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Where is the “New Woman”?
A Study of Women Characters in *The
Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* and *The
Hound of the Baskervilles*
By Arthur Conan Doyle

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Abstract

Detective stories are a common part of our society today through literature and television, and the most famous detective of all is undoubtedly Sherlock Holmes. The Sherlock Holmes stories narrate several mysteries set in the late 19th to mid 20th century, and through the mysteries a large number of men and women are presented. During the late 19th century, the women's movement for more equal rights was in full swing which resulted in several economic and social changes for women. This essay will study how women are depicted in the Sherlock Holmes stories and discuss the social and economic situation of women during the Victorian era which have influenced the stories. I will argue that the social and economic changes can be seen through the female characters in the Sherlock Holmes stories, but that there are still indications of men's ideals of women present. This reasoning will be shown through a background chapter on women's situation during the 19th century as well as a discussion that connects the progress of women's role in society with the women in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* and *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

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Introduction

Detective stories are immensely popular in literature as well as on television. There are a great number of celebrated authors who write detective fiction where the story follows a fictional detective who solves crimes, usually in a rather uncommon but ingenious way. Even though detective fiction is a very celebrated genre today it is a relatively new form of literature, as it came to be in the mid- to late 19th century. One of the first detective stories is Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue", published in 1841. This story combines some Gothic elements with the "rationalism of a post-Enlightenment age of science" (Scaggs 19) creating a mystery only the genius detective Dupin manages to solve. Another detective story which is described as "the first detective novel written in English" (Scaggs 23) is *The Moonstone*, written by Wilkie Collins in 1868. This novel is beloved by readers as well as by other authors such as T. S. Eliot who described it "as the first and greatest of English detective novels", and Dorothy Sayers who named it "probably the very finest detective story ever written" (qtd. in Knight 44). In contrast to Poe's work, *The Moonstone* (1868) presents a detective who employs scientific methods to a higher degree.

The features of the detectives, the mysteries, and the deductions presented by both Collins and Poe inspired a new author to write detective fiction, namely Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. He adapted the analytic genius shown by Poe's Dupin as well as the more scientific methods used by Collins and produced the detective Sherlock Holmes, recognized as the "one great detective" (Knight 55) of the 19th century. But even though the fiction by Poe and Collins served as an inspiration to Doyle, it was his own scientific knowledge as a medical doctor that was of aid to him when writing Sherlock Holmes' deductions and scientific methods. Sherlock Holmes is one of the most memorable characters in English literature and Doyle's stories established a foundation for the detective genre, inspiring new authors to write detective fiction.

It was the late 19th century when Sherlock Holmes made his appearance in Doyle's first novella. Along with the great detective we are also introduced to his loyal companion and narrator, Dr John H. Watson. Their adventures were published monthly in *The Strand Magazine* from 1887 until 1893, where the last short story ended with the death of the great detective. The tragic ending of Sherlock Holmes induced strong reactions among the readers of *The Strand Magazine*, who demanded that the stories continued. So a couple of years later Doyle published the novella *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902) as a response to the public outcry for new Sherlock Holmes stories. While Doyle's previous narratives had attained

a tremendous reputation, his new novella *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is, without a doubt, the most famous one. *The Hound of the Baskervilles* consisted of all the excellent qualities presented in his best work, making it immensely popular even to readers in the 21st century. From the beginning of the 20th century until the early 1920s, Doyle published an addition of three collections of short stories and one novella, creating a canon of Sherlock Holmes consisting of four novellas and fifty-six short stories.

The canon of Sherlock Holmes narrates several cases that the detective and Dr Watson undertake. Throughout the novellas and the short stories, the readers encounter men as well as women from various backgrounds who appeal for help from Mr Holmes and Dr Watson. In addition to the individuals requiring help from the detective, the readers also encounter numerous side characters who are or become part of the mysteries. However, even though both men and women are present in the Sherlock Holmes's stories, there is a difference in how they are portrayed. I will look at how women are depicted in the Sherlock Holmes stories and discuss the social and economic situation of women during the Victorian era which has influenced the stories. I will particularly focus on the social and economic changes that contributed to more equal rights for women through the first wave of feminism, and how the feminist changes in society are reflected through the female characters in the Sherlock Holmes stories. Beyond the changes in the Victorian era caused by the feminist movement, I will also look at how the women in the Sherlock Holmes stories are described in contrast to how women were supposed to be during this era. Prior research on gender in the Sherlock Holmes stories has mostly investigated the portrayal of femininity versus masculinity in the characters and the portrayal of the feminine villains. However, in this study I aim to show how the social changes for women influenced the description of the women appearing in Doyle's work. I will argue that the first wave of feminism can be seen in the description of the women in Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories when it comes to the improvement of their social and economic situation, but that there are still indications of a man's ideal in the depictions of how women should behave.

A background section will give the reader an understanding of women's situation during the Victorian period. The background will also present the changes which the first wave of feminism brought for women. I will then discuss the women in the stories and study how the social situation and changes for women in the 19th century are illustrated in Doyle's work.

I will focus on the novella *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and the first collection of short stories, namely *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. The reasons for choosing these two are that *The Adventure of Sherlock Holmes* is first collection of short stories written about Sherlock Holmes while *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is the first story about Sherlock Holmes

after Doyle's long silence, and by choosing a novella I will be able to study the depiction of women in one longer text as well as several short ones. Another reason for choosing *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is that it is one of Doyle's most popular and appreciated works. The primary source for this paper will be *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* published by Race Point which contains the entire collection of Sherlock Holmes, i.e. fifty-six short stories and four novellas.

Background

During the Victorian era, the British society and economy flourished. Britain had several colonies around the world that served under the British crown and its government which made Britain, or the British Empire, the most powerful empire in the world. Although the economy prospered, there was a considerable number of people who suffered under the laws of society and economy. These people were, mostly, the ones that did not belong in the higher-ranking groups within the hierarchy. One group of people was women who demanded a change for their economic and social situations.

In the 19th century, women were characterized "as financially, intellectually and emotionally dependent upon their male kin" (Gleadle 51), and they were encouraged to identify themselves as relative and modest creatures. In alignment with the characteristics meant for women, Sarah Ellis who was an advocate of domestic ideology, proclaimed that if a woman undertakes a paid position, she "ceases to be a lady" (qtd. In Gleadle 51). Many women, especially in the middle- and upper-class, therefore dedicated their lives to become the perfect wife. The perfect wife was an active family member who should contribute to the wellbeing of the family and to achieve this she should fulfil certain responsibilities, where childbearing was the first vital task (Vicinus ix). This meant that the lives of most women were structured first and foremost around the domestic concerns, as the Victorian family, was regarded as "the essential building block of a civilized society" (Perkin 74). This does not mean that women constantly were the submissive, passive, and pure creatures of glorifications, but neither were they entirely liberated from this stereotype.

The feminine ideals and stereotypes for Victorian women are often referred to as "the angel in the house" (Christ 147). This description of the ideal woman comes from Coventry Patmore's poem 'The Angel in the House', first published in 1854, which outlines the Victorian ideals for women (Christ 147). According to Patmore, the woman is and should be associated with traditionally feminine values such as virtue, love, beauty, selflessness, and intuition (Christ

149). Carol Christ summarized the central point of the poem as “an idealization of woman’s passivity... [and an alternation] between woman’s superiority to man and asserting her absolute domination by him” (152). This indicates that the feminine ideals mostly concerned how women should act towards their husbands. The women who embodied these ideals in the Victorian period were, according to Patmore, the perfect wives. But even though this ideal was highly regarded, not every wife, rich or poor, embraced the Victorian ideals.

For married women in the 19th century, the characterization as financially dependent upon their male kin was particularly accurate. In the Victorian society, married women had, in the eyes of the law, no individual identity apart from their husbands. A simple explanation of the law that binds the wife to her husband is that the “husband and wife are one person, and the husband is that person” (qtd. In Holcombe 4). Furthermore, in a Victorian marriage the husband was “the legal representative” (Holcombe 6) of his wife, which made him responsible for his wife’s possible wrongdoings. The law also granted the husband access to his wife’s property. A woman’s property mostly consisted of money from investments and earnings which all became her husband’s property when she married (Holcombe 6; Gleadle 89). This law placed married women in the same legal category as criminals, minors, and lunatics, who were all seen as incompetent and irresponsible in the eyes of the law (Holcombe 7). But during the middle of the century, an increasing number of women, as well as some men, requested a change in the laws regarding women’s legal status.

The feminist movement in the Victorian period is usually said to have started in the mid 19th century, but as Ray Strachey argues “the true history of the Women’s Movement is the whole history of the nineteenth century” (qtd. in Caine, *Victorian Feminism* 18). One of the first changes women demanded was regarding the married women’s property law. This campaign against the law resulted in the “Married Women’s Property Bill” which aimed to ensure that a married woman should be capable of acquiring, disposing, and holding property in the same sense as an unmarried woman (Holcombe 11). This campaign for more equal rights for women was ground-breaking for its time, and according to Barbara Caine “the campaign for reform of the legal situation of married women was the first one around which the movement organized, and ... it remained a sustained campaign, ... [that occupied] the attention of almost all the prominent members of the movement until the passage of the Married Women’s Property Act in 1882” (*Feminism, Suffrage* 541). The passage of the act altered the law and made it possible for married women to own, sell and buy property. In addition to married women’s rights to own property, the act likewise gave wives an equal protection under the law, meaning

indicated that the passage of the act was an essential milestone on Victorian women's path to liberation and equality (Holcombe 28).

In addition to the Married Women's Property Act, the feminist movement sought a more equal divorce law, a change in the working opportunities for women, and to give women and girls more rights to education. A woman in the 19th century had little to no possibility to file for a divorce as adultery had to be proved along with other offences such as bigamy, incest, or physical cruelty (Perkin 123). Although divorce between men and women did not become more equal, the working opportunities and the possibility for education grew during the mid-to late Victorian period. One contributor for the increase in paid positions for women was the Society for the Promotion of the Employment of Women, meaning that the feminist campaign undoubtedly played a vital part in contributing to the acceptance of paid employment for women (Gleadle 139).

Technological developments also played a role in the development of paid positions for women, and in particular the development of the typewriter and the telephone. Previously, only men were employed as clerks even though these occupations were not considered masculine (Gray 487). When the demand for typewriters grew, so did the demand for clerks. But as clerical work was not a highly regarded profession and since female dexterities seemed to be beneficial for clerical work, several women were employed as typists. An efficient typist should be "light and supple and quick" (qtd. in Gray 487) when typing, and this was comparable to women playing the piano (487), which strengthened the ideas of clerical work as feminine. The occupation as a typist was also "a suitable job for a somewhat educated, middle-class girl" (487) as the women did not need to have any specific previous training. Similarly to clerical work, it was an advantage being a woman when the position of a telephone operator emerged. The first telephone operators were boys, but after some time they were replaced by girls or younger women. In contrast to boys, young women, and girls "were more likely...to be polite, to be able to sit still, and to be able to attend properly to the dexterous and precise work of operating a switchboard" (Glew 32). This widened the possibilities of employment beyond domestic work.

During the middle of the 19th century, several women initiated a campaign for women's rights to attend universities. In the late 1840s, there were some colleges for women where they could acquire academic qualifications (McWilliams-Tullberg 122), but these establishments were limited. Universities such as Cambridge and Oxford were more restrictive in allowing women to take their acceptance examinations and allowing them to study at the universities. Cambridge was first of the two prestigious universities to allow women to become

students in 1865, while women had to wait another four years to be able to study at Oxford (Howarth 237). But even though Cambridge and later Oxford allowed women to take their examinations and become students, there were still a considerable number of people, especially male students and university staff members, who were opposed to female scholars. When the idea of women attending these prestigious universities emerged, it was answered with strong opposition (Howarth 240). The strongest opposition came from Oxford University and their scholars who argued that the “matter of examining young ladies [was] quite beyond the university’s sphere of duty” (McWilliams-Tullberg 123) and therefore could not be performed. Cambridge University was less opposed to the idea of women taking their examination, but they believed that the women’s examinations should be taken in private and not with the male students, as women should have “privacy and modesty” (qtd. in McWilliams-Tullberg 123). However, though women could attend Cambridge as well as Oxford in the late 1860s, they were not able to receive a degree until well into the 20th century. Throughout the end of the 19th century, many female students at Cambridge as well as Oxford campaigned for a change regarding women’s rights for degrees and these campaigns reached their height in 1890. During the late 1880s, several female scholars at Cambridge demanded that Cambridge should award women degrees, which provoked strong reaction among several male scholars. Prior to this, many Cambridge men had supported women attending universities but were now “opposed...to [the] proceeding...of admitting women...[to more] academic privileges” (qtd. in McWilliams-Tullberg 134). Several men protested and demanded that women should not receive degrees, which caused hostility within friendships between men and women (McWilliams-Tullberg 140). Women’s demand for degrees led to a vote in 1897 where the women lost, which was celebrated by the male undergraduates with fireworks, bonfires, and dummies displayed as women to mock them and their loss (141). However, this loss did not stop women from continuing to demand the rights to university degrees.

While women in the Victorian era were campaigning for a change in their economic and social position, there was a contemporary debate concerning the ideal woman between two prominent authors: John Stuart Mill, who supported the feminist movement, and John Ruskin, who adapted the more traditional view of the ideal woman (Millett 121). Mill’s as well as Ruskin’s thoughts concerning the position of women were presented in two central works: Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* (1869) and Ruskin’s “Of Queen’s Gardens” (1865). In *The Subjection of Women* Mill presented and discussed the position of women through history and clearly stated that marriage was a natural destiny for women (Millett 123; Caine *Victorian Feminism* 34). Mill’s text was also an “attack on the conditions of legal bondage, debilitating

education, and the stifling ethic of ‘wifely subjection’” (Millett 123-124) in the Victorian period. In contrast to Mill, Ruskin proposed that men and women should be treated differently as they were different by nature. He, like many Victorians, believed that women had “finer instincts” (136) and due to this, men and women should have different positions in society as well as in marriage. This division between men and women in society was often referred to as “separate spheres”. The term “separate spheres” denotes the difference between the more domestic oriented lives of women and the more public role of men.

Women in society, according to Ruskin, were not in need of an education but should instead learn how to “contribute their ‘modest service’ to the male” (Millett 128). Mill opposed strongly to Ruskin’s idea of an educated woman: instead he encouraged women to be educated in “every branch of arts and science” (128). This approach to the question of female education made Mill a valuable contributor to the Women’s Movement. In addition to Mill’s views on female education, his critique of the wife’s situation in marriage strengthened his popularity among women protesters. According to Mill, the wife is “the actual bondservant of her husband: no less so, as far as legal obligations go, than slaves commonly so called... [the wife] vows a lifelong obedience to him at the altar, and is held to it all through her life by law” (qtd. in Millett 131). Mill’s attitude towards women, concerning marriage as well as education, made him an important supporter and contributor to the feminist movement (Caine *Victorian Feminism* 33-34). But even though the feminist movement strove for more rights and power for women, it was not their only goal. As Barbara Caine explains, “for many members of the women’s movement, suffrage was important not just because it gave women political rights and power, but also because it was seen as bringing an end to the domestic subordination and the narrow outlook of women” (*Feminism, Suffrage* 538). Caine’s explanation of the feminist movement shows that the movement not only demanded that the legal system should be more equal, but rather that it wanted society to understand the neglect and abuse which women endured, the domestic abuse as well as the abuse and neglect the women endured from the society and its legal system.

When Conan Doyle started to publish the Sherlock Holmes stories in 1887, the situation for women was in other words on the threshold of improvement. Women had gained the power to control their own property and their opportunities for paid positions had increased. Women’s opportunities for higher education were also improving, but they could still not receive degrees for their education. A woman who embraced this new independence was often referred to as a “New Woman”, a term first used by the feminist Sarah Grand in the 1890s (Caine *Victorian Feminism* 252; Jordan 19). This “New Woman” was seen as superior to men

(Jordan 20), which was upsetting for many men. Several papers started to include cartoons of “the New Woman” which illustrated her as awfully masculine and with grotesque features (Jordan 19). Although “the New Woman” had become a comedy character for several people, many women began living a “financially self-sufficient [and] single” (Jordan 19) life as well as appearing more in public spheres during the 1890s. In addition to appearing more in the public sphere, the “New Woman” also “exhibited emancipated behaviors such as smoking...[or] riding a bicycle” (Collins 310). This marked a change in the public as well as the private sphere, and there were those who were offended by this new feminine independent life.

The Weak Women

There are female characters in practically every one of the Sherlock Holmes stories. However, many of the women whom the detective and his companion encounter are characterized by passive helplessness as well as weakness. In the short stories “A Case of Identity”, “The Copper Beeches”, and “The Adventure of the Speckled Band” such women are presented. In “A Case of Identity”, Miss Mary Sutherland comes to 221B Baker Street to request the help from Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson in finding her lost fiancé. She met her fiancé Hosmer Angel at “the gasfitter’s ball” (Doyle *The Adventures* 197) which she was not allowed to attend by her stepfather, and since the ball she and Mr Angel have met regularly in secret. Miss Sutherland explains that her stepfather Mr Windibank did not want her to marry as he thought that “a woman should be happy in her own family circle” (197), but as Miss Sutherland points out, a woman needs to start her own family circle to begin with (197). However, Miss Sutherland does have a paid position of her own as well as an inheritance, but latter is controlled by her stepfather. It is later found out in the story that her fiancé Mr Hosmer Angel is in fact her stepfather in disguise, and that he disguised himself because if Miss Sutherland marries, he will lose the money. Sherlock Holmes describes Mr Windibank as a man who “married a woman much older than himself for her money and enjoyed the use of the money of the daughter” (203). But Holmes will not tell the truth to Miss Sutherland as he argues that snatching a delusion from a woman is a dangerous thing (205).

Similarly to “A Case of Identity”, the short story “The Copper Beeches” constructs a case where a father tries to control his daughter. The victim in this story is Miss Alice Rucastle who is imprisoned in her own chamber to prevent her from marrying, since if she marries, her father loses control over her and the money she inherited from her mother.

Miss Rucastle is described as a woman who “had rights of her own by will, but she was...[very] quiet and patient...[and] just left everything in Mr. Rucastle’s hands” (Doyle *The Adventures* 340), but when a suitor came along, Mr Rucastle felt threatened. He wanted his daughter to sign a paper that declared that even if she marries, her father could still use her money, but she refused. Therefore Mr Rucastle locked his daughter in her chamber, hired Miss Violet Hunter as a governess to his new wife’s child, and altered her appearance to resemble Miss Rucastle so that her fiancé would not become aware of her being missing. It is Miss Hunter who approaches Sherlock Holmes after being employed by Mr Rucastle, as she notices that something is wrong when Mr and Mrs Rucastle want her to sit in specific places and wear specific clothes. Sherlock Holmes realizes instantaneously that Miss Rucastle is imprisoned in her home, but just as Sherlock Holmes, Dr Watson and Miss Hunter are about to rescue Miss Rucastle, her fiancé instead rescues her from her imprisonment.

The third short story in which parental control plays a vital part is “The Speckled Band”. In this short story, Helen Stoner approaches Sherlock Holmes after starting to hear the same hissing noise her sister Julia heard before she mysteriously died in her bed. When Helen comes to Mr Holmes and Dr Watson her appearance is all “drawn and grey, with...frightened eyes, like those of some hunted animal... [and with an] expression...[that] was weary and haggard” (Doyle *The Adventures* 266). Helen explains that her mother, Mrs Stoner, married her stepfather Dr Roylott in India after she became a widow. When Mrs Stoner died, she bequeathed her money and earnings to Dr Roylott for as long as Helen and Julia reside with him, but when the time comes for them to marry, they should each acquire a certain annual sum (267). When Helen comes to Mr Holmes, she explains that two years ago her sister got engaged and after declaring to her stepfather that she was going to get married, she started to hear strange noises outside her room in the middle of the night and claimed that she saw “[t]he speckled band” (269). Now Helen is engaged and fears for her life. Helen explains that she had to move into her sister’s old room as Dr Roylott had started to do some renovations in and around her bedroom. Holmes undertakes the case and detects that it was the stepfather Dr Roylott that had killed Julia and tried to kill Helen as well. He had in his possession a swamp adder which is “the deadliest snake in India” (280) that has the appearance of a “yellow band...with brownish speckles” (279) which he had trained to slide into Julia’s room through a small hole in the wall connecting Dr Roylott’s room to Julia’s. The hissing noise that both Helen and Julia had heard in the middle of the night was in fact Dr Roylott training the snake to listen and follow the hissing noise. Holmes and Watson manage to save Helen from the snake which instead bites Dr Roylott when he tries to push it through the hole leading to Julia’s room. The story ends

with the death of Dr Roylott which gives Helen the right to all of her late mother's money and the opportunity to get married.

All of these shorties describe cases where a younger woman and her earnings are controlled by her parents, and in most cases by a father figure. Miss Sutherland in "A Case of Identity" is very obedient as she allows her stepfather to handle the inheritance that is rightfully hers. Her meek characteristics and her acceptance of the patriarchal system in handling money agrees with Carol Christ's summary of Coventry Patmore's poem 'The Angel in the House' as Christ explains that an ideal woman should "[assert] her absolute domination" (152) to her husband or father. Cassandra Poole argues that Miss Sutherland's story is a perfect illustration of the "oppression of women" (18) as she possesses a considerable sum of money from an inheritance but is too obedient as well as submissive and allows her parents to control her income from the inheritance. Miss Sutherland is also selfless as she does not want to "be a burden" (Doyle *The Adventures* 196) to her parents as long as she lives with them, which was an important feminine trait that the perfect woman should inhabit according to Patmore.

Just as Miss Sutherland can be associated with Victorian ideals and patriarchal oppression, so can Alice Rucastle in "The Copper Beeches". Miss Rucastle has rights of her own as well as money, but she chooses to leave it all to her father. Mr Rucastle takes advantage of his daughter due to her quiet and passive nature, which results in him controlling the money bequeathed to her. For that reason, he chooses to imprison his own daughter to assert full power over her and her income. This patriarchal oppression applies to Helen Stoner in "The Speckled Band" as well. Rosemary Hennessey and Rajeswari Mohan argue that Mr Roylott "enacts the ultimate patriarchal privilege: control over women *as* property that simultaneously denies them access *to* property" (392) which is equally true about Miss Sutherland and Miss Rucastle. The control over women in "A Case of Identity", "The Copper Beeches", and "The Speckled Band" is not solely economical but also concerns their emotions and their sexual lives. Catherine Wynne claims that Mr Roylott's "desire for the continued appropriation for his stepdaughters' money causes him to sexually, emotionally and physically control them" (qtd. in Gills 75). Hennessey and Mohan support Wynne's claim that Mr Roylott sexually controls Helen Stoner as they equate the murder of Julia Stoner and attempted murder of Helen Stoner with rape (390), which is symbolized by the poisonous snake emerging through a hole connecting Mr Roylott's room with Julia's.

In "Deconstructing the Text: Sherlock Holmes", Catherine Belsey claims that many of the Sherlock Holmes stories are "haunted by shadowy, mysterious and often silent women" (385) who mostly appear in the background of the great detective. It could be argued

that the reason for including these weakly feminine women is to a greater extent display Sherlock Holmes as a masculine man with superior deductive skills. This view of seeing the women as a way to highlight the masculinity of Holmes is argued for by Meghan R. Gordon who claims that the “intellectual advantage [of Holmes is strengthened] by juxtaposing him with women who are eccentric, sparsely seen, silent, or sensuous” (1). If women are supposed to strengthen the masculinity and intellect of Holmes, then the women should in general “have less control over their emotions” (Jann 697) and more often act and make decisions based on emotions in contrast to Holmes. A few women are certainly seen acting purely on emotions throughout the stories, and one of them is Miss Turner in “The Boscombe Valley Mystery”. When Miss Turner first appears in the story she is described as “one of the most lovely young women that [Watson has] ...ever seen...[with] violet eyes shining...[and] a pink flush upon her cheeks, all thought of her natural reserve lost in her overpowering excitement and concern” (Doyle *The Adventures* 211). In this scene she is about to defend the man she loves who stands accused of the murder of his father. Likewise in “The Man with the Twisted Lip”, Kate Whitney, who is an old friend of Mrs Watson, comes to the Watson residence late one evening and when she is about to explain why she has come she loses “her self-control” (235). Mrs Whitney explains that her husband has gone to an opium den and that she is unable to retrieve him, so she needs Dr Watson’s help. Miss Turner and Mrs Whitney are both depicted as emotional and impulsive characters who abandon their rational side when under distress.

A woman who radiates femininity is Mary Holden in “The Beryl Cornet”. The portrayal of Miss Holden corresponds with Patmore’s ideal woman as she is described as “a sunbeam in [the]...house... [who is] sweet, loving, beautiful, a wonderful manager and housekeeper, yet as tender and quiet and gentle” (Doyle *The Adventures* 313). Miss Holden’s gentle nature and domestic abilities make her the perfect “Angel in the House”. Similarly to Miss Holden, Mrs Barrymore in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* appears to have a gentle nature. She is the housekeeper at Baskerville Hall and is described by Dr Watson as a woman of interest as she appears secretive and unemotional, but is heard sobbing in the middle of the night (Doyle *The Hound* 547). It is later discovered that her sobbing and sadness is due to her younger brother, who is a convicted criminal that hides out on the moor. Almost every night, Mrs Barrymore’s husband brings out food for his wife’s brother at her demand, as she indicates that even though her brother is a criminal, she still cares for him deeply (555). The concern and sympathy she feels for her brother may be seen as strong feminine traits, as she still loves and cares deeply for him even though he is a criminal. Another woman character whose judgement is clouded by love and concern in this text is Miss Stapleton, later revealed as Mrs Stapleton.

Miss Stapleton is described as a “beauty ... of a most uncommon type ... with a finely cut face ... [and a] sensitive mouth and ... beautiful dark ... eyes” (540). Throughout the story, Miss Stapleton is depicted as a devoted sister, as well as wife, who loves Mr Stapleton. However, she falls in love with Mr Henry Baskerville and Mr Stapleton does nearly all in his power to keep them separated. It is later revealed that Mr Stapleton is a relative to Henry Baskerville and has come to Devonshire to murder Baskerville so that he himself can inherit Baskerville Hall. His wife, Mrs Stapleton, explains that she had to act as his sister as she would be more useful to him in the character of a free woman (576). Furthermore, it is explained that Mr Stapleton treated his wife badly as her arms were “mottled with bruises” (594) and that she was frightened of her husband due to the “brutal ill-treatment” (600). Mrs Stapleton is threatened and beaten into submission by her husband, whom she loves, and she lets him. The submissiveness that is forced upon Mrs Stapleton could be seen as a parallel to the ideals of femininity forced upon women during the Victorian era. Here too the “feminine” woman is victimized, recognizing femininity as a dangerous trait.

The Strong Women

The women in Doyle’s stories are not always content with the roles given to them based on their gender. Throughout the stories, some women challenge their prescribed gender roles by acting in a more “masculine” way. The masculine behaviour does not seem to imply that these women cannot have any feminine traits as well, as some of them can be seen as having many feminine traits as well as a more independent and masculine lifestyle. Some examples of this are Helen Stoner and Miss Sutherland who can be seen as conforming to a feminine ideal as well as challenging it. Helen Stoner is an observant character and a woman who is able to take advantage of the Married Woman’s Property Act which allowed her the freedom of obtaining and handling inherited property. The passing of the Act brings more freedom to Miss Sutherland as well, as an inheritance was bequeathed to her and not her father. In addition to this, Miss Sutherland also executes the newfound freedom of taking employment in one of the newly established paid working positions for women, i.e. as a typist. Miss Sutherland clarifies that she can “do pretty well with what [she earns] at typewriting” (*The Adventures* 196) illustrating that she is able to provide for herself even without the inheritance. Furthermore, Miss Sutherland attempts to perform acts that go against her usually obedient role by acting against her stepfather’s wishes as well as by eloping.

Another woman who takes advantage of the new working opportunities that emerged for women in the late 19th century is Laura Lyons in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Laura Lyons tried to follow the Victorian ideals and marry but her husband deserted her. Her father, Mr Frankland, also abandoned her after she became married because he did not approve of her marriage. So, due to being abandoned twice she had to take up a job to be able to support herself. Laura Lyons, like Miss Sutherland, took the position as a typist. When Dr Watson meets Laura Lyons, he is first taken aback by her extreme beauty, but later he notices that there is “something subtly wrong with her face, some coarseness of expression, some hardness...[and] some looseness of lip which marred its perfect beauty” (Doyle *The Hound* 566). Nicole Kurtz discusses the similarities between Laura Lyon’s marred beauty and her marred performance of the Victorian ideal woman (15), which Kurtz then uses to explain why Dr Watson noticed something amiss in her appearance. Furthermore, Kurtz also indicates that Dr Watson feels that there is something amiss with Laura Lyons because she sits at a typewriter when he first encounters her, which is not seen as an ideal position for a woman in the Victorian society (15). Nonetheless, the remark of something about Laura Lyons being wrong is made by the notoriously unreliable narrator, Watson, who is a man that gets most things wrong and is generally sentimental and conventional in all of his views. However, as *The Hound of the Baskervilles* was written in the early 20th century, the ideal and standards for women at that time were slightly different from when Doyle’s first short stories were published, as women had achieved more rights and were more frequently seen outside the domestic sphere. As a result, an increasing number of people, men as well as women, had altered their attitude towards women in paid positions. But even though the attitude towards women in paid positions might have changed, a wife was still her husband’s property by law. Laura Lyons stresses this when she says; “the law is upon his [her husband’s] side, and every day... [Laura Lyons faces] the possibility that he may force...[Mrs Lyons] to live with him” (*The Hound* 568). With this passage, Laura Lyons clearly expresses the injustice of marriage established by the patriarchal law system.

As the end of the 19th century was a period of change regarding society’s view of women, the female characters portrayed in literature during this time display a wider range of feminine and masculine traits. Cassandra Poole argues that Miss Violet Hunter, the governess hired by Mr Rucastle in “The Copper Beeches”, can be recognized as a woman who challenges stereotypical feminine ideals (19). According to Dr Watson, the appearance as well as the manners of Violet Hunter imply that she is an independent woman who has to take care of herself (*The Adventures* 327). It has been claimed that the women in the Sherlock Holmes

stories merely provide information and are mostly absent in the process of discovering and capturing the criminal (Gordon 4). However, in “The Copper Beeches”, Violet Hunter plays a vital part in both detecting the crime and rescuing the victim Miss Alice Rucastle. Poole explains that Violet instantly recognizes that “her job as a governess for the Rucastles is not what it appears, and that something more sinister is going on” (19) which shows that she does not agree to be only the silent woman in the background but takes an active role in the solving of the mystery. When explaining the situation to Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson, Violet says that “[she is] naturally observant” (Doyle *The Adventures* 336), which makes her stand out in comparison to other women in the Sherlock Holmes franchise. Even the detective himself is impressed by her and calls her “a quite exceptional woman” (338) as well as including her in his plan for rescuing Alice Rucastle.

For a woman to be considered feminine, at least according to Patmore and Ruskin, she had to be selfless, quiet, and submissive as well as obedient to her husband, and appear mostly in the domestic sphere (Christ 149; Millet 134). In “The Noble Bachelor”, the reader encounters Miss Hatty Doran, an American millionaire’s daughter, who is betrothed to Lord Robert St. Simon, but she disappears at her wedding breakfast. Hatty Doran is described as a tomboy and an independent woman who has “a strong nature, [is] wild and free, unfettered by any sort of traditions...and fearless in carrying out her resolutions” (*The Adventures* 300). Her soon to be husband explains that her free and unfeminine behaviour is due to her running “free in a mining camp [until her twentieth, when father became a rich man] ... [and that she had her] education from nature rather than from schoolmasters” (300) and that her characteristics are not typical of a noblewoman. In addition to her unfeminine behaviours and traits, she is also already married. This marriage occurred in secret when Hatty Doran and her father still lived in America, and it is also the reason to why Hatty Doran disappeared on her wedding day. The unfeminine traits that Miss Doran has as well as the fact that she rebelled against her father by marrying someone she chose herself reinforce the image of her as an independent woman who wants to follow her own instincts and not bend to a man’s will. Another woman with unfeminine traits is Mrs St. Clair in “The Man With the Twisted Lip”, who says that she is not a hysterical woman and does not faint easily (243) hinting that the common opinion of women was that they were helpless and emotional. Although Mrs St. Clair distances herself from the preconceived assumptions about women, she does adhere to Gordon’s claim that women characters mostly appear to provide information to the case but are mostly absent in the solving of the crime (4).

The Sherlock Holmes canon consists of several important women, but there is only one woman that undoubtedly surprises and outsmarts the great detective himself. This woman is Irene Adler who appears in “A Scandal in Bohemia” as a former mistress of the King of Bohemia. Miss Adler has in her possession a photograph that is compromising to the King which she refuses to sell. The King explains that there have been five attempts to steal the photograph, but none have given any results (Doyle *The Adventures* 168). When Holmes asks the King to describe Miss Adler she is described as a woman with “the face of the most beautiful ... [woman] and the mind of the most resolute ... [man]” (168) as well as a soul of steel. Holmes then decides to use Irene Adler’s feminine traits against her to find out where she has hidden the photograph and so obtain it. By shouting “fire” Holmes plays on the assumption that if a “woman thinks her house is on fire, her instinct is at once to rush to the thing she values most” (175). Holmes explains that it is an overpowering impulse for women which he has taken advantage of more than once. However, Irene Adler figures out Holmes’s plan and while wearing a disguise she follows Holmes and Dr Watson to their residence and bids them goodnight without them knowing it was her. The next morning when Holmes is about to call on Miss Adler she is already gone, but has left a note to him explaining that she understood that he tricked her and that she then tricked him by disguising herself and leaving with the photograph.

Irene Adler is a woman who plays on her feminine traits and uses them to her advantage. It can be argued that Irene Adler changes her gender performance depending on the situation she encounters. She plays the role of a mistress, which historically is nothing new for women, and with her role as a mistress she becomes an important person who can control someone’s life with something as simple as a photograph. In addition to her role as a mistress, Irene Adler is also a well-known actress, opera singer, and adventuress which implies that instead of marrying and living a domestic life she has focused more on her career. Rosemary Jann claims that Irene Adler can be seen as having a demimonde status which she uses as a weapon, as her status is not “low enough to prevent her from marrying a respectable lawyer, but it is sufficiently questionable to enable her to turn the tables on the exploitative aristocrat and blackmail the King of Bohemia” (699). The self-awareness that Irene Adler seems to have regarding her status and opportunities as well as her ease to challenge the specific gender performances makes it easy for her to dress up in men’s clothes. When she dressed as a man in “A Scandal in Bohemia”, Sherlock Holmes does not realize that it is in fact Miss Adler that passes him on the street. The reason that the great detective himself cannot see through Irene Adler’s disguise may be because he did not think that she would see through his plan, in other

words he did not believe that anyone, let alone a woman, would be able to fool him. Elizabeth Miller argues that “Irene Adler interrupts and challenge Holmes’s visual methodology (41) by crossdressing which “offers an ... destabilization and disruption of what seems fixed” (qtd. in E.C. Miller 41). This destabilization of gender roles and performances challenges the Victorian ideals as well as demonstrates the injustices of the patriarchal society which Irene seeks to change (Frank 54), which is seen when she claims that crossdressing gives advantages and freedom which women otherwise do not have (*The Adventures* 177). Irene Adler’s strong impression on Sherlock Holmes makes him refer to her as “*the woman*” (163), as she is the only woman who has outsmarted him.

Where is the “New Woman”?

Arthur Conan Doyle’s works present a wide spectrum of female characters who display different characteristics and ideals. However, the phenomenon of the “New Woman” seems absent from Doyle’s works. The absence of the “New Woman” character is somewhat curious, as she was such a popular female character in turn-of-the-century fiction and the subject matter of a heated debate. Doyle himself grew up with five sisters and one brother and was mostly raised by his mother alone due to his father being confined in a mental hospital (R. Miller 23-45), so Doyle was well acquainted with a strong and independent woman from an early age. Doyle expressed hardly any criticism against women being physically active, and was certainly not against the idea of women cycling. This was clearly seen when he gave an interview and said that [h]e ... [was] never happier than when on his tandem with his wife” (150), which supports the idea that Doyle had no opposition to the active “New Woman”. In addition to Doyle being surrounded by women in his childhood, he also had daughters who grew up around the time the “New Woman” figure became popular in society as well as in fiction.

Even though Doyle was surrounded by women his whole life and included a variety of women in his works, there is a lack of the “New Woman” and her impact on the society in his texts. Within the works themselves there is nothing which suggests that Doyle was against the “New Woman” ideals which emerged in the late 19th century, as there is no character that ridicules the traits or appearance associated with the “New Woman”. However, there is also no woman character that suggests that he entirely supported the “New Woman” movement. Maybe Doyle did not include a “New Woman” character simply because he did not want to take a position in the ongoing debate but instead preferred to be neutral so to not displease any

of the sides. Nevertheless, Elizabeth Miller argues that Doyle's series support the feminist view of the domestic sphere as unsafe for women, since the respectable British homes are repeatedly the place of the crimes which usually concern domestic violence (54). Doyle's awareness of women's situations within the domestic sphere can be seen in "A Case of Identity", "The Copper Beeches", and "The Speckled Band" which all stress the change in women's rights to property. All these stories "call into question women's traditional social position of domestic obscurity, by extension recognizing women as public figures" (E.C. Miller 57), a fact which suggests that Doyle was in favour for women's rights concerning economic independency.

Another interesting aspect concerning Doyle's stand in the debate about the "New Woman" is the use of Watson as a narrator. It is primarily Watson who admires the pretty emotional women as well as being the one who is most often wrong in his conclusions concerning the mysteries and suspects. As Watson's instincts about nearly every mystery and suspect are incorrect, he can be described as an unreliable narrator. By making the unreliable narrator Watson the one who seems to advocate traditional femininity while Holmes himself openly admires the transgressive woman character Irene Adler, Doyle avoids taking a stand in the debate and leaves it to the reader to determine how to interpret his views on femininity.

Conclusion

In the late 19th century women obtained the right to higher education and to own and inherit property, which granted them a small sense of freedom as they no longer had to rely on their husbands to the same extent. Due to the industrial changes that occurred in Victorian period, more working opportunities also appeared in society for men as well as women. Two of the most prominent paid positions that became available for women were the position as a typist or as a telephone operator. These social and economic changes can be recognized in the Sherlock Holmes stories. The short stories "A Case of Identity", "The Coper Beeches", and "The Speckled Band" all contain women who have inherited money and property which was possible due to the change in the law as a result to the feminist movement. The women in these stories have the opportunities to handle their own money and property when they get married, which is the reason to why their fathers and father figures try to prevent them from marrying.

Within the Sherlock Holmes stories there are also women who are employed in the new positions that became available in the late 19th century. Both Laura Lyons in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and Miss Sutherland in "A Case of Identity" are employed as typists and can

provide for themselves, which is depicted in a positive light. In addition to the typists, there is another woman who displays independence to a great extent. Irene Adler is a well-known actress and opera singer as well as a mistress, who uses her femininity as a weapon against men as well as using crossdressing to obtain more freedom. Several of the short stories and the novel also depict women with traits that were considered less feminine. There are also women who act in correlation with the existing ideals for women during the 19th century. These women tend to be quiet and tender and mostly appear in the background of the story.

Overall, the depiction of women in the Sherlock Holmes stories is reasonably diverse as a wide range of women are represented. The portrayal of these women appears realistic and accurate as, even in the Victorian period, all women were different and thus acted differently. However, one type of woman that is definitely absent is the “New Woman”. The reason why there is no “New Woman” character might be Doyle’s disinclination to take a stand in the ongoing debate. However, there are women characters that express the injustices women had to endure in the Victorian society, which indicates that Doyle knew and sympathized with the situation for women.

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