

Traces of English Poor Laws in Sherlock Holmes Novels: A Socioeconomic Review

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Extended Abstract

In the mercantilist period known as merchant capitalism, the English nobles described the people who had no income enough to live as poor. In other words, poor expression is used to mean “joe public”. In British society, no religious superiority is provided. In the society, the care of the elderly, the disabled and the homeless have been undertaken primarily by themselves, while the begging and the hooliganism have been tried to prevent with extremely severe punishment. Because, especially in the Protestant morality helping the poor’s is not a personal help but a social task. Therefore, helping the poor, during the period of I. Elizabeth (1533-1603), the teaching of pure morality was abandoned and accepted as a public obligation. In this context, it can be said that with the development of the liberal thought in England, the debate about poverty and poverty benefits are intertwined in a sense.

In 1576, 1589 and 1601, “Poor Laws” were issued and legal regulations for the poor were enacted. These laws have centralized the church as an important institution and have given them vital tasks. For example, the church has been tasked with providing services such as running the property for those who are unemployed and able to work at their own jurisdiction, running a poor house, training apprentices for orphaned and underprivileged children, and providing care for the elderly and disabled. These services and expenditures are made by the church and financed by local and mandatory taxes. In the literature, this law is called “Old Poor Laws”. However, it should not be forgotten that these laws are pre-capitalist era regulations.

The breakdown of the second paradigm in poverty in the United Kingdom occurred in the 1830s and the differences between “independent laborers” and “poor’s” began to differentiate. The last break occurred during the Victorian period, in the form of a struggle for charity and the vision of the social state. The formation of early liberal governmental framework of poverty and the inclusion and comprehension of the social problem in capitalist social relations has occurred in the mid-19th century in England.

The Victoria period, which is the focus of the work is separated from other periods in economic, political, and social events. The writers, poets and artists living in the period in question have used the events they have witnessed and the social sciences in their works.

The Victorian period began with Queen Victoria's ascension in 1837 and ended in 1901 when the queen died at the age of 82. Stability, progress and social reforms are common in the period, but major problems such as poverty, injustice and social unrest have also been among the realities of the period. So much so that the new approaches and views of social events, science and technology, as well as religion, literature, and artistry, which took place during the Victorian era, have led to the emergence of many ideas. Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, Charles Dickens and Arthur Conan Doyle...

The period of Victoria was accelerated by the recognition of poverty as a problem in Britain, the control of misery and the emergence of the prejudice of labour. However, the reason for the importance of Victoria Period is that it reflects the tradition, customs, values of the British nation and its colonial identity, the ideology of those years. As is known, 19th century was a period that for European States, colonialist activities are regarded as a systematic state policy. For England, however, colonialism is not state ideology but identity politics. In this period, led by Queen Victoria, colonialism is at the root of the social, cultural and economic identity of the British Empire. In this context, various propaganda has been made especially in visual and discursive ways to ensure the legitimacy of colonialism. However, criticisms of the period about difficult working conditions and poverty were frequently found in novels, stories and poems of the period.

Art shows a mirror quality reflected in every period. The art of novel is not only aesthetic but also a kind of reality which is best reflected in the reality. Especially in the 19th century and the following centuries, "Industrial Revolution" has changed the social life and restructured. Technological inventions and ideas that emerged after the Industrial Revolution have opened the way for thinking and rationality. In this respect, more rational facts and forms in the novels and in the stories, have begun to be spoken and created. In this way, Arthur Conan Doyle created a detective named "Sherlock Holmes" in his novel "A Study in Scarlet" by putting thought and intelligence in the foreground as required by his era.

Arthur Conan Doyle's birth year 1859 was a period when the British Empire was experiencing tremendous growth and optimism, coinciding with the 22nd anniversary of Queen Victoria's 64-year rule. The resources and labour obtained by the colonialist policies make Britain a more successful and stronger structure. Rapid population growth has become inevitable as technology has improved and welfare has increased. When the negative developments of the period are examined; Poverty, homelessness, widespread use of drugs, increased crime rates, overcrowding of cities. However, London during the Victorian period is a cosmopolitan city, and it is known that this situation causes the spread of epidemics. At the same time, due to the impact of crowded population, today's famous Thames River disrupts the silhouette of the city due to wastes and threatens its health. Along with the growth of the city, there has also been a significant increase in the number of buildings. The wastes of horses pulling cars, and the smoke rising from the soft coal burned to warm up, the city's air became dirty like city's water. Under these circumstances, Conan Doyle, who wrote his novels, didn't remained indifferent to the Victorian period.

When Arthur Conan Doyle uncovered the character of "Sherlock Holmes" in 1887, the readers believed he was a very professional detective and not a fiction. At its core, Mr. Holmes is an amateur and a detective who is not affiliated with the London Police Department. The author, Conan Doyle,

has created a character in the first “Sherlock Holmes” novel, “A Study in Scarlet,” that uses the power of observation and reflects logic principles to the resolution of events. In its most basic form, Sherlock is the person who organizes events in the novels, but at the same time he is a character who conducts research with him and who carries out his research through logic filtering. These features distinguish him from other detective novel characters. Conan Doyle therefore successfully applied the scientific thinking of the period to the character creation process. Doyle is a medical doctor who, as a writer, reads the period quite analytically, and at the same time scientific knowledge, education and observation are necessary at the top. In this work of observations and observations, the sentiments of the Victorian period attempt to keep away from family conflicts and class conflicts, but they have not succeeded so much.

In Sherlock novels, where science and literature are synthesized and curiosity is the forefront, the crime and especially the murder element, which will arise due to the development in the city culture that is likely to be experienced in an industrializing society, is the main subject. However, the political ideas of the period are also seen in Doyle’s novels. As mentioned earlier, it is known that in the period of Victoria, there are a lot of rhetoric that Britain produces in the direction of colonial politics. In this context, in the first part of the novel “A Study in Scarlet”, there is Watson’s short story of life, which led the profession of medicine to the war. Doctor Watson, who was injured in the war that Britain made in Afghanistan, reflects the British colonialist mindset. Likewise, Charles Darwin who is one of the most important names of the period, mostly mentioned “war of existence”, also shows itself in romance. Britain is basically a “struggle for existence” in the opinion that “it is necessary to fight to spread and multiply”.

From 1887 to 1927, Sherlock Holmes stories, written for forty years, represented the good, the bad and the ugliness of the Victoria community. Without making an anachronism to touch the spirit of the period, it is the subject of this work to examine Detective Sherlock and his close friend Dr. Watson, with the dynamics of the Victorian period. In the study, 56 stories of four Sherlock Holmes books written by Arthur Conan Doyle were examined and tried to explain the socioeconomic status of the period. As a last word, as Sherlock Holmes said: “this is insignificant detail Watson; but there is nothing more important in the world than the details.”

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