Queer-baiting on the BBC’s Sherlock: Addressing the Invalidation of Queer Experience through Online Fan Fiction Communities

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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 sexualizing 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 reimagining of the classic Sherlock Homes 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.”

Queer Identity Development

A Psychological Process

In order to undergo “healthy human development,” queer individuals find sources to mirror and validate their identities.11 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.”12

The Dangers of Invalidation

Television shows such as Sherlock embody heteronorms which are internalized by audiences.13 These norms are improper 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.14

Addressing Invalidation Online

Fans are able to explore and develop their identities similarly in both online fan fiction communities and online queer communities.15 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 heteronormative values, and engage in queer activism.

From “13, 19, 38” by InnocuousPitcrew—Sherlock gospel quickly, feeling his breath speed up a bit, suddenly a bit panicly. It’s not gay. He couldn’t be. He didn’t really want to steal his heart with this. This fit him—what? Not gay, anyway. Definitely not gay. He had his head in his hands, warm tears pricking his eyes. What was he going to do? He was already hared at school, an outcast that no one talked to, except make fun of. If anyone found out, it would just be one more bullet in his huge arsenal of ways to torture the freak.

- Venue pulled away, his hands coming up to roughly shove Sherlock’s shoulders into the back of the sofa, and he was standing, moving to the other side of the room, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. …and you thought I was queer too? Why did you think you knew that? With all of your stupid fucking deductions, you couldn’t have figured out that I think fucking hormones are fucking disgusting.

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

3. "Homophobia" by achievableformylife
4. From “I Thought Wrong” by hellfab
5. John had figured in his hangover haze; he now realized that it had nothing but a drunken mistake and tried to forget the tingling feeling at the pit 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.

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