

# Approaches to Crime in the Sherlock Holmes Stories and the

## BBC's *Murder Rooms*

From Late-Victorian Anxieties to Twenty-First-Century Realism

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## Summary

This thesis will look at the representation of crime in the Sherlock Holmes stories of the nineteenth century, and that in the BBC's series *Murder Rooms: The Dark Beginnings of Sherlock Holmes*. The aim is to answer the following question: How does the way crime is represented in the Sherlock Holmes stories of the nineteenth century relate to the reality of that issue at the time the stories were written, and how does this compare to the representation of crime in *Murder Rooms*? I will analyse the crime milieu of late-Victorian Britain by examining crime statistics of the time, and the ways crime was seen by leading sociologists. I will also look at the presentation of crime in the twenty-three Sherlock Holmes stories that were published in the last decade of the nineteenth century, and compare this presentation to the historical evidence. This will show that there is a discrepancy between the two, as the stories shy away from presenting crimes that could be connected to larger issues in society, such as poverty, thus expressing a certain anxiety when it comes to these issues. An analysis of *Murder Rooms* will then show that this series moves away from the reluctance to present larger issues, again creating a contrast. Going against the premise of the stories that form its inspiration, *Murder Rooms* continually points out mishaps in society and critiques them.

Key words: Sherlock Holmes, crime, adaptation, *Murder Rooms: The Dark Beginnings of Sherlock Holmes*

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## Introduction

The first episode of BBC's *Murder Rooms: The Dark Beginnings of Sherlock Holmes* starts with a shot of a waterfall, followed by that of a deerstalker floating in the water. The iconic headpiece and the waterfalls will be recognised by those familiar with the Sherlock Holmes stories as a reference to the supposed death of the fictional detective in "The Final Problem". The fact that this series which centres on the birth of the Holmes stories begins with his death might be interpreted as rather ironic. However, its significance becomes clear at the end of the episode, when Doyle's journey to creating the detective has been related, which according to the voice-over led him to invent a character which "people believed in so much, that he could never die" ("Dr Bell"). In showing how the fictional detective came to be the series also indicates the need for such a character. *Murder Rooms* paints a grim picture of the times which are riddled with violence, poverty, and a police force that fails not only in crime management but also in crime detection. Even Dr Bell, who is presented as a proto-type Holmes cannot seem to be able to ensure the public's safety. Whereas the series engages with these issues of society to draw out why Holmes was created, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* and *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* seem to shy away from addressing these problems. This thesis will study this contrast and show that the stories' reluctance to deal with larger problems in society is connected to fin-de-siècle anxieties on these subjects, and it will explain how the added element of biographical facts opens up space in *Murder Rooms* to address issues that the source texts shied away from.

When the first issue of *The Strand Magazine* was published in January 1891, the introduction claimed that the magazine would include "special new features which have not hitherto found place in Magazine Literature" (Newnes 1). As the first of Arthur Conan Doyle's short stories, "A Scandal in Bohemia", was published in June of the same year, the magazine's initial claim seemed to come true. Not only did the publication of Doyle's *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* introduce a short story cycle which centred on the same lead characters, the stories also revolutionised the genre of detective fiction, and brought forth a character which would become a popular icon for many decades to come (Ashley 199).

As one of the most well-known examples of crime fiction, it is interesting to note that the first short stories about Sherlock Holmes were conceived at a time when anxieties about crime were at an all time high. The early reign of Queen Victoria had seen a significant rise in crime rates, which were answered by a positive change in crime management (Gillespie and Harpham 452). By the time Doyle introduced his mastermind detective, crime rates had significantly decreased (452). Anxieties about crime were however widespread, brought on by

a general pessimism that seemed to pervade the last decade of the nineteenth century, and the belief in degeneration: the idea that as people can develop into better versions of themselves, there is also the risk of them falling into decline (Pykett 13). As Michael Gillespie and John Harpham point out in their article “Sherlock Holmes, Crime, and the Anxieties of Globalisation”, the exaggerated fears of crime and violence that existed at the time were irrational, a mere fabrication of the public imagination (450).

These anxieties were also reflected in the writing of the time. By the late nineteenth century crime had already become a topic of public fascination and was written about extensively in newspapers and magazines, while it also made its way into the realm of fiction. The so-called ‘penny dreadfuls’ were one of the types of crime fiction that were popular before the 1890s, relating sensational stories of criminal activity and violence (Pittard 81). By the fin-de-siècle, people started to worry that these kinds of literature could have a potentially negative influence on its readers, fearing they would indulge in the same crimes they had read about. Anxieties about crime thus made its way into the realm of the written word, something which can also be seen in the introduction to the first edition of *The Strand Magazine*. The brief introduction, presumably written by the editor of the magazine, George Newnes, promises to supply “cheap, healthful” literature (Newnes 1). This inclined that unlike the penny dreadfuls, all the literature in *The Strand* would be safe for the public to read, including the Sherlock Holmes stories.

The fact that the Sherlock Holmes stories were written in a time when anxieties about crime were flourishing raises questions about how crime is presented in these stories. This thesis aims to answer the following question: How does the way crime is represented in the Sherlock Holmes stories of the nineteenth century relate to the reality of that issue at the time the stories were written, and how does this compare to the representation of crime in *Murder Rooms*? The goal is to scope out to what extent the stories reflected on the actual issues of crime apparent in society or responded to anxieties the public had on this topic. The subsequent step is to determine how this differs in the modern TV adaptation.

*Murder Rooms* is a particularly interesting adaptation to compare to the original stories because it does not take Holmes and Watson as its main characters, nor does it strictly follow any of the plots of the Sherlock Holmes stories. Instead, it focuses on Arthur Conan Doyle, and his mentor at medical school, Dr. Bell. The series relies on biographical facts about Doyle’s life as well as elements of the Sherlock Holmes stories to create a fictional account of what inspired Doyle to write his stories. The series thus focuses on the background to the stories, and in doing so space is opened up to go beyond their plots and engage with issues

that might not have been put forward in the original stories. This spin on the original stories sets *Murder Rooms* apart from the majority of Sherlock Holmes adaptations, and as Doyle's stories are one of the most adapted on film and television, this makes *Murder Rooms* a rather unique adaptation. However, the amount of academic interest in the series has been rather limited. The series is included as an entry in Alan Barnes's *Sherlock Holmes on Screen: The Complete Film and TV History*, and is briefly discussed in Tamara Wagner's "Transposing Sherlock Holmes across Time, Space, and Genre". The only other, rather more substantial, piece written about the series is a chapter in Iris Kleinecke-Bates's book *Victorians on Screen: The Nineteenth Century on British Television, 1994-2005*. Although these writings do provide a substantial basis for dissecting how *Murder Rooms* is put together, none of them focus precisely on the series' presentation of crime. Taking these writings as a starting point, this thesis will aim to fill this gap.

The first step in answering the question of how the two short story cycles of the 1890s and the 2001 adaptation relate to the issue of crime in late Victorian society is to investigate the crime milieu of the fin-de-siècle. I will provide an overview of the ways crime was being managed, what changes this management went through throughout the nineteenth century and what the main issues and problem areas were in fin-de-siècle Britain. Furthermore I will look at how crime was viewed by leading sociologists of the time. When I have established an overview of the historical context I will place the Holmes stories in them, ascertaining how they relate to this context. This will be my first chapter. In the second chapter I will turn my attention to *Murder Rooms* and analyse how crime is presented, and how this compares to the representation in the original stories.

## 1. Sherlock Holmes and Crime in Fin-de-siècle Victorian Society: Fiction vs. Reality

Crime was a problem in Victorian society as much as it is in ours today. However, this century laid the groundwork for crime management as we know it in our contemporary society (Maunder and Moore 1). As cities expanded and their social fabric changed, crime increased and people started calling for better crime regulations (2). Throughout the nineteenth century the ways crime were managed and penalised significantly changed, and crime rates dropped from the middle of the century onwards (Emsley 27). Despite these positive changes, anxieties about crime only seemed to rise, fuelled by extensive media coverage on the subject which was reaching an expanding reading public (Gillespie and Harpham 463). By the time Doyle's stories were first published in *The Strand Magazine*, the topic of crime had managed to get a firm hold on the public imagination of the British readers. The first two Sherlock Holmes short story cycles, which were published in the 1890s, can be shown to mirror fin-de-siècle anxieties about crime, thus reflecting the spirit of the time.

### 1.1 Changes in Crime Management and the Crime Milieu of the Fin-de-siècle

In the beginning of the nineteenth century England did not have a police force as we know it today. A system of unpaid constables had been in place for many centuries, and although this worked efficiently in smaller villages, it could not cope with the increasing amount of crime in the growing cities of the industrial revolution (Gillespie and Harpham 452). The eighteenth century writer Henry Fielding acknowledged that there was a problem and established the Bow Street Runners together with his brother John Fielding in 1750 (452). The main aim of this small group of constables was to solve crimes, as Fielding believed that catching major criminals through detective work was a better way to curb crime than to clamp down on punishment, which had been the government's approach up until that point (452). Although the Bow Street Runners would occasionally receive government support, it was not until 1829 that the first professional police force, the Metropolitan Police, was established. The main goal of this police force was not to solve crime—as had been the aim of its predecessor—but to prevent it. However, after several plots to assassinate Queen Victoria were unearthed, the call for an investigative body grew, and in 1842 this was established in the form of Scotland Yard (452). In his book *Crime and Society in England 1750-1900*, Clive Emsley claims that although crime rates gradually climbed until the end of the 1840s, the second half of the nineteenth century saw a gradual decline in crime when it came to theft and violence (27). One of the reasons for this might have been the ongoing professionalization of the police force, but Emsley also indicates other reasons, such as economic stabilisation after



the 1840s—or the hungry forties as he calls them (35). He explains that during the first part of the nineteenth century, peaks in crime rates often coincided with economic depression and high food prices (35). In the second half of the century the export market expanded, which led to more economic stability, while at the same time food prices stopped wavering (35).

Emsley points out that even though an overall decline in crime rates can be detected from 1850 onwards, these figures should not be taken at face value. At this time, the keeping of crime records was still new and in a developing stage. The government first started keeping records of indictable crime in England and Wales in 1905 (Emsley 18-19). In 1834 Samuel Redgrave came up with a new classification for types of offence, which is still largely used in England today (19). The six types of offence Redgrave distinguished were: Offences against the person (homicide, assault), offences against property involving violence (robbery etc.), offences against property not involving violence (larceny etc.), malicious offences against property (arson etc.), offences against the currency, and miscellaneous offences (including riot and treason) (19). Although this new classification helped in organising crime statistics, Emsley points out that these figures do not provide a reliable overview, as many outside influences are not accounted for in these figures (21). He argues that for one, not all the crimes committed were reported to the police, which is especially true when it comes to sexual assault, which many women and girls were afraid to report because of the strict moral codes in Victorian society (21,24). Furthermore, these rates are subject to the social, political, and economic context of a certain time (21). As mentioned before, in times of economic distress, crime rates would often peak. Other than that, changes in laws or policing can affect these figures, as well as the workings of the public imagination: if a certain crime is highlighted in the media and causes some anxiety among the public, these offences will be reported to the police more readily (22, 24, 35).

Even though Emsley gives a fair warning about the representativeness of the crime figures in the nineteenth century, he believes that these figures do give a general idea of how crime changed during this period. As established before, a decline in theft and violence can be detected throughout the second half of the century. However, the rates of housebreaking and burglary stayed roughly the same (27). The most common crime was small-scale theft, while three in four of all offenders were men, most of them fairly young—in their teens or early twenties (27).

Looking at the offenders more closely, a class distinction immediately becomes apparent. Theft, which was the most common crime throughout the nineteenth century, was mostly committed by people from the poorer classes, most thefts being petty and not

involving large sums of money (48). Emsley argues that as the quantity of crime was more important to the public than the quality of the crime, the public increasingly saw crime as a problem that was tied to social class (48). Interestingly enough, most sociologists of the time denied the link between poverty and crime, rather focussing on the lower classes' 'immorality' or 'debauchery' as reasons behind their heightened involvement in criminal activities (49). This idea was also held by Henry Mayhew, who took to the more destitute parts of London to form a description of the capital's poor. He sympathised with the people he came across but he did not see a direct link between poverty and crime. Instead, he believed that living in poverty destroyed people's morality, which would then lead to crime (60). Charles Booth, another Victorian sociologist, saw a correlation between criminal activity and people's social conditions and living environments (Joyce 7). He drew poverty maps of London, and his description of the lowest class, class A, shows this correlation as it reads: "The lowest class which consists of some occasional labourers, street sellers, loafers, criminals and semi-criminals. Their life is the life of savages, with vicissitudes of extreme hardship and their only luxury is drink" (Booth 87, 88). Booth's maps showed that the most destitute areas of London where the poorest classes lived were situated in the East End, while the better to do classes clustered in the West End.

As a result of ideas such as Mayhew and Booth's, crime was increasingly regarded as something personal instead of public. If the sociologists of the time had admitted there was a clear-cut connection between poverty and crime, the problem would most likely have been regarded as a matter of the state, as the underlying causes of such poverty like low wages and high food prices would have to be taken into consideration. However, sociologists focussed on the fact that these poor people were living a life of debauchery, and that it was things like drunkenness, bad parenting, or reading unhealthy literature which led them to criminal activities (Emsley 64). Another idea was that people chose to be criminals, as Henry Mayhew also stipulates in his reports for the *Morning Chronicle*, in which he divided the poor into three groups, one of them constituting those who made a conscious decision not to work (60). Ideas like these were backed up later in the century by the theory that hereditary traits were responsible for criminal inclinations in people, a theory that emerged from new developments in the medical sciences (64). Through this belief in the individual reasons behind crime, increasingly less blame could be laid on the state.

Even though crime was mostly seen as a problem that was tied to the lower classes, it was also acknowledged that members of the upper classes could be involved in criminal activity. However, the upper classes were mostly tied to white-collar crimes such as fraud and

embezzlement, and these offences were mostly seen as incidents (49). Unlike offenders from the lower classes, they were not seen as part of the ‘criminal class’, but rather as the odd ones out in their own social milieu (49).

The media played an important role when it comes to the perception of crime in the nineteenth century. The abovementioned crimes of fraud and embezzlement were surely discussed in the newspapers, but the stories that got the most attention in the press were those that included the more sensational elements. Stories of murder and violence, like the case of Jack the Ripper, sent shockwaves throughout the nation, and a lot of attention was given to stories like these in the press (36). A result of this was that anxieties about crime did not comply with the reality of the criminal milieu of the time. As mentioned earlier, small-scale theft was the most common crime, but most of these small offences were not given any prominent attention in the papers. Homicide and violent robbery on the other hand received a lot of media attention, even though these offences were much less common. According to Emsley, the average number of homicides was three hundred and fifty a year in the last decade of the nineteenth century, and in most cases the murderer already had some kind of relationship to their victim (38). The most common cases involved husbands killing their wives, our mothers killing their children (40). These statistics show that even though the public was most anxious about violence coming from strangers, in reality it was often the domestic sphere that was the scene of murder and violence.

### *1.2 The Representation of Crime in the Sherlock Holmes Stories of the Fin-de-siècle: the Upper Class Criminal*

The two Sherlock Holmes short story cycles that appeared on the pages of *The Strand Magazine* in the beginning of the 1890s, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* and *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, consisted of respectively twelve and eleven short stories. In these twenty-three stories in total, murder is the most common crime dealt with, occurring in six of the stories. The second most common crime is theft, which happens in five of the stories, while the third most common situation is that there turns out to be no crime at all. Other types of crime that are dealt with in the stories are blackmail, breaking and entering, kidnapping, begging, and the forgery of money.

These general statistics already show a discrepancy with the actual crime milieu the stories were written in. As mentioned before, murder was statistically never one of the most prominent crimes in late Victorian society, but in these two short story cycles it is the most common crime dealt with. Furthermore, small-scale theft, which according to Emsley was the

most common crime in the late Victorian period, does not occur in any of the stories. Thefts that are presented in the stories revolve around important documents, objects of great monetary value, and in one case, a particularly well-bred race-horse. Other than these differences, the criminals in the stories are often upper-class individuals or members of old aristocratic families. In “The Speckled Band” the reader finds out that the criminal is no other than Dr. Grimesby Roylott of Stoke-Moran, the last survivor of an aristocratic family which had lived in considerably wealth in Surrey since Anglo-Saxon times. “The Reigate Squire” and “The Boscombe Valley Mystery” are also among the stories that present upper class families involved in crime. This contrasts sharply with the aforementioned idea that crime was mostly a problem that was tied to the lowest classes in society. Location is also of the essence here. As Simon Joyce already pointed out in his book *Capital Offences: Geographies of Class and Crime in Victorian London*; whereas Charles Booth clusters criminal activity in the East End and South London, Doyle’s criminals are mostly people living in the West End of London, or living outside the city in the countryside of Surrey, Kent, and Devon (145).

In search for an explanation for this discrepancy, Joyce takes up the claim that detective and crime fiction moved away from presenting crimes committed by lower class individuals because it was an escapist genre, and people did not want to be confronted with the destitution related to these classes—which could be observed in their own society (Joyce 6). However, he immediately follows this with a counter argument, claiming that this explanation would not make sense as other pieces of writing of the time—like that of Booth—showed a fascination with lower-class culture (8). Even in Doyle’s short story cycles there is some engagement with the environment of the lower classes, most prominently in “The Man with the Twisted Lip”. This short story is the odd one out in the sense that it is the only one of the twenty-three that is set in the East End of London. The reader is introduced to the opium dens and gin-shops of Upper Swandam Lane, “a vile alley lurking behind the high wharves which line the north side of the river to the east of London Bridge” (Doyle, “Twisted Lip” 111). Doyle gives a detailed account of the place, describing not only the opium den’s exterior which included a flight of stairs “worn hollow in the centre by the ceaseless tread of drunken feet”, but also painted a vivid picture of the inside of the den, “thick and heavy with the brown opium smoke and terraced with wooden berths, like the forecabin of an emigrant ship (Doyle, “Twisted Lip” 111). These descriptions paint a thoroughly negative picture of the East End, where drunkards and addicts seek refuge in their ‘dens’. It also shows that Doyle was not afraid to introduce his readers to a milieu associated to the lower classes, which according to Joyce, the late-Victorian reading public was already familiar with through the

work of other writers like Mayhew and Dickens (Joyce 147). “The Man with the Twisted Lip” might be the only Sherlock Holmes story that engages with the London of the lower classes, but it does constitute a claim against Doyle’s fiction being escapist.

Even though the story is set in the East End, “The Man with the Twisted Lip” still presents the reader with a criminal that comes from the upper classes, shying away from engaging with lower class criminals. The story follows the disappearance of Mr Neville St Clair, who is described by Holmes as a respectable gentleman living on the outskirts of London in a small village called Lee. Mr St Clair works in London, but his exact occupation is unknown to Holmes. One day, as Mr St Clair’s wife is in London to pick up a parcel, she sees her distraught husband at a window in a small house in the East End of London. Convinced that her husband is in trouble she calls in the help of some policemen she encounters nearby, and they enter the house where Mr St Clair was last seen by his wife. However, on entering the room he was suspected to be in, there is no trace of the gentleman. Instead, a crippled beggar by the name of Hugh Boone is found in the room, who says to be ignorant of anyone entering his lodgings. These facts, which Holmes relates to Watson in the beginning of the story, give the impression that the crime was probably committed by Boone, who is described as a “sinister cripple” and “creature”, thus not putting him in a favourable light with the reader (Doyle, “Twisted Lip” 118, 119). As the story progresses, the mystery is solved by Holmes, exposing Hugh Boone not as the killer of Mr St Clair, but as being this gentleman in disguise. St Clair then confesses that he makes his living by begging, but faced with being exposed to his wife he maintained his cover in fear of his children ever finding out their father was less than the gentleman they thought him to be. The exposure of St Clair does away with the initial supposition of the murder being committed by a member of the lower classes, and thus moves the story away from the subject of lower class crime.

Upper class criminals are presented in multiple stories in the two cycles, which can be interpreted as a reaction to late Victorian anxieties about crime. Next to “The Man with the Twisted Lip”, there are six other stories in the two short stories cycles that present the reader with a criminal from the upper classes, while half of the stories revolve around upper class families. To understand why Doyle chose to focus on the upper classes, it is important to return to some of the ideas circulating in the second half of the nineteenth century, introduced by sociologists of the time. As mentioned before, Victorian sociologists were adamant in claiming that criminality among the poorer classes was a side-effect of their immoral lifestyle, and had less to do with low wages and unemployment pushing these people to criminal activity out of necessity. Lower class criminality was thus not seen as the result of social

problems for which society should take responsibility, but as individual incidents due to these people's nature. This denial of underlying problems helped soothe anxieties about crime: it was easier to see crime as a string of individual incidents that have to be removed from society, instead of there being one great overarching problem that needed to be solved to lower crime rates altogether. Doyle's stories achieve a similar evasiveness by presenting the reader with upper class criminals, whose one-off crimes are easily eradicated from society by Holmes. In "The Man with the Twisted Lip" the impression is given that Hugh Boone might have killed Mr St Clair, but as Boone is a beggar, this might suggest that he committed his crime because of his poverty, connecting the crime to an underlying social problem. Doyle then moves away from this initial impression and presents St Clair as an imposter, ensuring that the connection to any social problem is lost. The crime that is left is that of begging, but St Clair confesses that he turned to this activity out of choice, not because he had to. Exposed by Holmes, St Clair promises to stop begging once and for all, and in turn the case will be hushed up by the police. As St Clair is terrified of the case coming to light, the story ends with a certainty: Hugh Boone is no more.

The other stories involving upper class criminals end with similar certainties, as the motives connected to the crimes make sure these events are exceptions. More than half of the stories in which the criminal is from the upper classes revolve around family disputes. A common motive in these stories is inheritance. In "A Case of Identity" Miss Mary Sutherland comes to Holmes in the hopes that he can find out what happened to her fiancé Hosmer Angel, who disappeared on the morning of their wedding day. As it turns out, Hosmer Angel was in fact Miss Sutherland's stepfather, Mr. Windibank. He deceived his stepdaughter in the hopes that the heartbreak caused by her fiancé's disappearance would stop her from ever marrying, so that he would still have access to her allowance. Similar motives are found in "The Copper Beeches" and "The Speckled Band", although in these stories the criminals take more extreme measures to ensure the inheritance they are after. In "The Copper Beeches" Mr Rucastle imprisons his own daughter because she is unwilling to sign over her inheritance to him, and in "The Speckled Band" Dr Grimesby Roylott of Stoke Moran resorts to murder to stop his stepdaughters from marrying and taking away a big sum of his inheritance. In "The Reigate Squire" the reader is also presented with upper class criminals, but here the dispute centres around land instead of money, and it does not take place within one family, but two upper class families are battling each other. "The Boscombe Valley Mystery" also sees two families going against each other, and just like "The Reigate Squire", the dispute ends in murder. However, the murder in "The Boscombe Valley Mystery" is more an act of revenge

mixed with despair, and has nothing to do with inheritance. What these crimes have in common is that they are all isolated events in the sense that they are not connected to bigger, systematic problems in society, like poverty or substance abuse, which are much harder to eradicate (Gillespie and Harpham 466). Instead, these perpetrators are spurred on by greed or revenge, which are both very singular motives. Doyle relies on motives like these to ensure that the committed crimes are anomalies, which in turn are easily eradicated from society by Holmes (Joyce 146). The use of these motives shows the underlying anxiety to deal with larger issues in society, while at the same time they help soothe them: every individual crime solved by Holmes is a step closer to a less dangerous Britain.

In multiple stories the criminal is set free by Holmes after they have confessed, or the true facts of the crime are not related to the police, which are also ways in which the singularity of these cases are emphasised. In some instances the wrongdoer gets away because there was simply no crime involved for which they could be legally persecuted, which occurs in “A Case of Identity”. Although the wrongdoer in this instance, Mr Windibank, might be morally corrupt, he cannot legally be called a criminal, which assures the reader that he does not pose a threat to society. There are also cases where Holmes is assured that the wrongdoer will not stray again, as is the case in “The Man with the Twisted Lip”, where exposure is enough to withhold Mr St Clair from taking up begging again. In “The Copper Beeches”, the police is never informed of any of the crimes committed by Mr Rucastle and his accomplices, but as the man becomes an invalid by the end of the story, his physical impairment poses as a reassurance that he is no longer a threat to society. A similar situation occurs in “The Boscombe Valley Mystery”. In this story Holmes and Watson find themselves in rural Herefordshire, sent for by Inspector Lestrade who is puzzled by the murder of a wealthy man of Boscombe Valley, called Mr Charles McCarthy. Holmes soon finds out that McCarthy was murdered by his neighbour, Mr John Turner. Turner was being blackmailed by McCarthy, who threatened to reveal the former’s criminal past as a highwayman in Australia. McCarthy was planning on having his son marry Turner’s daughter, thus obtaining Turner’s estate and inheritance. Objecting to this, Turner murdered McCarthy in protection of his daughter. As Turner confesses his deed to Holmes, it becomes clear that he is a dying man, suffering from diabetes. Knowing that Turner will not have long to live, Holmes decides to not disclose his findings to the police. Although Turner’s physical state probably played a role in Holmes decision, his motive also seems to weigh heavily for the detective. “I am no official agent”, Holmes explains, “I understand that it was your daughter who required my presence here, and I am acting in her interests” (Doyle, “Boscombe Valley” 87). Holmes seems to be aware that

even though Turner committed a crime, he did it because of very singular reasons, and will not be prone to crime again.

An interesting case in point is “The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle”, in which Holmes again let’s a criminal go, partly because the story takes place at Christmas—He tells Watson: “Besides, it is the season of forgiveness”— but more importantly because the detective is convinced that this particular man “will not go wrong again” (Doyle, “Blue Carbuncle” 153). This story differs from the ones discussed above because in this case the criminal comes from the working classes. James Ryder is head-attendant at the prestigious Hotel Cosmopolitan in London and stole the Blue Carbuncle, a precious stone, from a wealthy Countess staying at the hotel, getting help from the Countess’s maid. However, Ryder seemed to repent his deed almost instantly, as the fear of arrest plagued him so much that he fed the stone to one of his sister’s geese in an attempt to hide it. Holmes acknowledges the criminal’s stress and unease, and is convinced to let him go. The idea that the crime in this story was just a one-off event is thus certainly there, but it is established differently: the criminal does not have a clear cut motive like his upper class counterparts that would ensure his crime was an anomaly.

### *1.3 The Representation of Crime in the Sherlock Holmes Stories of the Fin-de-siècle: the Habitual Offender*

Even though most stories in the two cycles present criminals with motives that ensure them as one-off offenders, habitual criminals are also presented in some of the stories. Holmes comes into contact with a hardened criminal in “The Red-Headed League”, and faces his arch nemesis and criminal mastermind Moriarty in “The Final Problem”. In “The Stockbroker’s Clerk” and “The Engineer’s Thumb” there are gangs of criminals at work. Unlike the stories discussed in the preceding paragraphs, the crimes that are presented in these stories are not isolated events in the sense that they are the only transgressions made by the criminals, neither are they the result of very singular motives. Instead, these crimes are the work of individuals that do not have very specific reasons for committing their crimes; it is just what they do. The criminal in “The Red-Headed League”, John Clay, seems to be a rather well-rounded one, as he is described by inspector Jones as a “murderer, thief, smasher, and forger” (Doyle, “Red-Headed League” 42). Holmes also seems to be familiar with him, as after capturing Clay he confesses: “I have had one or two little scores of my own to settle with Mr Clay” (Doyle, “Red-Headed League” 46-47). Seemingly escaped from Holmes’ grasp before, the capture of this criminal thus seems of some significance to the detective. In “The



Stockbroker's Clerk" two brothers steal the identity of Holmes' client Hall Pycroft in order to rob a financial house called Mawson & Williams. A newspaper article read by Watson explains that the brothers were famous forgers, and had only recently returned from five years of penal servitude. Like John Clay, these criminals seem to have built up a certain reputation which confirms their status as habitual offenders. The gang of forgers in "The Engineer's Thumb" do not seem to have made a name for themselves as such, but the police have been on the hunt for them for a while. The nature of their crime is more in the form of a business: they have made the illegal act of forging money their fulltime occupation, and for that reason can be called habitual criminals as well.

These offenders could be described as what Henry Mayhew would call "professional criminals" (Emsley 62). According to Mayhew these people constituted for the most part what he liked to call "the Dangerous Classes", and he believed that these professionals rejected real work of any kind and preferred to live by stealing from others (62). Their crimes included burglary, robbery, poaching, and smuggling (62). In terms of their activities, Doyle's habitual offenders seem to fit Mayhew's image of professional criminals. They too have rejected doing any legitimate work, and burglary and robbery are among their committed offences.

However, when Mayhew talked about the dangerous classes he situated these within the poorer ranks of society. Although the knowledge we receive of Doyle's criminals is rather limited, their descriptions do not necessarily paint a picture of them being from the poorer classes. John Clay is said to have royal blood, and he has been educated at Eton and Oxford, indicating that at one point in his life he was living in relative wealth. The money forgers from "The Engineer's Thumb" are described as gentleman, both in manner and in dress. Not much is known about the two brothers in "The Stockbroker's Clerk", but no indication is given that they might belong to the poorer classes either. As for Moriarty, he is described as "a man of good birth and excellent education" (Doyle, "Final Problem" 486).

An answer for this discrepancy can again be found by looking at some of the ideas held by leading sociologists of the time. By the time the first of Doyle's short stories were being published, Mayhew's presumption of there being a criminal class that choose a life of crime still held. However, the connection to class was slightly loosened by new ideas surrounding heredity and those linked to new developments in the medical sciences (Emsley 64). Criminality was no longer strictly seen as a result of being part of a certain class that was associated with immorality. Instead, there was a growing belief that criminal inclinations were tied to the individual, even before birth (65). One idea was that criminality was in your blood, passed down through the generations (65). Another put the blame on the environment people

lived in, specifically focussing on bad parenting (65). This individualisation of the problem meant that the firm connection between crime and class was slightly loosened, which in turn enabled Doyle to present his readers with habitual offenders that did not necessarily come from the poorer classes. At the same time these new ideas could be seen as another way of dissolving crime as a public problem. Viewing crimes as individual incidents meant they were more easily eradicated from society, thus soothing anxieties on the subject.

The reliance on habitual criminals that do not come from the lower classes in the Sherlock Holmes stories seems to achieve the same effect. By presenting habitual criminals that do not have a background in poverty, the threat of their crimes being the result of larger social issues is deleted, and the criminals become individual problems that are easily rid from society by Holmes, soothing readers' anxieties on this subject. In some instances the stories express the idea that crime is hereditary, emphasising the individuality of the cases even more. This occurs most notably in "The Final Problem", when Holmes talks about Dr Moriarty's "hereditary tendencies of the most diabolical kind" (Doyle, "Final Problem" 486). As Holmes introduces Watson to the character of Moriarty he confesses that in him he "had at last met an antagonist who was my intellectual equal", and describes him as "the Napoleon of crime", "the organiser of half that is evil and of nearly all that is undetected in this great city", thus presenting him as a most dangerous character, and a serious threat to society (Doyle, "Final Problem" 487). However, as the cause of Moriarty's criminal nature is inherent to him—the "criminal strain in his blood"—the professor's demise guarantees a return to safety, and the reader is somewhat assured of this demise by the presence of Sherlock Holmes (Doyle, "Final Problem" 486). As is the case with Doyle's upper class one-off offenders, the individuality of these habitual offenders is stressed, although in a different way. With the one-off offenders their motive reassures the reader: the criminal resorted to their deed because of very specific reasons, and their capture ensures it will not happen again. This does not hold for the habitual offenders as their criminal activity is not limited to one event, but in their case the reader is assured that they resort to crime because of their character, which again means that with their capture, the crime ends.

#### *1.4 The Absence of Crime*

So far this thesis has examined how anxieties about crime are represented in these stories by looking at the criminals, but the absence of crime in some of these stories can also be shown to be an indicator of these anxieties. In four of Holmes and Watson's adventures no crime turns out to have been committed, even though this may have been supposed at the

beginning. In “A Case of Identity”, “The Crooked Man”, “The Yellow Face”, and “The Noble Bachelor” there is no crime in the legal sense, although certainly the first of these could be interpreted as a moral crime—Mr. Windibank deceives his own step-daughter for personal gain. To understand why these detective stories lack any crime it is important to look at the medium they were published in. As stated earlier, George Newnes wanted to provide literature for the masses that he saw as “absolutely pure” (qtd. in Pittard 67). His *The Strand Magazine* was meant to be read by the entire family, and thus had to provide literature that would ensure its readers’ cultural health (Pittard 68). Being published in *The Strand*, Doyle’s stories had to make sure they fitted in with the overarching principle of the magazine. According to Peter McDonald, Doyle wrote by some self-employed rules—to not make the criminal a hero and keep the number of legally punishable crimes to a minimum— in order to comply with the wishes of his publishers, but also to protect his own good name (qtd. in Pittard 84). With these rules, Doyle hoped to reject claims of his stories having the sensational elements that were inherent to the sensational novels and penny dreadfuls, which were believed to be harmful (Pittard 81,84). Both of these crime narratives were popular before the 1890s but came to be seen as threats; the sensational novel because of its sympathetic approach to criminals, and the penny dreadful because of its explicit portrayal of violence (Pittard 81). As mentioned briefly in the introduction, ideas arose throughout the second half of the nineteenth century that literature like this could influence its readers, putting them up to crime and violence themselves. The sensational novel in particular brought criminal activity into the middle class family in its narrative, which was seen as threatening for the audience of *The Strand Magazine*, which mostly consisted of members of that particular class (81). To fight the “invasion of a working-class literature usurping the settings of the middle-class romance” who were “bringing a contagious criminality with it”, Newnes then tried to steer away from these kinds of literature (81). His attempt to do so can then be seen as a way of trying to soothe middle-class anxieties about crime, which is then similarly done in Doyle’s stories. The four stories mentioned above might have an inclination of the sensational through the initial suppositions of crimes committed—“The Crooked Man” in first instance leads the reader to believe a murder has happened within an upper-class family— these suppositions are diffused throughout the stories, disabling the sensational elements. These rather obvious rejections of the sensational can then be traced back to be a result of efforts to fight reader’s anxieties.

*The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* and *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* mirror fin-de-siècle anxieties about crime and at the same time provide a cure for these anxieties in the

form of Holmes. As anxieties about crime were at an all-time high during the last decades of the nineteenth century, sociologists of the time were adamant to deny any connection between crime and larger issues in society. This meant that they rather saw crimes as individual events that could easily be eradicated from society, instead of them being the result of larger underlying issues in society, like poverty. Mirroring these anxieties, the Sherlock Holmes stories present a similar evasiveness to deal with larger problems in society. One of the ways this is achieved is through the reliance on upper class criminals, whose singular motives ensured that the crimes committed by them were one-off events. Often these criminals are released after their crime, emphasising the fact that their transgressions were one-off events, and that they do not pose a further threat to society. A similar approach can be noted when habitual offenders are presented, who are never from the lower classes, and often hereditary traits are used to explain their criminal behaviour. This is again used to emphasise the individuality of these cases. Lastly, some stories do not present crime at all, even though the reader is made to believe otherwise at the beginning. The sensational element of crime is diffused in these stories, which can be traced back to anxieties on this topic held by the publishers of *The Strand Magazine*. While the stories mirror anxieties about crime in several ways, they also present readers with a constant factor in the form of Sherlock Holmes. His superhuman powers eradicate these individual crimes from society one by one, soothing readers' anxieties as a result.

## 2. BBC's *Murder Rooms*: A Critical Look at the Victorian Crime Milieu through the Fictionalised Life of Doyle

Alan Barnes' *Sherlock Holmes on Screen*, which claims to provide a complete overview of Sherlock Holmes adaptations on film and television, gives a fair indication of the immense magnitude of Holmes' screen presence. Barnes' overview shows that every decade of the twentieth century saw multiple adaptations of Doyle's original stories, and in the introduction Barnes contests that as the stories were written not much before film became a popular medium, "it would be possible [...] to observe almost every historical, cultural and technological development in the moving image purely through the changing representations of Sherlock Holmes" (Barnes 8). Republished in 2011, the book includes numerous new adaptations, as well as a foreword by recent adaptor Steven Moffat—co-creator of BBC's *Sherlock* (2010)—who praises Barnes for not judging any of the films by authenticity, but rather as the cultural products they are. As such, Barnes has included many adaptations that considerably stray from the original stories, in terms of plot and characters. One of these adaptations is David Pirie's *Murder Rooms: The Dark Beginnings of Sherlock Holmes*, first aired in January 2001. *Murder Rooms* tells the story of Arthur Conan Doyle's early life, which inspired him to write his famous stories. Taking biographical facts about Doyle's life as a starting point the series then adds a heavy dose of fiction to this, while at the same time invoking a world very similar to that we know from Doyle's stories. In the narrative space opened up by the addition of biographical facts *Murder Rooms* explores issues in society which were shied away from in the original Sherlock Holmes stories. Addressing mishaps in society such as the mistreatment of the poorer classes and police corruption, *Murder Rooms* presents these issues as incentives for the creation of the great detective.

### 2.1 *Blurring of Fact in Fiction in Murder Rooms: The Dark Beginnings of Sherlock Holmes*

*Murder Rooms* includes many references to the original stories, most notably through a remake of the Holmes and Watson dynamic. In her book *Victorians on Screen*, Iris Kleinecke-Bates describes the construction of *Murder Rooms* as such: "a fictional character becomes the inspiration for a fictional drama about the historical figure of Arthur Conan Doyle" (110). Indeed, *Murder Rooms* is less an adaptation of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, or any of the subsequent short story cycles about the detective, but rather uses these as an inspiration for the story of their conception. At the same time the series puts forward the notion that Doyle's experiences as presented were the inspiration for the Sherlock Holmes stories, which meant they should constitute a clear link to

the originals. The most obvious way it achieves this is by making Doyle part of a prototype Holmes and Watson duo, as he fulfils the role of Watson, and Bell that of Holmes. Although Bell is a medical man and not a consulting detective, he does employ many of the same techniques as Holmes does, relying also on the science of deduction. In the first episode, titled “Dr Bell and Mr Doyle”, Doyle is initially very much unconvinced by Bell’s methods. The first time the two meet—this occurs in a laboratory reminiscent of Holmes and Watson’s first meeting in “A Study in Scarlet”—Doyle, unaware that he is addressing Dr Bell, admits that after reading one of the doctor’s articles he thinks him a charlatan, who sound “as ridiculous as the rest” (“Dr Bell”). Even after finding out later that the man he was addressing was in fact Dr Bell himself, Doyle remains unconvinced of his methods, which prompts Bell to invite Doyle to be his clerk. As Doyle works with Bell he becomes increasingly aware that his tutor has other occupations next to his work as a medical professor at the university, as he is occasionally called away upon mysterious engagements. Doyle soon finds out that Bell works as a forensic consultant, helping the Edinburgh police force solve crimes that puzzle them. The term forensic consultant is very close to that of Sherlock Holmes, who calls himself a consultant detective, and “the only one in the world” for that matter (Doyle, “Study Scarlet” 23). As soon as Doyle becomes aware of Bell’s other occupation he is whisked away to solve his first case with him, kick-starting the Holmes-Watson dynamic between the two.

As the duo start working on cases together, more references to the original stories are brought into the series. The first case they embark on together involves a man poisoning his wife by exposing her to a lethal doses of gas, which infiltrates her room from another nearby. Barnes points out the similarities of this case to that of “The Speckled Band”, in which the threat also comes from a neighbouring room (Barnes 130). The only difference between the two is that in “The Speckled Band” the lethal task is performed by a snake instead of gas (130). Another, rather overt reference to the original stories is made some time after this first case, when Bell inspects Doyle’s pocket-watch in a final attempt to sway his clerk that his methods are effective. This instance is a direct reference to *The Sign of the Four*, in which Holmes examines Watson’s pocket-watch, inferring more from it than Watson would have liked. Like Watson, Doyle calls Bell’s deductions “unkind” and believes he must have had some knowledge of his family history, but is eventually persuaded by the professor’s methods (“Dr Bell”). As they move on to the next mystery, one the characters receives a parcel which contains a pair of cut-off ears. This is again an allusion to one of the original stories, as similar events occur in “The Adventure of the Cardboard Box” (Kleinecke-Bates 106).

The episodes following “Dr Bell and Mr Doyle” seem to contain significantly less references to the original stories. There is a slight reference to “A Study in Scarlet” to be found in “The Photographer’s Chair”, which introduces a doctor who used to work at St. Bartholomew’s Hospital, the place where Watson and Holmes meet for the first time. The most overt reference to the original stories is made in the second episode, titled “The Patient’s Eyes”. This episode focuses on a young woman who is being haunted by a mysterious cyclist, which is reminiscent of the happenings in “The Solitary Cyclist”. Apart from these, references to the original stories seem to be scarce in the four remaining episodes. However, as is the case in the Sherlock Holmes stories, the series present the viewer with a reassuring and constant factor in the form of Dr Bell: if there is a mystery he will be there to solve it, reoccurring as faithfully as his fictional counterpart.

Although the direct references to the Sherlock Holmes stories seem to fizzle out after the first episode, the series relies on biographical facts about Doyle’s life that are integrated throughout the episodes. The series tracks Doyle’s life from his education at medical school in Edinburgh, to him setting up a private practise in Southsea, which happened in 1882 (Kleinecke-Bates 105-106). While in Southsea, Doyle gets interested in spiritualism—this happens in the third episode, “The Photographer’s Chair”—which was indeed something the author was involved with in several periods of his life. The series thus seems to follow the different stages of Doyle’s life as they actually happened, but at the same time these episodes from his life are heavily fictionalised. Doyle was indeed lectured by Dr Joseph Bell at Edinburgh University, starting in 1878, but Doyle never became Bell’s clerk, and the murder investigations they embark on together are also fictional. However, Pirie’s proposition of Bell as the original Holmes is not entirely a product of his imagination. As Pirie has admitted, he was inspired by a letter written by Arthur Conan Doyle to Joseph Bell, in which he confessed to his former mentor that “it is certainly to you that I owe Sherlock Holmes” (qtd. in Kleinecke-Bates 109). Pirie thus used this confession and built his series around it. Another element of Doyle’s life that returns in the series is the mental illness of Doyle’s father. Early on in the first episode the viewer is introduced to Doyle’s father, who ends up in an asylum near the end of the episode. Doyle’s difficult relationship with his father is a topic that is frequently returned to throughout the series, and also helps Doyle get closer to his fiancée to-be, Elspeth Scott, who has lost her father as well. Elspeth is an important factor in the series, as her death becomes one of the main motivating factors for Pirie’s Doyle to fight crime together with Bell, and try to catch Elspeth’s killer. Moreover, Elspeth’s death is presented as an incentive for Doyle to create his fictional detective. As the voice-over at the end of the first

episode explains: “out of the pain something came [...] Someone who could’ve helped us and who would have won as surely as the doctor lost: the ultimate consulting detective” (“Dr Bell”). Although she has an important role in the series, Elspeth is an invention of Pirie, and a tragic love story never motivated Doyle to write his stories. There is some truth to Elspeth’s killer Neill, who, according to the end notes, was hanged at Newgate Prison in 1892 (“Dr Bell”). The end note also suggests the serial killer attended medical school alongside Doyle, but there are no implications the two were ever friends. Just as many other occasions in the series, Pirie used biographical facts about Doyle’s life in his narratives, but embedded these in his larger, fictional stories.

The incorporation of biographical facts about Doyle opens up narrative space to explore issues of crime that were shied away from in the original stories. As the preceding paragraphs have shown, Pirie’s *Murder Rooms* seems to operate in two different ways. On the one hand it could be called a Sherlock Holmes adaption, as it draws heavily on the original stories in terms of plot, characters and dialogue. However, the series has a different focus: “the dark beginnings of Sherlock Holmes”, with Arthur Conan Doyle and Dr Joseph Bell as the main characters. In that respect the series seems to lean more in the direction of a literary biopic, even though it does not give an exhaustive account of Doyle’s life but only focuses on what inspired him to write his famous stories. These accounts are heavily fictionalised, which, as Jeremy Strong explains in his article “BBC America’s Fleming and the Trouble with Author Biopics”, has to do with literary biopics’ double duty. He explains that on the one hand the audience expects works like these to resonate with biographical facts of the person’s life, while at the same time there has to be some connection to the author’s work, which is why people are interested to begin with (Strong). In *Murder Rooms* this combination of factors has an interesting result, as this blurring of fact and fiction opens up space to discuss issues that in the original stories were shied away from. Tamara Wagner explains in her article “Transposing Sherlock Holmes across Time, Space, and Genre” that *Murder Rooms* “capitalizes on a foregrounding of historical background material”, and accentuates “the social, cultural, and scientific discourses of the time” (212). This foregrounding of historical background material is achieved through the series’ incorporation of biographical facts about Doyle’s life. This addition frees the series from any expectancy of fidelity to a literary source, and creates a narrative space in which certain issues can be addressed that the original stories shied away from (Kleinecke-Bates 111). Facts about Doyle’s life, like his medical education in Edinburgh form the basis of the fictional story about what inspired him to write the Sherlock Holmes stories. Within this fictional story issues like the mistreatment of the lower



classes of society and police corruption are engaged with, which also function as incentives for Doyle to create his superhuman detective.

## 2.2 Pirie's Doyle and the Plight of the Poorer Classes

The most obvious way in which *Murder Rooms* sets itself apart from the original stories is by presenting issues of crime that pertain to the poorer classes of society. As mentioned in the previous chapter, none of the stories in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* and *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* deal with the lower classes, except for “The Man with the Twisted Lip”. This story is the first and only in these short story cycles in which Holmes steps into the streets of London’s East End for a suspected murder enquiry, his chief suspect being an old beggar. As it turns out, the beggar is in fact a respected gentleman, and the presence of lower class characters becomes as scarce as in the other stories. Such a reluctance to deal with the poorer classes is in no way reconstructed in *Murder Rooms*, which in one of the first scenes of the first episode already brings the viewer into “one of the most depraved and colourful streets”, not of London, but Edinburgh (“Dr Bell”). Here we see a young Doyle in the Old Town of Edinburgh, giving money to a fiddler, who according to the voice over “began it, and I will never forget him” (“Dr Bell”). The ‘it’ alludes to Doyle’s interest in criminal detection, and all is explained later in the episode when Doyle’s violin player is found dead on the street. When Doyle arrives on the scene, a crowd has formed around the dead man, among whom are a policeman and passing gentleman who have already concluded that the man died from alcohol poisoning. When Doyle contests this his protestations are quickly swept under the carpet by the gentleman: “it is a common enough occurrence, he was a drunken beggar!” (“Dr Bell”). Within minutes *Murder Rooms* has already proven it is nothing like the literary source that functions as its inspiration, as it deals with those members of society which Henry Mayhew would have described as “the dangerous classes” living in the more disadvantaged areas of Edinburgh that seem to echo the destitution of London’s East End (qtd. in Emsley 61). Instead of anxiously staying away from these instances that can easily be linked to larger issues in society, *Murder Rooms* sets up a line of criticism, which continues throughout the entire series. In fact, as the voice-over in the beginning of the episode makes clear, it is the mishaps in society that seem to initially drive Doyle to become involved in criminal detection, and indirectly help him to create England’s very first consulting detective.

The main issue that returns throughout the first episode is that of the police’s unwillingness to seriously investigate crime in Edinburgh, especially those crimes that include

members of the poorer classes. The incident with the fiddler introduces Doyle to the police's negligence to start proper criminal investigations, before he has even become Bell's clerk. Doyle is outraged at the policeman and gentleman's conclusion that the fiddler must have died from an overdose of alcohol, because they seem to have no proof to back up their claim. Doyle then takes it upon himself to examine the dead man's body, finding no proof that he consumed any alcohol at all. The two men stay adamant in their convictions, telling Doyle to "go pester someone else" ("Dr Bell"). A few scenes after this the lodger that stays at Doyle's house confronts him about the fiddler's death, asking him if they are "not better off with the streets being clear of such people" ("Dr Bell")? Although the two men at the crime scene might not have given voice to their opinion as brashly as the lodger, his remark seems to encapsulate what the others already expressed by their unwillingness to treat the fiddler's death as anything other than self-inflicted. The police's negligence is later confirmed by Dr Bell, who claims that his own investigations have led him to the conclusion that Edinburgh has an "unwritten code": "do as little as possible" ("Dr Bell"). Bell is investigating the death of a well-to-do woman, which according to him is only taken seriously by the police because her social status has already caused her death to be noticed by the public. "For a woman of the street it would be different", Bell explains, "when they are attacked the police do nothing" ("Dr Bell"). Furthermore, Bell believes that the police will only examine cases that will certainly lead to the catching of the killer, because the details are so obvious. The case of the well-to-do woman seems to be anything but obvious, as her body appears to be unmarked. Bell assures Doyle that even for these kinds of cases the police have a solution, putting her death down to heart failure. Indeed, the police fairly quickly conclude that the woman must have died from natural causes, as they cannot find many clues to lead them in a different direction. Bell on the other hand deduces from very small clues that in fact the woman was murdered, and by no other than her husband. Had it not been for Bell's involvement and his insistence upon looking farther than mere suppositions, he would have immediately been able to prove his claim that the police's way of handling cases made "the worst crimes imaginable go unremarked" ("Dr Bell").

Next to the police's reluctance to investigate certain cases, the series also draws attention to a more general powerlessness that the poorer classes face when it comes to crimes committed against them. During the second part of the first episode Bell and Doyle examine an attack made on one of the women who works at a brothel named Madame Rosa's. The woman has mild injuries, but more disturbing is the fact that the attacker left one room dripping with blood from top to bottom—a very graphic scene that *The Strand Magazine*

would certainly not have approved of. The police again are reluctant to investigate the case thoroughly, which comes as no surprise to Bell, who tells Inspector Beecher that he knows that the latter would do anything “to avoid investigating death in a brothel” (“Dr Bell”). Beecher lives up to these expectations, leaving Bell and Doyle to pursue the matter themselves. They begin to see a connection between the attack in the brothel and some other deaths, including that of Doyle’s fiddler. Their suspicions centre on Edinburgh gentleman Henry Carlisle, husband to one of Doyle’s patients—who also happens to be Elspeth’s sister—and frequent visitor to Madame Rosa’s. Carlisle is an influential figure in Edinburgh’s public life, and this becomes a stumbling block when Bell and Doyle try to find evidence against him. Doyle is called in to attend to a woman who has fallen ill, and by chance he finds out she has been in contact with Carlisle, who has given her some pills that appear to be the perpetrator of her condition. The woman gives a brief statement of what happened, but refuses to say more. This is completely understood by Bell who claims that if she did speak out, nobody would probably believe her. The series thus pinpoints the helplessness of the poorer classes, who can only rely on being mistrusted and mistreated by the police. Perhaps most indicative of this sentiment is inspector Beecher’s remark to Bell that it was a prostitute who was attacked in the brothel and not a woman, as Dr Bell contends. His crude correction of Bell clearly shows how these women are seen as something lower than human beings, who are apparently unworthy of the police’s support.

Pirie continues to engage with the topic of the victimisation of the poorer classes in the second episode, although this time the culprit is not the police, but one of Doyle’s acquaintances from medical school. The beginning of the episode sees Doyle disembarking his train at Portsmouth, meeting his former colleague, Dr. Turnavine, at the station. The events presented in this episode occur several years after those of the previous one, and are emphasised by Turnavine as he tells Doyle: “it seems an age since medical school” (“Patient’s Eyes”). Doyle has come to work with his colleague, and as they approach his practice for the first time it seems that they will have enough patients to keep them busy, as people are queuing all along the street. The reason for this crowd is explained in the next shot that shows a sign that reads “free consultations, but pay for your medicine” (“Patient’s Eyes”). Two arrows point to a smaller sign that advertises “blood tonic by Dr. Turnavine” (“Patient’s Eyes”). It quickly becomes clear that Turnavine is exploiting his patients by describing every single one of them his patent medicine, even making up conditions as he is heard diagnosing one lady with “tea poisoning” (“Patient’s Eyes”). He takes no pains to deny his fraudulent actions, even telling Doyle that he should “throw all etiquette to the devil”, and that he hopes

that he is not dealing with “one of those morally superior doctors” (“Patient’s Eyes”). Doyle quickly proves to be of the calibre that Turnavine fears, telling his colleague off for his establishment that is “run on exploitation and greed”, before parting ways with him (“Patient’s Eyes”). Even though Turnavine is never really brought to justice for his fraudulent ways, the series does make a strong case of pointing out how the poorer classes are mistreated by those in society that could be seen as more fortunate. Similar to the actions of the Edinburgh police force in the first episode, the lower classes are let down by those they should rightly be able to rely on the most.

Even though *Murder Rooms* differentiates itself from the original Sherlock Holmes stories through its continuous engagement with the lower classes, it stays close to these stories when it comes to the kinds of criminals that it presents. The previous chapter showed how in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* and *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* the role of the criminal was mostly fulfilled by upper class characters, and that lower class criminals were shied away from. *Murder Rooms*’ choice of criminals is remarkably similar to this as none of the episodes present lower class criminals, while in three out of the five episodes the criminal comes from an upper class environment. An interesting case in point is “The Photographer’s Chair”, which seems to have slight echoes of the “The Man with the Twisted Lip”. Just like the original story, the episode places the main suspicion for a string of murders on a lower class individual, a photographer named Mr Mitchell. At the end of the episode however, it is revealed that Mitchell has nothing to do with the murders, and that they were committed by Sir Edward Rhodes, an upper class gentleman. As explained in the previous chapter, the original stories’ reluctance to deal with lower class criminals can be seen as a symptom of underlying anxieties to engage with larger issues in society. As the preceding paragraphs have shown, *Murder Rooms* deals extensively with the late Victorian lower classes not only by giving them a fair representation in the series, but also by continually calling attention to their mistreatment in society. This makes any claim of underlying anxieties being the cause for the series’ lack of lower class criminals incredulous. A more satisfying explanation might be that by presenting mostly upper class criminals *Murder Rooms* is copying the format of many of the original stories, leaving behind any underlying connotations this format might have.

### 2.3 Criminal Crime-Fighters: Presentation of a Flawed Police Force in *Murder Rooms*

The previous paragraphs have already outlined how in “Dr Bell and Mr Doyle” the shortcomings of the Edinburgh police force are continually alluded to. In showing the police’s reluctance to seriously investigate most crimes—and particularly those that involve members

of the lower classes—*Murder Rooms* engages with the institution's failing far more thoroughly than the Sherlock Holmes stories. In the original stories Holmes and Watson are seen working with the police in most cases, and some mild criticism of the institution can be found throughout the stories. However, this criticism is almost exclusively aimed at the fact that the police lack Holmes's power of deduction. In "Silver Blaze" Holmes alludes to "the value of imagination" which forms part of his deductive skill, and which is "the one quality which Gregory lacks"—Gregory is the detective handling the case (Doyle, "Silver Blaze"). The critiques of the police force in Doyle's work seem to never reach a deeper level than this, that is to say they never touch upon issues that might genuinely exist in the non-fictional police force of the time. Again this could be put down to Doyle's reluctance to deal with existing issues in society. Other hints of criticism in Doyle's work are mostly slight sneers like the one Holmes makes at the end of "The Blue Carbuncle". Holmes has just let a criminal get away with his crime, but assures Watson that he "is not retained by the police to supply their deficiencies" (Doyle, "The Blue Carbuncle"). Bell's remark regarding an Edinburgh inspector in "Dr Bell and Mr Doyle" is equivalent to Holmes's sneer, as he laments: "poor Beecher, knows nothing, understands less" ("Dr Bell").

*Murder Rooms* is thus not completely devoid of more superficial sneers about the police, but it also delves deeper into issues concerning this institution, not only questioning their crime-fighting proceedings but also the internal management of this government body. The latter occurs in "The Photographer's Chair", as Bell and Doyle come into contact with the police coroner in Southsea, who has a serious drinking problem. His alcoholism should constitute very clear grounds for dismissal, but as Bell points out, the coroner belongs to the same Masonic lodge as the police constable of Southsea, which is why he is given leave to stay. Bell relates a tale of the coroner's incompetence: "a spectacularly bodged operation" in which he managed to amputate not only the patient's leg and testicles, but also two of his own fingers ("Photographer's Chair"). It is thus clear that the coroner should not be in employment by the police, but apparently friendly ties outside of the force weigh heavier than the man's incompetence. The series thus draws out that even within the police force, corrupting activities are going on that could pose a serious threat to how this institution functions.

The most serious case of police corruption occurs in the last episode, "The White Knight Stratagem", in which the criminal turns out to be an Edinburgh police inspector. The episode centres on the murder of Henry Starr, the son of a wealthy Edinburgh financier. Bell is contacted by the police to consult them, and he has called in Doyle to assist him in the investigation as well as to function as a mediator between him and Lieutenant Blaney, with

whom he is not on good terms. It is revealed that the two worked together previously, and after Blaney made a devastating error, the suspect got away. Bell then proceeded to recommend Blaney's dismissal, causing bad blood to stir between them. However, Blaney managed to keep his job despite of his failings, and his obvious drinking problem. Although the exact reasons for allowing Blaney to stay are not made clear, it again goes to show that the police are not doing everything in their power to ensure the individuals working with them are trusted to do their job properly. As the investigations go on it becomes clear that Starr's murder is related to the suicide of Alicia Craine, who owns a local mill, and the murder of her husband Jack Craine—which coincidentally was the murder Bell worked on together with Blaney, which caused their dispute. Bell and Blaney have different ways of investigating the murder, Bell relying as always on his powers of deduction, while Blaney relies less on hard evidence but contests that he “can read people”, letting his feelings lead him (“White Knight”). These different ways of investigating have as a consequence that Bell and Blaney suspect different people. Bell places his suspicion on Starr's business partner George Milburn, while Blaney is convinced Starr was murdered by someone else, and that Milburn is in danger of being murdered as well. When Milburn is indeed murdered, Bell is left humiliated, to Lieutenant Blaney's content. However, while Bell and Blaney were wrapped up in their dispute, Doyle took it on himself to investigate Blaney, and eventually confronts Bell with the fact that there are multiple instances in which Blaney's actions did not make sense. The two soon find out that it was in fact Blaney that was behind Starr and Milburn's murders, and that it was all part of his scheme to embarrass Bell. The episode thus brings forward a very serious case of corruption within the police force, and one which could have been avoided had they acted responsibly in light of his previous failings and alcoholism.

*Murder Rooms'* engagement with topics like police corruption and the mistreatment of the lower classes is indicative of its emphasis on pointing out the mishaps in late Victorian society, putting the series in juxtaposition with the original stories. The previous chapter established that *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* and *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* shied away from presenting a crime milieu that could be connected to larger issues in society, thus expressing a certain anxiety towards those issues. The crimes committed in the stories were mostly one-off events, easily eradicated by Sherlock Holmes, a constant factor and a source of reliability. *Murder Rooms* achieves the exact opposite of the original stories by presenting a late Victorian society that is riddled with interconnecting issues of crime, poverty and corruption, and absent of any clear antidote. Bell might be heralded for his deductive skills in the same way as Holmes is, but he does not constitute a foolproof answer to crime as

much as his fictional counterpart. The series also does not make any pretensions to prove otherwise, as in the first episode his method fails to prevent Elspeth's murder, while the killer manages to escape to Canada. Doyle is affected by this failure the most and it leads him to question Bell's method more than once. In the last episode, even Bell expresses a sense of doubt toward his method of investigation, after being defeated in his wisdom by Lieutenant Blaney. The series thus presents an uncertainty that moves it a striking distance from the original stories. It does, however, not do so without being self-aware. At the end of the first episode, Doyle explains how the uncertainty led him to create "someone who could have helped us, and who would have won as surely as the doctor had lost: the ultimate consulting detective" ("Dr Bell"). This then seems to justify the uncertainty that is put forward in the series and present it as being inescapable: after all, it gave birth to the character that would become a beacon of assurance.

## Conclusion

*The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* and *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* form a remarkable contrast with the TV adaptation *Murder Rooms: The Dark Beginnings of Sherlock Holmes* when it comes to the representation of crime. Whereas the stories seem to shy away from addressing larger issues in society that are connected to crime, *Murder Rooms* seems to make a point of presenting these to viewers. The original stories' reluctance to deal with larger issues in society is the result of them mirroring fin-de-siècle anxieties on these subjects. During the late-Victorian period, a clear-cut connection between crime and social issues such as poverty was denied by sociologists. In doing so, crime became something tied to the individual, and thus easier to eradicate from society, soothing anxieties on the subject. Doyle's stories seem to do the same as they avoid dealing with lower class criminals or cases that can in any way be connected to larger issues in society. Instead the stories often present upper class criminals with exceptional motives that ensure the committed crimes are anomalies. When habitual offenders occur in the stories they are never from the lower classes, and their criminal inclinations are often presented as being hereditary, thus emphasising the individuality of these cases. There are also stories that start out with a supposed crime, but as the mystery unravels, no crime seems to have been committed. This diffusion of the sensational element of crime can be traced back to anxieties the publishers of *The Strand Magazine* had on this topic.

In drawing out the events that led to Doyle creating the Sherlock Holmes stories, *Murder Rooms* engages with the late-Victorian society's issues with poverty, crime, and police corruption that are all interconnected. The series uses both references to the original stories as well as factual information about Doyle's life to construct its fictional narrative. The added element of biographical facts enables the series to engage with issues that were fervently avoided in the original stories. The facts are used to recreate the main line of Doyle's life, while the series adds their own fictional story to fill in the gaps. A part of this filling in means sketching the society Doyle lived in and its most pressing problems. These receive extra emphasis as they play an important part in Doyle's conception of Sherlock Holmes: someone society could rely on to rid it from the mishaps and crimes that Doyle saw happening all around him.

By engaging with these problems in society in such an overt manner *Murder Rooms* effectively illustrates the power of adaptations to create something entirely different from their sources of inspiration. It shows that even from a source text that anxiously stays away from involving itself with issues of society, another work can be created that actively engages



in a critique of society. It is important to note that *Murder Rooms* achieves this in the form of a literary biopic. The series' premise is to show what inspired Doyle to create his stories, and its engagement with certain issues in society can be seen as the direct result of this, as they are presented as playing an important role in prompting Doyle to come up with his crime-fighting detective. The way *Murder Rooms* shows a fundamentally different approach to larger issues in society can thus be traced back to its status as a literary biopic.

An interesting question to ask is to which degree *Murder Rooms* possesses an awareness of going against the original stories. As mentioned earlier, the first episode ends with Doyle explaining how his experiences with Bell led him to create the ultimate detective who would give himself and the rest of the public the certainty and hope that Bell could not fully guarantee. This statement indicates that the series is aware of the superhuman quality of Holmes which provided the reading public with some sort of confirmation of safety, and thus also shows an awareness of the need for such a character to curb anxieties. However, this point alone does not provide enough evidence to fully claim that the series is aware that in drawing out the events that led Doyle to create Holmes—and thus by engaging with certain problems in society—they are going against the original stories. This would make an interesting point for further study.

Other interesting points for further study could be the way *Murder Room* engages with issues of women's rights, and the threat of terrorist cells. The first topic is presented in the introductory episode, and the second in "The Kingdom of Bones". These topics could be discussed similarly to the discussion of crime in this thesis, also including the way the original stories deal with these topics.

*Murder Rooms* has not garnered much academic interest in the past. However, the way it deals with issues of crime has already shown the series' eligibility to be the topic of academic research, not only when it comes to the field of adaptation studies but also in the context of the Sherlock Holmes stories. Moreover, the discussion of *Murder Rooms* in connection to the two Sherlock Holmes cycles of the Victorian fin-de-siècle has proven that there is always something new to add to the decade-old discussion of the great detective, who continues to engage audiences and academics alike till this day.

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