

The moderate
victorian male
spectator in a study in
scarlet, the
moonstone, "the ...



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The Victorian depiction of the masculine is divided by not only class factors but also by degrees of gender conformity and morality, it is this conformity and morality that shapes the role of the masculine narrative in Victorian literature. In this essay I will be examining the accepted norm of the Victorian male and those who transgress these norms in *A Study in Scarlet* (Doyle, 1887), *The Moonstone* (Collins, 1868), “*The Harlot’s House*” (Wilde, 1882) and “*Hermaphroditus*” (Swinburne, 1863). By examining these texts through the lens of concepts of masculinity I hope to show that the role of men in these select Victorian narratives can be roughly divided into the functions of spectator and spectacle, prescribed by their relationship to gender norms. The spectacle can be the often showy, athletic, criminal or unchivalrous masculine, or the feminine masculine who transgresses or transcends gender to become god-like, genius or otherworldly. In this way the normative masculinity in these texts is one of moderation, neither indulging in animal like masculinity, or transgressing too far into the territory of the feminine. This normative masculine ideal serves as both a standard by which all other characters are judged and an audience surrogate.

An understanding of the division and segmentation of masculinity is key to understanding the masculinity of the characters within the discussed Victorian texts (Smart and Yeates, 1). As reimagined in *A Study in Scarlet*, “*The Harlot’s House*” and *The Moonstone*, the spectator is a relatively conventional, Victorian masculine figure who can stand in judgement of the criminal subversive masculine spectacle. *The Moonstone* sets up Franklin Blake as the moderate masculine in direct opposition to the bold and driven Godfrey, and, in *A Study in Scarlet* Watson is the moderate masculine

observer who is permitted to stand in judgement over the more brutish and base actors in the story. Similarly, the narrator of "The Harlot's House" is a moderate masculine middle-class person who stands in judgment of the debauchery he has sought. These moderate men, in their role as the less muscular and aggressive male, allow for the reimagining of the typical Victorian man; a standard by which others may be compared to and consequently condemned or worshipped.

These texts highlight masculinity as being inherently problematic with the folly of the masculine standard bearer highlighted throughout. These masculine characters are often fallible and vulnerable to deception and seduction by the criminal element and the feminine. The uncontrollable and base masculine is full of bravado and bluster, and is a danger to the fabric of society and it is only through the efforts of the moderate masculine and the transgressive masculine that these villains of the text can be controlled.

Godfrey in *The Moonstone* is described as being bold, athletic and pleasant and is later, quite literally unmasked (Collins, 1113) as being deceptive and base in his motivations. Collins reimagines the Victorian male hero into a character that unlike the greed, villainy and "muscular Christianity" of Godfrey (Karpenko, 134) is more considerate, thoughtful and less aggressive in his masculinity. The muscular male ideal is challenged in Collins's *The Moonstone* with the characters who make the most notable positive impact being far from muscly, heroic adventurers, but rather educated and calculating. The positive masculinity demonstrated by character in the text is not necessarily the typical "uncontrolled physicality" (Karpenko, 133) of the

conqueror, brave Christian missionary or adventurer but tows a more moderate almost secular line.

Similarly, *A Study in Scarlet* advocates for a considered and less traditionally aggressive form of masculinity. The villains of the mystery are Stangerson, Drebbler and the rest of the Mormon settlement, who do not adhere to the Anglo Christian morality. Aside from Brigham Young, Stangerson and Drebbler are the most demonized characters despite the fact that they are not the perpetrators of the murders that form the crux of the mystery, but are instead the victims. Their immorality and criminality is conflated with their religious ideology and the narrator of the second part and John Ferrier refer to Mormon polygamous marriages as "harems" (Doyle, 181) showing contempt and condemnation of their way of life. The two murder victims do not directly kill anyone but take part in cultural and religious practices that result in forced marriage and the deaths of John and Lucy Ferrier. Stangerson and Drebbler's eventual murderer, Jefferson Hope, is a base masculine spectacle, giving into his desire for vengeance, however he is painted more sympathetically than his two victims as he adheres to social constructs such as chivalry and monogamy that are viewed moderate and favourable in the text, with Watson describing him pleasantly after Hope's apprehension (Doyle, 231). The case of Jefferson Hope demonstrates how the degrees by which the aggressive masculine can be tempered is indicative of their acceptability in the narrative. The text even affords Hope, a murderer, the dignity of dying, however painfully, without having to face the consequences of his actions and before he can be brought before the judicial system (Doyle, 255).

Hysteria, which is most associated with the feminine, is a common trait of gender transgressive masculine characters. Holmes in *A Study in Scarlet* is moved to hysteria when confronting a failure in his own deductive reasoning, leading him to become anxious and aggravated (Bragg, 9). This nervous energy makes him a more feminine character than the blustering Gregson or the confounded Lestrade. These conventionally masculine characters look on as Holmes makes an emotional and nervous spectacle until he is able to reestablish his understanding of the mystery (Doyle, 131). Similarly, Ezra Jennings in *The Moonstone* is driven to tears as he relates the illness of Candy, and is visibly emotional and sentimental in a way that is not associated with Victorian masculinity (Karpenko, 133). Jennings is aware of his transgression and reflects upon it saying “ Physiology says, and says truly, that some men are born with female constitutions—and I am one of them!” (Collins, 930). Jennings’s emotional vulnerability and feminine qualities give him an additional otherness that makes his medical and deductive genius just another aspect of his unusual and transcendent identity. As Watson and Blake watch on with interest they are merely spectators of the feminine spectacle before them such as the narrator in “ *The Harlot’s House*”, positioning themselves outside the action, but are inexplicably drawn into it; Jennings makes an unusual proposal that Blake cannot resist, Holmes appeals to Watsons need for danger and in “ *The Harlot’s House*” the allure of the spectacle of prostitution and debauchery fascinates and entices the narrator’s voyeuristic urges (Fong, 200).

The masculine intellect is a preoccupation of *A Study in Scarlet* with Holmes pushing all typically masculine concerns aside and focusing on the pursuit of

knowledge pertaining to criminology. He explains his dedication to criminology to Watson “ I consider that a man’s brain originally is like a little empty attic, and you have to stock it with such furniture as you choose. A fool takes in all the lumber of every sort that he comes across” (Doyle, 29). This pursuit of knowledge is all consuming and leaves no room for the pursuit of normative masculine goals. The legacy of Poe’s Dupin from “ Murders in the Rue Morgue” as the precursor to Doyle’s Holmes is perhaps one of not just a particular brand of deductive reasoning but a sexual and gender ambiguity (Bragg, 6) that contributes to Holmes subversiveness and eccentricity.

Wilde’s spectator comes in form of the narrator and provides us with a text dealing with the male gaze and view of the female spectacle in “ The Harlot’s House”. The narrator beholds the spectacle of prostitution, and voyeuristically indulges his curiosity with his “ love” (Wilde, 25). His use of the plight of the women of the lower classes for entertainment removes him from the scene that is taking place. He is the observer, and when his companion is drawn into the action he is helpless to stop her. His voyeurism is the downfall of his companion, but he, ever the spectator comes out of the experience relatively unscathed showing the privilege that his masculinity affords him. We can liken Wilde’s narrator to other observers and spectators such as Watson, who has nothing to lose in A Study in Scarlet and a whole host of male characters in The Moonstone, who emerge from, the text unscathed. They are removed from the scene in a way that is typical of the gentleman spectator. The gentleman spectator often has very little concept of the repercussions of his actions in both “ The Harlot’s House” and The

Moonstone. Often the male characters, defined in this essay as the spectators, act upon their own whims without thought for the greater repercussions for others. In the male spectator there is often a lack of awareness or care for those with less agency than themselves, as demonstrated repeatedly by the blissfully unaware Franklin Blake who is clueless as to Rosanna's affection for him and the motive to Rachel's disassociation with him.

The collaborative abilities of the transcendent masculine and the masculine spectator is key to solving the mysteries at the heart of *A Study in Scarlet* and *The Moonstone*. The homosocial friendships in the texts form part of the reimagining of the Victorian male ideal. The Victorian male as a lone wolf is an incomplete and ineffective entity, whereas with the companionship of another man is able to achieve almost impossible feats. The ineffectuality of the moderate male to decode the mystery is exemplified by the confusion of Franklin Blake until he is drawn into collaboration with Ezra Jennings and Watson's displacement until he takes up rooms with Holmes in Baker Street (Buchanan, 20). Within this collaborative effort the moderate masculine man tethers the othered and transcended masculine to reality, particularly in *A Study in Scarlet* with Watson proving to be the essential morally present character that keeps Holmes's antisocial and apathetic behaviour in check (Buchanan, 20).

The masculine moderate man's role as audience surrogate is firmly established by his role as narrator in all four texts under analysis. The sole exception to this is the contribution of the female narrator of *The Moonstone*, Miss Clack. However, Miss Clack is written as a caricature of the Christian
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woman, written from a very Victorian masculine viewpoint. The folly of her female behaviour is poked fun at repeatedly during her narrative, and she is oblivious to the ridiculous nature of her actions. Just as Miss Clack judges her fellow women, Betteredge as a moderate male narrator of *The Moonstone* stands in judgement of the women of his household. The women of his acquaintance are divided into three categories, those who are his social superior, those who he has fatherly feelings towards and those who he dismisses as cruel and silly. Even those to whom he shows fatherly compassion he views as less than him. *The Moonstone's* Betteredge is not alone in its judgmental male gaze. "The Harlot's House" is a poem that deals solely in the male narrator's judgement of the female. He is the observer, the standard by which the virtues of the "Harlot's house" are judged as "The dead" dancing with "the dead" (Wilde, 25, 26). Prostitution is the spectacle, and he is the spectator.

The moderate male is able to not only stand in judgement of the women and feminine in his sphere but he is also able to condemn those deemed more brutish, aggressive or criminal in their masculinity. The status of the criminal and corrupted male as "other" to the masculine or gentleman spectator such as Watson, Blake and Betteredge is often achieved through the transgression of gender norms or exercising traits of aggressive muscular masculinity for immoral ends. Unlike the transgression of Sherlock Holmes and Ezra Jennings, the criminal male such as Stangerson and Drebber in *A Study in Scarlet* and Godfrey in *The Moonstone* reject the Victorian notion of chivalry and take advantage of women rather than protecting them. The deceptive and brutish nature of the criminal characters leads them take

advantage of the feminine to meet their own ends. This transgressive and criminal behaviour allows the masculine spectator to judge them and condemn them. The othering of the criminals in the two novels often hinges on them straying from the accepted duties and characteristics of the masculine. Unlike the transcendent characters who also go against masculine norms and become divine or otherworldly, the criminal or immoral characters use their gender transgressions for personal gain and gratification.

The social dysfunction and otherness that results from the otherness of the genius and the god-like figure is shown to be a necessary consequence of their unusual qualities. Hermaphroditus is denied true allegiance with either gender, Ezra is shunned by virtue of his manners and heritage (Collins, 918) and Holmes alienates almost all but Watson through his arrogance and emotional volatility (Bragg, 11). The lack of compliance with society norms seems in all of these characters to be not a matter of unwillingness but a matter of inability, they are simply outside of society norms by the very nature of their being. These characters are, however, given permission to be transgressive due to the god-like (Buchanan, 22) or genius qualities are also demonstrated in the masculine spectator's reverence for Holmes and Ezra. The other masculinity, the masculinity that is permitted to stray into the territory of the feminine is granted its permission through the spectacular nature of their capabilities.

In "Hermaphroditus" the titular character is the spectacle who is considered asexual and transcendent, associated with Greek mythology and their realm of Gods (Morgan, 322). The male homoeroticism and intersexuality that runs <https://assignbuster.com/the-moderate-victorian-male-spectator-in-a-study-in-scarlet-the-moonstone-the-harlots-house-and-hermaphroditus/>

through the poem supports the idea of the sublime nature of the transgression of gender norms. The transgression of heteronormative values in Swinburne's poem is sensual and sublime, in fact it is this transgression that renders Hermaphroditus desirable and divine in the Victorian Hellenic tradition (Morgan, 317). The Victorian Hellenic tradition often utilizes homoerotic and gender queer themes to better emulate the Ancient Greek aesthetic (Morgan, 317). As in the Greek myth Hermaphroditus transcends gender and the Victorian normative values of Swinburne's time, allowing the figure to rise above the narrator or spectator (Morgan, 324). Hermaphroditus is perhaps the most revered of the transcendent figures in the texts discussed in this essay, eclipsing even the god-detective Holmes.

Hermaphroditus is the only character who is explicitly and physically intersex making him the epitome of feminine masculinity with Swinburne reflecting on the now permanent inability of his subject to fit neatly into accepted gender roles:

" Yet by no sunset and by no moonrise
Shall make thee man and ease a
woman's sighs, Or make thee woman for a man's delight" (Swinburne, 34-36)

Swinburne's celebration of the visage of Hermaphroditus is not unlike Watson's celebration of Holmes's unusual abilities or Franklin Blake's fascination with Ezra Jennings (Collins, 813). Jennings, Hermaphroditus and Holmes are spectacles of abnormal masculinity, very unlike the more conventionally masculine literary characters that behold them. These male characters who fit more conventional masculine molds are portrayed as straightforward, controlled, fallible and bearing witness to the feminine and

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the transgressive. The conventionally masculine men are positioned as the norm by which all else is judged, and as a result are often the narrator as in “The Harlot’s House”, A Study in Scarlet and Franklin Blake’s narrative in The Moonstone. The masculine spectator being positioned as the reader surrogate assumes that the audience is likely to be able to relate to that viewpoint, and is further evidence of the moderate masculine being positioned as the norm within these texts.

The picture of Victorian masculinity painted by A Study in Scarlet, The Moonstone, “Hermaphroditus” and “The Harlot’s House” is one that is segmented and conditional. The power and status that comes with the masculine can be stripped away by purposeful immorality and criminality, and can be superseded by transcendent otherness that goes beyond masculine gender to a superhuman status. These superhuman characters such as the god-like Hermaphroditus and the genius Ezra Jennings are deliberately othered to make their abilities stranger, thus negating the need for explanation, they are simply beyond the normative masculine experience. Whereas the normative masculine character takes his power from much more explicable socially enforced means. The ability of the male spectator to divorce himself from the scene and yet have lasting repercussions on the lives of those within it is a way that his power manifests and yet he is often blissfully unaware of this power, taking it for granted, oblivious of his privileged place within the narrative. Another manifestation of masculine power is through the friendships and relationships between the male observer and the transcendent other. It is through these modes of power that the masculine observer characters within these texts are able to

maintain their status as spectator as the scene plays out around them, allowing them to dance with danger but never to be truly exposed to it.

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