

The Red-Headed League: Social Location of London

Aditya Iyengar (180100007)

October 13, 2020

Abstract

This paper aims to describe the impression of the social location of London that appears to the reader upon reading *The Red-Headed League* by Arthur Conan Doyle.

Arthur Conan Doyle's detective fiction story, *The Red-Headed League*, is a vivid description of the dynamic world of late Victorian London. Set, and written, in the late 19th century, the time coincides with that when Britain was a colonial power and London, the epicentre of this extensive and formidable empire. However, despite being the *de facto* capital of the world, London was also a city enshrouded in deep mystery. This aura of darkness and iniquity is the London Doyle highlights in the story - a story of an uncanny detective cutting through the shadows to intercept equally cunning and mysterious criminals, à la the contemporary Jack the Ripper.

Being set in a rapidly urbanizing society, there is a stark contrast that keeps coming up during the narration. Upon visiting Wilson's office in the city centre, Watson remarks that it was a 'poky, little, shabby-genteel place' and portrayed a 'smoke-laden and uncongenial atmosphere'. However, just round the corner, the street seemed to be lined with 'fine shops and stately business premises'. This dissimilitude is aptly described to be as great as that between 'the front of a picture and the back'. The theme of contrast also comes up when Watson visits the same locale at night, when it feels like 'an endless labyrinth of gas-lit streets'. This suggests that the dark and mysterious side of the city has come to the forefront.

Another major influence is the establishment of the police force and the scepticism that the general public possessed of their competence in investigating crimes. Doyle portrays the police as a gang of bungling incompetents, however earnest they may seem in their desire to uphold justice, as Holmes describes Detective Jones as 'not a bad fellow, but an absolute imbecile in his profession'. Due to low wages, the police forces were often gleaned from the lowest ranks of society, leading to a large number of people who considered themselves socially superior to question their authority and skill. This is evident when John Clay, claiming to possess royal blood, demands to not be touched by the police officer's 'filthy hands'. Sherlock Holmes' character, in itself is revolutionary, as he appears as a 'consulting detective' - distinct from the public Scotland Yard as well as the newly emergent private detectives, who were apparently perceived as seedy and ignoble. By rendering Holmes as an 'irregular pioneer standing in front of the regular force', Doyle is both playing off the emergence of the detective in public consciousness and trying to stir that same public into demanding more

from their police forces.

The rapidly changing social structure in London is also something that can be inferred from the story. As a world centre of industry and commerce, many people were drawn to it, leading to a burgeoning third estate. With scientific development and literacy on the rise, aided by the newly popular Darwinian theories of logical reasoning, Doyle targeted this large pool of readers with his detective stories. To them, Holmes appeared as an embodiment of this new faith in scientific reasoning, as a way to bring about law and order to the world. Whilst empowering the masses with Holmes' logical methods of crime-solving, Doyle also takes a jab at the aristocracy, and it wasn't a coincidence that the story was written around the same time as when Prince Edward VII was plagued by various scandals. John Clay's ridiculous pride in his social rank symbolises the royals that considered themselves to be above the law, as well as their general disdain for the *hoi polloi*. Holmes' unassuming appearance shows us that Doyle believed that skill and intelligence should be the keys to social advancement, not which family one belonged to - a message that resonated with the rapidly mushrooming London middle-class.

In conclusion, *The Red-Headed League* provides the reader with an evocative account of a bustling metropolis in transition - the perfect setting for the emerging genre of crime fiction.

References

- [1] O'Neill, E., *Sherlock Holmes and the Police*, Passengers' Log, Sydney (1999).
 - [2] Weise, B.G., *Sherlock Holmes: A Character of the City*, Leiden University (2017).
-