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## **A Study of Charlotte Holmes: Reimagining Sherlock Holmes as a Victorian Woman Sleuth**

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### **Abstract:**

Michel Foucault asserts that crime and its investigation are uniquely tied to their social context; crime is a violation of laws that represents the will of the State at that particular point of time. When crime is narrativized in form of historical fiction, it provides the ideal opportunity to understand the socio-legal structures of the period and what constituted criminality during that time. In this research paper, I intend to examine Sherry Thomas' feminist reinterpretation of Sherlock Holmes as Charlotte Holmes in her novel *A Study in Scarlet Women*. To study Charlotte Holmes' characterization as a Victorian-era detective, I draw upon Virginia Woolf's theory of how women of equal calibre to their male counterparts are unable to develop their intelligence and abilities due to social restrictions on women in 'A Room of One's Own'. allow a keener understanding of women in roles of agency such as detective figures along with women as victims in this period.

**Keywords:** Historical fiction, crime fiction, detective novels, women detective, feminism, golden age fiction.

### **Introduction**

Edgar Allen Poe has been crowned 'the father of detective fiction' due to his creation of the character C. Auguste Dupin in three short stories where the birth of the quintessential detective figure took place, one who saw beyond what the reader could analyze and restore order in the community by apprehending the most conniving criminals. The private detective figure started from Dupin but culminated in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, who became immortalized as the master of the art of deduction. Sherlock Holmes was first featured in 'A Study in Scarlet' in 1887 but has since become a global phenomenon with the original collection being republished continuously, new stories published featuring the same characters, and the stories being adapted in television and films as recent as the award-winning BBC

Sherlock television series in 2010 which featured a modernized take on the Victorian detective and his exploits with Dr Watson.

Similar reworkings of Sherlock Holmes have panned popular culture, some of which feature gender-swapped Sherlock – Charlotte Holmes. This reworking of the British sleuth allows an understanding of how women would function in the traditionally masculine space of crime and policing. The original set of Sherlock Holmes stories had very little literary space consumed by female characters, which too, barring a few exceptions, remained limited to the helping hands of Mrs. Hudson and perplexed clients. The female versions of Holmes thus provide a strong contrast to the original collection in terms of women's representation by situating the female sleuth in a conservative Victorian society where women's access to education and public spaces was extremely limited. The two prominent series featuring Charlotte Holmes have been written by Brittany Cavallaro and Sherry Thomas. While Cavallaro's young adult novel features Charlotte Holmes in modern-day U.S. as a descendent of Sherlock Holmes, Sherry Thomas' *A Study in Scarlet* is a historical fiction novel where Charlotte Holmes hides behind the ruse of brilliant but bed-ridden detective brother, Sherlock, to earn money by solving cases for clients and the London Metropolitan police.

This paper aims to take a two-pronged approach while analyzing *A Study in Scarlet*. The first line of query will be to analyze how historical novels like *A Study* tackle the issue of placing a female character in the forefront of the action-filled world of detective fiction where outdoor movement, social mobility and access to finances all become a necessity to solving cases and catching criminals. The second line of query will be to analyze how historical fiction allows a deeper understanding of the social and economic circumstances of women in Victorian society by juxtaposing this novel alongside Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*.

Booker prize-winning novelist Margaret Atwood about her novel 'Alias Grace', a historical true crime story, characterized historical crime fiction as, "Such stories are not about this or that slice of the past, or this or that political or social event, or this or that city or country or nationality, ... They are about human nature, which usually means they are about pride, envy, avarice, lust, sloth, gluttony, and anger" (Atwood 1516). Atwood goes on to argue that the purpose of historical crime fiction is to show the universal nature of human criminality which is driven by sins of similar motivations across time. Historical crime fiction allows the reader to safely distance themselves from the danger of criminality depicted in the novel as compared to the current true crime and crime fiction content that fixates on informing the readers about present dangers. Historical crime fiction, rather historical fiction in general, allows the depiction of social lives in past cultures where narratives of marginalized members

of society were rarely documented while remaining tied to the present understanding of human nature through their fictionalization of murder and violence. Similar to the detective, historical writers also work by reading and joining clues to create a full picture of an event that has already taken place. *A Study in Scarlet* seeks to bring forth one such marginalized community of Victorian society: women. Victorian society has been the subject of intense feminist criticism due to its preoccupation with strict enforcement of gender roles. Critic Ben Griffin in his text *The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain: Masculinity, Political Culture and the Struggle for Women's Rights* argues that there was a clear separation of spheres occupied by men and women, men occupied the patriarchal role of family decision-maker while women were expected to pliantly accept his decision even as parliamentary debates raged to provide more legal protection to women against violence and grant them more rights relating to marriage and child custody. This sentiment is echoed in the Victorian icon “Angel of the house” which is rooted in the idea that the woman or the wife is the centre of the private, domestic sphere where she manages the household while her husband works in the public sphere and earned the money necessary to maintain their social status.

*A Study in Scarlet* is set in Neo-Victorian London where Lady Charlotte Holmes uses her skills in the art of deduction to break hegemonic social orders which placed her in private spheres of high society London with the singular task of finding a suitable husband. Charlotte Holmes possesses the ratiocination that was associated with Sherlock and the ideal Victorian male in general, the opposite of the emotional and ‘hysteric’ female. In *Fanfiction and the Author* Judith Fathallah argues, “The model of masculinity the Holmes stories construct is rational, logical, courageous and patriotic-though not to emotional excess” (Thomas 48). This Victorian construction of masculinity is flipped upside down in Thomas’ Charlotte Holmes who while rationalised similar to her male counterpart is characterized as a feminine woman who is not divorced from emotional intimacy. This characterization of Charlotte as a woman’s woman who wears frilly gowns filled with lace is justified by adding the plot point of Charlotte’s father, Sir Henry, who promises to sponsor her education post the age of twenty-five years if she invests herself fully into feminine arts of domesticity and fashion until then and attempts to find a suitable husband. However, Charlotte is later shown to fully own the experience of fashion and social bonding, “I did as he asked. As it turns out, fashion is rather enjoyable. And so is talking to people-amazing how much they’ll tell you if you only enquire” (Thomas 29). Charlotte Holmes is a character who defies the expectations of Victorian society by retaining traits that are not prescribed to her gender. She aims for financial independence, refuses to indulge in the institution of marriage and while she doesn’t have a nicotine addiction

like Sherlock Holmes did, she is shown to be addicted to baked goods and confectionaries. Throughout the text she is described as “tubby” and “plump” indicating she did not fit in with the Victorian expectation of a slim and slender young woman. Charlotte constantly sneaks cakes and confectionary behind her mother’s back who is concerned with her gaining weight and not being marriable. Thomas also frames Charlotte Holmes as a sexually active woman. Traditionally, Sherlock Holmes has been framed as an asexual character who has no interest beyond indulging his mental faculties. However, Thomas’s characterization of Charlotte is multidimensional with the inclusion of feminine traits that are generally set opposite to masculine rationalization displayed by male detective characters in fiction. Thomas breaks the binary of a woman possessing either feminine or masculine traits alone, Charlotte Holmes’ possesses both emotional attachment to her family and friends while also being able to dispassionately dissect the social malignancy.

The novel begins with a sexual scandal involving Charlotte Holmes and a married man, Mr Roger Shrewsbury, who is caught by his wife mid-passion. Thomas’ choice of introduction for Lady Charlotte Holmes breaks every code of conduct imposed by society on women and the novel differentiates itself from the get-go from various historical fiction which remain primarily interested in the aesthetics and fashions of the bygone era more than investigating the problematic gender and class ideologies of the society. Kate Mitchell in her text *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorina Fiction* describes this tendency of historical novels to recreate commercially viable text while glancing over the difficult social and cultural aspects of that historical moment, she writes:

The issue turns upon the question of whether history is equated, in fiction, with superficial detail; an accumulation of references to clothing, furniture, décor and the like, that produces the past in terms of its objects, as a series of clichés, without engaging its complexities as a unique historical moment that is now produced in a particular relationship to the present” (Mitchell 3)

*A Study in Scarlet* skirts this referential take on Victorian society by constantly confronting the gender and socio-economic complexities faced by women at this time. Thomas frames the plot with Charlotte’s motivation for earning economic independence and to escape falling into the traps of a married life. Her search for economic independence begins at home through her father and when he refuses to sponsor her education, she decides to take her out of consideration for marriage in high society by creating a scandal with Mr. Roger Shrewsbury. Charlotte Holmes is never shown to have concern for her reputation even when she is expected by society to feel humiliated for being caught in a sexual scandal. Thomas portrays her as least

concerned with what is expected of her gender behaviour while being confronted by Lady Shrewsbury, “When the girl was ready to leave, she simply walked out, forcing Lady Shrewsbury to catch up. Again, as if she weren’t a strict moral guardian escorting a fallen woman to her consequences, but a simple-minded maid scampering behind her mistress” (Thomas 7). In this scene Charlotte refuses to adhere to her expected gender role of feeling shame and attempting to hide her sexual encounter and that deeply bothers Lady Shrewsbury who is upholding the patriarchal structure of Victorian society by squarely placing the blame of her son’s wayward actions on the ‘loose’ young lady, she states, “...But men are creatures of unbound lust. It is the duty of good women to keep them in check. For your daughter to lure my son from home and hearth, for her to-” (Thomas 39). As Judith Butler argues in *Performance Acts and Gender Reconstitution*, gender is a construction that requires the collective agreement of performance to maintain its credibility and to become a part of the cultural fiction about male and female gender identity. While Lady Shrewsbury is upholding her gender expectation of regulating female sexuality, Charlotte is refusing her gender performance of shame and guilt traditionally associated with sexual encounters outside the institution of marriage. Simone De Beauvoir writes about women’s lack of agency in sexual encounters in *The Second Sex*, “for her the act of the flesh, if not sanctified by the code, by a sacrament, is a fault, a fall, a defeat, a weakness; she is obliged to defend her virtue, her honour; if she “gives in” or if she “falls,” she arouses disdain, whereas even the blame inflicted on her vanquisher brings him admiration” (Beauvoir 444). Lady Shrewsbury is arousing this disdain against Charlotte for sexually engaging with her married son while explaining away his sexual liaisons as a part of his natural gender identity. The central plot of the novel involves the murders of Lady Shrewsbury, Amelia Drummond and Lord Harrington Sackville which Charlotte suspects to be interconnected. The reason of their death is revealed to be Lord Sackville’s paedophilic sexual assault on underaged girls in a brothel and his own niece, Clara. The plot further reveals that the two murdered women chose to hide Lord Sackville’s crimes and were murdered for their complicity in hiding the sexual assaults of young girls. Sexual relations thus become a prominent point of discussion in Thomas’ text where she deals with both consensual sexual engagement in a rigid Victorian society and with rape and assault of young girls and women who are unable to protect themselves due to their lack of agency in a patriarchal setup. Thomas does not shy away from discussing sexual engagement in this neo-Victorian text where such discussions would have culturally been taboo at the time.

Virginia Woolf in her feminist text *A Room of One’s Own* concerns herself with the question of women not writing fiction and fiction not being written about women themselves.

Her text creates a fictional sister to the British playwright William Shakespeare, Judith Shakespeare, through whom she suggests that women could just as well produce masterpieces of literature but the lack of economic independence and freedom to pursue career restricts their talents from being explored. Woolf writes about the limited financial capacities of women in the Renaissance where they were neither allowed to own property nor able to hold vocations to earn their own, “Since her pin money, which depended on the goodwill of her father, was only enough to keep her clothed, she was debarred from such alleviations as came even to Keats or Tennyson or Carlyle, all poor men...” (Woolf 79). Thomas frames Charlotte Holmes’ adventures in similar vein to the complexities described by Woolf regarding the financial independence of women and their right to self-determination and rejection of marriage as the only available out from their parental custody. Charlotte’s involvement with Mr. Shrewsbury creates the narrative turn of her deciding to run away to London to escape her parents’ decision to confine her in country area. Her arrival in London turns out to be far less rosy than she had hoped, her limited savings and money given to her by her sister Livia, are her only source of survival while she tries to find a job. Thomas describes the struggle of finding a job in a society that tightly controlled financial opportunities for women through Charlotte’s visit from organization to organization that claimed to connect eligible women to employment opportunities. The organizations require women to not only be skilled but also be vouched for by “ladies of good standing”, immediately eliminating Charlotte from consideration. Thomas writes, “...The money would not last forever. It wouldn’t even last very long. And then what? If she couldn’t look after herself, how would she begin to help Livia?” (Thomas 83). Charlotte wants to be financially independent so she can then strive to save herself and Livia from the fate of forced marriage. Thomas underscores the idea that upper-class women had only marriage as a respectable future to attain and their families being wealthy did not translate into them personally gaining financial independence. This is contrasted with other women characters like Becky Birtle and Mrs. Cornish who are working as domestic helps; the women from financially weak families were afforded more freedom to work as their income became a necessity for the family’s survival.

Charlotte’s detective consultancy is under the pseudonym of ‘Sherlock Holmes’ to gain legitimacy in a society where occupations surrounding crime and law were exclusively held by men. Charlotte’s letter always bears the name ‘Sherlock’ and her in-person consultancies with Detective Treadles are run after creating the charade of ‘Sherlock’ being too sick in the other room to speak directly to the Inspector and Charlotte being the messenger between the two. Woolf narrates similar disguising done by female authors to gain legitimacy in society and

using male pseudonyms to publish their work. Woolf writes, “To have lived a free life in London in the sixteenth century would have meant for a woman and playwright a nervous stress and dilemma which might well have killed her” (Woolf 35). Woolf’s argument runs on a similar vein to what Thomas portrays with Charlotte Holmes, an impossibility to own your intelligence and skill as the society would see it as a defilement of their purity which was maintained by keeping them secure in domestic settings- a woman working and working to gain publicity was displaying herself to the public and inevitably losing her chastity. At the beginning of *The Adventure of the Abbey Grange* by Arthur Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holmes awakens John Watson by saying, “Come, Watson, come. The game is afoot. Not a word! Into your clothes and come!” This phrase has been since associated with the action-filled adventure and chases that Holmes and Watson pursued while solving their cases. Thomas does not portray Charlotte and Mrs. Watson in high-powered chases and action as the Victorian setup would have made in nearly impossible for two unmarried women to travel and interact with police authorities without breaking every social code of conduct. As Charlotte and Mrs. Watson do not have the social freedom to chase criminals and investigate, Inspector Treadles becomes the man on the ground who travels to crime scenes to conduct interviews and gather clues. In this sense, Charlotte Holmes thus becomes truly an armchair detective with no physical presence on the site of action.

One of Virginia Woolf’s central thesis in *A Room of One’s Own* is the difficulty women face in creating their own spaces for work. She argues that for a woman to have her private area to apply herself in work is a necessity, the lack of which keeps them from writing fiction of stature similar to popular male authors of the time. Woolf writes, “In the first place, to have a room of her own, let alone a quiet room or a sound-proof room, was out of the question, unless her parents were exceptionally rich or very noble, even up to the beginning of the nineteenth century” (Woolf 79). Thomas similarly frames the troubles of Charlotte Holmes trying to find a room to live in after arriving in London and later a room to set up the apartment of sick and ailing Sherlock Holmes’ from where she would run her detective consultancy. Her lodging at Mrs. Wallace’s boarding house in London is acquired after lying about her identity and is mired with restrictions, she is not allowed to step out in the evening or have any male visitors. This arrangement too is cut short when Mrs. Wallace learns of her identity as a woman caught in scandal and asks her to vacate immediately. Mrs. Wallace claims her boarding house has no place for a woman caught in a compromising position and states, “In that case I have no choice but to ask you to leave immediately. I must have a care for the reputation of my establishment. This is a house of virtue, of good Christian respectability. There is no room for



you, Miss Holmes. There never was” (Thomas 90). Mrs. Wallace echoes the general sentiment of Victorian society where if women were allowed to live without a patriarchal authority figure, they must strictly continue to follow the social conditions imposed on them in exchange for this freedom. Charlotte is finally able to secure her basic living necessities, gain access to movement and setup her detective consultation only after Mrs. Watson, a wealthy widow who plays the counterpart of Sherlock’s Watson in the narrative, asks Charlotte to be her lady in waiting. This offer secures her basic financial needs and allows her to have the necessary free time to run her consultancy. The fruition of detective agency is possible when Mrs Watson offers her empty apartment as the setup for ‘ailing Sherlock’ where Charlotte would meet with her clients and consult with Inspector Treadles. Her lack of ‘room’ to live and work hampered her from earning an income as her consultations were limited to only helping a few people within her circle to whom she wrote letters as Sherlock Holmes which were delivered via Lord Ingram.

## Conclusion

We thus see throughout the novel a resistance against the Victorian restrictions imposed on women. Sherry Thomas chooses to use the neo-Victorian premise of the novel to probe the complexities surrounding women’s lives as her protagonist attempts to enter an all-male-dominated domain of crime investigation. Another prominent feature of this novel is its address of sexual activity as a personal choice and as a crime, an issue rarely discussed in Victorian texts. As a historical crime fiction, this text does not limit itself to a superficial recreation of Victorian lifestyle and mannerisms but instead probes deeper into issues of women’s rights to social and financial independence by situating Charlotte Holmes as the lead detective. *A Study in Scarlet Women* borrows its name from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s first Sherlock Holmes novel *A Study in Scarlet*; however, one can also find the title’s inspiration to be bound in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* which too is a historical fiction novel that deals with the issue of women’s sexuality and independent agency which stands in conflict to the morally strict Puritan American society. In fact, *A Study in Scarlet Women* and *The Scarlet Letter* both have the central plot line of young women engaging in sexual encounters outside the socially accepted setup of matrimony and throughout the novel face social rejection because they transgress patriarchal sexual conduct. *A Study in Scarlet Women* as historical fiction can be considered a window into a time when women’s voices were excluded from cultural narratives and looked at their circumstances from a feminist perspective. Historical crime fiction thus not only provides the reader with an unfamiliar social setting to experience crimes of universal

motives, it also allows the reader to experience how historical conditions that undermined marginalized sections of society made them more susceptible to crime and made these vulnerable groups less likely to attain justice.

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