

THE VICTORIAN ERA'S CRIMINAL INVESTIGATION METHODS AS SEEN IN ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE'S *A STUDY IN SCARLET*: A NEW HISTORICISM APPROACH

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Abstract

This research aims to (1) identify the criminal investigation methods employed by Sherlock Holmes in a novel entitled *A Study in Scarlet* and (2) explain its representation of criminal investigation applied in Victorian era. New Historicism theory was used to attain the objectives of this research. This research is a qualitative research and used content analysis technique to analyze the data. The main source of the data was a novel entitled *A Study in Scarlet*. The data was the expressions related to criminal investigation methods enclosed in the story of *A Study in Scarlet*. Non-literary texts such as newspaper articles, journals, and books were also used as the secondary data. The analysis of the data was conducted in six steps; reading and rereading, noting, identifying, categorizing, analyzing, and interpreting. To obtain trustworthiness, the researcher used triangulation technique. The findings of this research show that there are three kinds of criminal investigation methods employed by Sherlock Holmes as seen in the novel. They are the conventional methods, the scientific methods, and Sherlock Holmes' invented methods. Two of the categories seen through the novel reflect the kinds of criminal investigation methods applied in Victorian era: the conventional methods and the scientific methods. Despite the fact that Sherlock Holmes' invented methods have the basis of either conventional methods or scientific methods, they are not the reflection of the criminal investigation methods that were commonly used in Victorian era.

Keywords: criminal investigation method, Victorian era, Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet*

INTRODUCTION

The past consists of eras that produce various narratives. One of the notable ones is the Victorian era. Victorian era was the period of Queen Victoria's reign. It lasted 64 years, from 20 June 1837 until 22 January 1901. In this long period of regime, Britain experiences rapid development in many different aspects. In

this era, the industrial revolution took place and the discoveries were born (Mitchell: 1996). This vast advancement is irrefutably related to the previous era; the era of Enlightenment. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* claims that the period of Enlightenment is marked by major developments in various aspects

including science, philosophy, and society as well as bringing along a new perspective of the world, thus changing the previous ideology.

The Enlightenment philosophy inclines to the notion of the challenge to think for oneself and stirs one's rational thinking, consequently makes them in the opposite position of religion beliefs that commands the believers' thoughts and actions. Thus, the advancement of scientific methods transforms traditional and religious society into modern scientific society. During this time, great changes happened, superstitions forgotten, and the beginning of new era was born. Science as knowledge continues to be in various aspects of society, and always progressing over the time.

The growth of science began to establish during the middle ages when science starts to lay its foundation. By the nineteenth century, science starts to take shape in study disciplines such as biology and chemistry and presents new discoveries of nature. These discoveries then create an immense change that initiate the industrialism and open the path to the other fields of science.

This period of time inevitably affects the nineteenth century literature as well. Authors that novels depict the Victorian era begin to pop up. The Brontë sisters,

Thomas Hardy, and Oscar Wilde are a few Victorian novelists that have their works set in the Victorian England. Novels filled with criticism as an impact of industrialism such as Charles Dicken's *Oliver Twist* (1837) and *Hard Times* (1854) also emerge in the nineteenth-century literature. Moreover, science advancement starts to play a role in the literary world as well and the impact is gradually increasing. Novels with representation of scientific period start to be written whilst science continues to grow such as the *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) by Robert Louis Stevenson or Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). Even now, the science-themed literary works already have the category on its own named as science-fiction or sci-fi; managed to be a popular genre in the modern literary works.

While countless science-influenced literary works had been written until the present time, one of the most well-known literary works that corresponds to the representation of science in the nineteenth century literature is Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories. If one tries to name a detective, it would be Sherlock Holmes, although they may have not read the stories themselves. Sherlock Holmes is unquestionably the most iconic and the most popular fictional detective of all time

confirmed by its attainment of the Guinness World of Records' title for the most portrayed literary human character in film and TV. Holmes as a character is a genius detective that operates in London and has solved a great number of England's criminal affairs. The stories of Sherlock Holmes are set in the nineteenth century Victorian era. The narratives of Sherlock Holmes are divided into four novels and fifty-six short stories.

Given the time of its publication, the various methods displayed by Sherlock Holmes develop into an interesting subject. The question of whether the criminal investigation methods reflect the criminal investigation methods in Victorian era grow to be a topic worth to be discussed. Thus, this research attempts to study the context of the nineteenth-century society in the particular aspect of criminal investigation to reveal the kind of method that Holmes employed in the first Sherlock Holmes novel entitled *A Study in Scarlet* as well as aiming to explain how the investigation methods of Sherlock Holmes that are used in the *A Study in Scarlet* reflect the criminal investigation methods at that time which is in the Victorian era. To obtain the objectives, New Historicism theory was used in this research. This study uses *A Study in Scarlet* for the reason that it denotes the

first appearance of Sherlock Holmes and presents new elements of criminal investigation that could be compared with the method in the Victorian era.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research applied a qualitative research. Krathwohl (1993) defines qualitative research as research that explains phenomena in words rather than in numbers or measures.

The main source of the data is the story of *A Study in Scarlet* written by Arthur Conan Doyle. The researcher read and scrutinized the expressions enclosed in the story that are related to the investigation methods and their representation of Victorian criminal investigation and put them side by side to the Sherlock Holmes' methods to be used as the data of this research. The researcher also used additional information from non-literary texts related to historical context of *A Study in Scarlet*.

The research instrument was the researcher herself. As the primary instrument of the research, the researcher used her ability to read the story, collect the data, categorize the data, and interpret the data taken from the sources by her.

Furthermore, data sheets were used to help the researcher to analyze the data.

There were several steps that the researcher used to collect the data. First, the researcher read the stories contained in *A Study in Scarlet* more than once in order to understand the detail of the stories. Second, the researcher collected the data by making any necessary notes that are related to the research to be analyzed further. Finally, the data were categorized into the categories relevant to the topic of the research. During the data collection, a data sheet is used to help the researcher to classify and to analyze the data systemically.

In order to obtain trustworthiness, triangulation was done with students from literature study program. In addition, the researcher also consulted the research with a lecturer who is an expert in this field.

In addition, the researcher also used analytical construct to categorize the criminal investigation methods employed in the novel.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

There are three types of methods which consist of conventional methods, scientific methods and Sherlock Holmes' original methods. The methods were grouped by the basis of the investigation approaches done in the novel. The

methods that exercise scientific deduction are collected into the scientific methods, whereas the methods which do not apply any kind of scientific reasoning are classified into the conventional methods. Lastly, the methods that are not considered as scientific as well as conventional and possess a particular feature of Sherlock Holmes' method were categorized into Sherlock Holmes' invented methods.

To apply the New Historicism approach, the criminal investigation methods that are used in the novel are compared to the criminal investigation methods in Victorian era that are collected from newspapers articles mostly dated from 1888 until 1889 around the case of Jack the Ripper. The interval of the articles' date is close to the novel's publication year which is 1887. Thus, the newspaper accounts were brought against the data from *A Study in Scarlet*.

The first kind of investigation method is the conventional method. The conventional investigation methods are the methods that are usual or regular methods employed in a criminal investigation done in the Victorian era and portrayed in the novel. It signifies that this kind of method is employed by Sherlock Holmes and can also be employed by regular police investigators without needing an extra knowledge of particular subject in the

investigation. Generally, the methods that are included in conventional investigation methods are; examination of victim's body, inspection of victim's belongings and surroundings, interview with witnesses, and surveillance.

The data shows that the conventional investigation methods that are employed by Sherlock Holmes in the novel are commonly used in the Victorian era as well. With the exception of little differences of some details such as the way of identifying and how the Victorian enquiries are performed, the others are the same. While Sherlock Holmes identifies the victim by their possessions, the Victorian era's police use the public's assistance to recognize the victim. Moreover, the enquiries in Victorian era present juries, coroner, or witnesses. Meanwhile, Sherlock Holmes' makes inquiries in private.

Besides the differences, the other investigation methods used in the novel represent the Victorian era's investigation methods. The following passage shows the example an investigation method that is performed by the detectives and Sherlock Holmes:

Sherlock Holmes approached the body, and, kneeling down, examined it intently. "You are sure that there is no wound?" he asked, pointing to numerous gouts and splashes of blood which lay all around.

"Positive!" cried both detectives. (Doyle, 1986: 26)

The detectives' answer implies that examination of the dead body had been done before Sherlock Holmes does the same method of body examination. It indicates that this method is usual and regular enough to be categorized in a conventional method. The method of victim's body examination in Victorian era is portrayed in the excerpt of *Times*' report related to one of the Jack the Ripper's victims:

Dr. Llewellyn, of Whitechapel-road, whose surgery is not more than 300 yards from the spot where the woman lay, was aroused, and proceeded at once to the scene. He hastily inspected the body where it lay and pronounced the woman dead. The police ambulance from the Bethnal-green station having arrived, the body was removed there. A further examination showed the horrible nature of the crime, for the lower part of the woman's body was found to have been horribly mutilated by three or four deep gashes. Any one of the wounds was sufficient to cause death. (*Times*, Sept 1, 1888)

From the passage above, it is evident that the method of body examination was already in practice in Victorian era. Even a common physician first thought was to examine the body of the victim. This fact denotes that the practice of victim's body examination is a conventional investigation method in Victorian era.

The second kind of criminal investigation methods is the scientific methods. The scientific methods are closely related to scientific practice. Likewise, it employs methodological reasoning and uses scientific knowledge to produce a logical deduction. In the novel, Sherlock mentions and uses scientific methods quite often. There is even an introductory of the method in the chapter two of the novel called "The Science of Deduction".

Based on the data, Sherlock Holmes uses the similar clues as the ones that are used in the Victorian era's criminal investigation. Both of them use scientific evidences in their attempt to identify the perpetrator. The hints such as foot and wheels mark, blood trails, and handwritings are used to discover the suspect. However, despite the fact that the scientific investigation methods are used both in the novel and the Victorian era, Sherlock Holmes is presented to have the ability to gain more details than the police with the same clue. The example of scientific investigation method is presented in the following quotations.

"Why, the height of a man, in nine cases out of ten, can be told from the length of his stride. It is a simple calculation enough, though there is no use my boring you with figures. I had this fellow's stride both on the clay outside and on the dust within. Then I had a way of checking my calculation. When a man

writes on a wall, his instinct leads him to write about the level of his own eyes. Now that writing was just over six feet from the ground. It was child's play." (Doyle, 1986: 32)

It can be seen that Sherlock Holmes measures the length of stride to propose deductions of the suspect. These scientific deductions apparently had also been adapted in Victorian era.

...First of all, the boot, or size and kind of foot, of the murderers. Secondly, the length of stride, and consequent height and weight. Thirdly, the age, for an old man makes a different step from a young one. Fourthly, the kind of walk, whether straight or otherwise; whether splay-footed or straight. Fifthly, the lower part of the dress. Now we should begin to be judges of what the murderers were like. Such a height, age, manner of walk, kind of dress, length of foot, description of boot. More. Some idea of the time when the body was laid there. For this we must look underneath it as it lay. If at night, the ground would be damper than in the daytime. Was it done hurriedly, or at leisure? (*Echo*, October 3, 1888)

The quotation above shows that the same deductions mentioned by Sherlock Holmes can be inferred from measuring the length of stride of the footprints. Even though the practice in reality had not reach the desired outcome since the police fails to perceive it, it reveals that the scientific investigation method and methodological reasoning had been utilized in the Victorian era.

The third category is Sherlock Holmes' invented investigation methods. The methods that are categorized in the Sherlock Holmes' invented methods are the methods that are invented by Sherlock Holmes and possess particular or unique characteristics of Sherlock Holmes. The methods that are presented here are, although not absolutely devoid of conventional method's features and even might have scientific aspect to them, are considered as the result of Sherlock Holmes creativity. Since Sherlock Holmes is evidently a scientific man, it is not surprising that his invented methods contain some scientific traits that are natural to his character. Nevertheless, these methods are still dominated by the distinctive qualities of Sherlock Holmes' ingenuity.

The first method that falls into this category is the original method of scrutiny with a magnifying glass and a tape measure. Even though the police in Victorian era evidently observe the crime scene as well, as referenced in the conventional method, the observation with tools such as a magnifying glass and a tape measure is originally invented by Sherlock Holmes. Henry Morton Robinson (in Berg, 1971), makes a comment regarding to this advance method of Sherlock Holmes in his book *Science Catches the Criminal* (1935):

"When Sherlock Holmes whipped out his magnifying glass to examine a flake of Latakia tobacco found on the smyrna rug in the Boscombe Valley affair, he became not merely a very charming character in detective fiction but an exponent of a whole new way of looking at life..." (as cited in Berg, 1971: 446-447)

Arthur Train (in Kurland, 2009) states in 1908 that the practice of carrying tools such as magnifying glass to solve cases is not a custom by the police other than Sherlock Holmes.

...No intelligent person to-day supposes that, outside of Sir Conan Doyle's interesting novels, detectives seek the baffling criminal by means of analyzing cigar butts, magnifying thumb marks...The *magnifying glass* is not one of the ordinary tools of the professional sleuth, and if he carries a pistol at all it is because the police rules require it, while those cases may be numbered upon the fingers of two hands... (Kurland, 2009: 8)

The examination of the dust is proven to be an original method of Sherlock Holmes as Dr. Edmond Locard, a French criminologist who did some researchers of dust acknowledges to *The Sunday Gentleman* (in Berg, 1971) that "Sherlock Holmes was the first to realize the importance of dust" and that he "merely copied his methods." Locard who is also the founder and director of the Institute of Criminalistics stated in his paper, *The Analysis of Dust Traces*, that he was inspired by Sherlock Holmes, saying that

the police experts “would not find it a waste of his time to read Doyle's novels” (Berg, 1971: 448).

Other than the analysis of the dust, the study of tobacco ash also inspired the readers of Sherlock Holmes. Sherlock declares that he had written a monograph of cigar ashes. That is why he can instantly recognize the type of cigar that had been smoked at the crime scene by observing the ash on the floor. Sherlock Holmes' broad knowledge of cigar ashes can be seen from the following quotation:

“...I gathered up some scattered ash from the floor. It was dark in colour and flakey—such an ash as is only made by a Trichinopoly. I have made a special study of cigar ashes—in fact, I have written a monograph upon the subject. I flatter myself that I can distinguish at a glance the ash of any known brand, either of cigar or of tobacco...” (Doyle, 1986: 32)

Another Sherlock invented-method that is presented in *A Study in Scarlet* is the method of poison detection. The simple method that he used is sniffing the victim's lips. Sherlock Holmes states that he suspected poison as the cause of the death because “there was no wound upon the dead man's person”, however it could not be sudden sickness because “the agitated expression” shows that “he had foreseen his fate.” Finally the theory rings true as when he sniffs the lips of the dead

man he detects “a slightly sour smell” (Doyle, 1986: 116-117).

On the other hand, the reality of poison identification in Victorian era is not that simple. In Victorian Britain, to provide evidence that a person cause of death is poison, one has to do a post-mortem examination. The result of the test is the undeniable proof that poisoning had occurred in the body. A concerned reader of *The Daily Telegraph* who is also a coroner questioned if the method of poison detection had been performed by the police, portraying the method that was adapted in the Victorian era. The coroner who sent the questions in “to the editor” column, asks if “the stomachs of most of them been ripped open to do away with the evidence of poisoning in this manner; and, second, has any analysis of the contents of the stomachs been made” (*The Daily Telegraph*, October 4, 1888).

In the meantime, the next method that is categorized in this section somehow has some aspects of those scientific methods which are referenced before. The method of the experiment of the evidence is indeed closely related to scientific methods; however, what makes this method classified into the category of invented methods of Sherlock Holmes is that the experiment is not formal or what the police would do. As explained above, the

detection of poison in the official force should follow the proper medical examination. Meanwhile, Sherlock Holmes dares to test the potential poison to a sick dog for the sake of proving his deduction.

The next method that is created by Sherlock Holmes is the advertisement method. In fact, advertisement method is not something that is unheard of, since the Victorian police use a similar method. Then again, this method deserves to be sorted in the method that is invented by Sherlock Holmes since it has a particular feature of the fictional detective. Similar to the examination method, even though the police advertise some evidences to the newspapers as well, the intention is different than that of Sherlock's. Unlike the authorities that publish a piece of handwriting so people would recognize it, Sherlock advertises fake evidence that is inadvertently left by the criminal for the purpose of luring the criminal. He argues that the criminal would "eagerly look for the evening papers in the hope of seeing it among the articles found" (Doyle, 1986: 40).

The last original investigation method that Sherlock Holmes used in *A Study in Scarlet* is the employment of the little beggars around his apartment. He declares them as "the Baker Street division of the

detective police force" (Doyle, 1986: 47). Holmes claims that it is effective to employ the little beggars in the surroundings since more information can be gained from one of the beggars than a hundred of police. He states that the officials will shut people off while the beggars can go everywhere and hear everything.

On the contrary, when the police in the Victorian era wanted to use money and the help of the public, they would offer some amount of money to anyone who can give some information as stated in an article of *Pall Mall Gazette* below:

The Lord Mayor, acting upon the advice of the Commissioner of City Police, has, in the name of the Corporation of London, offered a reward of £500 for the detection of the Whitechapel murderer, the last crime having been committed within the jurisdiction of the City. The following is the placard offering the reward... (*Pall Mall Gazette*, 2 October 1888)

The report illustrates that, the police in Victorian era would offer a much more amount of money and hoped to engage the members of the society.

A Study in Scarlet is a tale about the first investigation case adventure of detective Sherlock Holmes and the narrator named Dr. John Watson. With the setting of Victorian Britain, the novel displays the ways of life in Victorian society. *A Study in Scarlet's* form of

detective fiction gives the readers a depiction of Victorian ways of handling a criminal case as well as the investigation methods that follows. The topic of criminal investigation methods in the past is especially interesting in Victorian era since in that era the criminal investigation means was exercised to the maximum level because they have to deal with the rising amount of criminal offenders triggered by the industrial revolution. With the development of science and the industry revolution, there were a lot of changes in the ways of lives of Victorians, including the criminal investigation methods

The various investigations methods in Victorian era are reflected in the novel *A Study in Scarlet*. These methods can be categorized into three kind of categories. The first kind of method, conventional methods, are the methods that are used by Victorians and Sherlock Holmes. The scientific investigation methods were employed by using scientific evidences and scientific methodology to identify the offenders. In addition, Doyle also features unique characteristics to the criminal investigation methods employed by his

fictional detectives, Sherlock Holmes. These special traits are different and advanced from its time. Even though Sherlock Holmes also uses scientific methods as well as conventional methods that are commonly used in the era, nevertheless, he also adds particular ideas in his criminal investigation methods and invents some methods that are made possible by Sherlock Holmes' capability and broad knowledge.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusions

There are three major categories of criminal investigation methods that are employed in the novel *A Study in Scarlet*. The categories are conventional investigation methods, scientific investigation methods, and Sherlock Holmes' invented investigation methods. The first category is conventional investigation methods. It refers to the methods which are considered as regular and used commonly by Victorians as well as Sherlock Holmes. The second category that is the scientific investigation methods are the methods which apply scientific technique and scientific methodology.

The last category is Sherlock Holmes' invented investigation methods. These methods are the methods which comprise certain elements of conventional and scientific methods but flavored with Sherlock Holmes' creativity, thus, make them an original of his own.

Among the kinds of criminal investigation methods found in the study, the scientific investigation methods are presented in the novel. This fact is well corresponding with the influence of the Enlightenment era as mentioned in the second chapter. In addition, it is mentioned in the second chapter that the scientific proofs in Victorian era are footprints and blood trails. The novel reflects those facts as well. However, the data in this research show that Sherlock Holmes uses the Victorian scientific facts to deduce more detailed points. Besides the footprints and blood trails, Sherlock also measures the marks he found necessary at the crime scene. From the measurements, he can deduce the age and height of the suspect, the type of the carriage, the movements of the occupant and the horses, and even the nail's condition of the suspect.

Furthermore, amongst the conventional investigation methods which are employed in the novel, it can be found that all the methods applied by Sherlock Holmes are also generally employed in the

Victorian era. They are the inspection of victim's body, survey of the crime scene, the cross-examination with witness(es), and shadowing. One method that is carried out a little bit different than Sherlock Holmes' method is the identification of the victim. In the novel, Sherlock Holmes inspects the belongings of the victim. Meanwhile, the identification means that is common in Victorian era is through the statement of witnesses or the people who recognize the victim.

Investigation methods with unique features can also be found in the novel. The methods such as scrutiny with a magnifying glass and a tape measure, advertisement, and undercover informants can be considered as conventional method in Victorian era; however, the way Sherlock adds magnifying glass and measuring tape in the examination process, advertises the evidence to lure the suspect, and employs little beggars to search for information are what makes these method not considered as regular methods. Moreover, the scientific-like investigation methods that are invented by Sherlock Holmes such as the experiment of the evidence, the identification of poison, and the analysis of dust and tobacco ash have inspired many of the readers. These methods proved to be innovative in

Victorian era and useful in the field of criminology later on.

Suggestions

According to the findings of this research, some suggestions can be given to some parties. For the future researchers that are interested in the historical context of a novel, further research regarding the representation of a background context is suggested, especially with New Historicism approach. Studying the context of a literary work is important to understand the literary work fully. Furthermore, by studying the historical context of the book, the readers can see its representation in a literary work.

For the students of English literature, reading more non-literary texts such as books, journals, articles, or reports that are related to the historical background of a literary work is keenly suggested by the researcher, so that the knowledge of a literary work can also be expanded to the history background of the text.

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