

The TJLC and The Sherlock Finale: a small retrospective

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On the chilly January day that I post this — January 15th 2023 — the series finale of BBC's *Sherlock* celebrates its sixth anniversary.

For anyone who was on Tumblr during those days, this might bring back some memories you've chosen to forget — people and theories and gifsets you'd rather see chucked to the moon than ever remember.

However, I want you to remember because not only did the series finale of BBC *Sherlock* change the way I interacted with media — it changed the way modern internet fandom interacted with media.

Come back with me, if you will, to January 15th 2017: I was a sophomore at community college and all that I really had going for me was that BBC *Sherlock* was back and that the ending was going to be phenomenal. I was an avid Tumblr user and part of the TJLC — The Johnlock Conspiracy.

Most people define the TLJC as a group who believed that Johnlock was endgame in the series. In Bo Christensen and Thessa Jensen's 2018 article 'The JohnLock Conspiracy, fandom eschatology, and longing to belong,' they define the TJLC as a group who all shared the same idea for "what must inevitably happen at the end of the program: John Watson and Sherlock Holmes (JohnLock) must get together romantically," which in my opinion is a very narrow-minded way to define the TJLC. As a person who was part of the TLJC, who followed all the big blogs and read all the meta theory, I think that we were just a group of overzealous Johnlockers. Some people did believe that Johnlock was endgame but others, like myself, just enjoyed the theories and the fan-created Johnlock content.

The TJLC consisted solely of Tumblr blogs — it was a shock to me that the research I've read and watched on the TJLC only ever mentions Tumblr, I never realized how insular the community was. Most of my TJLC time was spent on Tumblr, yes, but I also used Twitter and just assumed that other fannish spaces online had a large TJLC presence.

That being said, anyone in fandom knows that there are big-name fandom creators or personalities and in the Tumblr TJLC realm, we had graceebooks, loudest-subtext-in-television, joolabee, and martinfreeman. Graceebooks, joolabee, and martinfreeman ran the TJLC blog, while loudest-subtext-in-television wrote the damn near sacred TJLC concept of M-Theory.

M-Theory was 80,000+ words, brought in James Bond, and made the argument that Mycroft was working towards endgame Johnlock and that all the M names (Mycroft, Moriarty, Maguneseen) meant something.

A lot of people ended up taking the meta written by these bloggers and kind of held it like scripture, as if M-Theory was a seriously real thing that Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss — the co-creators and writers — spent their time working on when in actuality if you looked over at *Doctor Who* you knew that Steven didn't put any serious thought into his writing.

Let's be real, at the core of the TJLC is a story of queer teens having a lack of representation, which is really just the story of Tumblr. This was 2017 Tumblr too, not 2020 Destiel is Canon-My Chemical Romance is back-Dan and Phil are gay-Tumblr, we weren't seeing queer people all over media, instead we were trying to pick up the scraps. In this case, the scraps were hope that a gay man being one of the creators and a head writer would result in the first-ever canonically queer Sherlock Holmes.

But, what happens when a website full of queer teens craving queer representation find out the long-awaited finale of their favorite show got leaked?

They all watch it and get immensely disappointed, of course!

January 14th, 2017 is the true premiere date of the *Sherlock* finale if you look back — it's the day it was leaked on some shady website and the fandom flocked to watch a terrible Sherlock Holmes reboot of *SAW*.

Tumblr lost its collective mind because the episode was absolutely awful. People began saying that this isn't actually what happens and that this leak was done on purpose, which would mean that the whole cast and crew filmed a bunch of stuff that wasn't actually part of the show and then released it with weird subtitles to throw us all off. While this does sound outrageous, you have to remember that the cast and crew actually would set up fake scenes during filming to throw people off because so many people would show up to watch them. No one wanted to believe that they ended the series with Sherlock and his never-before-mentioned evil sister playing violin for their family and that Redbeard wasn't a dog but actually Sherlock's childhood best friend Victor Trevor, who Erus killed.

With Tumblr freaking out the night before, the day of the premiere was stressful because no one wanted the leaked finale to be the real finale but a whole 24 hours later we were all stuck with the reality that yeah, the finale was God awful and Johnlock wasn't canon.

There was a lot of anger online and a lot of sadness the day it premiered, because many of us were just blatantly heartbroken by the fact that a show that had been so well done and engaging gave us this B-rated horror movie ripoff as a series finale, it was really disappointing to just about everyone. Honestly, I don't remember one person I have ever interacted with who thinks season four of *Sherlock* was good, especially the finale episode.

In a way, I think we should've seen this coming.

By that I mean, we have the first episode of season three where a group of Sherlock Holmes fans — run by Anderson, who famously hated Sherlock for two seasons and is always referred to as the dumbest character — who all have different ideas about how exactly Sherlock faked his death. This group is obviously a stand-in for real-life fans, some of whom spent the two-year break writing amazing meta and fanfic about ways Sherlock could have survived, and they treat these fans terribly.

There's one girl — and as an eating disorder survivor I'm not here to be judging body type or appearances because that's not helpful to anyone — that was fat and seemed to be more of an emo-looking girl who thinks that Sherlock and Moriarty kissed up there on the roof and that they probably ran away together. The scene starts with Anderson berating her for her theory, asking her if she's out of her mind, and telling her that her theory is in no way plausible. Not only does Anderson make fun of her, but the show has a whole sequence where Sherlock kisses Molly — a character created for the show and treated so terribly — in one fan's imagining but they cut off the emo girl's imagining as soon as Sherlock and Moriarty are about to kiss. Looking back this was obviously them making fun of us Sherlock fans, of trying to shame specifically the ones of us who wrote queer fanfiction. This one character is the obvious outcast — the largest woman in the room, the only one in all black with black-rimmed eyes, and she has a nose ring — she looked like me. She looked like other people I knew in the *Sherlock* fandom. Oh, and this all comes after Greg Lestrade during the opening of the episode saying: "Two years and the theories keep getting more stupid."

That's when we all should've jumped ship.

Instead, many of us stayed and watched the show implode on itself two years later.

Once again, our four big TJLC creators — graceeboks, loudest-subtext, martinfreeman, and joolabee — were helping to push the theory that the series finale was going to be aired the following week and that this episode was a big joke. We would see the true ending and we would all be vindicated. The thing is, on the TV schedule for the following week was a show called *Apple Tree Yard* and when people watched *Apple Tree Yard* the next week, they saw that instead of a new *Sherlock* episode, it was just a random new BBC drama.

If you know anything about the stages of grief you will know what came next: anger.

Immediately, the criticism of the final episode became righteous anger. People were mad because they loved the show and it did this to them, and others were mad because they saw the show as blatant queerbaiting.

That queerbaiting accusation? It was the queerbaiting accusation heard 'round the world, a game changer in the way teenagers online interact with media and those creating the media.

Since people had spent two years writing and reading meta, making up theories, and dissecting every single detail in a random shot, they thought that they knew the story better than those who were writing it. While you can say yes, Steven and Mark's Holmes is one of the most out-of-character adaptations we've seen, you also have to realize that these are the people who wrote the story and you cannot tell someone that they were wrong when you did not create the story.

We were told constantly during interviews that Mark and Steven had been planning out this series for years, and that they had planned the ending since the beginning. So the reaction from fans was that the writers themselves had gotten things wrong, that the writers had so obviously put in all of these hints and they didn't follow through with it for some reason and that reason was totally that they wanted to queerbait us.

This is a trend that didn't end six years ago, instead, accusations of queerbaiting have continued to bubble up every time a fan pairing isn't canon in the show, accusations of bad writing are made not because the writing is bad (*Sherlock* seasons three and four are bad writing) but because the writing didn't follow through on what the fans wanted in their relationships.

Was Clexa queerbaiting? No. But it was bad writing.

Was Destiel queerbaiting? No. But it was bad writing.

I've written about how these accusations have also made their way to people in the real world, and I think that looking back we can pinpoint the *Sherlock* fallout to this problem — it was the first time we saw the fannish internet react in a way that was more anger about queer representation than it was about writing in general.

There's also something to be said about how Mark and Steven's reactions have informed the way other creators interact with fans and fanworks.

During the time between the *Kingdom Hearts 3* drop and the DLC drop, fans worked together on a large Google Doc creating a theory called the Sleeping Realm Theory — fans thought that *KH3* was taking place in a time loop and created a 487-page long theory to back it up.

When the DLC came out, however, it was proven wrong.

Fan reaction wasn't to the level of *Sherlock* and I think that a lot of it has to do with the creator's reactions to fan theorizing and work. Don't get me wrong, the Sleeping Realm Theory was also a gay shipping theory (SoRiku) but instead of berating fans for having these theories, Tetsuya Nomura (creator of *Kingdom Hearts*) was honored that fans had spent so much time dissecting and interacting with his work.

I honestly think that most of the anger that came with the ending of *Sherlock* and the TJLC was more about the way fans were treated by the creators than anything else. As I look back on it, I realize that it's where a lot of my personal anger with the show comes from.

BBC's *Sherlock* was billed as a show created by two lifelong Holmes fans, and in the end, they did the exact same thing Sir Arthur Conan Doyle did: disappoint the fans with Holmes's death. While Doyle came back a decade later, reviving Holmes and giving the world some of his best adventures — Steven and Mark don't look like they're going to, and we don't want them to either.