

The representation of violence and social order essay examples

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



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Elizabeth Gaskell (1810 – 1865) and Arthur Conan Doyle (1859 – 1930) have both written novels that demonstrate how violence and prejudice disrupt the social order although their perspective is very different. Gaskell's novel *North and South* (published in 1855) took place mostly in northern England and dealt with the complex issues of the social upheaval at the start of the Industrial Revolution. Doyle's novel *The Sign of the Four* (published in 1890) had settings in both India and England. The *Sign of the Four* narrative takes place during the time of upheaval and social disorder when the East India Company was losing its grip in India. In fact by the time the novel was dissolved by the British Parliament had dissolved the East India Company as of June 1, 1874. (Robins, xv)

This paper suggests that there are many parallels between the *North and South* and *The Sign of the Four* that address the social issues of violence and social order. There are similarities in the two novels bringing attention drawing attention to social inequality between the rich and poor and between the masculine and the feminine. Both novels show the hard life of poor people, of people in prison, and the heedlessness or compassion to the problems from the powerful. One novel is written by a woman and one by a man so there are differences in how the issues are perceived by the main characters but the injustice in society is an integral part of both of the stories. The hypothesis is that by having the main plot thread its way through the violence and the hierarchies of social order of the times a reader can recognize that although society is changing around them, the power elite do not change at all.

General Comparisons

The Victorian Period and the Industrial Revolution are the periods in which the two demonstrate an overlap in the societal era. The Sign of the Cross is set firmly in the Victorian Period in England. Men are expected to be breadwinners and women are expected to run the home well. The military and administrative systems of Great Britain are expected to protect and expand the empire. The British Empire is expanding and the navy is held in great regard during this period. The Industrial Revolution began in the Victorian Era with promises of new riches and plenty of work for everyone.

In both novels the protagonists are outsiders. Margaret Hale is the female protagonist of North and South. She is the daughter of a minister who moves his family to northern England where industry was changing the lives of the formerly agricultural community. Margaret observes what is happening through the eyes of an outsider. This is due to two different reasons. Firstly she is new to the community and secondly she considers herself a part of the gentry in the English social circles, not at all familiar with people in trade or factory workers. Sherlock Holmes is the famous protagonist of The Sign of the Cross. He is an outsider by choice and by vocation. He is a gentleman investigative detective who has enough money to live by choosing his own clients. In the London world of Holmes he is the first investigative detective, he never plans to marry, and he does whatever he wants to do regardless of social conventions. The most shocking habit he has is taking cocaine.

Power Dynamics

Set side by side the two novels are parallel narrations about a dynamic where the rich are powerful and the poor are vulnerable. The rich have easier lives and higher quality lives. Gaskell's novel tells the story of the internal changes and domestic policies that operate within this power dynamic. Doyle's novel does the same except the events are set externally in the country of India, a country the British have tried to colonize as part of the British Empire. In this way the internal and external British government policies towards Indians and the English poor of the latter half of the 1800s are exposed in both novels; the domestic policy in northern England and the foreign policy in India. The poor of both countries are similarly treated. Doyle's writing reflects the society of his day whereas Gaskell allows her characters to have opinions.

The beginning of the Industrial Revolution

Margaret Hale is the daughter of a clergyman and living in comfortable circumstances when she is uprooted to a northern English manufacturing town. Her father decides he must leave his profession as a minister due to a small, private but overwhelming disagreement with the Church. Margaret and her mother must move with him and they end up in an industrial town which has none of the comforts of their well loved Helstone to a dreary industrial town called Milton. Margaret describes the town in terms of dinginess and darkness. It is hard to breathe there and causes ill health. At first she is prejudiced against the men there because there are no gentlemen; instead the men are all involved in trade. This is how we

understand the position Margaret feels she is in when she arrives in Milton. Simply put she believes she is of a higher class. Her family is unusual because of her relationship with her father. Her father is very sensitive and portrays as more like a woman or child would be perceived during that time. Because of her father's personality Margaret has more power within the family. This could be one of the reasons she feels comfortable when she starts to understand the difficulties of the workers at the factory. She is particularly sensitive to how difficult it is for women.

Another unusual trait of the family is the situation of Margaret's brother, Frederick. Frederick was the leader of a mutiny on a British naval ship. In a country that regards the British Navy as the one of the greatest military organizations in the world this represents an unusual streak in Margaret. It suggests she is a woman that makes her own decisions rather than following the crowd. Shuttleworth (2008) explains that Margaret regards her father and her brother as "outlaws or outcasts both standing outside institutional law" (xvi). In fact here is how Margaret explains their actions as both religiously sound and as bravely standing up to unjust power.

Loyalty and obedience to wisdom and justice are fine; but it is still finer to defy arbitrary power, unjustly and cruelly used--not on behalf of ourselves, but on behalf of others more helpless. (Gaskell, 109)

Margaret's attitude towards rebellion against injustice is consistent throughout the novel. The new urbanization caused by the industrialization of work is not friendly to the workers. The workers are men, women and children; perhaps they are the industrial slaves of the new age.

Although women who work in the factories are working outside the home and inside the home they are the lowest on the social ladder. People would never hire a woman who had worked in a factory for domestic work in their home for example. And a man who has a wife who works in a factory is portrayed as likely to go to ruin at such misfortune. The female in England at this time receives little to no respect but the protagonist, Margaret has different circumstances. Because she takes on the role of the father because her father is not suited to the task she has more freedom to observe the society and to develop an opinion on it. Margaret's opinions about treating workers fairly are within a relationship she develops with John Thornton. Thornton owns a cotton mill factory. As their relationship develops into a romance the reader sees them gain more mature, less judgmental assumptions about the workers. Ermath (1997) explains that

The struggle for truth is a narrative crux during the entire century, and a primary crux of sociality. Even in novels with entirely secular and social agendas, the narrative of 'turning' appears in the structure of disillusionment and moral readjustment so common in Dickens, Gaskell and George Elliot. (42)

Ermath is describing the experience of 'turning' as a transition from one belief to another belief. The belief can be religious or it can be secular; she describes the transformation as having three distinct phases. The first phase is a denial of what is happening in the real worlds, the second phase may bring on despair as the pain and injustices are fully understand, and the third phase is when the experience has adjusted to the reality " to a final reconciliation with nature and the world" (Ermarth, 41). This is a

characteristic of Gaskell's novel which is not found in the novel of Doyle.

Gaskell's characters change and grow. Doyle's character's note what is

happening but are not impacted, much of that is due to the audience

expectations for Sherlock Holmes and Watson to remain in character type.

The end of the East India Corporation

In 1657 the East India Company (EIC) became “ permanent joint stock

coloration” and one of the most obvious symbol of the British Empires power

and corruption (Robins, xiv). The first of many attempts by members of the

British parliament to investigate the EIC's corruption was in 1695. Three

years later though the Asian trade monopoly is awarded to the EIC. (Robins,

xiv) A lot of the action in the The Sign of the Four takes place in India during

the uprising of the Indians against the British colonists from 1857 to 1858.

McBratney (2005) describes the attempt by the British to develop racial and

criminal ethnographic categorization for the complex structure of the Indian

culture. They gathered data and information in order to understand better

the Indians in order to govern them better. McBratney (2005) explains that “

by setting racial, caste, and tribal types in authoritative taxonomies, the

Indian census formed an epistemological template that left its stamp on

imaginative literature about the Indian subcontinent” (153).

Tonga is a foreigner in other words the ‘ other.’ He is the companion of the

Englishman Small who attempts to steal a treasure he lost during

circumstances when he was imprisoned in India. Small saved Tonga's life

and in doing so gained a devoted lifelong friend. The deductions that Holmes

makes about Tonga from a popular gazetteer are not kind, in fact they are

racist.

They are naturally hideous, having large, misshapen heads, small fierce eyes, and distorted features. Their feet and hands, however, are remarkably small. So intractable and fierce are they that all the efforts of the British officials have failed to win them over in any degree. They have always been a terror to shipwrecked crews, braining the survivors with their stone-headed clubs or shooting them with their poisoned arrows. These massacres are invariably concluded by a cannibal feast. (Doyle, 69)

This description should lead to great doubts about Holmes's deductive abilities but it does not because he is perfectly describing "the other." Tonga is small like a female or even the size of a child according to the tracks he made at the scene of a crime (as described by Holmes). Tonga is a loyal friend to the person who saved his life that does not sound like the creature being described by Holmes. Yet even the recipient of Tonga's devotion has one kind thing (and only one kind thing) to say about Tonga. By the time Tonga is located on the boat on the Thames both Watson and Holmes decide everything they learned from the gazetteer is true. The society was more comfortable with a foreigner who is a strange creature, a creature who needs to be governed by a mature culture. Stereotypes of 'the other' gave Brits a virtuous reason to colonize distant lands. (McBratney, 2005) Not only that 'the other' has characteristics that are feminine or womanly which is a hint to the role of women in the Victorian society.

Conclusion

This discussion of North and South and The Sign of the Cross could not dissect and compare all the topical social issues found in the novels, but some important points have been discussed. For example the terrible conditions in colonial and domestic prisons were a subject in both novels. In The Sign of the Cross it was an integral part of the plot because Small is put into a prison and betrayed by two of the British prison officials. The anger of the people in the rebellions both in India and in northern England led to violence. Both of the rebellions grew from a similar reason the expectation that the poor or the foreigner are not really people and should work as slave for corporations or industry. That is a complaint of similar movements today, the Occupy Wall Street movement.

The hypothesis proposed that although the main plots were not directly about social injustice and social reforms similarities to today's events of violence, hierarchical social orders and discontent of the poor, yet readers can recognize an important consistent thread. Although society is changing around them, the power elite do not change at all. Other contemporary events lend themselves to demonstrate the hypothesis is correct. Another example that comes to mind is the opening ceremony of the London Olympics. In the recent Olympics held in London, the Industrial Revolution was idealized and corporations were given every opportunity possible to make money. No wonder Gaskell and Doyle are still being read in modern times.

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