poetika
Jurnal Ilmu Sastra
https://jurnal.ugm.ac.id/poetika

Vol. 13, No. 2, October 2025
page 94—104
https://doi.org/10.22146/poetika.v13i2.111179

Reinterpreting Narcissism: Sherlock Holmes in Doyle's "The Final Problem" and BBC's "The Reichenbach Fall"

Dhea Humaira[1]*, Kartika Dina Ashfira[2]
[1] Department of Language and Literature, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia
Jl. Nusantara 1, Bulaksumur, Depok, Sleman, Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta 55281

[2] School of Humanities and Languages, UNSW Sydney
High St Kensington NSW 2052 Australia

Corresponding Author: dhea.humaira@mail.ugm.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Sherlock Holmes, a famous figure in popular culture, has been continually reinterpreted across different mediums and eras. This study analyzes narcissism in Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Final Problem" (1893) and its modern adaptation, the BBC series *Sherlock*, particularly the episode "The Reichenbach Fall" (2012). Using Sigmund Freud's theory of narcissism, the study examines three core traits of Sherlock's character: megalomania, lack of empathy, and the need for admiration. Freud's concepts of primary and secondary narcissism serve as the theoretical framework. The study uses a qualitative approach using an intertextual method to compare the narrative structures, character portrayals, and thematic elements of the two works. The findings reveal that Doyle's portrayal of Sherlock aligns with Victorian ideals of heroism and intellectual superiority, framing narcissism as a functional trait that aids in his pursuit of justice. In contrast, "The Reichenbach Fall" explores Sherlock's vulnerabilities, focusing on the emotional consequences of his actions and the collapse of his carefully constructed public image. These differences highlight the evolution of Sherlock's narcissism from a utilitarian trait in Doyle's work to a multidimensional characteristic reflecting contemporary anxieties about reputation and identity. The study concludes that the BBC adaptation enriches Doyle's original portrayal by humanizing Sherlock. This study contributes to both literary and psychoanalytic studies by bridging classic and contemporary perspectives on how narcissism shapes Sherlock Holmes as a literary and cultural icon.

Keywords: *Freud; narcissism; Sherlock Holmes; "The Final Problem" (1893); "The Reichenbach Fall" (2012)*

INTRODUCTION

Is a genius born of empathy, or does he grow out of indifference cloaked in narcissism? This question frames the long trajectory of Sherlock Holmes, the most iconic detective in popular literary history, who has undergone more than a century of cultural interpretations and adaptations since his first appearance in "A Study in Scarlet" (1887). Due to his extraordinary intelligence, eccentric behavior, and methods of solving crimes, Sherlock continues to be adapted and reinterpreted across various media. One of the most significant turning points in Sherlock Holmes's story appears in the short story "The Final Problem" (1893) and its modern adaptation in the BBC TV series "The Reichenbach Fall" (2012).

In "The Final Problem", the highly intelligent Sherlock is introduced to Moriarty, a nemesis designed to match Sherlock's intelligence. The climax of the story is a dramatic confrontation between Sherlock and Moriarty at the Reichenbach Fall. This encounter confirms Sherlock's belief that his genius is validated by his ability to defeat Moriarty. Meanwhile, in the modern adaptation "The Reichenbach Fall", Sherlock is portrayed as a character who constantly struggles with his narcissism.

Detective fiction, as described by Todorov (1977), revolves around two interconnected narratives: the crime and the investigation (Todorov, 1977). Sherlock Holmes epitomizes this by serving as both the solver of mysteries and the source of the problem itself. However, modern detective fiction adaptations often go beyond this narrative to delve into the psychological and emotional complexities of the characters (McCaw, 2012). BBC's *Sherlock* (2010-2017), created by Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss, is an example of this shift. This TV series retells Doyle's stories in a contemporary setting that not only explores the mysteries Sherlock solves but also his relationships, vulnerabilities, and internal struggles against and in the face of narcissism. The episode "The Reichenbach Fall" adapts the events of "The Final Problem", retaining its core conflict while expanding the psychological depth of Sherlock. Unlike Doyle's portrayal, which focuses on Sherlock's intellect, this adaptation focuses on his emotional vulnerability, particularly the impact of his damaged reputation resulting from Moriarty's evil plan.

Adaptation, as defined by Hutcheon (2006), is an extended and deliberate reexamination of a particular work that transforms the original to suit a new medium, audience, or cultural context (Hutcheon, 2012). "The Reichenbach Fall" illustrates this process by reinterpreting Doyle's story to address modern concerns about identity and public perception. Thus, this adaptation shifts the focus from Sherlock's external struggles to his internal conflicts, particularly his struggle against narcissistic traits. Traits such as megalomania, lack of empathy, and the need for admiration are central to Freud's theory of narcissism (Bačík & Hardy, 2013).

In a world increasingly obsessed with self-image and social recognition, Sherlock's representation in various media is no longer solely about his unique intelligence, cold demeanor, and impressive deductions, but also about his intriguing psychological complexity, namely the narcissism in Sherlock's personality that introduces vulnerability, failure, and a subconscious urge to be admired (Larsen, 2023). The BBC adaptation portrays Sherlock not only as a genius detective, but also as someone who is constantly grappling with his public identity, confronting society's expectations, and drowning in a more complex narcissism than in the original text.

In "The Final Problem", Sherlock is portrayed as an almost invincible figure, with sharp deductions and high self-confidence. However, in its modern adaptation, "The Reichenbach Fall", Sherlock's character shows a more vulnerable side, with deeper emotional pressure and an identity crisis. This change reflects a shift in society's understanding of narcissism and its impact on individuals.

Narcissism, in psychology, refers to excessive self-love and a need for recognition from others. Sigmund Freud (1914), in his essay *On Narcissism: An Introduction*, defined narcissism as a psychological state in which a person's libido (psychic energy) is directed inward, rather than outward toward an object or external relationship. Narcissism, in this sense, is seen as a fundamental aspect of personality and a lens through which to analyze behavioral patterns. Freud also described two types of narcissism: primary narcissism and secondary narcissism.

First, Freud identifies primary narcissism as a natural and universal phase in human development. At this stage, a person's self-love is instinctive, with libido focused entirely on oneself. This form of narcissism is essential for survival because it centers on self-defense and self-interest. In literary characters such as Sherlock Holmes, primary narcissism is often expressed through a belief in one's unique abilities and superiority. Sherlock's intellectual prowess and his perception of himself as the sole protector of society against Moriarty reflect this primary narcissism (Benvenuto, 1914).

Second, Freud describes secondary narcissism as a reorientation of libido back to oneself after external objects or relationships fail to satisfy emotional needs. This regression is often associated with defense mechanisms such as arrogance, emotional detachment, and a high need for external validation. While primary narcissism is functional and consistent with development, secondary narcissism emerges in response to trauma, external threats, or identity crises.

Freud's theory identifies three main traits associated with narcissism. First, megalomania is a sense of self-confidence and belief in one's extraordinary abilities. In Sherlock Holmes, this can be seen in his unshakeable self-confidence and intellectual dominance, especially in his confrontation with Moriarty. Second, lack of empathy refers to narcissistic person who often has difficulty connecting emotionally with others and is more focused on their own needs and perspectives. Sherlock's interactions with Watson, both in Doyle's story and the BBC adaptation, reflect this trait. Third, need for admiration is a narcissist who seeks external validation to maintain their self-esteem. Although this is not particularly explicit in Doyle's story, the BBC adaptation highlights Sherlock's dependence on societal validation and his vulnerability when this validation is threatened.

Freud's concepts help us situate the evolution of Sherlock's character within a historical and cultural context. In "The Final Problem", Sherlock's narcissism is portrayed as functional. This is in line with the concepts of individualism and heroism in the Victorian era. His intellect and self-confidence enable him to face Moriarty, whom he describes as "the Napoleon of crime" ("The Final Problem", 1893). This confrontation is not just a battle of wits, but also a validation of Sherlock's self-esteem. However, Doyle's portrayal is largely one-dimensional, focusing on Sherlock's external actions rather than his internal conflicts.

In the episode "The Reichenbach Fall", the emotional consequences of Sherlock's narcissism are foregrounded, portraying Sherlock as a man deeply affected by public perception, as evidenced by Moriarty's plan to destroy his reputation. In one scene, Sherlock admits to Watson, "I am a fake. The newspapers were right all along" ("The Reichenbach Fall", BBC, 2012), revealing a vulnerability that contrasts sharply with Doyle's portrayal. This modern adaptation develops Sherlock's character by highlighting the psychological impact of his narcissistic nature, particularly his need to be admired and his struggle to maintain his identity in the face of public scrutiny.

Although several writings have examined gender, friendship, psychological dimensions, and public perception in Sherlock Holmes, few have examined his narcissistic traits using Freud's theory. Marchinal (2017) examines how gender dynamics are rearranged in the BBC's 21st-century adaptation of *Sherlock*. He compares Doyle's original depiction, in which gender and sexuality are downplayed, with the ironic and explicit treatment of these themes in the adaptation (Marchinal, 2017).

McLaughlin (2022) analyzes the BBC series *Sherlock* (2010) as a contemporary adaptation of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories (McLaughlin, 2022). This study focuses on the representation of the friendship between Sherlock Holmes and John Watson, which explores themes of masculine identity. It compares the cultural anxieties of the late Victorian era with those of the contemporary era, highlighting how the series integrates criticism of the original text while emphasizing the characters' dependence on their friendship to fight crime. This study also examines how this relationship humanizes Sherlock. This scholarship does not specifically discuss Sherlock's narcissism through Freudian theory or compare his portrayal in Doyle's original texts and the BBC adaptation.

Therefore, the significance of this research lies in its novel approach to bridging this gap. By applying a psychoanalytic lens to these two iconic works, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Sherlock Holmes as a cultural figure. It not only illuminates the evolution of his character but also demonstrates how literary adaptations serve as a mirror, reflecting changing societal values and anxieties from the Victorian era to the 21st century. This study offers a fresh perspective for literary and adaptation studies, highlighting the enduring relevance of psychoanalytic theory in interpreting character complexity across media. This study addresses this discrepancy by applying Freud's theory of narcissism to compare Doyle's original portrayal of Sherlock Holmes in "The Final Problem" with its adaptation in "The Reichenbach Fall". It analyses Sherlock's narcissistic traits, as defined by Freud's theory of narcissism, evolve in response to their respective historical and cultural contexts.

This study uses a qualitative approach and an intertextual method, focusing on a comparative analysis between Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Final Problem" and its modern adaptation, the BBC episode "The Reichenbach Fall". The qualitative method is well-suited to literary and psychoanalytic analysis because it emphasizes interpretation, context, and

textual analysis. Using Freud's theory of narcissism as a theoretical framework, this study examines how Sherlock's narcissistic traits, such as megalomania, lack of empathy, and the need for admiration, are portrayed in both works.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The analysis reveals that while narcissistic traits are central to Sherlock Holmes's character in both Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Final Problem" and the BBC's "The Reichenbach Fall", the interpretation and consequences of this narcissism differ significantly between the two works. In Doyle's original story, Sherlock's narcissism is portrayed as a functional and even heroic quality, consistent with Victorian ideals of intellectual superiority and moral responsibility. It is a tool that enables him to pursue justice. Conversely, the modern adaptation reframes these same traits as a source of profound vulnerability, exploring the emotional and psychological fallout in a way that resonates with contemporary anxieties about public image, identity, and social validation. This shift highlights how the character's core personality is reinterpreted to reflect the cultural values of each era.

To understand this evolution more deeply, the following discussion examines Sherlock's narcissism through the three core traits identified by Freud: megalomania, lack of empathy, and the need for admiration. By comparing how these specific characteristics are depicted in both the original text and its modern adaptation, we can trace the transformation of Sherlock's personality from a one-dimensional hero to a complex, humanized figure. The analysis begins with megalomania, a defining feature of his intellectual confidence.

Megalomania

From Freud's perspective, megalomania stems from a regression to the stage of primary narcissism, where the ego no longer distinguishes between internal and external reality. Characters such as Sherlock, although portrayed as heroes, exemplify this condition. He believes in his own uniqueness, his existential mission, and his unique position in human history. Feelings of superiority, the need to be recognized as the savior of society, and the belief that even his opponents consider him equal or even greater, all reinforce the megalomaniacal aspects of his personality (Akhtar & O'Neil, 2011).

Sherlock's perception of himself as a superior intellectual is a recurring theme in "The Final Problem" and "The Reichenbach Fall". In "The Final Problem", Sherlock demonstrates this trait in a way that reinforces the Victorian ideal of greatness based on moral strength. When Sherlock describes Moriarty as "The Napoleon of Crime," it is clear that he sees their confrontation as the pinnacle of his career. This self-constructed narrative is not only an intellectual competition but also a moral war. Sherlock explicitly links his success in defeating Moriarty to his sense of self-worth by saying:

> Watson, in all seriousness, that if I could beat that man, if I could free society of him, I should feel that my own career had reached its summit, and I should be prepared to turn to some more placid line in life.
>
> (Doyle, 1893: 2)

In this line, Sherlock positions himself as the only person capable of saving society from great evil. The idea that he cannot sit idly by while criminals like Moriarty remain free reflects an exaggerated view of his own role in the social structure. According to Freud, narcissism can develop into megalomania when a person places their ego and abilities above objective reality. Sherlock sees himself not only as a detective but as a savior of society. The belief that only he can stop Moriarty shows an assumption of absolute moral and intellectual power over the social order. This is in line with the ideals of Victorian individualism, where intellectual and moral superiority were celebrated (Hutter, 1975; Pittard, 2003). Sherlock's belief that he has extraordinary abilities and that only he can solve major cases reflects an altruistic attitude that motivates him to save society, but on the basis that only he is capable of doing so. In another line from "The Final Problem", Sherlock also shows that he views his battle against Moriarty as a battle between two intellectual giants.

> Never have I risen to such a height, and never have I been so hard pressed by an opponent. He cut deep, and yet I just undercut him.
>
> (Doyle, 1893: 2)

In this case, Sherlock not only positions himself as a brilliant detective, but also as someone involved

in the most monumental intellectual contest in the history of crime. This style of storytelling resembles narcissistic fantasy in Freudian psychoanalysis, where the main character feels as if he is part of something big that cannot be achieved by ordinary people. Arrogance about personal achievements is a form of ego inflation that is characteristic of megalomania (Nobus, 2024). Another line shows Sherlock's megalomania:

> He is the Napoleon of crime, Watson. He is the organizer of half that is evil and of nearly all that is undetected in this great city.
>
> (Doyle, 1893: 2)

In this line, by labelling Moriarty as "the Napoleon of crime," Sherlock not only dramatizes his enemy's stature but also elevates his own role as the only mind capable of challenging such a figure. This is classic megalomania where Sherlock frames the conflict as a monumental duel between two titans, implicitly placing himself on the same world-historical scale as Napoleon. In Freudian terms, Sherlock inflates his ego by situating his detective work within the grand narrative of civilization's battle against evil, reinforcing his belief that his personal actions shape the fate of society.

In "The Reichenbach Fall", the same intellectual rivalry is reframed through modern concerns of identity and public perception. Meanwhile, in "The Final Problem", Sherlock is driven by a sense of justice. The BBC adaptation presents a more extreme side. In one scene, Sherlock arrogantly calls himself "a high-functioning sociopath," a statement that confirms his reluctance to conform to normal social structures. However, over time, this characterization shows cracks in his megalomaniacal facade. When his reputation is destroyed, Sherlock becomes more introspective, showing that the superiority he displays is part of a narcissistic defense against a world he cannot control. The emotional consequences of Sherlock's obsession with maintaining his intellectual dominance are also seen in Moriarty, who directly challenges this self-perception by exposing Sherlock's reputation and questioning his authenticity as a detective. In one scene, Moriarty confronts Sherlock by saying:

> "You're just getting that now? You think you can make me stop the order? You think you can make me do that?"
>
> (Haynes, 2012)

When Moriarty says this, he positions himself not only as Sherlock's counterpart but also as someone who can manipulate the narrative surrounding Sherlock. In this scene, Sherlock's confidence is shaken when he realizes Moriarty's plan to destroy his reputation and that his megalomania is a weakness, not a strength.

This shift reflects contemporary anxieties about identity, where public validation is often linked to one's sense of self-worth. The BBC adaptation reinterprets Sherlock's narcissism as a source of brilliance and vulnerability that resonates with modern audiences facing similar pressures in an increasingly mediated world. It also confirms that in modern adaptations, Sherlock's megalomania is no longer accepted at face value by the narrative but becomes the subject of criticism and deconstruction.

In "The Reichenbach Fall", this same intellectual rivalry is reframed through the modern concerns of identity and public perception. Moriarty's strategy directly targets Sherlock's public image, seeking to dismantle his reputation and question his very authenticity as a detective. The findings reveal a distinctively contemporary anxiety about identity, as Sherlock faces a profound crisis when his public image is shattered. His megalomania, once a source of strength, is revealed to be a fragile narcissistic defense against a world he cannot control. Sherlock's confidence is shaken not just by a clever opponent, but by the collapse of his reputation, revealing that his self-worth is deeply linked to public validation. This narrative reflects the pressures of identity performance in the digital age, where a public persona is constantly curated and subject to scrutiny.

This transformation of Sherlock's megalomania from a functional asset into a psychological liability highlights how adaptations reflect shifting cultural values. However, this intense focus on his own intellectual greatness does not stand alone. It is inherently linked to another core aspect of his narcissism: his inability to emotionally engage with those around him. His hyper-fixation on his own superiority logically leads to a devaluation of the feelings and perspectives of others, which brings us to the analysis of the next narcissistic trait: lack of empathy.

Lack of Empathy

In Doyle's early stories, Sherlock shows almost no

empathy. He viewed emotions as a distraction from logic and efficiency. This is evident in his treatment of Watson, who is often used as an investigative tool rather than a true friend. This view aligns with Freud's statement that secondary narcissism can cause a person to be incapable of loving or developing empathy for others (Freud, 1914). In "The Final Problem", Sherlock's relationship with Watson is described as functional rather than emotionally reciprocal.

> "Then it makes it the easier for me to propose that you should come away with me for a week to the Continent."
>
> (Doyle, 1893: 1)

Here, Sherlock's lack of attention to Watson's own life and commitments underscores his emotional detachment. Watson serves as a tool in Sherlock's larger scheme, reinforcing Sherlock's perception of himself as emotionally isolated and primarily focused on his own needs. This is also evident in a conversation between Sherlock and Moriarty.

> "'Danger is part of my trade,' I remarked. "'That is not danger,' said he. 'It is inevitable destruction. You stand in the way not merely of an individual, but of a mighty organization, the full extent of which you, with all your cleverness, have been unable to realize. You must stand clear, Mr. Holmes, or be trodden under foot.'
>
> (Doyle, 1893: 3)

In this conversation, Sherlock shows no concern or fear of death whatsoever. He even considers "destruction" to be part of his job. This might be read as showing courage, but from a Freudian perspective, it also reflects his inability to feel fear or anxiety like most people, especially regarding his own fate and that of those around him, such as Watson. Not only does he show no empathy for Watson, who is clearly worried about his safety, but he also places the entire emotional burden on his friend. In Watson's narrative, Sherlock's calmness actually causes even greater anxiety. A narcissistic person is often unaware of the emotional impact of their actions or attitudes on others. They are more focused on achievement than on interpersonal consequences. This is further reinforced in another line that clearly shows that Sherlock deliberately let Watson go based on false information, even though he was already convinced that it was a trap set by Moriarty.

> Indeed, if I may make a full confession to you, I was quite convinced that the letter from Meiringen was a hoax, and I allowed you to depart on that errand under the persuasion that some development of this sort would follow.
>
> (Doyle, 1893: 8)

This is a strong example of narcissistic manipulation devoid of empathy. Watson is his loyal friend, but he is considered merely a tool in Sherlock's grand strategy to trap Moriarty. From a Freudian perspective, this reflects an impulsive narcissistic control in which the narcissist disregards the emotional reactions or dangers that may befall others as a result of his plans. Even when Watson feels deceived and perhaps blames himself for abandoning Sherlock, the detective only acknowledges it as a "tactical decision." The lack of empathy here is evident in Sherlock's failure to consider the profound emotional impact on Watson, who not only loses a friend but also feels guilty for indirectly "abandoning" him. Another line reflects Sherlock's lack of empathy:

> No, my friend, you might find me a dangerous guest. I have my plans laid, and all will be well.
>
> (Doyle, 1893: 4)

In this statement, Sherlock refuses Watson's offer to stay the night, citing the danger he might bring to Watson's household. On the surface, this seems considerate, but his detached tone shows little awareness of Watson's genuine worry or emotional need for reassurance. Instead of sharing his plans or offering comfort, Holmes maintains secrecy and distance, treating Watson more as a bystander than as a friend. This emotional withholding illustrates a lack of empathy, since Sherlock does not recognize the depth of Watson's anxiety nor the value of transparent communication in their friendship. Freud's theory of narcissism helps explain this detachment: Sherlock directs his energy inward, focusing on his strategy and role as hero, while neglecting Watson's emotional stake in the crisis.

However, the BBC adaptation complicates this by emphasizing the emotional consequences of Sherlock's lack of empathy. Although Sherlock is still often cynical and insensitive, there are moments

when he shows genuine emotional concern, especially when Watson is in danger. In "The Reichenbach Fall", Sherlock not only devises a strategy to foil Moriarty's plans but also ensures the safety of his friends. This suggests character development towards empathy. This is evident in Watson's grief over Sherlock's death, which clearly reveals the depth of their bond and the impact of Sherlock's decisions on those around him. At Sherlock's grave, Watson says:

> You were the best man and the most human... human being that I've ever known. And no one will ever convince me that you told me a lie.
>
> (Haynes, 2012)

This moment highlights Watson's perception of Sherlock as both extraordinary and flawed. Although Sherlock's actions were ultimately intended to protect Watson, his failure to communicate his plan shows his inability to fully consider Watson's emotional state. This lack of empathy is presented as a tragic flaw, deepening the audience's understanding of Sherlock's character. By focusing on the relational consequences of narcissism, this BBC adaptation adds a layer of complexity to the Sherlock-Watson dynamic, which contrasts sharply with Doyle's more stoic portrayal.

The Need for Admiration

The analysis of both works reveals that while Sherlock Holmes consistently seeks external validation, the source of this validation shifts dramatically from professional esteem in "The Final Problem" to public fame in "The Reichenbach Fall". In Doyle's original story, Sherlock's need for admiration is largely satisfied by the intellectual respect and unwavering loyalty of Watson, who serves as both his audience and his chronicler. His gratification is rooted in solving the ultimate crime and having his genius recognized by a trusted peer. Conversely, the BBC adaptation externalizes this need on a massive scale. "The Reichenbach Fall" portrays a Sherlock whose identity is deeply intertwined with his celebrity status, fueled by blogs and media headlines. The admiration he seeks is no longer confined to his inner circle but extends to the public at large, making his reputation an essential component of his narcissistic self-image. This fundamental difference highlights how a core narcissistic trait—the reliance on others for a sense of self-worth—is reinterpreted to reflect the cultural anxieties of each era.

In Freud's theory of narcissism, one of the main characteristics of pathological narcissism is the need for admiration. People with high narcissistic tendencies have a strong urge to be recognized, praised, or overly respected because they depend on external validation to support their fragile self-esteem. Narcissistic validation and public image play important roles in both versions of Sherlock, though in different forms. In the short story "The Final Problem", although Sherlock is a protagonist with a great reputation, we can observe several parts that show signs of the need for admiration, as understood in Freud's theory, even as Sherlock's reputation and actions appear motivated by his intellect and driven by a sense of duty rather than a need for public recognition. Sherlock does not actively build or maintain his image, as his successes are proof enough of his greatness. His willingness to sacrifice himself to defeat Moriarty reflects the heroic ideals of the Victorian era, where moral responsibility was more important than personal desires. Sherlock does not seek admiration for his actions; instead, he prioritizes the greater good.

> You know my powers, my dear Watson, and yet at the end of three months I was forced to admit that I had finally met an adversary who was my intellectual equal.
>
> (Doyle, 1893: 2)

In this line, Sherlock boasts about his high intellectual abilities when facing Moriarty. Even when acknowledging that Moriarty is his "equal," the statement actually reinforces his own image as an extraordinary figure, because only another extraordinary figure could be his opponent. This is a form *of self-aggrandizement* or ego inflation that seeks recognition for greatness in extreme conditions. According to Freud's theory, this kind of narcissism shows that a person not only wants to win but also wants to be admired for their extraordinary qualities even in the face of danger. This drive stems from the ego's desire to live up to its "ego ideal," an internalized image of perfection, and relies on external validation to affirm its worth (Freud, 1914; Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010). By conveying this to Watson, Sherlock shows his need to be heard, appreciated, and celebrated personally by those close to him. By acknowledging Moriarty's brilliance, Sherlock indirectly elevates himself—because if Moriarty is extraordinary, and Sherlock is the only one capable

of matching or defeating him, then Sherlock must also be extraordinary. This subtle boasting reflects a need for admiration, where Sherlock reaffirms his unique status by positioning himself as the only worthy counterpart to the "Napoleon of Crime." This is also evident in a line that perfectly describes Sherlock's narcissism":

> The air of London is sweeter for my presence. In over a thousand cases, I am not aware that I have ever used my powers on the wrong side.
>
> (Doyle, 1893: 6)

In this line, Sherlock states that his presence makes the air in London fresher, as if he were a moral and social purifier. This line contains delusions of grandeur and a strong need for admiration, where he not only wants to be praised, but also wants to be considered the main character in the narrative of the city's history and law. In the context of Freudian psychoanalysis, this shows a form of narcissism that leads to self-idealization, where a person cannot see their own mistakes or weaknesses. The need for admiration at this point becomes a kind of existential drive, where his existence is seen as defining a better social order. He wants to be considered irreplaceable. Another line explicitly demonstrates Sherlock's grandiose self-image:

> I think that I may go so far as to say, Watson, that I have not lived wholly in vain.
>
> (Doyle, 1893: 6)

Base on the excerpt above, Sherlock positions himself as indispensable to the moral and social order, implicitly demanding recognition not only for his intellect but for his very existence. The line illustrates how the need for admiration in "The Final Problem" takes the form of self-idealization, aligning with Victorian ideals of the heroic genius but simultaneously underscoring Sherlock's dependence on external acknowledgment to sustain his self-esteem.

Conversely, "The Reichenbach Fall" rearranges this dynamic through reputation and identity in a media-saturated society. Sherlock cares deeply about how he is perceived by society. Moriarty exploits this by destroying Sherlock's reputation, making the public believe that he is a fraud. Moriarty's plan strikes at the core of Sherlock's narcissistic need to be admired. The trauma that arises from this event signifies that in contemporary society, self-image is closely linked to social recognition. This adaptation reflects today's popular culture's obsession with identity performance, both in mass media and social media. By portraying Sherlock as a fraud, Moriarty undermines the foundation of Sherlock's identity. In other scenes, Sherlock says:

> I am a fake. The newspapers were right all along.
>
> (Haynes, 2012)

Although this statement is part of Sherlock's strategy to deceive Moriarty's network, it also shows his vulnerability to the collapse of his public image. Sherlock's attachment to social recognition becomes a form of contemporary narcissism, which relies not only on internal abilities but also requires external validation. This shows that in modern society, narcissism is rooted not only in the need to be admired but also in the fear of identity loss if that recognition disappears. The BBC adaptation also emphasizes the psychological impact of this loss by depicting Sherlock's struggle to reconcile his internal feelings with the external narrative imposed by others. This focus on reputation reflects contemporary anxiety about how identity is constructed and maintained in an era of constant surveillance and judgment.

The Evolution of Narcissism: From Rational Hero to Performative Icon

The transition of Sherlock's narcissistic traits from Doyle's original text to the BBC's modern adaptation is not merely a stylistic update; it reflects a fundamental shift in cultural values regarding heroism, identity, and intellect. The analysis of megalomania, in particular, reveals a critical evolution from a Victorian ideal of rational heroism to a postmodernist construction of performative identity.

In "The Final Problem", Sherlock's megalomania functions as a necessary and even admirable component of his character. It is the engine of his genius, reinforcing the Victorian belief in the heroic power of the individual mind. His intellectual superiority is presented as an objective, empirical fact, a tool for establishing order and justice in a world governed by rational principles. This is further emphasized in adaptations of the story, where Holmes

is often portrayed as a "national" martyr who selflessly endangers his personal safety to rid his fellow citizens of Moriarty. Chopra (2017) notes that the Granada television adaptation, in particular, eulogizes the supposedly dead Holmes, turning him into a "veritable relic, a defender of official law and order" (Chopra, 2017). Sherlock's self-assurance is therefore not a flaw but a social good; it is the guarantee of his ability to triumph over chaos. His megalomania is a private conviction, validated by results, perfectly aligning with a Victorian culture that celebrated great men whose exceptional abilities placed them above ordinary society.

In contrast, "The Reichenbach Fall" deconstructs this ideal entirely. The BBC's Sherlock operates in a postmodern world where objective truth is unstable, and identity is a public performance. His megalomania is no longer a private conviction but a public brand, meticulously crafted for media consumption. His genius is not simply demonstrated but must be constantly performed and validated by a public audience through blogs and media coverage. This construction of a media-savvy genius creates what Fogle and Maisano (2013) term the "new sexy," where Sherlock's intellectual prowess becomes his most alluring and performative trait, designed to captivate a contemporary audience (Fogle & Maisano, 2013). This reframing aligns with contemporary anxieties about authenticity in the digital age, where the detective's identity is mediated and therefore vulnerable to public opinion. Moriarty's attack is not on Sherlock's intellect directly, but rather on his public persona—his performative identity. By turning public admiration into suspicion, Moriarty exposes the fragility of an identity built on external validation. Sherlock's resulting crisis demonstrates that his megalomania is not a heroic trait but a narcissistic vulnerability, revealing a deep-seated fear that without an audience, his genius—and indeed, his very self—ceases to exist.

Ultimately, the evolution of Sherlock's megalomania serves as a mirror of changing cultural paradigms. Doyle's hero reflects a world that relies on empirical truth and the authority of the exceptional individual. The BBC's adaptation presents a world where identity is fluid, performative, and perpetually at risk of being unmasked as fraudulent, making Sherlock's narcissism not a tool for justice, but a tragic symptom of a contemporary condition.

The differences in the portrayal of Sherlock's narcissism in "The Final Problem" and "The Reichenbach Fall" highlight Doyle's ability to adapt his character to cultural and historical contexts. In Doyle's work, Sherlock's narcissism is presented as a trait functional and in line with the values of rationality and self-sacrifice of the Victorian era. Megalomania and lack of empathy are portrayed as necessary for his role as a detective, while his need for admiration is downplayed in favor of moral responsibility.

In the BBC adaptation, the episode reinterprets these traits to humanize Sherlock by exploring the emotional and relational consequences of narcissism. By focusing on Sherlock's vulnerability and his dependence on public perception and validation, "The Reichenbach Fall" offers a more multidimensional portrayal that resonates with modern audiences. This evolution reflects a broader shift in cultural values, where emotional complexity and psychological depth are increasingly prioritized in character development.

Narcissism as the Personality Structure of Sherlock Holmes

In "The Final Problem", Doyle depicts Sherlock Holmes as a detective who is so confident in his intellectual abilities that he appears detached from prevailing social norms. Sherlock places himself above the law and feels that he is the only one capable of confronting Moriarty, "The Napoleon of Crime." In this narrative, Sherlock's narcissism functions as a form of extreme functional self-confidence. He shows no emotional needs or attachment to others, not even to his close friend Watson. These characteristics are consistent with Freud's concept of secondary narcissism, which arises when a person's libido is redirected inward because external relationships are considered inadequate (Freud, 1914).

In contrast, "The Reichenbach Fall" (Haynes, 2012) shows Sherlock's character development as increasingly humanized. Here, Sherlock is depicted as experiencing an identity crisis after his reputation is destroyed by his enemy, Moriarty. This collapse of his public image forces Sherlock to face his own vulnerabilities, a dimension not found in Doyle's text. The BBC adaptation presents a Sherlock who considers the feelings of others, especially Watson, and is even willing to "sacrifice" his reputation to save his friends. This transformation reflects a transition from rigid narcissism to a more complex

and emotional narcissism, approaching a condition known as "mature narcissism," in which a person begins to form empathy and social bonds.

This change suggests that Sherlock's narcissism in the BBC adaptation has shifted towards a more reflective direction, where the need to be admired is increasingly balanced by the need to be understood and accepted. This indicates that his personality structure has developed from defensive narcissism to a more mature form, in which a person begins to integrate empathy and emotional closeness into their definition of self.

Thus, Sherlock's personality structure is not a fixed entity. It undergoes disruption, adaptation, and internal negotiation over time. From a detective who suppresses emotional expressions, he becomes a figure who begins to show concern for the emotions of those around him. This process not only signifies the character's maturation but also redefines what it means to be a genius in an era that demands not only intelligence but also humanity.

CONCLUSION

The results of the study reveal that although Sherlock Holmes' narcissistic nature remains consistent throughout "The Final Problem" and "The Reichenbach Fall", his portrayal is shaped by the cultural and historical context of each work. Doyle's portrayal emphasizes intellectual heroism, in line with Victorian values, while the BBC adaptation explores the psychological and emotional complexities of narcissism, reflecting contemporary anxieties about identity and reputation.

This difference demonstrates that the character of Sherlock Holmes is timeless not only because of his intelligence, but also because of his ability to adapt and resonate with the psychological and social dynamics of different eras. Using Freud's theory, this study illustrates that narcissism is not merely a pathological tendency but also a complex psychological structure that shapes the way a person views themselves and others. Sherlock's narcissism becomes a reflection of changing cultural values, from rationality-based heroism to an existential struggle to remain relevant, loved, and understood in a society increasingly obsessed with image and social recognition.

Thus, analyzing Sherlock Holmes through Freud's theory of narcissism not only enriches our understanding of this character but also opens up a broader field of study on the relationship between literature, psychology, and culture. As a literary figure who has undergone more than a century of transformation and adaptation, Sherlock Holmes continues to be a reflection of human genius, personality complexity, and social anxiety inherent in every era.

STATEMENTS OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors hereby declare that this article is entirely free from any conflict of interest related to the processes of data collection, analysis, editorial handling, and publication with *Poetika: Jurnal Ilmu Sastra*. None of the authors were involved at any stage in the editorial review or decision-making process concerning this manuscript.

REFERENCES

Akhtar, S., & O'Neil, M. K. (2011). *On Freud's "Beyond the pleasure principle."* Karnac.

Bačík, T., & Hardy, S. P. (2013). Sherlock and Sherlock Holmes: A Comparative Analysis. *Bachelor's Diploma Thesis. Department of English and American Studies, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University.*

Benvenuto, S. (1914). *Freud's Concept of Narcissism*.

Chopra, S. (2017). Sherlock Holmes on Screen: the Aesthetics and Politics of Adapting the Great Detective in a Hyper-mediatised Age. Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities, IX(2), 175-185.

https://dx.doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v9n2.18

Doyle, A. C. (1893). *The complete Sherlock Holmes*. Race Point Publishing.

Fogle, K. A., & Maisano, T. (2013). The New Sexy: A Rhetorical Analysis of Sherlock. Conversations: A Graduate Student Journal of the Humanities, Social Sciences, and Theology, 1(2). https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/conversations/vol1/iss2/3/

Freud, S. (1914). *On Narcissism: An Introduction*.

Haynes, T. (Director). (2012). *"Sherlock" The Reinchbach Fall* (No. Series Two Episode 12) [Broadcast]. BBC.

Hutcheon, L. (2012). *A Theory of Adaptation*. Routledge.

Hutter, A. D. (1975). Dreams, Transformations, and Literature: The Implications of Detective Fiction. *Victorian Studies*, *19*(2), 181–209. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3825911.

Larsen, S. E. (2023). Between the Media: Media Relations in Literature and Art. *European Review*, *31*(S1), S7–S22. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798723000303.

Marchinal, H. (2017). *Adaptation and Variation, Remaking the Dynamics of Gender in Sherlock, a New Sleuth for the 21st Century.* Université de Bretagne Occidentale.

McCaw, N. (2012). *Adapting detective fiction: Crime, Englishness and the TV detectives* (Paperback ed). Continuum.

McLaughlin, D. (2022). Mapping enchanted landscapes in Philip Weller's *The Dartmoor of* The Hound of the Baskervilles. *Cultural Geographies*, *30*(2), 259–277. https://doi.org/10.1177/14744740221110580

Nobus, D. (2024). *Narcissism and the Pleasures of Extinction: For the Centenary of "Beyond the Pleasure Principle."*

Pincus, A. L., & Lukowitsky, M. R. (2010). Pathological Narcissism and Narcissistic Personality Disorder. Annual Review of Clinical Psychology, 6, 421–446. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1146/annurev.clinpsy.121208.131215

Pittard, C. (2003). Victorian Detective Fiction. *Crimeculture Reviewing since the Dawn of Crime*. https://www.crimeculture.com/?page_id=7486.

Rumain, B. (2021). A Study in Sherlock: Our Fascination with Pathological Narcissism and the Narcissistic Personality. *PsyArt*, 1–24.

Todorov, T. (1977). *The poetics of prose*. Cornell University Press.

Worton, M. (Ed.). (1995). *Intertextuality: Theories and practices* (Repr). Manchester University Press.