

Narrative Innovation from a Feminist Perspective in "She Variety"

-- Taking Season Two of Sherlock as an Example

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Abstract

This study examines the second season of Sherlock, employing feminist theory, gender studies, and narratology alongside textual analysis, case studies, and comparative research to dissect the program's narrative innovations through a feminist lens. Findings reveal that through reconstructing narrative subjects, optimizing narrative structures, and deepening narrative content, the program achieves a profound integration of feminism with detective variety formats. This provides a model for balancing entertainment value with intellectual substance in "She Variety" programs, thereby advancing the popular dissemination of gender equality concepts.

Keywords

She-variety; Sherlock; Narrative Innovation; Feminism; Female Narrative Subject.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

In contemporary society, feminist discourse permeates popular culture, with "she-variety" programs—centered on women as core narrative protagonists—emerging as a significant segment within the media market [1]. As a representative example of this genre, Sherlock garnered critical acclaim and popularity in its first season. Its second season, launched in December 2024, achieved narrative advancement through new elements: 24-hour recording sessions and a group retreat setting. The focus shifted from presenting dilemmas to taking concrete action, while character development emphasized human complexity. Selecting this program as a case study captures the latest practices in detective-themed "she-variety" shows, offering insights for the industry to overcome homogenization.

1.2. Research Significance

1.2.1. Theoretical Significance

Existing academic scholarship offers limited in-depth analysis of detective-themed "she-variety" programs, with most studies remaining superficial and confined to the first season of < Sherlock >. This research illuminates the transformative shift from passive to active female agency, filling a critical gap in the literature [2]. It constructs a theoretical framework for narrative innovation in "she-variety" programs, providing novel perspectives for feminist media criticism.

1.2.2. Practical Significance

The program resolves the imbalance between entertainment value and intellectual depth in "she variety" shows. Summarizing its experiences can provide a creative paradigm for similar programs, helping them avoid common pitfalls. Simultaneously, the program transforms

individual female struggles into public discourse, aiding the awakening of female agency and advancing gender equality from media representation to real-world implementation.

1.3. Research Content and Methodology

1.3.1. Research Content

Defining the concept and characteristics of "she variety shows," reviewing relevant theories, and constructing an analytical framework; comparing narrative differences between the two seasons of Women's Detective Agency and analyzing innovations in Season 2; exploring the program's narrative innovation practices and summarizing its practical value and implications.

1.3.2. Research Methodology

(1) Textual Analysis Method

Using the complete content of the second season of Sherlock as the core analytical text, comprehensively deconstruct the program's narrative structure, core thematic content, cinematographic language, and character dialogue design. Precisely identify the embedded feminist narrative elements, gender expression logic, and value orientation to provide robust textual support for analyzing narrative innovation pathways.

(2) Case Study Method

Focusing on the exemplary case of Sherlock Season 2, this method conducts targeted analysis around key practices such as constructing a "female mutual-aid community," deeply integrating social issues, and multi-perspective character development. By incorporating external information including audience feedback and media commentary, it comprehensively evaluates the program's narrative innovation in terms of communicative impact and societal influence, highlighting the case's exemplary nature and reference value.

(3) Comparative Research Method

Employing both longitudinal and cross-sectional comparative dimensions. The longitudinal dimension compares Season 1 and Season 2 of Sherlock in terms of plot design, topic selection, character development, and narrative structure, clearly illustrating the narrative evolution of Season 2. The horizontal dimension contrasts it with other "she-variety" programs of the same genre, distilling its uniqueness in feminist expression and the integration of detective narratives, thereby providing a differentiated perspective for industry reference.

2. Relevant Concepts and Theoretical Foundations

2.1. Conceptual Definition and Core Characteristics of "She Variety"

"She-variety" programs emerge from the convergence of female consciousness and media market segmentation. Centering women as narrative protagonists and value focal points, they integrate feminist perspectives to depict authentic female experiences, aiming to construct female agency and promote gender equality. Core characteristics include: female-led narratives, content themes centred on female experiences, and value orientations focused on female empowerment[3].

2.2. Core Theoretical Foundations

2.2.1. Feminist Theories

Liberal feminism advocates equal opportunities, reflected in female protagonists independently solving cases; radical feminism emphasizes the "sisterhood" concept, mirrored in the collaborative dynamics of female detective teams; postmodern feminism opposes singular views of womanhood, with program characters exhibiting diverse traits [4].

2.2.2. Gender Theory

Distinguishing biological sex from social gender, the program uses cases to expose society's differential discipline of women, prompting audiences to reflect on gender norms [5]. This aligns with the core arguments of media and gender studies, which explore how media content shapes and reflects societal gender perceptions [6].

2.2.3. Narratology

This theory aids in analyzing narrative innovations, such as the "main plot + subplots" framework for examining "modular nested" designs, while the multiple perspectives theory explains the portrayal of diverse female experiences [7].

2.2.4. The Synergy Between Reasoning Variety Shows and Feminist Expression

Deductive variety shows inherently align with feminist aspirations: linear narratives afford women agency, teamwork fosters female collective formation, layered clues provide vehicles for implicit expression of women's issues, while justice-oriented plots extend gender equality values [8]. The program's practice of integrating detective gameplay with gender-themed expression also draws on the theoretical framework of media and gender studies, which discusses the combination of media forms and gender discourse [6].

3. Comparative Narrative Analysis of Women's Detective Society Seasons One and Two

3.1. Key Narrative Elements Across Both Seasons

3.1.1. Plot Structure Comparison

Season One of Sherlock centers on members of the "Good Good Good Detective Club" infiltrating the "1111" new media company to investigate Cheng Lala's disappearance. It employs a dual-track narrative progression: standalone episode mysteries and a serialized overarching storyline. Individual episodes, such as the case of anchor Yi Mei's disfigurement due to an allergic reaction and the employee poisoning incident at a company party, were self-contained yet served as layers of foreshadowing for the main storyline of Cheng Lala's disappearance. This formed a hierarchical structure of "case-clue-main storyline interconnection". Such a structure provided episodic highlights while maintaining overall coherence through foreshadowing and subplots, drawing viewers into sustained engagement with the main narrative through the satisfaction of solving individual cases.

Season Two elevates the narrative framework, centering on uncovering the truth behind Ding Lingling's death as members infiltrate the enigmatic T.W.O Hotel. Building upon Season One's dual-track progression, plot complexity significantly intensifies. On one hand, causal links between cases grow tighter—such as the academic plagiarism exposed in "The Way Home" resonating with character motivations in subsequent episodes like "Sunshine's Echo"; On the other hand, Season Two adopts a "standalone episodes + serialized narrative" format. Each standalone case deeply explores specific social issues while collectively serving the overarching plot of exposing the criminal organization "New Paradise" and the conspiracy of the "Patriarch". This constructs a more expansive, intricately interconnected plot network, immersing viewers in puzzle-solving amid a web of complex clues.

3.1.2. Comparison of Thematic Selection

Season One emphasized the injustices and hardships women face in real life, skilfully weaving issues like workplace sexual harassment, appearance anxiety, workplace bullying, and gender discrimination into its cases. For instance, in the "One Astonishing Name" case, the story of an overlooked office underling resorting to extreme revenge after enduring prolonged neglect and unfair treatment mirrors the difficult position women find themselves in under workplace

gender inequality. In "Triple Offence", a cleaning lady commits crimes to shield her daughter from workplace sexual harassment, profoundly revealing the helplessness and resistance of female victims under gender-based violence, prompting viewers to consider gender safety.

While continuing its focus on women's struggles, Season Two further encourages women to boldly assert their rights, deepening and broadening its exploration of real-world issues. The program remains closely attuned to current affairs, addressing diverse topics including employment for vulnerable women, illegal voyeurism, fake news and public opinion manipulation, academic exploitation, workplace psychological manipulation (PUA), and campus sexual assault. In *The Way Home*, the female advocacy group guides Alin, long exploited by her mentor, to courageously stand up for her rights, showcasing female self-awakening. *Sunshine's Echo* focuses on the employment struggles of vulnerable groups like women released from prison and their resistance against corporate power. Through vivid case studies, it elevates women's issues from merely "presenting hardship" to "advocating action," sparking deeper societal discussions on safeguarding women's rights.

3.1.3. Character Contrast Analysis

Season One crafted a richly diverse ensemble of female characters. Members of the Detective Club possessed distinct personalities and complementary skills: Qi Wei's decisive leadership, Li Xueqin's analytical puzzle-solving, and Tian Xiwei's fearless courage. Their growth through investigations shattered gender stereotypes. Supporting characters (NPCs) also shone brightly. Li Renli, the HR director, initially presented a warm persona before revealing her undercover role for the Investigation Bureau, her character arc adding depth to the plot. Shang Lianjie's transformation from a gentle superior to a "villain" protecting her child showcased the complexity of human nature and the radiance of motherhood. Through emotional bonds and conflicts between characters, the program reinforced female strength and emotional connections.

Season Two deepens character development further. Having honed their dynamics in the first season, members of the deduction society now exhibit more pronounced individual moments of brilliance and more precisely defined roles. Qi Wei, as the "recap specialist", frequently leads members in organising clues and controlling the pace of deduction; Li Xueqin, through her intelligence, repeatedly unravels puzzles, becoming the "puzzle-solving specialist". Simultaneously, Season Two crafts more multidimensional female NPCs: hotel lobby manager Dong Liyi, outwardly gentle yet trained as a ruthless 'killing machine' with decisive and brutal tendencies; Kelly Du Duqi, a survivor of sexual assault, undergoes reconstructive surgery before founding the meticulously planned revenge organisation Spark. These characters' complete backstories extend beyond the program itself, imbuing the show with strong dramatic tension. By depicting female characters as complex, multifaceted, and fully realized individuals, the program comprehensively showcases the diverse experiences of women navigating adversity and growth.

3.2. Narrative Innovations in Season Two of Sherlock

3.2.1. Narrative Framework Strengthening the Connection Between Main Storyline and Individual Episodes

Season 1 adopts a structure where "standalone cases are nested within a long-term main plot." While episodes such as "Anchor Yi Mei's Allergic Reaction Case" and "Company Party Poisoning Case" share clue connections with the main plot of "Cheng Lala's Disappearance," they retain a high degree of independence. Some standalone episodes prioritize "immediate puzzle-solving," with loose logical ties to the main storyline, resulting in a structure where "discrete case points" support a "linear main plot".

Season 2 evolves into a "modular nested" framework, dividing the entire season's cases into thematic modules—such as the "Workplace Rights Module," "Vulnerable Groups Protection Module," and "Resistance to Gender-Based Violence Module." Each module contains 2-3 interconnected standalone cases, forming internal causal chains. For example, the "Academic Plagiarism Case" and "Workplace PUA Case" share the core conflict of "power oppression," with characters linked through workplace hierarchies. Crucially, each module embeds key foreshadowing for the overarching mysteries of "Ding Lingling's Death" and "The New Paradise Organization's Conspiracy." This structure transforms standalone episodes from "isolated points" to "interconnected modules," creating a relationship where "thematic surface modules" support a "three-dimensional main plot." This not only enhances narrative systematicity but also amplifies the impact of feminist themes through the progressive development of cases within each module.

3.2.2. Clue Arrangement Expands Narrative Depth and Breadth

Season One's clue system primarily comprises "case clues" and "main plot clues," forming a "dual-clue" structure. "Case clues" focused on solving individual episode puzzles, such as physical evidence and witness testimonies, while "main plot clues" pointed towards Cheng Lala's disappearance, including mysterious symbols and the movements of key figures. Though these two strands occasionally intersected, their functional divisions remained distinct, with clues serving primarily as tools rather than carriers of meaning.

Season Two establishes a "three-dimensional interwoven clue system". Building upon the "case clues" and "main storyline clues", it introduces a new "women's issues clue". These three strands permeate each other and advance concurrently.

(1) Case Clues: Continue to serve episode-specific puzzle-solving functions, such as physical evidence from the T.W.O Hotel's locked room or suspects' alibis.

(2) Main Plot Thread: Points towards the core conspiracy of the "New Paradise Organisation," such as members' secret codes and financial flows.

(3) Feminist issue clues: Subtly reveal women's struggles and resistance through case details, such as the diary of a female victim in the "Illegal Voyeurism Case" or discriminatory hiring clauses in the "Post-Release Employment Case".

These three strands form a progressive logic of "puzzle-solving → breakthrough → expression": for instance, in the "Academic Exploitation Case," "Case Clues" (tampered thesis data) drive puzzle-solving, the "main plot thread" (the connection between the implicated supervisor and New Paradise) advances the conspiracy's exposure, while the "feminist issue thread" (the female student's rights-defence email) deepens the theme of "women resisting academic hegemony." This arrangement ensures the clues both propel the narrative and serve as vehicles for feminist expression.

3.2.3. Narrative Pacing Balances Detective Tension and Emotional Expression

Season One employed a "linear, steady-paced" rhythm, adhering to a fixed sequence: "incident occurrence – initial investigation – clue gathering – multi-source verification – logical connection – truth restoration." Each segment maintained relatively balanced duration, with pacing prioritizing "deductive efficiency." While sustaining viewers' immersion in puzzle-solving, this approach left insufficient space for female emotional interactions and in-depth thematic discussions, resulting in somewhat weaker emotional resonance for certain cases.

Season Two innovatively adopts an "alternating fast-slow elastic rhythm". By interweaving "tension-driven deduction segments" with "emotional depth segments", it achieves a balance between "deductive tension" and "feminist emotional expression".

(1) Tense deduction segments: Employ rapid-fire editing techniques—such as handheld shots during clue gathering and cross-cutting during group discussions—to sharpen logical

reasoning and propel narrative momentum, preserving the core appeal of deduction-based programming.

(2) Deep Expression Segments: Following case resolutions, the pace slows. Through roundtable discussions and character interviews, the female deduction team revisits the case to explore feminist themes. For instance, after solving the "Campus Sexual Assault Case," guests debated "Women's Self-Protection and Social Support," with cinematography employing close-ups and slow motion to capture emotional shifts and clashing viewpoints.

This pacing design avoids the common pitfall of deduction shows prioritizing thrills over substance, while the "slower-paced" segments create narrative space for in-depth exploration of feminist perspectives.

3.2.4. Narrative Perspectives Enrich the Multidimensionality of Female Characters

Season One primarily employed the "single investigator's perspective" of the 推理社 members, centring narratives around the female investigative team's actions. Viewers observed cases and gathered information through the "investigators' eyes," enhancing immersion. However, this perspective remained confined to the "puzzle-solvers," inadequately portraying the inner worlds of female victims and supporting characters. Female figures predominantly existed within the binary labels of "investigator" and "victim."

Season Two establishes a "multi-perspective complementary" framework. Building upon the "investigator's perspective," it integrates the "female victim's viewpoint" and the "female supporting character's viewpoint." Through the interweaving of multiple perspectives, it presents a multidimensional ensemble of female characters.

(1) Investigator Perspective: Remains the core viewpoint, focusing on the deductive process and teamwork to highlight women's rationality and agency.

(2) Female Victim Perspective: Presented through diaries, letters, and flashback sequences. For instance, the victim's private diary in the "Illegal Voyeurism Case" documents her fear and resistance after the assault, transforming her from a "case symbol" into an individual with emotions and demands.

(3) Supporting Female Character Perspective: Independent narrative segments are granted to female supporting characters, showcasing their choices and growth amidst adversity. For instance, Dong Liyi's evolution from "obeying the organisation" to "covertly assisting the female investigative team".

The integration of multiple perspectives breaks the limitations of "investigator-dominated narratives," enabling a comprehensive portrayal of female characters with diverse identities and circumstances. This resonates with the core feminist principle of "respecting the plurality of women's experiences."

4. Practical Pathways for Narrative Innovation Through Feminist Perspectives

4.1. Constructing Female Agency: From Passivity to Proactivity

The program constructs female agency through a threefold strategy: the core reasoning segment grants women pivotal agency to challenge patriarchal perspectives; capability portrayal eschews rigid categorization to showcase multifaceted abilities; dynamic narrative depicts character development, reinforcing subjectivity.

4.2. Representation of Female Mutual Support: From Antagonistic Competition to Collaborative Synergy

The program crafts authentic and powerful female solidarity: detailed depictions of collaborative scenarios make mutual aid tangible; empathetic portrayals of emotional bonds

strengthen community cohesion; and the elevation of solidarity to a social value imbues it with public significance.

4.3. Integrating Contemporary Issues into Detective Narratives: From Surface to Depth

Through "clue-driven thematic progression" "case-based metaphorical expression" and "post-case reflective extension", the program achieves deep integration of social issues with narrative, balancing entertainment appeal and intellectual depth.

5. Significance of Narrative Innovation and Implications for "She Variety" Development

5.1. The Practical Value of Narrative Innovation

For female audiences, the program offers actionable models, empowering them from conceptual understanding to practical application; for the variety industry, it establishes balanced paradigms, providing insights for genre innovation; for society, it lowers the threshold for disseminating gender equality concepts, promoting widespread public awareness [9].

5.2. Implications for the Sustainable Development of "She Variety"

Content-wise: Deepen exploration of female experiences, addressing structural challenges and diverse communities. Narrative-wise: Strengthen genre fusion and entertainment-value equilibrium. Value-wise: Uphold inclusive feminism, avoiding gender dichotomies and label-imposed constraints [10].

6. Conclusions and Outlook

6.1. Research Findings

The second season of Sherlock achieves innovation in narrative structure, content, and implementation pathways. It establishes a model for the deep integration of feminism and detective storytelling, providing a template for "she-variety" programs while advancing the dissemination of female discourse and the transformation of gender equality concepts.

6.2. Research Limitations and Future Directions

This study focuses solely on a single case and employs primarily qualitative research. Future research could broaden the case scope and incorporate quantitative methods to explore the program's interaction with the industry ecosystem and policy environment, offering more comprehensive insights for the development of "she-variety" programming.

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