

# The Significance Of Narrative To Interpret 'Sherlock Holmes' Characterin Museums

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## ABSTRAK

*Penelitian ini berfokus pada pembahasan karakter "Sherlock Holmes" yang telah menjadi ikon detektif yang terkenal di dunia, dimana karakter tersebut kemudian menjadi tema utama yang diinterpretasikan oleh museum. Metode yang digunakan oleh museum untuk "bercerita" tentang karakter tersebut sangat signifikan untuk menentukan tujuan dan latar belakang dari museum terkait sebagai penyelenggara pameran. Narasi memegang peranan yang sangat penting untuk "memandu" pemahaman audiens terhadap sebuah karakter, atau malah terkadang dapat "membingungkan" audiens pada saat membedakan apakah tokoh tersebut fiksi atau non-fiksi. Dengan membandingkan narasi pada display permanen pada Sherlock Holmes Museum dan display pameran sementara di Museum of London dengan tema Sherlock Holmes, maka dapat dilihat signifikansi dari relasi antara narasi dan interpretasi sebuah karakter yang juga menentukan pesan dari museum tersebut.*

*Kata kunci: narasi, interpretasi, Sherlock Holmes, museum, pameran*

## ABSTRACT

This research focuses on the study of Sherlock Holmes character that has been a famous detective icon in the world, where this character then become the main theme interpreted by the museum. The method employed by the museum to "narrate" that particular character is very significant to determine the objective and background for the museum as the exhibition organizer. Narration holds a crucial role to "guide" the understanding of the audiences to a character, or sometimes can make "confusion" to the audience when differentiate whether the character is fiction or non-fiction. By comparing the narration on the permanent displays of Museum of Sherlock Holmes to temporary exhibition display in Museum of London with Sherlock Holmes theme, it can be seen the significance of the relation between narration and interpretation of a character that also determine the message of that museum.

Keywords: Narration, interpretation, Sherlock Holmes, museum, exhibition

## INTRODUCTION

As a big fan of detective stories, I grew up believing that Sherlock Holmes was the most famous detective, a real person who lived in London around the time when Jack the Ripper case happened. I remembered thinking why Sherlock did not catch Jack using his great deduction before I found out that Sherlock was a merely fictional character. Even though I was disappointed with the fact that he was fictitious, but he is always my favourite detective. Then, when I visited London, I felt it was my obligation to visit Sherlock Holmes Museum, to 'his house' at 221b Baker Street. Fortunately, Museum of London also opened a temporary exhibition on a subject of Sherlock Holmes that year. These circumstances gave me a chance to experience Sherlock in two different ways, both recreational and educational approaches.

Therefore, I write an essay about Sherlock Holmes Exhibitions' displays and narratives based on my observation and research. Firstly, I investigate relating the background of Sherlock Holmes as the iconic character of detective and his context with London. Then, I focus on Sherlock Holmes Museum in comparison with the temporary exhibition of Sherlock Holmes at Museum of London. I also focus on museums' target audience, displays and collections. After-wards, I will discuss the main issues regarding the narrative, title, and interpretation; and how these relate with museum's objectives. Finally, I conclude all of information based on individual interpretation from visitors.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This article was written using field research, observation and on site visit. Writer was also used supporting data and documents based on direct study in the

museum, such as books, reports, and other related sources. Furthermore, writer developed all sources with additional information based on hypothesis, perspective, and also further knowledge from site visit in Sherlock Holmes Museum. Then, the writer constructed those all ideas into one written idea for this article.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### BACKGROUND

#### The Iconic Character: Sherlock Holmes

As one of the world's most famous detectives, Sherlock Holmes is believed by many people in the world as a real person instead of fictional character. This is likely understandable since Sherlock Holmes is a fictional character that was created as inspired by a real person. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the author of this famous fictional detective was a young student when he met Dr. Joseph Bell – one of the teachers at the medical school of Edinburgh University – who gave a remarkable impression.



Fig 1.  
*Arthur Conan Doyle* (n.d.)



Fig 2.  
Dr. Joseph Bell (n.d.)

In his autobiography, Conan Doyle described him as a “thin wiry, dark” man, “with a high-nosed acute face, penetrating gray eyes, angular shoulders.” Next Conan Doyle began to set out his idea for a new sort of detective with Dr. Bell in his mind. He studied Bell’s remarkable ability to assess patients’ background and condition just from close observations. Then tried to immitate Bell’s methods into crime solving cases as accurate as he could in his writing.

Ever since 1887, Conan Dyle’s detective writing started on, when Sherlock Holmes was first introduced to the world, in an adventure story entitled ‘A Study in Scarlet’, which appeared in *Beeton’s Christmas Annual*, before the *Strand Magazine* gave the opportunity to him to write more on Sherlock Holmes stories. However, in spite of everyone’s entreaties, this amazingly prolific but very impulsive author decided to eliminate of Sherlock Holmes in *The Final Problem*, published in December 1893. But

then at the end Conan Doyle finally decided to resurrect Sherlock Holmes to please thousands of frustrated fans and made them very delighted when the *Strand Magazine* started to serialize ‘The Return of Sherlock Holmes’ in 1903.

### Sherlock Holmes and Context of London

London was a city in a transition when Sherlock Holmes stories were first published, that is why it is considered as an important element of contextual itself. Sherlock Holmes’s London is both real and imaginary, his world radiates out from 221B Baker Street, a fictional address of a real name of a street. Just at the time when Arthur Conan Doyle was writing his first Sherlock Holmes stories, the horrific Jack the Ripper murders were taking place in Whitechapel, a district of East London - and simultaneously on the stage every evening in the West End, Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* was shocking London audiences. These circum-stances provided dramatic possibilities for Conan Doyle to introduce Sherlock Holmes as the world’s only consulting detective that could be discussed alongside the backdrop of Victorian and Edwardian London. Sherlock Holmes could be considered as an iconic London and his ‘existence’ either it is real or fictional will not be an issue for his fans because he is already become a ‘symbol’ of London itself.

### Sherlock Holmes Exhibition

#### Sherlock Holmes Museum vs. Museum of London

‘When you are looking at an artefact you are looking at a person’s thoughts,’ this statement is really suitable with the objects that are shown in the Sherlock Holmes Museum’s permanent display. Located in the actual street address in 239 Baker Street,



Fig 3.  
*Sherlock Holmes and Dr. John Watson as depicted by Sidney Paget in  
 'The Adventure of Silver Blaze'. The Strand Magazine, December 1892. (2013)*

Sherlock Holmes Museum does a good job of making visitors feel that Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson were real people and that this was their home, which still well-preserved more than a century afterward. Though in contrast, Conan Doyle's daughter, Dame Jean Conan Doyle, was against the museum from the outset. She was very much opposed to the idea of encouraging the belief that her father's famous creation was a real person and knew that the presence of the museum would clearly go contrary to that wish.

Despite the fact that the museum received a considerable amount of controversy both before and after it opened in 1990 for business, Sherlock Holmes Museum enjoys the distinction of being the most successful private museums in the country. Moreover, this fact confirms what Ambrose and Paine stated about museum as 'a key of cultural attractors that have an

important contribution to make the development of tourist destinations,' since it is an unavoidable fact that so many people around the world have come to London and visited this museum as space for leisure and recreational activities.

From my personal experience, visiting Sherlock Holmes Museum was more likely as a 'theme park' than a 'museum'. We could find this museum full of curious visitors seated in Holmes chair posing for photograph and generally wearing a deerstalker hat, pretending that they have come coming for a consultation with the 'great detective'. This place could be said as a curated space for commercial needs, I could assume that Sherlock Holmes Museum's purpose is clearly for entertainment.

Besides the permanent display in Sherlock Holmes Museum, to commemorate Sherlock Holmes as an iconic character,

Museum of London arranged a temporary exhibition with a theme at 'Sherlock Holmes: The Man Who Never Lived and Will Never Die'. This exhibition runs for about 6 months, from 17 October 2014 – 12 April 2015.

As a public museum managed controlled by the City of London Corporation and the Greater London Authority, Museum of London has responsibility to develop exhibition that could meet public expectation while in-line

with its mission statement *"to inspire a passion for London and a passion for learning"*. Based on this information, it is clear that Museum of London tries to deliver knowledge about Sherlock Holmes by exploring depictions of Victorian London and its connection with the fictional character.

#### Target Audience

"People are the only reason for museum to exist." No matter how great the



Fig 4.  
*Sherlock Holmes Museum (2014)*

museum is, either it is a permanent or temporary display, the most significant aspect to measure the successfulness of exhibition is the audience. This aspect is realised by both Sherlock Holmes Museum and Museum of London. Accordingly, both museums try to classify their audience based on different research methods.

Sherlock Holmes Museum tries to classify its audience by letting themselves to decide which type of visitors they belong

to. As the museum has stated in the brochure/ticket, there are three categories of visitors that were measured based on their knowledge about Sherlock Holmes: visitors who are visiting out of curiosity, visitors who are the admirer of Sherlock, and visitors who are already an expert or a 'Sherlockiana'.

In contrast, Museum of London has a different approach to classify its audience. Using the research method based on audience's motivation and segmentation,

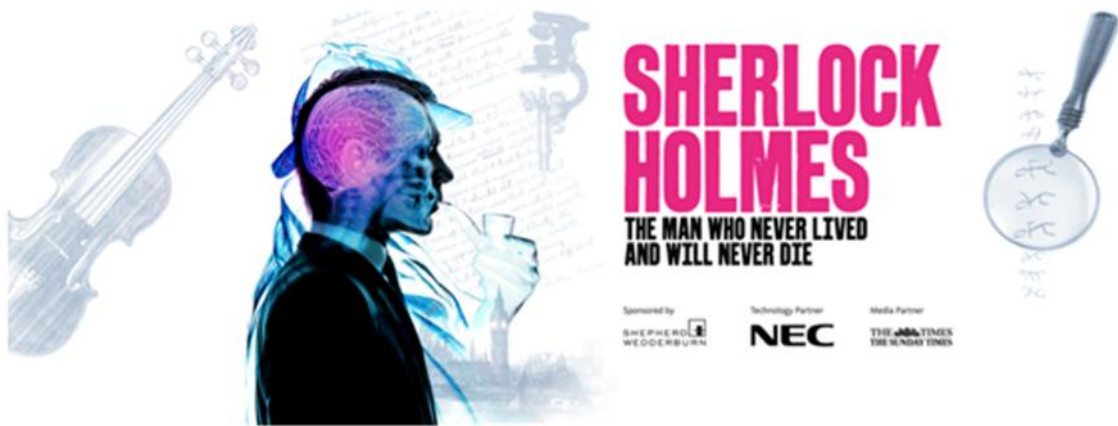


Fig 5.  
*Sherlock Holmes Exhibition Banner – Museum of London (2014)*



Fig 6.  
*Sherlock Holmes Exhibition Entrance – Museum of London (n.d.)*



Fig 7.  
*Museum of London (2014)*

Museum of London tries to focus on specific audience. According to Frazer Swift, Sherlock Holmes exhibition's main target audience i.e.

- **Leading audience:** Cultural Connoisseurs and London Insiders  
 These two groups are very culturally aware and active; they also love London and the world-class experiences it offers them. Visiting Sherlock Exhibition is essential for them since it is part of London's cultural activities.
- **Core audience:** Intellectual Tourists and Self Developers  
 These groups seek good value for money and do not want to take risks; they also want to be 100% sure everyone is going to have a good time. For this group, Sherlock Exhibition is essential for developing their knowledge about Sherlock Holmes since he is indeed the iconic character of London.

### Display and Collection

Cathy Ross stated, "Displays are the main way of communicating with the public," although the museum has re-

markable objects and collections, if it can not display those objects using the right approach, then it will not be able to deliver the story. Having decided on the theme of the display, the curator and the display team need to decide what kind of display it is to be.

As for Sherlock Holmes Museum, based on my observation when I was visiting this place, I presumed that the museum applied *discovery displays* as its method of display. There were organising principles in this museum, but collections were displayed in a non-conventional way and also not in a chronological or thematic order and without texts or labels to provide context and information. Instead, we, the visitors were encouraged to explore the displayed objects and made our own connections and discoveries.

Moreover, objects occupy the fictional space; they are directly imperceptible and indefinitely interpretable since the objects work as a package. Although, it will not become issues since visitors are not questioning the 'authenticity' of objects, only the 'experience' is matter. Therefore, the museum tries to engage visitors with collections by acting as 'time capsule' and

give them the experience of Victorian lifestyle.

On the contrary, Museum of London used *didactic displays* as its method for Sherlock Holmes exhibition. Here the display try to tell a story, to teach something.

As I was wandering around to see the exhibition, I realised that the collections were displayed in chronological and thematic order. In this exhibition, objects were provided with comprehensive information in texts or labels, the museum also tried to relate London with Sherlock's stories, which clearly in-line with the museum's mission. Besides using its permanent collections and loans from other partners, Museum of London was also acquiring new collections, both field collecting and commissioning artists. Most of the collections were about Sherlock Holmes and his connection with London.

In this exhibition, object can be seen as individual artefact that helps visitors to construct story. It does not have to be seen as a package or a set with other collections in displays. From my perspective, this exhibition's purposes are undoubtedly intellectual and philosophical. Museum of London aims to be the source of information that could give knowledge and understanding about the connection between Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holmes, and London.

## Narrative, Title And Interpretation

### Museum Narratives

"A museum narrative provides an explanation of the relationship between a set of objects according to the underlying stories (events) and plots (relations between events) that link them." In this definition, museums act as a channel between objects and stories. Shanks and Tilly stated that "*artifacts are essentially used to authenticate the social description written around them. 'Write' because the museum is in many ways a book around which the visitor may wander. This makes the ultimate message of the past as a descriptive information encoded in objects more palatable.*" Visiting museum or exhibition is like looking at a book, objects are the words that tell story. Then 'write' it together, we have a beautiful 'chapter' of displays to 'read'.

Regarding the narrative, both Sherlock Holmes Museum and Museum of London have different approaches regarding the displays and how they tells stories. As a space for leisure and recreational activities, Sherlock Holmes Museum does not need to provide texts or captions. Visitors simply come for fun and do not want to spend their time to read long texts or labels. The museum wants visitors to believe that they come to the 'real' residence of Sherlock Holmes and look closer to his private life. Therefore, texts and labels will not be



Fig 8.  
*Sherlock Holmes Museum's Displays and Collections (2014)*





Fig 9.  
*Museum of London: Sherlock Holmes Exhibition Displays and Collections (n.d)*

needed since they could be a distraction for the displays.

On the other hand, the Sherlock Holmes Exhibition in the Museum of London tries to provide comprehensive texts and labels for educational purposes. Texts and labels were written carefully by specialists and experts, which also included 'voice of the curator'. It is exactly like Julia Hoffbrand, the curator of social and working history in the Museum of London, who stated, "Our work is about telling people the stories of London." Therefore, in this exhibition, the Museum of London does not tell a story about Sherlock Holmes; instead, it tells stories about Sherlock Holmes in the context of London.

### Title and Interpretation

'Interpretation' usually means translating from one language to another. In the museum and heritage world, though, it has a special meaning: explaining an object and its significance. There are so many interpretations in the museum, from texts, labels, and also one of the most important aspects: title or headline. As for exhibition in the museum, title is the key to guide the narratives. Even though, sometimes a title can misguide and lead the audience to have a different interpretation, which is far from reality.

Stated as a title in the Sherlock Holmes Museum's brochure: "*I have it here in my museum*" said Sherlock Holmes in the Adventure



Fig 10.  
*Sherlock Holmes Museum's Displays and Collections (2014)*

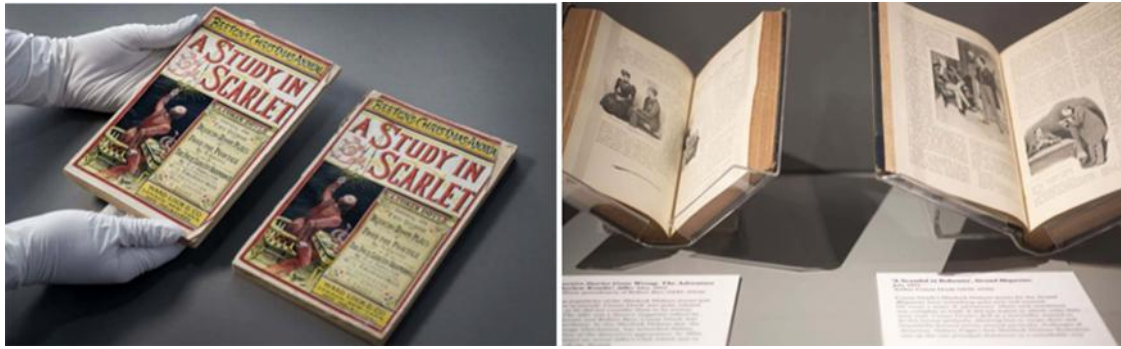


Fig 11.  
Museum of London: *Sherlock Holmes Exhibition Displays and Collections* (n.d)

of the *Blue Carbuncle*. This statement leads the visitors to assume that Sherlock Holmes was a detective, a real person. Additionally, the first paragraph, “*The opening of the Sherlock Holmes Museum to the public on 27 March was an event which should have happened several decades ago. 221b Baker Street is, after all, the world’s most famous address because of its long association with the great detective*” emphasised more of that assumption. Although the museum also provides different form of interpretation, for example, some labels in second floor contain texts or quotes from Sherlock’s stories, it does not give any clue that Sherlock is just a fictional character.

Quite the reverse, Museum of London exhibition’s title: “*Sherlock Holmes: The Man Who Never Lived and Will Never Die*”, clearly stated that Sherlock is a fictional character, not a real person. Visitors who come to this exhibition have already known that Sherlock is not real and all the exhibition objects are connected with the process of his ‘existence’ as iconic London. This exhibition was produced to increase public awareness, appreciation and understanding of London. Museum of London wanted to engage visitors with exciting programmes and exhibitions, and also produced a leisure activity without giving up their educational mandate. Moreover, texts and labels in the exhibition were created based on ‘history’

of London that ‘inspired’ the author to write about Sherlock, so that they could encourage visitors to explore London through Sherlock’s imaginative cases. The title and interpretation gave clear boundaries between fact and reality.

## CONCLUSION

There are many ways of telling stories; museums have responsibility as the source of information to engage with audience, produce displays and exhibitions that could meet public’s expectation, either for recreational or educational purposes. Museum as a space is a significant fundamental of deciding the ‘theme’ of displays and how to use the objects, so that it can relate with the narratives. Objects are used as the ‘media’ to construct stories. As for the titles, texts, and labels, they are significant to guide visitors and lead them to make individual interpretation. They can guide the museum narratives and lead visitors to simply ‘believe’ or encourage them to be more ‘inquisitive’.

In conclusion, I agree with what Ambrose and Paine had stated, “every individual is distinct and a good interpreter; they will come with their own interests, assumptions, beliefs, knowledge and curiosity.” Museum or exhibition can have many different ways to provide

information, but in the end, visitors will be the one who decide which approach will be the best for them, either for entertainment or intellectual reasons.

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Figure 1. *Arthur Conan Doyle* (n.d.) [online photograph]. Available at: <http://www.sirarthurconandoyle.com/Biography/index.htm> [accessed: 17 Dec 2014]

Figure 2. *Dr. Joseph Bell* (n.d.) [online photograph]. Available at: <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/collection/artists-a-z/u/artist/unknown/object/dr-joseph-bell-1837-1911-surgeon-pgp-r-1028-57> [accessed: 17 Dec 2014]

Figure 3. *Sherlock Holmes and Dr. John Watson as depicted by Sidney Paget in 'The Adventure of Silver Blaze'*. *The Strand Magazine*, December 1892. (2013), [online photograph]. Available at: <http://bernews.com/2013/03/sherlock-holmes-adventure-of-the-bermuda-nc/> [accessed: 17 Dec 2014]

Figure 4. Wijaya, H. (2014) *Sherlock Holmes Museum* [photograph] In possession of: The author: London.

Figure 5. *Sherlock Holmes Exhibition Banner – Museum of London* (2014) [online photograph]. Available at: <http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/london-wall/> [accessed: 1 Nov 2014]

Figure 6. *Sherlock Holmes Exhibition Entrance – Museum of London* (2014) [online photograph]. Available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/europe/uk/11162961/Sherlock-Holmes-in-London-The-man-who-never-lived-and-will-never-die.html> [accessed: 1 Nov 2014]

Figure 7. Wijaya, H. (2014) *Museum of London* [photograph] In possession of: The author: London.

Figure 8. Wijaya, H. (2014) *Sherlock Holmes Museum's Displays and Collections* [photograph] In possession of: The author: London.

Figure 9. *Museum of London: Sherlock Holmes Exhibition Displays and Collections* (2014) [online photograph]. Available at: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/10/16/uk-life-britain-sherlockholmes-idUKKCN0I522820141016> [accessed: 1 Nov 2014]

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