



## **Interpreting Issues of Heredity and Inheritance in Holmesian Children through Criminal Anthropology and Degeneration Theory**

**Camilla Del Grazia**

### **Abstract**

This article focuses on the ways in which childhood in the Holmesian canon tends to epitomise pervasive Victorian anxieties connected with inheritance and heredity in their double economic and genetic significance. On the one hand, because children represent an earlier state of biological and social development, their growth and education are seen as potential paths to progress. On the other, they become the physical embodiment of previous stages of evolution that so plagued the Victorian imagination, and can exhibit signs of regression and degeneration. Simultaneously, children also carry socio-economic value, as the heirs to their parents' property. Their helplessness in defending themselves and, as a result, this economic patrimony, adds to their liminal position: children in the canon become the expression of hope for the future and the progress of society, and at the same time, of the fear of impoverishment and regression. Finally, the article shows that the action of the detective, whose scientific approach incorporates criminal anthropology alongside hard sciences, ultimately strives to decode the unpredictable, uncontrollable offspring of Victorian society. His normalising action targets inheritance in its ambivalence, striving to restore order in the economic-judicial domain and investigating the transmittance of hereditary traits.

### **Keywords**

criminal anthropology; Victorian childhood; Sherlock Holmes; degeneration; heredity

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## **Interpreting Issues of Heredity and Inheritance in Holmesian Children through Criminal Anthropology and Degeneration Theory**

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### **Introduction**

Only a small number of children make appearances in the Holmesian canon, which comprises fifty-six short stories and four novels written by Arthur Conan Doyle, featuring Sherlock Holmes as the protagonist. One notable reason for this is the detective's well-known celibacy, as he directs his energies solely towards his craft and maintains a certain detachment from social conventions. His brother Mycroft, equally if not more gifted, also opts for a rather solitary life, so that there are no known heirs to the brilliant Holmes lineage. While Watson seems more inclined to fall into the family man mould, having been married at least once, he also remains childless, as far as readers know.

Direct contacts between Sherlock Holmes and children, then, generally come from his cases and can be categorised into two groups. The first consists of lower-class children, primarily the notorious Irregulars of Baker Street: a group of "street urchins" on which the detective relies for underground intelligence, appearing in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) and *The Sign of the Four* (1890). The second includes children of the aristocracy and the middle class: two are the offspring of Holmes's clients ("The Adventure of the Priory School" [1904]) and "The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire" [1924]), two more, under different circumstances, turn out to be the object of his investigation ("The Adventure of the Copper Beeches" [1892] and "The Adventure of the Yellow Face" [1893]). Two other adventures prominently feature a teacher and a governess, respectively, "The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist" (1904) and "The Problem of Thor Bridge" (1922). However, Holmes never engages with the pupils, nor do they hold particular significance to the investigation.

Albeit infrequent, the contacts between Holmes and late-Victorian children proves to be rather interesting if considered in the light of the issue of heredity. Or, more accurately, aristocratic and middle-class Holmesian children seem to draw attention to interconnections between genetic and patrimonial lineage. Early associations of unsettling genetics and

endangered inheritance can already be observed in both gothic and sensation novels, two genres that greatly influenced Conan Doyle's writing and the detective fiction genre as a whole (see Clausson 2005; Ascari 2007). To make but two of the most prominent examples, in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) Manfred's schemes to marry Isabella associate the threat of incest with that of dispossession, while in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859) illegitimacy facilitates Sir Percival's plans to fake his wife's death. As pointed out by William Greenslade, ancestry and heredity were also prime sources of distress for Victorian and Edwardian families, in a disquieting mix of economic and biological concerns (1994: 152, 164).<sup>1</sup>

Property, which was a significant concern for Victorian authors and readers (see Jaffe 2010; 2016), remains a prime motive for crime in Sherlock Holmes's adventures, as in most works concerned with detection (see Ascari 2007; Pittard 2011). Yet, the question of genetic heredity also plays a significant role: for instance, in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1901), the antagonist is unveiled as the doppelgänger of a malevolent ancestor, thus endangering the Baskerville lineage by embodying its most undesirable traits. He also endangers the Baskerville patrimony, through his plans to murder the rightful heir.<sup>2</sup> In a similar vein, in "The Adventure of the Creeping Man" (1923), Holmes delves into the peculiar regressive conduct of a respected professor at the request of the professor's assistant, who is engaged to marry the professor's daughter (presumably wishing to start a family with her) and stands to inherit both his spiritual and material wealth.

A possible approach to interpret the uncanny polysemy of "heredity" in the canon, especially in relation to childhood, is to add the interpretive key of criminal anthropology to a broader reflection on issues of property and inheritance laws. This article specifically focuses on three Holmesian adventures ("The Adventure of the Priory School," "The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire" and "The Adventure of the Copper Beeches") within the context of prevailing theories surrounding atavism and degeneration. Its aim is to highlight how representations of middle- and upper-class childhood in these stories can shed light on the underlying anxieties of late-Victorian England.<sup>3</sup> After a concise examination of Victorian and late-Victorian inheritance and property laws concerning children, the article analyses children's role within the framework of criminal anthropology, showing how this role is performed in the three selected stories mentioned above.

## **Inheritance law, women, and children**

The position of aristocratic and middle-class children in Victorian and late-Victorian society was an ambivalent one, at best. They held the responsibility of upholding the family's name and legacy, thus requiring nurturing and safeguarding against potential risks. Consequently, they represented a source of both hope and anxiety (see Greenslade 1994: 152). At the same time, the legal standing of children was nearly non-existent, as highlighted by Frances Power Cobbe in *Criminals, Idiots, Women, and Minors* (1869). Children, along with women and the mentally ill, were denied "full civil and political rights" (Power Cobbe 1869: 5). They found themselves in the peculiar position of being crucial for society's future while being nearly

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<sup>1</sup> Greenslade examines the progression of these themes in the literary works of Thomas Hardy.

<sup>2</sup> On the topic of evolutionary and atavistic motifs in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, see Clausen (1984), Frank (2003), McBratney (2005), Neill (2009), Karschay (2019) and Allan (2019), among others.

<sup>3</sup> The same approach could yield results if applied to lower-class children, although the latter's connection with inheritance and family legacy may not be as pronounced.

inconsequential in the present. This raised the question of how to ensure their care and, consequently, the endurance of the family.

In 1837, a parliamentary act, called the Wills Act, was introduced as an attempt to regulate the transmission of property through a unified law (Sugden 1837). Before this time, testaments and provisions were the object of an intricate collection of customary rules and ecclesiastical and common laws. Minors, that is, males under the age of twenty-one, could not dispose of property, something that could prove problematic when marriage was contracted before majority was reached. Moreover, in the absence of a cohesive system to codify inheritance, any written document which could pass as a will was usually accepted as such: the law did not even require a testament to be signed by the testator, or mandate the presence of witnesses to its signing (Sugden 1837: 211).

It is no wonder that manuscripts like wills, letters, records or diaries – and their forgery – had become a staple of gothic novels: patrimonial insecurity and the risks of dispossession were probably heightened by such a muddled state of the law. The Wills Act attempted to rectify the situation, introducing a few safeguards against counterfeits and misappropriation. For instance, wills drafted from 1837 onwards had to be signed in the presence of witnesses, with full consent by testators and with their knowledge that their signature validated the document. However, a few concerns persisted. For instance, there was no legal requirement for testators to leave a portion of their property to their rightful heirs. In theory, an entire estate could be bequeathed to an external party. Furthermore, married women were still unable to create a legally valid will due to the legal doctrine of coverture, which subsumed their legal identity under that of their husbands. Additionally, marriage of the testator would render a previously made will invalid, thus requiring the creation of a new will.

With the Married Women's Property Act of 1882, married women obtained the right to retain and manage the property they owned prior to marriage. This provided them with a modicum of autonomy and self-determination, as evidenced by their ability to invest their money in various ventures (Henry 2018) However, they still faced a restriction in that they were prohibited from making a formal bequest. Upon their death, the family estate was therefore once again in the hands of their male relatives, to be disposed of as these saw fit. Custody was also a pressing issue for Victorian women as, in the event of a legal separation, children generally remained under the guardianship of their fathers. The 1873 Custody of Infants Act made it possible for married women to petition for custody of their children, but this remained an option which involved some form of legal litigation, rather than a system of shared guardianship. Unsurprisingly, then, "the intertwined economic and affective lives" (Henry 2018: 11) of characters became one of the main focuses of Victorian novels (see also Jaffe 2010: 5-6).

Children from aristocratic and middle-class backgrounds were subject to the same regulations as other forms of inheritance. They were regarded as assets to be nurtured and invested in, while simultaneously being part of a collection of properties that were transmitted within the family. Minors, naturally, lacked the ability to care for themselves and administer their patrimony in the event of their parent's demise. The norms that were supposed to protect them in such an event, albeit amended and improved during the century, still retained notable sites of insecurity. Despite efforts to streamline the inheritance process, the presence of witnesses during the signing of a will did not guarantee its inviolability, particularly considering that a subsequent marriage could invalidate prior provisions. Minors, moreover, could not appoint lawyers, and had little say in their own tutelage. Divorced mothers could strive to obtain custody, but this was neither an inherent right nor affordable, making it a rare occurrence (see Berry 1999; Nelson 2007).

Children, the natural heirs of the family's social position and fortune, were made defenceless by their lack of civil rights. The norms that were in place to support them and to ensure a smooth inheritance process were, as mentioned, still potentially unreliable. In this respect, children were the embodiment of the future and a source of concern for this very future, at the same time. To this already uncanny quality of childhood, however, Victorians added a new one derived from the era's fascination with Darwinian science.

## **The Representation of Childhood in Criminal Anthropology: Atavism and Degeneration**

Several studies have reckoned with Conan Doyle's fascination with the concepts of atavism and degeneration and tracked their appearance in the Holmesian canon.<sup>4</sup> Both concepts derived through multiple mutations from Darwin's evolutionary theory, and specifically from his suggestion that evolution – the progressive modification of a species through natural selection – also contained within itself the possibility of reversion, or atavism. Darwin proposed that individuals of a species could suddenly exhibit characters that had belonged to distant ancestors, but had disappeared in the next generations. For instance, he observed how “thoroughbred” pigeons bred in captivity had spawned a few individuals that had reverted to the appearance of their wild ancestors. In Darwin's perspective, the suddenness of the reversion was only apparent, citing as the most probable hypothesis that “in each successive generation there has been a tendency to reproduce the character in question, which at last, under unknown favourable conditions, gains an ascendancy” (Darwin 1859: 160-1). In this system, the environment does have a role in the expression of a character, although it does not factor in its first emergence.

The concept of atavism, then, introduced in the scientific discourse the notion that some individuals could effectively embody the return of the past within the present. This was a rather gothic thought, and one that, as mentioned, is present in the Holmesian canon: the clearest example is Stapleton, the villain in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, who is quite evidently an atavistic throwback. Another notable exploration of this concept is found in “The Adventure of the Creeping Man,” in which the supposedly rejuvenating serum derived from an ape triggers a process of physical and mental regression in the scientist who administers it to himself.

Atavism undoubtedly influences Darwin's discussion of human races in *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871). The suggestion put forth was that non-European races represented an earlier evolutionary stage in comparison to Europeans, offering insights into a more primitive phase of human existence. This notion gained traction and was further developed by thinkers such as Herbert Spencer, Ernst Haeckel, Francis Galton, and Charles Letourneau (Leps 1992: 65).

Some even proposed a hierarchical model that placed white middle-class males at the apex of the evolutionary pyramid, followed by lower-class white males on the next step, with white women, children, and black African males occupying the third tier, and so on. White women, the so-called “inferior races,” and white children shared the characteristic of embodying a previous stage of development in relation to white males, who were believed to

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<sup>4</sup> See Clausen (1984), Greenslade (1994), Thomas (1994 and 1999), Goldsmith (2010), Pittard (2011), Frank (2003), Claussion (2005), Ferguson (2007), Neill (2009), Kerr (2013), von Rothkirch (2013), Glazzard (2018), Cranfield (2019), and Karschay (2019), among others.

“recapitulate” the entire evolutionary progress (Leps 1992: 65-6).<sup>5</sup> Male children had the potential to advance towards full progress through education, making the educational process crucial for the advancement of society as a whole (Greenslade 1994: 69-70; McNabb 2017: 736; Karschay 2019: 101).

Max Nordau’s concept of degeneration further reinforced the notion that close monitoring of the environment and stimuli to which minors were exposed was necessary. In his critical work, *Degeneration* (1892), Nordau drew upon Darwin’s suggestion that reversion could be triggered by unspecified environmental factors. Nordau identified this with the perceived evils of urbanisation, including unsanitary living conditions and the vices it fostered. Furthermore, he proposed that, unlike atavistic throwbacks, which affected individuals and could potentially remain dormant in their offspring, the effects of degeneration were inevitably passed on to the next generation, intensifying with each transmission. Theoretically, degeneration could be halted or even reversed by addressing the very conditions that gave rise to it through a process of normalisation.

This system of transmittable characteristics, which can be interpreted as a means to monitor societal progress, becomes significant in the analysis of the Holmesian canon when viewed through the lens of criminal anthropology. Sherlock Holmes employs various scientific methods of his era, ranging from chemical analyses of blood traces to discerning different types of ashes based on their cigar origins. Criminal anthropology provides him with a similar taxonomic tool or, at the very least, a clear system of categorisation for criminals (Thomas 1994: 662; Thomas 1999: 24; Karschay 2019: 105). Furthermore, the role of the detective, which is to restore order, can be seen as fitting within this semiotic system when we consider “order” in both its social and natural contexts (Clausen 1984: 116; Thomas 1999: 10; Frank 2003: 157; Clauson 2005: 65).

In the field of criminal anthropology, the work of Cesare Lombroso garnered significant attention during the late-Victorian era. While it sparked considerable scholarly debate, it also swiftly permeated the cultural discourse. Lombroso’s influence not only earned him a dedication in Nordau’s *Degeneration* but also had a substantial impact on the works of Francis Galton and Havelock Ellis<sup>6</sup>. Conan Doyle was also undoubtedly familiar with the evolving scientific discourse (see Ferguson 2006), including the debate on atavism and degeneration, as well as Lombroso’s theories (see McNabb 2017). This is evident in his frequent mentions of Lombroso in his letters, particularly in relation to his Spiritualist beliefs (see Ferguson 2010). Furthermore, Conan Doyle appears to have applied Lombroso’s methods in compiling his own statistical survey titled *On the Geographical Distribution of British Intellect* (1888).

Lombroso theorised the existence of a “born criminal,” an individual whose physical and psychological traits, or “stigmata” – which were also recognisable in primates and non-European races – were signs of an innate criminality ([1876] 2006). Lombroso’s taxonomy, ostensibly derived from his observations and recordings of traits exhibited by convicted criminals, also posited a connection between genius and lunacy, suggesting that they stem from the same set of core characteristics. According to Lombroso (1891), madness and genius are alternative manifestations of these shared traits. These characteristics could potentially be inherited by future generations or remain dormant based on chance.

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<sup>5</sup> See also Eagle Russett (1991: 51), Stocking (1991), Greenslade (1994: 70), Thomas (1999: 209), Frank (2003: 147), and Ferguson (2006).

<sup>6</sup> Both Galton and Ellis appeared to adopt a more receptive stance, acknowledging the influence of environmental factors in the manifestation of criminal or atavistic traits.

Lombroso also painted a rather unromanticised picture of childhood, framing it not as a state of innocence, but, on the contrary, as the prime site of crime, or moral insanity. Children, in this view, would *normally* harbour the seeds of criminality, deprived as they are of moral sense. What is more, they would embody Lombroso's model of the born criminal through their "deviant" characters and behaviours, entering normalcy only in their adulthood (Lombroso [1876] 2006: 188-92). A correct education and a healthy environment are therefore necessary for the right "conversion" of the dangerous child into a functioning, normal member of society. Lombroso, however, also stresses that education alone cannot suffice in correcting born criminals, and that "great criminals reveal their tendencies at an early age" ([1876] 2006: 192).

If childhood already acquires ambivalent undertones through a consideration of issues of patrimonial inheritance, biological heredity reinforces this notion. Victorian children became their family's heirs in multiple respects: it was their responsibility to further its social standing and wealth, but also to contribute to the progress of the species, expressing successful – and, possibly, non-criminal – characters. The chances of this transmission going wrong, and of children expressing deviant or degenerative traits, represented a threat to the family in the first place, as well as to society at large. If we understand "liminality" as an intermediate state that establishes communication between two distinct sites or concepts (Downey, Kinane and Parker 2016: 6), Victorian childhood, with its dual significance of progress and regression, can be considered a liminal phenomenon. At once a symbol of progress and reversion, children were hard to place in a cohesive interpretive system. Furthermore, they shed light on the growing permeability of the boundaries between private and public spheres, blurring the distinction between the welfare of individual families and that of society as a whole (Berry 1999: 1).

For Sherlock Holmes, criminal anthropology serves as an invaluable tool through which individuals can be assessed and classified, much like analysing ashes or bloodstains. Their origins, physical traits, and idiosyncrasies all become part of a hermeneutic approach that has the potential to not only prevent crime but also to trace it back to the perpetrator (see also Jaffe 2010: 9-10). However, this system raises a fundamental question: atavism suggests that regressive traits may resurface unpredictably, while degeneration argues that these traits will inevitably manifest in future generations, potentially worsening over time. If Holmes were to apprehend a criminal but leave their children behind, would the threat truly be dispelled?

Moreover, considering the liminal position of late-Victorian children within society, one wonders if Holmes can truly exert a normalising influence. Scholars have extensively examined how Conan Doyle crafted his short stories to align with the conventions of George Newnes's *Strand Magazine*, which served as Holmes's primary publication platform (Thomas 1999; Cairney 2007; Pittard 2011; Kerr 2013; Allan and Pittard 2019; Burrow 2019; Cranfield 2019). In fact, both Newnes and Conan Doyle had a keen sense of the *Strand's* "community of readers" and of the "communal reading experience" (Pittard 2011: 63) that it fostered. On the one hand, the magazine often placed Holmes's adventures and other detective fiction works side by side with popularisations of scientific and anthropological theories, while also featuring reports on actual police investigations (Thomas 1999: 75; Cairney 2007: 22; Cranfield 2019: 91). This made readers of the *Strand* engage with a common vocabulary encompassing both evolutionary theories and criminal anthropology. On the other, the magazine purposefully presented itself as an un-sensationalised reading option suitable for the entire family, thus striving for a rational, reassuring, and even "purified" stance (Pittard 2011). The additional question, therefore, arises as to whether the elusive and ambiguous nature of the "liminal" child could be effectively categorised and, thus, neutralised in Holmes's cases. To explore these inquiries, "The Adventure of the Priory School," "The Adventure of the



Sussex Vampire” and “The Adventure of the Copper Beeches” serve as compelling test cases, as they prominently address these very issues.

### “The Adventure of the Priory School”

“The Adventure of the Priory School,” published in 1904 shortly after Holmes’s resurrection in “The Adventure of the Empty House,” opens unexpectedly with the arrival of “Thornycroft Huxtable, M.A., Ph.D., etc.” (Conan Doyle 2009: 538), the principal of a prestigious preparatory school, at 221b Baker Street, the home of two bachelors. Huxtable seeks the detective’s assistance in solving the kidnapping of Lord Saltire, one of his pupils and the sole heir to the Duke of Holderness. This crucial detail is immediately conveyed through a typical device of Holmesian narration as Sherlock consults his encyclopaedia of reference, reads the entry aloud for Watson and the reader, and exclaims: “‘Holderness, 6th Duke, K.G., P.C.’ – half the alphabet! ‘Baron Beverley, Earl of Carston’ – dear me, what a list! [...] Chief secretary of state for –’ Well, well, this man is certainly one of the greatest subjects of the Crown!” (539-40). Aside from aligning with the prevalent classification tendencies of the era, Holmes’s description of the distinguished aristocrat would have resonated with readers of the *Strand*. They were accustomed to encountering “‘Portraits of Celebrities at Different Times of their Lives’, which reproduced photographs of eminent Victorians alongside a few lines of biography” (Clarke 2019: 31).

The principal proceeds to portray the boy as a “charming youth” (Conan Doyle 2009: 540) who had adapted smoothly to his life at the preparatory school but dearly missed his mother, as his parents had separated some time prior. While there are no hints of atavism or degeneration in Lord Saltire, there are signals that something is going against the natural order of things: his parents’ marriage is not stable. In accordance with the law, the Duke has custody of his son, while the Duchess has chosen to live in France. This is the reason why Huxtable, rather than the Duke, comes forward with the case: “his Grace is extremely desirous to avoid all public scandal. He was afraid of his family’s unhappiness being dragged before the world. He has deep horror of anything of the kind” (541).

The Duke’s concern with his family’s private matters becoming the object of gossip can be interpreted not only as a wish for privacy, but also as the unwillingness to show ostensible signs of failure to the rest of society (see also Glazzard 2018: 94; Ue 2019: 41-2). The Duke is a public figure, one who “is completely immersed in large public questions” (Conan Doyle 2009: 542), so much so that his public life evidently takes precedence over his private one, even in the event of his heir’s kidnapping. At the same time, preserving the family name is, somehow, a way of preserving his son, as well – or at least, the legacy he is to inherit. The Duke must effectively choose between prioritising Lord Saltire’s physical well-being, thereby securing the future of the family’s title, or protecting the title in the present, aiming to avoid any scandal. When he finally does confer with Holmes, the Duke arrives with his secretary, Wilder; the pair is presented through a close description of both men’s physical characters:

I was, of course, familiar with the pictures of the famous statesman, but the man himself was very different from his representation. He was a tall and stately person [...] with a drawn, thin face, and a nose which was grotesquely curved and long. His complexion was of a dead pallor, which was more startling by contrast with a long, dwindling beard of vivid red [...]. Such was the stately presence who looked stonily at us from the centre of Dr. Huxtable’s hearthrug. Beside him stood a very young man, whom I understood to be James Wilder, the



private secretary. He was small, nervous, alert, with intelligent, light-blue eyes and mobile features.

(543)

The physical features of the two men already provide some indication as to their personality. None of them are completely positive: the Duke's traits, like his drawn face and grotesquely bent nose, make him resemble a bird of prey, a type of predator which Lombroso used as a correlative for criminality (Lombroso [1876] 2006: 172-3). An extreme pallor and a thin beard are also features which Lombroso associates with the "born criminal" ([1876] 2006: 311). However, both pallor and a long, thin nose can also be distinctive characters of the man of genius, as Lombroso argued in *The Man of Genius* (1891: 7, 354). Conan Doyle softens the negative tone of this portrayal by repeatedly using the adjective "stately" (2009: 543). This repetition reinforces the exceptional nature of the Duke and associates the interpretation of his character with genius rather than criminality.

The Duke's stateliness is then openly contrasted with the attributes which qualify Wilder: the first is tall and dignified, the second small and nervous; the Duke looks "stonily" on, while Wilder has expressive, "mobile" features, which paired with his alertness and nervousness can suggest mercuriality (543). The characters displayed by Wilder can also be found in a specific type of criminal, the "criminal of passion" (Lombroso [1876] 2006: 105), which contrarily to "ordinary" criminals can be extremely intelligent. Much like the Duke's, they are ambiguous traits, which can be found in the man of genius (Lombroso 1891: 3, 30), as well. However, the description of the secretary is shorter and more concise than the Duke's, lacking the mitigation of more positive attributes.

This account gains significance when it is linked to the committed crime. It is revealed that Wilder, the kidnapper, is actually the Duke's illegitimate son and is responsible for abducting his half-brother. Furthermore, Wilder's existence is the catalyst for the family's upheaval, as it was the scandalous secret of his parentage that led the Duchess to leave the Duke. When Holmes infers all of this, the Duke, who had already formed suspicions about the identity of the culprit, hints at two significant sites of danger, one concerning patrimony and the other genetic transmission.

Firstly, Wilder is presented as a jealous individual, who, having discovered his father's secret, "has presumed ever since upon the claim which he has upon [him], and upon his power of provoking a scandal which would be abhorrent to [him]" (Conan Doyle 2009: 556). His plan involves getting rid of his brother and becoming the sole possible heir to the Duke's title and fortune, thus forcing his hand in acknowledging him legally as his son. Making Lord Saltire disappear, physically removing him from the equation, is the only possible recourse Wilder has to be acknowledged, since his father refuses to do so through other official means. Despite his illegitimacy, he is part of his father's life and offices, including his public ones, given that he acts as his secretary. The legitimate son is endangered as a result of his half-brother's opaque legal standing: the boy's guardian – his father – is paralysed by the need to uphold a successful picture of the family, leaving him defenceless in the face of Wilder's schemes (see Ue 2019).

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, Wilder may represent an instance of regression. The Duke affirms that he "cherished and cared for him" and gave him "the best of educations"; nonetheless, "James' folly and jealousy" have reduced the family to a "desperate situation" (556). Apparently, education did not prove enough to correct James's inherent seeds of criminality, in keeping with Lombroso's conclusions on "born criminals" (Lombroso [1876] 2006: 192). This is true both of parental guidance, as the Duke specifies

that he loved and cared for his illegitimate son, and of formal education, making private and public instruments of correction essentially useless.

Moreover, there is something pathological about Wilder's attitude: his behaviour is explicitly that of a madman, since his behaviour is called "folly" – a folly that could jeopardise the symbolic future of the family, Lord Saltire (Conan Doyle 2009: 556). In addition to this, the Duke states that from the very first moment, James hated his "young legitimate heir [...] with a persistent hatred" (556), something that qualifies his crime not simply as a premeditated scheme to gain legitimacy, but as a crime of passion. As previously pointed out, Wilder's physical characters can be interpreted in Lombroso's semiotics as "stigmata" of the "criminal of passion" (Lombroso [1876] 2006: 105). The story's insistence on the connection between crime, hatred and folly seems to validate this interpretation on the psychological level, as well.

Wilder clearly represents a throwback, if only in the sense of a suppressed past returning to haunt and disrupt the present – the Duke openly admits that "his presence had something to do with the unhappy issue of my marriage" (Conan Doyle 2009: 556). But if he is a degenerative individual, his deviant traits beg the question of lineage: did he inherit them from his stately father, or from his unknown mother?

The Duke describes his eldest son's mother as a morally upstanding woman who refused his proposal of marriage to avoid marring his career, and later died in childbirth. There certainly is something of her in her son: "I could see his mother's face in his, and [...] for her dear sake there was no end to my long-suffering" (556). Apart from an unspecified physical resemblance, there appears to be little similarity between James and his mother. James, as a criminal of passion, could be categorised as "morally insane" according to the principles of criminal anthropology (Lombroso [1876] 2006: 83). In contrast, his mother exemplifies selflessness by rejecting the Duke, his title, his wealth, and social recognition to preserve her lover's standing.

As mentioned earlier, the father exhibits traits that are shared by both born criminals and men of genius. It is possible that James could have inherited his father's traits, expressing them in a different, degenerative way. His illegitimacy, therefore, poses a dual challenge: it disrupts social stability by blurring the lines of his claims to the title and property, and it deviates from the expected transmission of genetic traits associated with progress and success.

Lord Saltire, the child, remains unseen throughout the adventure: his kidnapping and attempted murder are the main preoccupation of the detective and his client, but his retrieval happens offstage. However, the threat of his elimination looms large for two significant reasons. Firstly, as the legitimate heir, he holds the key to preserving and potentially expanding the family's fortune and maintaining its reputation. Secondly, he shows none of the deviant characters of his half-brother, pointing to his father's characters having found a better outcome in his second son. Solving the case and preserving his life could secure both the socio-economic and biological continuity of the family and, therefore, of society at large.

In the end, Sherlock successfully solves the case by unravelling the details of the kidnapping and explaining *how* it occurred. However, it is important to note that Holmes is not directly responsible for normalising the situation or restoring order (see Ue 2019: 40). Before his final revelation, Wilder is already driven away from the paternal home and sent to Australia to seek his own fortune. This act effectively transfers the threat to a distant location, neutralising the immediate danger to the homeland and the family by relocating it to the colonies. Holmes even acts as the unlikely marriage counsellor, advising the Duke to reconcile with the Duchess. As a reply, the Duke assures him that he has already written to his wife with

that very aim. While the situation does return to stability both in the private and public spheres, little of this is Holmes's doing (see Ue 2019: 43-4).

Moreover, the solution can potentially be a precarious one: what if Wilder decides to come back to haunt his father with his secret, like a ghost from the past? And what of his deviant traits? Will a change in the environment – a possible course of treatment suggested for degeneration – suffice to correct his folly? And who could say that Lord Saltire's progeny will not, eventually, display deviant characters? All in all, the family's future seems to remain in a liminal state, where both Wilder and Lord Saltire embody unexpressed potential and latent danger simultaneously.

### **“The Adventure of the Copper Beeches”**

An even more unsettling scenario is presented in “The Adventure of the Copper Beeches,” which also features an educator as a central figure: a governess, Miss Violet Hunter. Governesses and tutors could make children an additional source of disquiet to Victorian upper-class families. Like other forms of in-house help, they were granted entrance into the Victorian home for the purpose of taking care of the children. The well-guarded privacy of Victorian families, then, was pierced by outsiders who became “intimately bound up with the family's personal lives” but could, by the same token, make them extremely vulnerable – for instance, by being called to testify in divorce or child custody cases (Nelson 2007: 127).

In this particular case, as in other works of Victorian literature, it is the governess who faces a threat from the family. Showing great intuition, Miss Hunter turns to Holmes because something in her new employer's household strikes her as odd. In doing so, she reveals the household's secrets to a stranger, but one who possesses the authority and moral obligation to uncover them (see Clausen 1984). The employer himself, Mr. Rucastle, is described as “prodigiously stout” (Conan Doyle 2009: 318), with small eyes, smiling and affable but with a strange list of requests which border on the fetishistic (Glazzard 2018: 92). He is not particularly concerned about the subjects the new governess is capable of teaching, but instead seeks someone who possesses the “bearing and deportment of a lady,” along with specific physical features (Conan Doyle 2009: 319).

Unlike in “The Adventure of the Priory School,” a child is shown in “The Adventure of the Copper Beeches,” described first by his father to the governess and later by the governess to the detective. The first description, though supposedly affectionate, raises some concerns:

“And my duties, sir? I should be glad to know what they would be.”

“One child – one dear little romper just six years old. Oh, if you could see him killing cockroaches with a slipper! Smack! smack! smack! Three gone before you could wink!” He leaned back in his chair and laughed his eyes into his head again.

(319)

Not exactly an angelic child, and yet the father speaks proudly of his unsettling behaviour. Traits such as anger, moral indifference, a lack of affection, and cruelty, exemplified by the tormenting of small animals, are among the characteristics identified by Lombroso as typical of both the child and the born criminal (Lombroso [1876] 2006: 188-91). This passage foreshadows aspects of the child's personality while also hinting that the father's joviality may be misplaced or concealing something obscure.

When unfolded, the plot of the adventure is indeed evocative of gothic and sensation novels and their dispossessed, vulnerable heroines. Mr. Rucastle, the antagonist, has devised

an elaborate scheme to have Miss Hunter impersonate his daughter from a previous marriage, allowing him to retain control over a substantial bequest left to her by her mother.

Miss Rucastle's condition emphasises how much, despite new legal safeguards, the transmission of patrimony could still be perceived as a problematic issue, especially in relation to female inheritance (see Michie 2013). The basic outline of the adventure is reminiscent of "The Adventure of the Speckled Band" (1892), in which two sisters are threatened (and one of them is murdered) by their stepfather (see Glazzard 2018: 21). In both cases, crime emerges when the young women become engaged and transition from being under the guardianship of their fathers or stepfathers to that of their husbands. This transition also involves the transfer of their inherited wealth or patrimony. The father figures in both "The Adventure of the Copper Beeches" and "The Adventure of the Speckled Band" reject the legitimacy of the provisions established by their late wives, leading them to resort to crime and violence to prevent the legal process of inheritance from taking place.

From the standpoint of biological heredity, the interesting feature of this adventure is that Holmes unravels this Brontë-esque case by analysing Miss Hunter's descriptions of the child she is tasked with caring for. As Miss Hunter assumes her role, she gradually reveals additional information about the family, shedding light on their dynamics and secrets.

The father remains apparently good-hearted, but prone to anger when contradicted; the mother is called a "nonentity," "colourless in mind as well as in feature" (Conan Doyle 2009: 324). The child is central to the description, and confirms the unease evoked by the introduction:

I have never met so utterly spoilt and so ill-natured a little creature. He is small for his age, with a head which is quite disproportionately large. His whole life appears to be spent in an alternation between savage fits of passion and gloomy intervals of sulking. Giving pain to any creature weaker than himself seems to be his one idea of amusement, and he shows quite remarkable talent in planning the capture of mice, little birds, and insects. But I would rather not talk about the creature, Mr. Holmes.

(324)

Minute, but macrocephalic and prone to fits, to an alternation of opposite states of lethargy and excitement, and with a marked cruelty towards defenceless creatures, the child – the *creature* – seems a compendium of characters which Lombroso associates with criminality (Lombroso [1876] 2006). In fairness, the same oscillation between moments of intense action and melancholy also qualifies the genius (Lombroso 1891: 30). Holmes, who famously turns to cocaine in between cases, when his remarkable brain lacks stimuli, would probably adhere to this model. However, when it comes to the child in question, the presence of numerous "stigmata" associated with inherent cruelty suggests that his destiny as a born criminal may be inevitable. The governess, recognising these traits, turns from referring to him as a child to using the term "creature," which carries connotations of monstrosity.

Why devote so much narrative space to the description of someone who, despite his innate criminality, could hardly be the culprit of a crime, given his young age, relative lack of intelligence and delicate build? The analysis of the child's "stigmata" becomes essential to the solution of the case when it is configured within the system of heredity and atavism, as Holmes himself points out: "my dear Watson, you as a medical man are continually gaining light as to the tendencies of a child by the study of their parents. Don't you see that the converse is equally valid. I have frequently gained my first real insight into the character of the parents by studying their children" (Conan Doyle 2009: 330).

By studying the deviant child, Holmes is alerted to the presence of criminal traits in the family which he then searches for in the parents. Given that the mother is a “nonentity” (324), the other possibility for a criminal ascendancy must be the father. Holmes’s acknowledgment of frequently employing this type of reasoning reflects the significance of criminal anthropology theories in his investigative approach. Even though this kind of inductive reasoning is perceived by contemporary readers as fanciful, it is presented as wholly rational (see Frank 2003). Holmes even appeals to Watson’s medical training to support the validity of his deductions and, therefore, present them as *scientific* to the reading public. In addition to this, the adverb “frequently” also suggests that the process is repeatable, another feature of the scientific method and proof that children in most cases recapitulate the characters of their parents. The child’s degeneration, then, is the alarm bell that triggers Holmes’s investigation into the inner workings of the family, then compounded by additional clues provided by the governess.

The case is solved rather violently when a cornered Mr. Rucastle is torn to pieces by the mastiff he used to keep his daughter confined, in what is presented as a fight between two ferocious beasts. Once again, Holmes has unravelled the mystery, but he is not directly responsible for bringing the culprit to justice. A violent death is appropriate retribution for this kind of criminal, in that his schemes are turned against him in a reversal of fate – a way of nature of protecting itself, possibly.

Yet, the issue of his progeny remains. His daughter is freed, and her property is rightfully restored to her, rather than passing on to her father and, after that, to her ostensibly dangerous half-brother. If Holmes confirms that the son has inherited deviant characteristics from his father, it raises the question of whether the daughter might also carry these traits in her biological makeup. If so, there is a risk that she could pass them on to her own offspring, who would inherit not only their mother’s bequest but also the potential for criminal tendencies. This notion highlights the lingering concern of criminal inheritance and the potential for deviant behaviour to re-emerge in future generations, as seen in other cases like *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

The child, on the other hand, is not neutralised: while degeneration can, in theory, be reversed, the physical features and the unmitigated tendencies of the boy seem to indicate that little can be done to make him a normal adult. Furthermore, he is now under the sole tutelage of his mother, a woman of no personality, who probably lacks the moral fortitude to correct her son’s tendencies. The child, as a creature that must be educated and protected, cannot be eliminated; at the same time, the signs he exhibits, and which the detective decodes, clearly point to a threatening future, rather than to progress. While the plot connected with feminine dispossession and economic inheritance has found a mostly satisfying conclusion by the end of the adventure, the larger danger to society remains unchecked: the child is a problem that cannot be solved, an anomaly that cannot be normalised even by Holmes.

### **“The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire”**

Together with “The Adventure of the Copper Beeches,” “The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire” is among the many stories set in the British countryside, an environment often made problematic by its evident ties to a possibly regressive past (Frank 1999; Frank 2003; Neill 2009; Glazzard 2018; Allan 2019). In addition to this, the figure of the vampire, which gained immense popularity through Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), has frequently been explored in relation to themes of atavism and degeneration (see Fontana 1988; Arata 1990; Hurley 1996; Greenslade 1994).

In “The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire,” the titular vampire is, evidently, nothing but a tease: an outlandish premise for the detective to disprove. Its presence is doubly out of place: first, Robert Ferguson, the desperate husband who called upon the detective, remarks on vampirism: “We had thought it was some wild tale of foreign parts. And yet here in the very heart of the English Sussex –” (Conan Doyle 2009: 1036). The concept of vampirism is thus immediately linked to notions of being “wild” and “foreign,” characteristics that align it with the classification of human races proposed by social Darwinism and the concept of recapitulation (see Eagle Russett 1991: 51; Stocking 1991; Leps 1992: 65-6; Greenslade 1994: 70; Thomas, 1999: 209; Frank 2003: 147; Ferguson 2006).

Secondly, a sensational vampire story would be out of place in the pages of the *Strand* as well as in one of Holmes’s adventures. The detective himself almost metanarratively refuses this notion: he introduces the case to Watson in the second paragraph of the story by saying that “for a mixture of the modern and the mediaeval, of the practical and of the wildly fanciful, I think that this is surely the limit” (Conan Doyle 2009: 1033). He then compares the case to “a Grimms’ fairy tale” (1034), concluding with the remark “the world is big enough for us. No ghosts need apply” (1034) which aligns perfectly with Newnes’s goal of targeting the “average man” and enhancing his readers’ “cultural health” (Clarke 2019: 33).

How, then, did a vampire materialise in the heart of Sussex? As in “The Adventure of the Priory School,” readers are once again confronted with a disrupted household. A widower with a fifteen-years-old son from his first marriage, Ferguson has recently remarried with a Peruvian woman and just fathered an infant son. The peaceful life of the Ferguson household is abruptly shattered when the new Mrs. Ferguson violently assaults her stepson, Jack. Subsequently, she is discovered biting the baby’s neck, causing it to bleed. Following this alarming incident, she isolates herself in her chambers, and the nurse, Mrs. Mason, is tasked with round-the-clock vigilance over the infant.

Concluding his account of the case, Mr. Ferguson tellingly asks: “is it madness, Mr Holmes? Is it something in the blood?” (Conan Doyle 2009: 1037). His concern is that his non-European wife could have transmitted her deviant traits to their progeny: that her madness, “something in the blood,” could be also found in his young son’s blood. Together with its primary symbolic value of “vital force,” in this tale blood assumes another possible meaning, in keeping with the evolving “scientised” lexicon of the late-Victorian and Edwardian eras (Ferguson 2006). Namely, it also becomes the material symbol of familial inheritance and the quest for purity (Pittard 2011). As will be demonstrated shortly, this notion of purity does take on racial hues, but it rather signifies a safeguard against the dangers of degeneration.

Echoes of *Jane Eyre* (1847) abound in this story: the supposedly mad South American wife is confined in her chambers and assisted by a nurse called Mrs. Mason. Yet, as pointed out by Andrew Glazzard, this is a misdirection, based on

the same set of cultural assumptions that Doyle appeared to indulge and reproduce in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* [...] Robert Ferguson’s baby son is apparently being attacked by his own mother, who is seen sucking blood from his neck: her origin marks her as alien and exotic, and her presence is the obvious explanation for the outbreak of bizarre, psychotic or even supernatural violence in the rural domain of the Sussex wolds.

(2018: 151)

It is not Mrs. Ferguson who is endangering the child’s life, but rather her stepson Jack, who had attempted to poison the child using a dart that this “South American household” (Conan Doyle 2009: 1043) kept on display together with a “fine collection of South American utensils and weapons” (1039). When Mr. Ferguson found her, the woman was only trying to suck the

venom out of the wound to save her son's life. Her refusal to defend herself is justified by her indignation at being falsely accused of such an unnatural act and by her selfless endeavour to protect the relationship between her husband and his first son.

Insofar as the weapon used by Jack is South American, a certain amount of unease with contamination from non-European countries can still be perceived. However, the English teenager remains the true culprit, thus dissociating the criminal act from the exoticised Other – Mrs. Ferguson – and her genetic patrimony. In the conclusion of the story, moreover, Holmes clearly states that “such things do not exist in criminal practice in England” (1043), thus expelling the possibility of the vampire from the motherland.

The contrast between Mr. Ferguson's sons supports this interpretation. Similar to the case in “The Adventure of the Copper Beeches,” the observation of the traits of the two boys leads Holmes to formulate his conclusions. The child is presented as “very beautiful [...], dark-eyed, golden-haired, a wonderful mixture of the Saxon and the Latin,” a veritable “cherub” (1041). The product of this mixed marriage is therefore not a source of anxiety or of fear of miscegenation, but rather the fortunate outcome of an experiment which would strengthen the English bloodline (Glazzard 2018: 152; Ue 2020: 6).

In contrast, the English adolescent is presented as physically weak and morally deficient (Glazzard 2018). Jack, who suffered an accident in his infancy resulting in a “twisted spine,” is described by his father as “a poor little inoffensive cripple” with the “dearest, most loving heart within” (Conan Doyle 2009: 1037). Mr. Ferguson then frequently remarks on the unconditional, almost obsessive love that Jack feels for him, claiming that “never in the world could there be so devoted a son. My life is his life. He is absorbed in what I say or do” (1038). Holmes moreover supposes him to be “very developed in mind, since his body has been circumscribed in action” (1038).

These observations draw a parallel between the nervous temperament of Wilder in “The Adventure of the Priory School” and Jack, who displays similar tendencies towards jealousy and obsessive fixations and is moreover extremely intelligent, in accordance with the characteristics of the “criminal of passion” (Lombroso [1876] 2006: 105). His first appearance is also quite significant in this sense:

He was a remarkable lad, pale-faced and fair-haired, with excitable blue eyes which blazed into a sudden flame of emotion and joy as they rested upon his father. He rushed forward and threw his arms round his neck with the abandon of a loving girl. [...] The boy went off with a curious, shambling gait which told my surgical eyes that he was suffering from a weak spine.

(Conan Doyle 2009: 1041)

Reprising the investigative method demonstrated in “The Adventure of the Copper Beeches” and “The Adventure of the Priory School,” Holmes quickly recognises the importance of Jack's characteristics, commenting that “he would certainly seem to be a most interesting lad” (1038). However, unlike in “The Adventure of the Copper Beeches,” where such traits were employed to deduce information about the father, in this case, they are utilised to infer the inherent deviance of Jack himself.

Although he displays many characteristics associated with the criminal of passion and murderers, such as his feminine appearance (as supported by his use of poison, a murder weapon traditionally associated with femininity) (Lombroso [1876] 2006: 51, 204), Jack is perhaps more accurately seen as a product of degeneration rather than a throwback to an earlier stage of evolution. The accident that caused the physical deformity in Jack's body, as Holmes himself suggests, also had a profound impact on the development of his mind (Conan Doyle



2009: 1038). This unfortunate incident not only rendered him disabled (although the extent of his disability is not explicitly revealed to the reader), but more significantly, it made him susceptible to bouts of intense passion and obsessive devotion, traits that Lombroso and later Nordau identified as characteristic of the degenerate.

Due to the identifiable cause of Jack's degeneration and the potential for its reversal, his punishment is comparatively more lenient than the one imposed on Wilder. He is sentenced to one year at sea, a confinement that serves multiple purposes. Firstly, the change in environment and engagement in physical labour are intended to counteract degeneration and facilitate correction. Secondly, his temporary removal from England effectively eradicates the perceived "monster" from English soil until his rehabilitation is deemed complete.

Although not as prominent as in "The Adventure of the Priory School" and "The Adventure of the Copper Beeches," the themes of patrimony and social status still hold significance in "The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire." Because this punishment is limited in time, Jack will presumably be able to regain his place in society. This does pose the question of socio-economic inheritance (Ue 2020: 7). The youngest, healthy, and strong child would seemingly be a more promising choice for the family's (and for society's) future. However, Jack holds the position of the first-born, and despite the absence of a title to inherit, he retains the inherent right to claim his place within the family structure. His father, portrayed as exceedingly loving and indulgent towards his eldest son, is unlikely to alter his will to exclude him or hinder his reintegration into society.

It is doubtful whether a year at sea will be enough to reverse the effects of Jack's accident and transform him into a respected member of society once again. If the outcome of his rehabilitation and reintegration remains unpredictable, his degeneration continues to pose a potential threat both within the private confines of the family and in the public social sphere.

## Conclusion

In "The Adventure of the Priory School," "The Adventure of the Copper Beeches" and "The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire" children play a relatively minor role and their involvement is limited to a more passive and behind-the-scenes presence. However, their very existence is problematic enough to catalyse the action: in "The Adventure of the Priory School" and "The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire" by providing a motive for the crime; in "The Adventure of the Copper Beeches" by pointing to the true culprit and his legacy. Other adventures, like "The Adventure of the Speckled Band," *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, "The Adventure of the Creeping Man" and more, could be considered as sites of investigation on the polysemy of the concept of "heredity" in connection with atavism and degeneration.<sup>7</sup> However, "The Adventure of the Priory School," "The Adventure of the Copper Beeches" and "The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire" vividly depict the ambivalent position of children within the intricate interplay of economic and biological considerations.

Interestingly, these three stories seem to subvert late-Victorian and Edwardian expectations in at least one aspect if, as Greenslade points out, "the subject of heredity is inseparable from questions of gender" in that "it was the woman (often in her role of mother) who seemed to have carried the burden of anxiety or guilt on the subject" (1994: 165). Yet, in

<sup>7</sup> See Clausen (1984), Jann (1990), Greenslade (1994), Thomas (1994 and 1999), Goldsmith (2010), Pittard (2011), Frank (2003), Clausson (2005), Ascari (2007), Cairney (2007), Ferguson (2007), Goldsmith (2010), Neill (2009), Kerr (2013), von Rothkirch (2013), Glazzard (2018), Cranfield (2019), and Karschay (2019), among others.

all three stories here examined, it is the father who is unequivocally identified as the origin of the transmissible deviant menace. Mothers are either physically or psychologically absent: both Jack Ferguson and James Wilder are orphans, and Edward Rucastle's mother is a "nonentity." As emphasised throughout the analysis, fathers then remain the primary source of their sons' regressive appearances and behaviours. According to Barsham, "dysfunctional fathers and husbands" represented as "predatory power-seekers" abound at least in the 1892 *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (2000: 128), which includes "The Adventure of the Copper Beeches." This mistrust of father figures seems to persist in later appearances of the detective, including "The Adventure of the Priory School" and "The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire" (Ue 2019: 41), as well as possibly in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and "The Adventure of the Creeping Man," where the concept of degeneration or regression is associated with deviant paternal traits.

In conclusion, children have the potential to inherit prestigious titles and vast fortunes, but these very privileges can transform into vulnerabilities when these defenceless beings are subjected to external forces beyond their influence. Furthermore, they can become a danger themselves, representing regression rather than advancement, and posing a threat to the continuity of the family lineage rather than contributing to its prosperity.

In "The Red-Headed League" (1891), Watson calls Holmes a "benefactor of the race," (Conan Doyle 2009: 190), indicating that Holmes's role extends beyond solving crimes and addressing specific offenses. Holmes is seen as someone who contributes to the restoration of social order by identifying and eliminating individuals who could potentially impede the progress of society. This suggests that Holmes is not only concerned with maintaining law and order but also with safeguarding the advancement and well-being of the broader community.

Still, in "The Adventure of the Priory School," "The Adventure of the Copper Beeches" and "The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire," the action of the detective is only partly normalising: Holmes can expose the culprit, but he cannot fight against the transmission or re-emergence of atavistic or degenerative traits. Nor can he physically eliminate children who have not yet committed a crime. His adversaries encompass a range of felons, including both common criminals and "criminals of passion," as well as criminal masterminds like his arch-nemesis, Moriarty. Nevertheless, certain children of today bear the potential to become the criminals of tomorrow. Apprehending them is not within Holmes's purview; instead, he can only observe, study, and catalogue them in his encyclopaedic references for future use. His actions are constrained by limitations: his domain is the now, while biology shapes the future. The evolution or devolution of children around him remains a constant force beyond his control, as these adventures clearly demonstrate.

Through these adventures and the liminal children that they feature, Conan Doyle seems to be painting a rather complex picture of the future. Are children a resource, or are they creatures to be closely monitored, for fear they will turn into monsters? They seem to embody both aspects, and therefore, to be utterly undecodable even for the rational detective.

A widely popular medium, the adventures of Sherlock Holmes reached numerous households, effectively making the residents of those homes protagonists in these cases. It is possible that these stories reflected some of the underlying anxieties felt by their readers. If the function of detective fiction is indeed to be "diagnostic, prescriptive, and corrective," showing that "all transgressions of the law are [...] followed by the restitution of social order" (Smajić 2010: 71), readers would then find these anxieties neutralised by the detective's work. Yet, when these concerns combine property and biological heredity, it is possible that the solution of the case could have produced a lingering sense of disquiet, rather than full catharsis (Clausson 2005). Indeed, Holmes is limited in his ability to influence the unpredictable processes of genetic transmission, degeneration, or the reappearance of atavistic traits. The

stability of social order, therefore, seems to rest on uncertain foundations, relying on principles that are, at least to some extent, unknowable. The introduction of scientific, biological concerns into the already gothicised concept of heredity, then, can have the effect of accentuating its precariousness, rather than stabilising it through a veneer of rationality.

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