The Middle-class Hero: Morality And Chivalry In The Adventures Of Sherlock Holmes

In the late nineteenth century, the middle class of England became more numerous and therefore more important as an audience of art and literature. The middle class began to form its own identity separate from the aristocracy, which included beliefs such as acting as a gentleman and being deferential towards women. These values were reincarnations of those from the feudal era (Isokoski 14). Specifically, the middle class of this time period favoured acting morally, meaning “holding or manifesting high principles for proper conduct” (“Moral”), and chivalry, meaning “courteous behaviour, especially that of a man toward women” (“Chivalry”). Sherlock Holmes, the main character of The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and published in The Strand magazine, is representative of the middle class of Victorian England through incarnating the values of acting morally and of chivalry towards women in the stories “The Adventure of the Beryl Coronet”, “The Boscombe Valley Mystery”, “The Five Orange Pips”, “A Scandal in Bohemia” and “The Adventure of the Speckled Band”, despite Holmes showing the opposite characteristics sometimes. This demonstrates that Doyle intended for his target audience, the average male middle-class reader, to find Holmes' character to be a hero.

Firstly, Sherlock Holmes embodies the Victorian middle-class value of acting according to his own moral code when interacting with or talking about his clients and their associates. He is courteous towards their needs, shows empathy in regard to their plights and feels responsible for their fates. Holmes considers himself a man of decency who sees to it that his clients trust him, and he often refuses a reward for his detective work. For example, in “The Boscombe Valley Mystery”, Holmes does not turn in a murderer, John Turner, who is dying of diabetes and says to Turner in response to what Holmes intends to do, “In view of your health, nothing. You are yourself aware that you will soon have to answer for your deed at a higher court than the Assizes. … and your secret, whether you be alive or dead, shall be safe with us.” (Doyle 96). Holmes does not consider himself bound by the rules given to police constables and therefore does not follow the law in this instance because he feels pity for Turner’s bad health and reasons for killing the murder victim (protecting Turner’s daughter). This is supported by John Greenfield, who wrote that Doyle’s detective stories “embody the ideological assumptions of the class served by the periodicals for which the stories were produced: the rising professional middle class. These ideological assumptions, or values, include … placing a higher justice above strictly legal concerns.” (Greenfield 19-20). In like manner, in “The Five Orange Pips”, when Holmes’ client is killed by the society that was threatening him, the Ku Klux Klan, Holmes says to Dr. Watson, “That he should come to me for help, and that I should send him away to his death -!” (Doyle 114). Holmes feels guilty that he could not help his client escape his pursuers before they caught up with him, since Holmes takes it upon himself to keep his client safe. He even gives his client instructions on how to stay safe on his way home (Doyle 108). Similarly, in “The Adventure of the Beryl Coronet”, upon seeing a distraught client enter their room, Holmes “pushed him down into the easy chair and, sitting beside him, patted his hand and chatted with him in the easy, soothing tones which he knew so well how to employ.” (Doyle 239). Holmes is following his own moral of attending to his client’s needs by easing the client’s fears enough that he would calm down and Holmes could help with the case. In all of these cases, Holmes exemplifies acting morally, one of the key attributes of the middle-class identity of Victorian-era

England. This helps the male reader to better relate to Holmes and find his detective work uplifting and reassuring as a hero's struggle against injustice and criminals.

At the same time, Holmes expresses gallant behaviour towards women during his cases, which is one of the components of the Victorian-era middle class. He attempts to calm or protect women, since he views it as his duty as a gentleman. Notably, in "A Scandal in Bohemia", Holmes "dashed into the crowd to protect the lady" when Irene Adler was apparently threatened by a gang of men fighting over the right to help her down from her carriage (Doyle 19). Despite the fact that Holmes is in disguise as a clergyman at that time and is manipulating Adler by hiring a group of men to pretend to fight, Holmes' intention is never to hurt her through his manipulation. As Dr. Watson says, "After all, … we are not injuring her. We are but preventing her from injuring another." (Doyle 20). Likewise, in "The Adventure of the Speckled Band", Holmes comforts his client, Helen Stoner, by saying reassuringly while rubbing her arm, "You must not fear. … We shall soon set matters right, I have no doubt." (Doyle 167). Stoner had just raised her veil and revealed just how agitated and fearful she was, and Holmes treated her sympathetically. Later in the story, Holmes protects Stoner by refusing to tell her stepfather, Dr. Grimesby Roylott, of her suspicions about her stepfather's role in her sister's death (Doyle 177). Holmes is not motivated by a monetary reward in this case, since, as he says to Stoner, "my profession is its own reward." (Doyle 168). Instead, he wants to protect his client's safety, particularly because he found out that Stoner's stepfather hurt her (Doyle 175). This is supported by John Greenfield, who wrote that one of the middle-class values represented in the Holmes stories was "upholding gender stereotypes of heroic men and weak women in need of protection." (Greenfield 20). Therefore, Holmes' courteous behaviour towards women and their safety from other men is an example of how he illustrates the middle-class integrity during the Victorian era in England. Male readers would view his chivalry as a virtue of a hero, reinforcing their identity as modern knights from the feudal period.

However, there are times that Holmes does not behave according to the values of acting morally and being chivalrous towards women that were associated with the Victorian middle class. These instances do not negate the arguments that Holmes embodies the principles of acting according to one's own conscience and gallantry because they are the result of Holmes' best intentions. For instance, in "A Scandal in Bohemia", Holmes fails to notice how Adler had disguised herself as a man to confirm his identity, leading to "how the best plans of Mr. Sherlock Holmes were beaten by a woman's wit." (Doyle 25). Holmes underestimated Adler after he manipulated her into revealing her hiding spot for the photograph that Holmes' client wanted, believing that she wasn't clever enough to determine that it was Holmes in disguise at her residence because she was a woman. In reality, she disguises herself as a man and greets Holmes in front of 221B Baker Street and he, despite knowing that she is an experienced actress, doesn't make the connection that a random man on the street who knows his name could be Adler in disguise. Nevertheless, this does not negate the instances when Holmes is chivalrous towards women because one does not have to respect women's intelligence to be deferential towards them. Comparatively, Holmes does not act like a gentleman in "A Case of Identity", when he threatens James Wendibank, his client's stepfather, by saying angrily, "It is not part of my duties to my client, but here's a hunting crop handy, and I think I shall just treat myself to –" (Doyle 69). Holmes is not a violent person, he only threatens Wendibank because he just exposed that Wendibank manipulated his stepdaughter into heartbreak so that he could keep the money that she receives as an unmarried woman. Holmes is only trying to avenge a woman's heartbreak, which is chivalrous. Equally important, Holmes does not speak like a gentleman in "The Adventure of the Speckled Band" when he says to Dr. Watson, "In this way I

am no doubt indirectly responsible for Dr. Grimesby Roylott's death, and I cannot say that it is likely to weigh very heavily upon my conscience." (Doyle 191). Holmes is talking about how he accidentally caused Dr. Roylott's death by striking the snake that the doctor sent to kill his stepdaughter, Helen Stoner. Since Holmes wants to protect Stoner from her abusive stepfather, he does not feel guilty for accidentally killing someone, even though he normally would. The latter two instances demonstrate how Holmes is a middle-class hero because he is shown to be protective of women, thus further ingratiating the character with male readers.

In conclusion, Sherlock Holmes manifests the late nineteenth-century values of the English middle class of being principled and of being courteous towards women through various stories in The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes, thus demonstrating that Doyle was catering to his average male reader of the ever-increasing middle class by making Holmes into a reassuring hero. Despite the fact that the character sometimes acted against these values and was a product of Doyle's time, Holmes still behaved with the intention of protecting women. Doyle's invention of a middle-class hero signifies that Holmes is a cultural and societal response to the demands of a growing social class that wanted to see a character like themselves in literature who could solve the problems they sometimes faced. This is supported by Pound, who wrote, "The middle classes of England never cast a clearer image of themselves in print than they did in The Strand Magazine." (qtd. in Clarke 76). While both Holmes and Dr. Watson were of the middle class, it can be argued that Dr. Watson's role as a first-person narrator of Holmes' cases is indicative of how Doyle created a representative of the reader who was imbued with characteristics from both the middle class and from Doyle himself.

Works Cited

1. "Chivalry." Oxford New American Dictionary, 3rd ed., Oxford University Press, 2015.
2. Clarke, Clare. "Professionalism and the Cultural Politics of Work in the Sherlock Holmes Stories." The Masculine Middlebrow, 1880-1950: What Mr. Miniver Read, edited by Kate Macdonald, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 73-89.
3. Doyle, Arthur Conan. The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes. Harper Collins Publishers, 2016.
4. Greenfield, John. "Arthur Morrison's Sherlock Clone: Martin Hewitt, Victorian Values, and London Magazine Culture, 1894-1903." Victorian Periodicals Review, vol. 23, no. 1, 2002, pp. 18-36. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/20083856.
5. Isokoski, Mari. The Victorian Middle Class, Imperialist Attitude and Women in Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes Adventures. 2008. University of Tampere, Master's Thesis.
6. "Moral." Oxford New American Dictionary, 3rd ed., Oxford University Press, 2015.