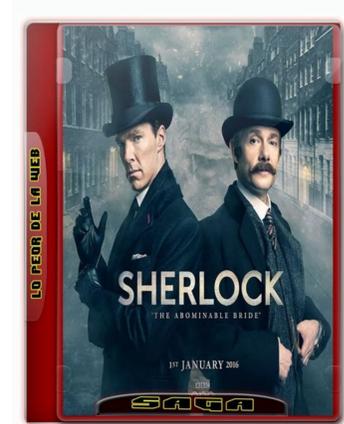
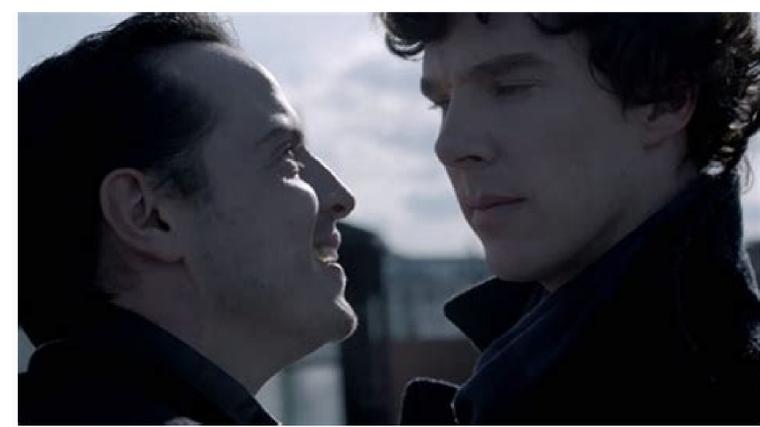


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Reviewed by Michael Reuben, January 14, 2016 Sherlock has now joined in the grand U.K. tradition of the holiday special, releasing a separate episode for broadcast on New Year's Day 2016 both abroad and at home. In England, an even-more-special version appeared in cinemas with behind-the-scenes footage. Now, just ten days later, BBC Home Video has released Sherlock: The Abominable Bride on Blu-ray. U.K. holiday specials are an unpredictable breed, but they typically depart from the episodic format with which a show's fans are familiar. The Abominable Bride was preceded by months of feverish speculation, as the BBC released production stills of Benedict Cumberbatch's Sherlock Holmes and Martin Freeman's John Watson in Victorian garb, looking very much like characters directly out of the pages of Arthur Conan Doyle. How would series creators Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss manage to send this quintessentially 21st Century pair back in time? What turn of fate would transform them, and might it possibly involve a crossover with the creators' other hit show, Dr. Who? Would Sherlock and Watson commandeer the TARDIS? To the disappointment of many, The Abominable Bride delivered nothing remarkable on the time-travel front. Without spoiling any plot elements for those who have yet to view it, let's just say that the device used to transplant our heroes to the era of horse-drawn carriages is both simple and familiar. Even though The Abominable Bride racked up impressive viewership numbers, cries of disappointment and betrayal from long-time Sherlock fans could be heard from both sides of the Atlantic even before the final credits rolled. Having watched The Abominable Bride a second time on this superior Blu-ray presentation, I view it differently. While there is admittedly an element of bait-and-switch in the Victorian packaging, Sherlock's New Years special turns out to be about something even more interesting than time travel. To employ a word heard repeatedly during the episode, the special takes a "deep" dive into Sherlock's own psychology, exploring issues that have been lurking in the shadows of the series since it began. Perhaps that sounds cryptic, but not all Sherlock fans have yet seen The Abominable Bride, and this review will not reveal its central mechanism. (Note, however, that events from the first three seasons of Sherlock are freely discussed. Newcomers take heed.) Clues to what Gatiss and Moffat are up to can be gleaned from the selection of clips, spanning all of Sherlock to date, that precede The Abominable Bride. Thereafter, a single word—"Alternatively"—redirects the narrative to the late 1870s and the Second Anglo-Afghan War, from which a convalescent Dr. John Watson returns to England to restart his life. As in "A Study in Pink" from Season One, Watson encounters an old school friend, Stamford (David Nellist), who introduces him to Sherlock Holmes, and the partnership at 221B Baker Street is born. What's especially noteworthy about this "alternate" introduction of Holmes and Watson is how easily the characters created by Cumberbatch and Freeman slip into the Victorian era, with only minor alterations (such as addressing each other by surnames). It's almost as if the creators of Sherlock want to brag about how faithful they've been to Conan Doyle. What most sharply separates these two versions of the partners' initial meeting on either side of a 125-year divide is Louise Brealey's Molly Hooper, the faithful morgue attendant who first appeared in "A Study in Pink" but has now been replaced by "Dr. Hooper", a man (albeit one whose mustachioed face should be familiar to any Sherlock fan). The difference in women's roles is a running theme throughout The Abominable Bride, further underlined with the appearance of Amanda Abbington's Mary Watson as a lonely wife pining for her husband John to spend more time at home. Even Una Stubbs's Mrs. Hudson strikes a different tone in her 19th Century incarnation, complaining to Watson how little she appears in his published accounts of Sherlock's exploits. Some years after their introduction, Holmes

and Watson are presented with a case by Inspector Lestrade (Rupert Graves, in muttonchops). A wife, Emilia Ricoletti (Natasha O'Keefe), dressed as a bride has committed a spectacularly public suicide by shooting herself in the mouth, but then some hours later the very same lady was seen murdering her husband (Thomas Kyd) in an equally public manner, having apparently risen from the grave for that purpose. Months later, after other husbands are reported murdered by this spectral avenger, Holmes is retained by Lady Carmichael (Catherine McCormack) to protect her husband, Sir Eustace (Tim McInnerny), from a death threat by the very same ghost. The alert viewer will already have noted the similarity between Emilia Ricoletti's manner of death and that of Jim Moriarty on the roof of St. Bartholomew's in Season Two's "The Reichenbach Fall". And indeed, the Ricoletti case is rife with the kind of misdirection and false identities that are the trademark of the late Moriarty. Anyone who recalls the conclusion of "His Last Vow" in Season Three should be prompted to consider the parallels between Emilia Ricoletti's post-mortem exploits and the surprise reappearance of Jim Moriarty (Andrew Scott) on London TV. The two cases are inextricably linked. The Ricoletti case turns out to be less an investigation than a portal through which Sherlock the man descends deep (there's that word again) into the past looking for answers, and Sherlock the show probes deeply (yet again!) into the psyche of its main character. No episode of Sherlock would be complete without an appearance by Holmes's brother, Mycroft, and The Abominable Bride obliges with a supercilious glutton (creator Gatiss in a fat suit) whose obesity recalls that of Mr. Creosote in Monty Python's The Meaning of Life. The hostility between the Holmes boys has always had an undercurrent of filial attachment, and The Abominable Bride casts new light on that relationship. Sherlock: The Abominable Bride was shot on the Arri Alexa by cinematographer Suzie Lavelle, whose credits include Dr. Who and Ripper Street. With due allowance for the Victorian production design, which lends this special episode a darker and richer palette than one usually sees on Sherlock, the presentation on BBC Home Video's 1080p, AVC-encoded Blu-ray is consistent with the look of Sherlock's Season Three, which my colleague Kenneth Brown justly praised for its detail, contrast, black levels and lack of aliasing, banding or other artifacts. The average bitrate of 25.99 Mbps bespeaks a healthy allotment of bandwidth and digital real estate. Add The Abominable Bride to the growing list of Blu-rays released with a Dolby Atmos soundtrack (which most current systems will decode as Dolby TrueHD 7.1). Presumably the recourse to the latest and greatest in digital sound formats was undertaken in view of The Abominable Bride's release in cinemas, but it's kind of the BBC to include the track for Blu-ray collectors, especially after the lossy DD 5.1 track of Seasons One and Two. The additional channels allow for some wonderful surround effects, such as the ghostly voice of Emilia Ricoletti circling the room and much more impressive presentation of the expositional sound effects that accompany Sherlock's recreations of events as they are related to (and visualized by) the great detective (e.g., the Ricoletti murder and suicide). Several other impressive effects cannot be described without spoilers, but the mix sets a new benchmark for Sherlock. Nor have the sound mixers fallen short in keeping the dialogue intelligible and in showcasing the familiar score by David Arnold and Michael Price. The conclusion of The Abominable Bride points us back to the riddle posed by Moriarty's reappearance in "The Final Vow", and it may be that the Bride's psychological hijinks cannot be fully understood until Season Four of Sherlock, when we discover just what the deceased mastermind's video image really means. Until then, The Abominable Bride is best enjoyed as a historical fantasia on the contemporary world of Sherlock, an opportunity to review and reflect on the twisty path that Sherlock and Watson have traversed not only in their three seasons of modern adventures but in the century and a quarter since Conan Doyle first brought them together. The Blu-ray is a superior presentation with entertaining and informative extras. 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