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Order, Hierarchy, and Rational Justice: Class and Social Order in Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes

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Abstract

Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories are widely recognized for their intricate plots and iconic detective, but beneath the surface lies a profound commentary on the rigid class system and social anxieties of Victorian and Edwardian England. This paper explores how the stories engage with class and social order – examining representations of the upper class, working class, and marginalized groups – and how Sherlock Holmes operates as a stabilizing figure within a society marked by deep divisions. Through Doyle's use of class as both narrative tool and social critique, the detective stories reflect the complexities and contradictions of a rapidly modernizing Britain.

Keywords: social order, hierarchy, rational justice, social expectations, class.

Introduction

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Britain were marked by dramatic social and economic change: industrialization, urbanization, and the pressures of a vast empire challenged traditional class hierarchies. In this environment, Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes emerged as more than just a detective – he became a mediator of class tensions and a guardian of social order. While the Holmes stories entertain through mystery and deduction, they also offer a compelling commentary on class structures, social

expectations, and the fragile cohesion of Victorian society.

Sherlock Holmes occupies a unique social position. Though educated and professionally respected, he is not part of the aristocracy. His companion Dr. Watson notes Holmes's disdain for social niceties and class pretensions. Holmes's alliances stretch across social strata – from Scotland Yard officers and wealthy clients to beggars and street children, most notably the Baker Street Irregulars in *Scarlet*. His ability to move fluidly through these social layers allows him to access information and solve cases that others cannot. This class mobility is both a

narrative device and a reflection of growing meritocratic ideals in late-Victorian society.

Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories offer a nuanced portrayal of the upper class in Victorian and Edwardian England, often highlighting the complexities and contradictions within this social stratum. While the upper class is depicted as powerful and influential, Doyle frequently exposes their moral failings and the fragility of their social standing.

In several stories, Doyle presents upper-class characters whose actions undermine the idealized image of nobility. For instance, in "The Adventure of the Priory School," the Duke of Holderness's personal scandal threatens his public reputation, illustrating how private indiscretions can jeopardize social standing. Similarly, "The Adventure of the Beryl Coronet" features a banker entangled in a case of theft involving his own family, suggesting that wealth and status do not equate to moral superiority. These narratives reflect Victorian anxieties about the decline of traditional aristocratic values and the potential for corruption within the upper echelons of society.

Sherlock Holmes himself occupies a unique position that allows him to navigate various social classes. Though not of aristocratic birth, his intellectual prowess grants him access to both high society and the working class. This mobility enables Holmes to act as a stabilizing force, resolving conflicts that often stem from class disparities. By restoring order, Holmes reinforces the existing social hierarchy, yet his interactions also subtly critique the rigid class structures of his time.

Doyle does not shy away from highlighting the prejudices held by the upper class. In "The Hound of the Baskervilles," characters like Jack Stapleton express disdain for the local peasantry, reflecting a broader societal tendency to view the lower classes as superstitious and inferior. Such portrayals underscore the deep-seated class divisions and

the often patronizing attitudes of the elite toward those beneath them.(Central College)

The upper class in Holmes's world is often shown as both powerful and precarious. In stories such as "The Adventure of the Noble Bachelor," "The Adventure of the Priory School," and "The Adventure of the Beryl Coronet," aristocrats and upper-class characters face threats to their reputations, inheritances, or family honor. These narratives reflect Victorian anxieties about the decline of traditional nobility and the moral failings behind the facade of prestige. The frequent use of blackmail, scandal, or hidden secrets within elite families suggests that class status does not guarantee virtue—an idea that challenges the notion of inherited superiority.

The working class is depicted with greater complexity—sometimes as noble, other times as deceitful or dangerous. For example, in "The Man with the Twisted Lip," a middle-class man disguises himself as a beggar to earn more money than he could through honest work. This blurring of class identity suggests social anxiety about appearances and economic mobility. Meanwhile, many criminals in Holmes stories are drawn from the lower classes, reinforcing Victorian fears of moral decline among the poor, particularly in urban settings like London's East End. However, working-class characters also appear as victims of upper-class abuse ("The Adventure of the Copper Beeches") or as allies to Holmes ("The Blue Carbuncle"). The ambiguity in these portrayals reflects a tension between sympathy for the lower classes and fear of their potential to disrupt order.

Women's roles in Holmes stories are deeply influenced by class expectations. Female characters from the middle and working classes are frequently placed in perilous situations due to their limited social and economic power. In "The Adventure of the Copper Beeches," Violet Hunter must accept a dubious job due to financial need—a situation that nearly leads to her exploitation. Such stories highlight the

precarious position of women in a patriarchal, class-conscious society, while also celebrating intelligence and moral strength in female characters.

Several Holmes stories engage with the British Empire and its intersections with class. In *The Sign of Four*, colonial wealth, betrayal, and racialized fear drive the plot. Characters who gain fortunes abroad often return to Britain to face the consequences of colonial entanglements. These stories suggest that wealth acquired through empire is morally ambiguous and socially disruptive—another challenge to the British class system.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Doyle's engagement with class is the consistent restoration of social order at the end of each story. Holmes solves mysteries, exposes deceit, and frequently protects the reputations of his upper-class clients. While some criminals escape legal justice, Holmes ensures that moral equilibrium is maintained. In this way, he functions as a guardian of the class system—even as he critiques or circumvents its failings. The detective genre itself depends on disruption followed by resolution, and in Holmes's hands, this resolution often reaffirms the existing social hierarchy.

Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories offer far more than clever plots and iconic characters—they provide a mirror to the class dynamics of Victorian and Edwardian society. Through Holmes, Doyle explores the tensions between classes, the threats to social cohesion, and the role of reason in maintaining order. The stories present a nuanced vision of class: one that acknowledges inequality and hypocrisy while ultimately upholding a vision of rational justice and social stability. In doing so, Doyle captures the complexities of his time and the enduring tensions that continue to define social life.

Through his depiction of the upper class in the Sherlock Holmes series, Arthur Conan Doyle offers a critical examination of the British

social hierarchy. By exposing the moral shortcomings and vulnerabilities of the aristocracy, Doyle challenges the notion of inherent nobility and invites readers to question the legitimacy of class-based privilege.

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