan

What is Queer-baiting?

Queer-baiting, a sometimes unintentional tactic used to spice up a plotline or attract viewers from a certain demographic, occurs when media producers create a homoerotic subtext between two characters within a narrative with no intention of actualizing that subtext. However, even if writers have good intentions, queer-baiting is harmful to members of the queer community.

Queer-baiting on Sherlock

The show—created and written by Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat and starring Benedict Cumberbatch as Sherlock Holmes and Martin Freeman as John Watson—is a modern-day reimagination of the classic Sherlock Holmes detective stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Contradictory statements from actors and showrunners as well as examples from the show itself are evidence of queer-baiting.

• Steven Moffat: states “I don’t think there is anything that suggests Sherlock is gay” and “agree[s] that he always wanted to play on the confusion of Holmes and Watson’s relationship and never intended to confirm either character’s sexuality.”

• Mark Gatiss: says the writers have “had lots of fun with the notion that, in the 21st century, people naturally assume they’re [Sherlock and John] a couple.”

• Martin Freeman: calls Sherlock “the gayest story in the history of television.”

• Benedict Cumberbatch: blames jokes in the script which “fuel the fantasy of the few into flames for the many.”

• Cumberbatch and Freeman: “feed the hype surrounding their characters’ bromance by teasing there was a scene filmed in a gay club from Watson’s stag party that was cut from series three.”

Characterizing the relationship between John and Sherlock as mostly platonic-ignors narrative cues.

The concept of a “bromance” also denies queer possibility by insisting that two men who are emotionally intimate remain heterosexual, without considering homonormativity or homosexuality as options.

Queer Identity Development

A Psychological Process

In order to undergo “healthy human development,” queer individuals find sources to mirror and validate their identities. When lacking other sources, media such as television may be used. According to Henry Jenkins, “fans construct their cultural and social identities through borrowing and inflecting mass culture images.”

The Dangers of Invalidation

Television shows such as Sherlock embody heteronorms which are internalized by audiences. These norms are impossible for queer viewers to rectify with their lived experiences and so invalidate these fans’ identities. This conflict may result in inhibition, self-doubt, depression, rage, despair, and low self-esteem.

Addressing Invalidation Online

Fans are able to explore and develop their identities similarly in both online fan fiction communities and online queer communities. The settings’ structure allows safe spaces for queer individuals to flourish.

Reifying through Fan Fiction

In the safe spaces provided by online communities, queer Sherlock fans can validate their identities, subvert heteronormes, and engage in queer activism.

From “13, 19, 30?” by InnocuousPiecrow: Sherlock gospel quickly feeling his breath speed up a bit, suddenly it hit passionately. It’s not gay? No, he couldn’t be. He didn’t really want to know anything. This was—this guy:—what? Not gay. Anyway. Definitely not gay.

He had his head in his hands, warm tears prickling his eyes. What was he going to do? He was already banned at school, an outsider that no one talked to, except to make fun of. If anyone found out, it would just be one more bullet in his huge arsenal of ways to torment the freak.


From “I Thought Wrong” by hellfabgirl: John had figured in his hungover haze the next morning that it hadn’t been nothing but a drunken mistake and tried to forget the tingling feeling at the tip of his stomach whenever he memory drifted subtly into his thoughts...He wasn’t gay. He knew this, he was certain of it, but then again... he’d really only dated women.

From “Homophobia” by achievableformyfuture: “For this chapter to go... all of you who messaged me to tell me your stories. I was and still am speechless at your honesty and your incredible bravery in the face of things that are entirely more real than anything that happens in this verse [fictional universe], and infinitely more terrifying. For it to...”

Conclusion

Although not much can be done about the perpetuation of harmful norms on Sherlock, fandom plays a role in creating safe spaces online where queer individuals can explore their identities through slash fan fiction and find support and validation in fellow fan fiction readers and writers. It’s crucial that these communities continue to grow and flourish so that all individuals may experience the positive development and validation that come with participating in online fandom.

Works Cited


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