Obstructing the flow of violence

The Holmes canon is redolent of late-nineteenth-century preoccupations with acts of brutality committed not merely by lower-class street ruffians but by higher classes, mainly middle-class professionals. In ‘ASB’, Doyle warns that violence literally and metaphorically ‘recoil[s] upon the violent’ and explicitly links the violent man with the trope of degeneration. While he does not suggest methods by which ancestral retrogression can be prevented, Doyle shows that the curbing of violent acts figuratively protects society from the bloody effects of degeneration and disease.

Dr Grimesby Roylott is represented both as a profligate upper-class tyrant and also a middle-class professional turned evil. The descendant of squires, the Roylotts of Stoke Moran, who have squandered the family fortune, Roylott trains as a doctor and makes his living in Calcutta. However, he embodies the worst features of Wiener’s ‘empire man’ and threatens, at least on a small scale, the management of the Empire. In India, Roylott responds hysterically to a number of burglaries in his house and he thrashes his servant to death. He narrowly escapes the death penalty for his crime and, once released from prison, returns to England a broken man. (We have, with *Phineas Redux* and *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*, seen the psychological impact which a close encounter with the death penalty can have on a Victorian man.) On returning to England, he egregiously involves himself in brawls and perpetrates further acts of violence against local villagers. Roylott, the brawler, recalls the untamed Chiltern in *Phineas Finn*, but he lacks Chiltern’s good nature. Furthermore, his violent acts are not outbursts of a restless character but emanate from a will to do harm.
Roylott’s stepdaughter, Helen Stoner, cannot account for her sister’s sudden hysteria and death during the night. She suspects Roylott and points out to Holmes that his hereditary ‘violence of temper approaching to mania’ might have some part to play. As Holmes surmises, it is Roylott’s ancestral degeneration and a lack of self-control that render him violent, but ultimately it is his profession which allows him to have the know-how to perpetrate murder on the sly. Referring to the case of Dr William Palmer, the Rugeley doctor/serial killer who was arrested in 1856, Holmes notes that: ‘When a doctor does go wrong he is the first of criminals. He has nerve and he has knowledge.’ Doyle’s readers were familiar with the figure of the evil professional and the idea that savagery and respectability could reside within the same mind was underscored by the Whitechapel murders. E.W. Hornung’s popular tales, contemporary with Doyle’s stories, feature the amateur burglar A.J. Raffles, who states that ‘it is [his] conviction that Jack the Ripper was a really eminent public man whose speeches were very likely reported alongside his atrocities’. The reports of the Whitechapel murders suggested the culprit was a respectable man: the Illustrated Police News of 8 December 1888 portrayed him as a medical doctor. The crimes were representative of the most extreme acts committed by educated men of blood. They constitute a background against which the more defensive deeds of Watson, also a middle-class doctor, and Holmes can be compared. Thus, as the story was published shortly after the East-End murders, ‘ASB’ is an indictment of male violence against women and an exposé of the man of blood.

Snakes in the grass

The trope of the poisonous snake in ‘ASB’ is a metaphor for the manner in which violent deeds were considered to inspire further aggression, ultimately leading to a decay of moral order. In the canon, the serpent represents the malevolent deeds of wealthy, educated yet unscrupulous middle-class men whose gentlemanly graces are indicative of the predatory snake that mockingly bows down to its prey. Like the serpent in the Bible, they are arch persuaders, tempting their victims to ruin. Roylott’s weapon is a swamp adder while Professor Moriarty’s ‘face protrudes forward, and ‘slowly oscillat[es] from side to side in a curiously reptilian fashion’, and the visage of blackmailer Charles Augustus Milverton recalls ‘the serpents in the Zoo’, which have ‘deadly eyes and wicked, flattened faces’. In 1892 an article in the Strand argued that the ‘raffish’ snake was a freakish contortion of nature, presenting an ‘extravagance