

Reflections and critiques of Victorian domestic values in Doyle's *The Sign of Four* and Stevenson's *The Beach of Falesá*

Benjamin Eskola

25 February 2021

The Victorian era saw massive and unprecedented social and economic shifts, including increasing industrialisation and urbanisation, grew to dominate one quarter of the world by the early twentieth century. Inevitably, this had an impact on the mindset of the British people and on popular culture; Marx famously wrote that “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas”,¹ which is to say that moral and political values developed in the context of industrialisation and of imperialism and reflected that context. The literature of the time could not fail to be influenced by these things, whether positively or negatively. In particular, for the growing middle class, particular ideas of domesticity became entwined with ideas of moral virtue, and the territories controlled by Britain overseas were seen both as a symbol of Britain's preeminence and a source of wealth and prestige both individually and nationally, a venue for adventure in which individuals could rise to power; but also as an individual and collective risk, the object of a moral duty, the ‘civilising mission’ that Britain took up for the sake of others and not itself. Ideas of race, gender, and class were intertwined, so that the working class was conceived of as not only economically but racially and morally inferior, and the geopolitical ascendancy of Britain was founded in its racial virility.²

Arthur Conan Doyle's *The sign of four*³ reflects both of these conceptions of domestic: both the home as a place of moral virtue (and deviations from it)

¹*The German ideology*, ed. by C. J. Arthur (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970), p. 64.

²Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London: Routledge, 1995).

³*The Sign of Four*, ed. by Shafquat Towheed (Broadview Press, 2010).

and the home *land* as a place of moral virtue contrasted with foreign territories. The story begins and ends, as do most Holmes stories, in Holmes' and Watson's flat, the now-iconic address of 221B Baker Street. This provides a point of reference for the readers: a setting and lifestyle with which they can identify. In particular, Watson, a wounded veteran and medical professional is a quintessential middle-class Victorian, and provides a normalcy by which the reader is enabled to understand the situations described in the stories.

However, even at Baker Street the domestic ideal is complicated: while Watson might be the bourgeois everyman, Holmes himself stands well outside the norm, constantly transgressing class boundaries. Rather than a respectable profession or trade, he consorts with dangerous criminal elements, ostensibly to bring justice; but it is noted on several occasions that had he not been a detective, his talents would have been equally suited to criminality himself (p. 85). Moreover, his comfort going 'undercover' in working-class environments marks him out as unusual: he is recognised by, and has a camaraderie with, the prizefighter-gatekeeper McMurdo (p. 77); his disguise as a seaman is convincing enough to fool even Watson, after several years of cohabitation (p. 116), and yet immediately after returning home from working-class Poplar he can offer a fine dinner of grouse, oysters, white wine, and port (p. 118-19), and seems to look down upon "people of that sort" (p. 103). Moreover, his outright rejection of marriage puts him at odds with the bourgeois-domestic ideal; his misogynistic distrust of women is 'atrocious' to Watson (p. 111), but even his failure to notice Mary Morstan's attractiveness is 'inhuman' (p. 61) and his lack of interest in marriage incomprehensible (p. 156).

The next domestic scene we are presented with is that of Thaddeus Sholto, and it is one which appears less in keeping with domestic norms. At first sight it is 'commonplace', a 'third-rate' suburban home in south London; its interior is initially 'sordid' (p. 66-67). But the rooms inhabited by Sholto are, by contrast, richly furnished; there is a degree of decadence to the display of wealth, when the need to appear respectable is abandoned in favour of private luxury. It is a home which falls short of the domestic ideal: great wealth is present, but moral virtue is not; Sholto is not entirely a sympathetic figure, curiously oblivious to Mary Morstan's feelings despite his apparent desire to do the right thing. Perhaps the source of his wealth contributes to this: not earned through his own hard work, but inherited, and before that stolen several times over. The oriental trappings enhance the impression of decadence and suggest that this is a somewhat 'unclean' source of wealth; Sholto's own weakness, his hypochondria and

cowardice, may be a result of this corrupting foreign influence.

The figure of Mary Morstan is also inherently bound up in the domestic ideal, being the object of Watson's romantic desire. Her own history is a colonial one: raised in India for a time, then sent 'home' to boarding school in Britain (p. 57): it is not clear whether she was born in India or not, but as the imperial capital, Britain could be 'home' even to those who had never been there. She is, moreover, a paragon of Victorian femininity: 'dressed in the most perfect taste', 'sweet and amiable', 'spiritual and sensitive'; moral virtue is prized here over physical appearance, and there is an implication that further virtue is to be found in her 'limited means' — by contrast with other minor characters of limited means, whose poverty makes them unvirtuous, e.g. the family of Mordecai Smith (p. 103). Later we see the home of Mrs Forrester, where Mary Morstan is employed; these middle-class surroundings provide a respite for Watson in the midst of the drama of the case. But her class position seems complicated: as the daughter of an officer, and potentially an heiress, but impoverished, she works for a living but nevertheless is 'no mere paid dependant, but an honoured friend', the usual Victorian divide between family and servants⁴ breaking down somewhat — allowing Watson to see her, if not as an equal, at least as an appropriate marriage prospect.

For Doyle, therefore, the idea of home is primarily a positive one, representing the moral virtue of the characters or its absence. For Stevenson, however, the theme is more complicated. The imposition of British moral values on Pacific islanders in 'The beach of Falesá'⁵ is clearly not a wholly positive one; nor is it a completely successful one. The institution of marriage, at the centre of the story, seems to have been treated with self-serving disregard by Europeans on the island, in order to manipulate the indigenous population for their own ends. It is Wiltshire himself who feels the need to put this right and legalise the marriage. Curiously, though, Wiltshire throughout is also suspicious of missionaries (p. 34) and appears (like Stevenson himself) to disdain religion as a whole (p. 11), suggesting that his motive is not consciously to uphold the Christian values that the other Europeans have abused. Indeed, the portrayal of both Europeans and islanders is an ambiguous one: Wiltshire's criticism of missionaries is that they 'suck up' to the natives and look down upon Europeans (p. 34), and it is clear throughout that he sees Europeans as superior, complaining that

⁴*Romantics and Victorians*, ed. by Nicola J Watson and Shafquat Towheed, 2nd edn (Open University Press, 2018), pp. 157, 276.

⁵*South Sea tales*, ed. by Roslyn Jolly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

the islanders have lost their 'respect for whites' (p. 22), comparing them to children (p. 55); even his own mixed-race children are to be looked down upon (p. 71). Yet on the other hand the Europeans in the story deserve little respect: Case is a fraud who manipulates the locals, and possibly a murderer too; Randall is an embarrassment (p. 8).

There is thus a parallel with Jonathan Small's story in *The sign of four*. There, too, Indian characters are looked down upon as a matter of course, but the Europeans behave immorally throughout, even to one another — Major Sholto seems not to consider a vow made to Indians as having any value, but is nevertheless surprised to be betrayed by Captain Morstan (p. 151). Moreover, explicit reference is made to the idea that the European presence in India is for the purpose of enrichment (p. 140). Doyle, a committed imperialist, presumably either disagreed with this sentiment, or considered it a valid justification — nevertheless, the story leads us to question whether European rule in India might have unintended negative consequences. Stevenson's relationship with imperialism is a more ambiguous one, but he too makes it clear that European expansion is not wholly positive, whether because European values are no better than others, or because Europeans themselves do not live up to them.

All in all, while neither may have intended to be critical of social norms, both Doyle and Stevenson give us reason to question whether Victorian domestic values — and the related values of class, gender, and race — are wholly positive ones, or ones in which the predominant state of affairs masks hidden downsides.

References

- Doyle, Arthur Conan, *The Sign of Four*, ed. by Shafquat Towheed (Broadview Press, 2010)
- Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels, *The German ideology*, ed. by C. J. Arthur (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970)
- McClintock, Anne, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London: Routledge, 1995)
- Stevenson, Robert Louis, *South Sea tales*, ed. by Roslyn Jolly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)
- Watson, Nicola J, and Shafquat Towheed, eds., *Romantics and Victorians*, 2nd edn (Open University Press, 2018)