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### The Fragility of Feminine Characters: A Charlotte Holmes Character Study

*A Study in Charlotte*, the first novel in the Charlotte Holmes series published between 2016 and 2019, is unlike any other modern retelling of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's work. At least, this is how the collection is marketed, "a Watson and Holmes story unlike anything seen before." This is because Holmes is a girl—not a woman, a sixteen-year-old-girl—caught in the midst of the daring adventures classic of detective novels. *A Study in Charlotte* parts from the premise that the titular character, Charlotte Holmes, and her friend, companion, and later romantic interest, Jamie Watson, are descendants of the real and famed Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson. However, despite the progressiveness of this idea, *Study in Charlotte* has some crucial issues, common in the development of female characters in their presentation of femininity, characterization, and agency.

#### I. Femininity, Not Like Other Girls

Charlotte is effectively introduced in the first chapter, the readers understand who she is, what her motivations are, and possibly even have an idea as to what her character arc will entail. However, in the same pages, the strange framing of Charlotte's girlhood and femininity become apparent as well. "The first I saw of her was her hair, black and glossy straight down to her shoulders..." The narrating character, Jamie Watson, presents Charlotte as undoubtedly beautiful. However, it is "Not that way that girls are generally beautiful, but more like the way a knife catches the light, makes you want to take it in your hands" (Cavallaro, pp. 5-6).

Firstly, there is an obvious argument here: Charlotte is described as beautiful in a way that an object is, as something to be taken. While this objectifying implication is found in the minutiae of language, it could be argued that the essence of that objectification—of Charlotte being something to be taken—is present throughout the entire narrative. She is something to be romanced upon by Jamie. She is seemingly predestined to be drawn into him, has no choice or

agency in the matter. Jamie has been fantasizing about Holmes since he was a child, and their bloodlines are intertwined to the point of inseparability. Before Jamie and Charlotte meet, the predestined romance between them is presented by its negation, “It’s not like I’m going to marry this girl,” Jamie argues (12).

Secondly, in the same breath in which Jamie describes Charlotte as beautiful as a knife, she is beautiful “not that way that girls are generally beautiful”. This argument of being “not like other girls” was a popular trope during early 2010’s, wherein girls were represented in two categories, those that are hyperfeminine—the stereotype of girls who care more about make-up and attracting the attention of boys—and those that were “other” and therefore “superior” to the first. This trope was massively popular in digital spaces, but it was also visible in pop culture.

To present an example outside of this franchise; In the *Harry Potter* series the main female character, Hermione, is characterized as the studious nerd. She is unaware of her beauty, and therefore, an acceptable model of femininity. On the other hand, female characters who are presented with stereotypically feminine traits and interests are materialistic and superficial, or outright cruel and antagonistic, with the most overt case being Dolores Umbridge (Baffoe).

At the core of female representation in *A Study in Charlotte*, and in similar narratives of this era, is that there is a correct and an incorrect way to experience femininity, girlhood, and womanhood. This “reminds viewers, often teen girls, who are the target audience, that femininity is dumb and undesirable” (Sophie). It presents to the reader that femininity is intrinsically shallow and inferior. In other words, it is internalized sexism and misogyny. This devaluation of femininity is commonly associated with issues of self-worth and self-esteem, particularly in younger women, though data has yet to prove or disprove this popular association (Means).

When Charlotte Holmes is described, she is “colorless and severe,” a “thin, angular girl” with an accented “extravagant voice” (5-6). She is “fastidiously put together” and wears “the slim navy pants instead of the pleated skirt most of the girls wore. Her white oxford shirt was

buttoned up to her neck and her ribbon tie looked as if it'd been steamed... she smelled like soap, not perfume." Charlotte Holmes is a girl unlike other girls. She stands out from the crowd, even amongst other peers of the same social strata, as is the case for the fictional school of Sherringford. Charlotte Holmes, the narrative tells the reader again and again, is not like other girls.

## II. Trauma, the Characterization Shorthand

Charlotte is a volatile individual; a quality attributed to the Holmeses in general, but more so to Charlotte than any other. This is only natural, she is a teenage girl, a group widely regarded as reckless, much like Charlotte. However, the Holmeses are meant to be made up of unique individuals, unlike any others. Though they are often volatile addicts, seeking to curb their boredom because of their grand minds, they are largely put together in their strangeness. They don't cave to their more human emotions, not Charlotte does. Charlotte's fault, according to herself (and her parents), is her emotionality: "What my mother was afraid of was sentiment...with my particular skill set, it's a liability" (Cavallaro, 251).

Charlotte's substance abuse is introduced in this same first chapter, implying that she injects something. While her struggles with addiction do not play a major role, they influence some of the major plot points found in the novel.

Towards the end of the first chapter, we are introduced to the character of Dobson. He claims he has "cracked the nut" that is Charlotte Holmes, who "might do [him] some favors again." Without hesitation, Jamie threatens to kill Dobson, and punches him in the jaw. In response, Charlotte mocks Dobson, "Now that you've *won* me, I guess I'll lay down and spread for you right here. Or do you only like your girls drugged and unconscious?" And chastises Watson, "You are not my boyfriend...though you so very much want to be...I don't need someone to fight for me. I can fight for myself" (Cavallaro, 15-17). Charlotte is strong, she's clever, she's not like other girls, she does not need saving. Except for when the narrative says she does.

Her addiction comes to the forefront when she relapses after feeling betrayed by Jamie. Which reminds him of his father's recommendation, "*Whatever happens, remember it is not your fault and likely could not have been prevented, no matter your efforts.* My father, once again, was proving himself an idiot" (Cavallaro, 246). He feels personally responsible for her relapse, though previous Watsons have been unable to prevent them, he believes he should be different. Charlotte tells him to go away, and he "tuck[s himself] in beside her, hoping [his] body heat, at least, would do something to warm her up" (Cavallaro, 248).

It is an intimate moment shared between them, at one of Charlotte's lowest points. Jamie couldn't stop her, Charlotte makes the choice to relapse— despite her often limited agency, she is not passive. However, in this same scene, this moment of Charlotte's vulnerability, she deduces Jamie is thinking about her assault. She tells him "It's not yours to think about" (Cavallaro, 249). Much like her addiction, her assault and subsequent trauma are not major themes in the narrative, even though they influence the plot beats.

Here, there is a question as to why. Could Charlotte's struggles and volatility been attributed solely to issues outside of her rape? Yes. Could the narrative have given another reason for her to be a suspect in the murder of the character that raped her? Also, yes; they gave Jamie a reason. The inclusion of Charlotte being sexually assaulted is, all around, unnecessary to the narrative.

Utilizing intimate assault as a plot device, especially when creating complex female characters, is a common problem in western literature. It is "a lazy shorthand for establishing character... Writers don't want to show the journey of why someone is damaged, so they'll insert a rape device" (Goodfellow). The only other event influenced by Charlotte's rape is her difficulty being affectionate with Jamie.

"Leaning over, she smoothed my hair back from my forehead... it was a surprise when she kissed me on the lips."

"That's all I can do," she whispered, resting her forehead to mine.

“That’s a lot,” I said, and she laughed.

“No. I mean, that’s all—it’s nearly too much for me to touch anyone, after Dobson, and I—for you, I’m trying... I don’t know how long I’ll be like this...or if I’ve maybe been this way all along. I don’t know if it’ll ever be enough” (Cavallaro 290)

Utilizing a previous rape to excuse a female character’s distaste for physical affection and, in this case, implied asexuality, is another reason as to why this inclusion felt unnecessary and uncomfortable. It detracts from the characterization of Charlotte— she could simply be troubled and asexual.

### III. Conclusion, Charlotte is Just a Girl

In the previously mentioned scene, where Charlotte is relapsing, she tells Jamie about August. He is hinted to have been the cause of her enrollment at the Sherrinford boarding school, “I loved him. And he wouldn’t have me... He said I’d grow out of it. My ‘crush.’ Him saying that was worse than him rejecting me” (Cavallaro 250). Charlotte firmly believes that it could not be August that is targeting them, and therefore doesn’t consider the possibility of the events to be the fault of anyone associated with the man whose life she allegedly ruined.

Eventually, Jamie and Charlotte realize that the murders the narrative is constructed around were planned by August’s ex-fiancée, who was left behind because of Charlotte. This proves her mother right, Charlotte’s emotionality clouded her judgement and skills.

The novel as a whole, while being a thrilling mystery and romance, follows plot beats that would not have been such—that could have been devised in much more interesting and complex reasons—if Charlotte had been conceptualized as a boy. That is not to say that these plot beats could not have been used were Charlotte not a girl, but that they were *because* she was a girl. The issue is not that *A Study in Charlotte* included a traumatized character who was not traditionally feminine, it is that the trauma and femininity are set in place as shorthand for a complex characterization of Charlotte.

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