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Women: Worldly, Wordy, or Un-written
An Analysis of the Women of Sherlock Holmes and the Victorian English Era

Victorian England marked a time of great change and adaptation, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes series attempted to use the social and political changes of Victorian England as a backdrop to much of the plot and character development in the installments of Sherlock's adventures. While Doyle's use of what were then current events in his tales typically furthers the understanding and intricacy of the story at hand, his construction of women in his stories is somewhat abusive.

While women in Victorian England were met with much confusion as to their precise role in the home, society, property, and politics Doyle manipulates this societal confusion within his stories to: 1) further the ingenuity of deduction of Sherlock Holmes in placing him in juxtaposition to female characters who are typically eccentric, sensuous, or silent; 2) use women in his stories to advance the perception of the English as the elite, and all other cultures as lesser; and 3) provoke and perpetuate the idea that a patriarchal society in England is preferred and prevalent.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle firstly uses the women in his stories to further the impression that Sherlock Holmes is a man of unmatched deductive skills. Doyle contrasts the wit and knowledge that Sherlock Holmes possesses with female characters who are typically silent and reserved. The mere fact that the women come to Holmes with an issue that needs solving renders them immediate victims to circumstances, while also ensuring that they are subservient to Holmes both for his talent and for his protection of them (which additionally perpetuates the structural stereotype that a woman cannot care for herself).

Doyle first gives Sherlock Holmes the intellectual advantage by juxtaposing him with women who are eccentric, sparsely seen, silent, or sensuous: "...these stories, whose overt project is total explicitness, total verisimilitude in the interest of a plea for scientificity, are haunted by shadowy, mysterious, and often silent women" (Belsey 385). While there are many examples of the aforementioned, the most memorable are arguably the women of "The Greek Interpreter", "The Crooked Man", and "The Dancing Men". Sophie Kradites, the lady of "The Greek Interpreter", though pivotal to the plot appears only briefly: "I could not see her clearly enough to know more than that she was tall and graceful, with black hair, and clad in some sort of loose white gown" (Doyle). Choice of words regarding Ms. Kradites connote her as mysterious and virginal according to Catherine Belsey, "The white gown marks her as still virginal and her flight as the result of romance rather than desire. At the same time the dim light surrounds her with shadow, the unknown" (Belsey 385).

Allowing for Miss Kradites to be sensuous as well as near silent and rarely present in the "Greek Interpreter" tale renders her character as seemingly insignificant to the development of the story, which in turn simply renders Holmes all the more integral. In placing emphasis on details that make her specifically and increasingly feminine, her luster becomes more those attributed to an object of affection and attention than an important or notable individual to the story. Furthermore, the continued emphasis placed

on the fact that she had run away with a man seems to demoralize the woman before the audience has ever been introduced to her formally.

Such de-emphasis on the importance of women in the story telling is also seen in the “Crooked Man” tale; which concerns Mrs. Barclay, whose husband is found dead on the day of her meeting with her lover of many years before. Mrs. Barclay is now insensible, “temporarily insane” since the night of the murder and therefore unable to speak. Doyle’s use of characterization, while sparse, is pointed and effective. In the case of Mrs. Barclay Doyle renders the woman as somewhat insignificant as she is attributed to be literally insane (Belsey 385), which furthers the rationality of Holmes while simultaneously de-emphasizing the woman’s role as both the bringer of the mystery and as integral to its solution.

A similar scenario is also seen in “The Dancing Men” with Mrs. Elise Cubitt, who was formerly betrothed to a convicted criminal but despite all provocation will not break her silence. Holmes’ introduction to the woman occurs while she is unconscious, a state which she remains in for the entirety of the tale. The solving of the mystery hinges on the cracking of a code, a series of stick figures that appear to be dancing men, which Mrs. Cubitt uses to communicate with her lover. “Elise’s only contribution to the correspondence is the word, ‘Never.’ The precise nature of their relationship is left mysterious, constructed of contrary suggestions...on the question of her motives the text is characteristically elusive” (Belsey 385-386). While for different reasons, yet another of Doyle’s women is one of few words, and is also written with little importance to the development of the story. Though she proved quite integral to all the prior action that was the heart of the conflict in the tale, the lack of an important female character to the development of the tale proves to render Sherlock Holes as more effective.

The same is also true of Helen in “The Speckled Band”, whose “...feeble rational powers set her apart from Holmes... [for] Helen’s mind makes her only able to entertain ‘vague fears and suspicions’ in contrast to Holmes’s enlightened rapid deductions, ‘as swift as intuitions, and yet always founded on a logical basis’ (Hennessey and Mohan 400)”. In “The Speckled Band” Doyle uses a woman overcome with emotion and the loss of her sister to contrast Holmes’ deductions; yet in all of the aforementioned Sherlock tales, time and time again the thought skills of women are slighted by the lack of writing by Doyle, this lack of detail and development is intentional on Doyle’s part to further the deductive skills of Holmes.

Likewise Doyle uses few and selective details regarding the women of the Sherlock tales to further the stereotypes regarding international women. Ladies of other lands than England are often presented as lesser than their English countertypes, and typically serve to further the English ideal and elitist attitude than to develop the plot. While not exclusively xenophobic, Doyle’s descriptions of women do serve to present the English woman in a more favorable light, though on the whole the women of his tales are still presented as less capable as the male characters. Instances of this are seen in both “The Second Stain” and the earlier “The Noble Bachelor”.

“The Second Stain” serves to propagate the English elite through few details of an English woman, wife to the Secretary of State for European Affairs, and a Frenchwoman, Madame Henri Fournaye. The Englishwoman, Lady Hilda Trelawney Hope is presented as timid and fearful (the reader later finds out she has good reason to be, with the

blackmail of her already under way while she visit Holmes and is introduced to the audience). However Miss Fournaye seems eccentric to say the least for no apparent (or no given) reason. She becomes useless to Holmes as a potential witness in the case and thus drops out of the story entirely with no words for her conclusion or any real catharsis as for the fate of the fatally insane Frenchwoman.

In comparison, the Englishwoman, Lady Hope, is resented as perfectly level headed, though shy to say the least. The direct contrast between these women of different and conflicting nationalities intentionally serves to portray the English woman, and the English as a whole, as the elite. The same can be seen in the earlier “Noble Bachelor” tale in which an Englishwoman and a woman of California, America, are starkly contrasted. The characterization of Miss Hatty Doran, of America, is that of a seemingly vanished bride and is a portrayal of a woman who is: new age, has a mind of her own, manipulative, tomboyish, and self-sufficient. This type of woman is not one who is likely to be accepted among the Victorian English (certainly not an Englishwoman), and in fact it is probable that had Miss Doran not been engaged to a nobleman her world-view would have resulted in her being ostracized.

It is no coincidence that Doyle attributes the above characteristics to an American woman in his tale. Miss Doran is then starkly contrasted with her English maid, Flora Millar, who despite aiding and abetting the disappearance of Miss Doran, is presented as loyal and sympathetic while also virtuous. While both women committed acts unbecoming of women, and certainly less than truthful from the onset, the Englishwoman is again written by Doyle to gain the audience’s sympathy and forgiveness. In doing so, the Englishwoman is again presented as more virtuous, righteous, and thus the elite of the duo.

Doyle lastly uses the description of women to emphasize the patriarchal English society as prominent and unchanging, in lieu of a time that saw vast change in the role of women. Specifically applicable to “The Speckled Band” story; in which a father attempts to murder his own daughter for the rights of lands that have been left to her, wherein the emergence of The Married Women’s Property Act (1822) which marked a time in which women began to receive rights exclusive to their male betrothed, is made central to the plot development. This movement sparked an emergence of women’s rights, which also came with a desire to achieve and participate in more. With more rights, came confusion over desire; both in terms of occupation and domestic expectations (Hennessey and Mohan 394). In a society that dictated that property equated to power, women were beginning to see that they desired power more than they desired children and domestic duties. This movement sparked confusion over the role of women, a confusion that Doyle seemingly attempts to “rectify” in writing his female characters as domestic and not work-oriented (Hennessey and Mohan 394-397).

Even in “The Speckled Band” the women in question never directly stated that they desire the land, and the issue of women’s right to property is not what the story calls into question. In writing his female characters a feeble and victimized Doyle shows women as needing men to assist them in life, whether that man is one Sherlock Holmes to solve the case, or a husband—there is no truly independent woman in Doyle’s stories. And even in a case such as Helen Stoner’s, wherein a woman has a very real possibility

to become independent and powerful, she is written as mostly silent and has no material assistance to provide in her case and renders herself as needy.

The women of the Sherlock Holmes series are often rendered more like a *femme fetals* than an independent intellectuals. This portrayal renders the women as incapable of assisting in their cases before Holmes, as though they are incapable of dealing with their personal affairs without the assistance of a man. This structure serves to preserve the English patriarchal platform for society, while also commenting on the fallibility of females.

While it would be inaccurate to assert that Doyle resorts to female stereotypes and quick quips about the female race merely to belittle them, as many readers of “The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax” believe when Holmes states, “There is one correspondent who is a sure draw, Watson. That is the bank. Single ladies must live, and their passbooks are compressed diaries”; it cannot be ignored that the general effect of Doyle’s commentary regarding women has a depreciated tone and an overall assertion of males, often Sherlock Holes and Watson, as elite and required.

Doyle’s continued construction of the women of his stories as silent or unintelligent victims, while they usually initiate the story and bring the matter asserted to Holmes’ attention, brings into question his intentions toward women in his tales. Doyle is quite meticulous in his plot construction and character development; yet the women of his tales seem to go without detail or consideration. Doyle’s women merely serve to bring forth information, re-emerge only when necessary to the plot, and subsequent to the solving of the crime by Sherlock are often neglected as integral and left without detail. When Doyle does make mention of female characters, it is done so to convey an outcome that either serves to further Holmes’s powers of detection, further the belief that the English are the highest of cultural classes, or further the idea that a patriarchal England is the only *modus operandi*.

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