

**“THOSE CRAZY KNIGHT-ERRANTS”: IDEALS AND DELUSIONS IN
ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE’S PORTRAIT OF A
FOURTEENTH CENTURY KNIGHT**

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ABSTRACT. *In The White Company (1891) and Sir Nigel (1906), Arthur Conan Doyle reconstructed the fourteenth century and explored the culture and visions of chivalry. He created many different knights with the intention of dissecting the mind and conduct of this historical type. He was concerned with his human as well as his romantic aspect, and he addressed the conflicts the divergent obligations of external duty and personal aspirations caused. Doyle’s reflections focused on the dreadful and illusory game played by knights like Sir Nigel Loring, the most curious and significant representative of idealistic and delusional chivalry in his medieval fiction. His youth and adult age show the tensions between the two worlds whose paths he must tread. His life is a long struggle for virtue and honour, oscillating between the responsibilities of a nobleman in the days of Edward III and the Hundred Years War and the pursuit of chivalry.*

Keywords: Conan Doyle, chivalry, ideals, visions, delusions, duty.

**“ESOS LOCOS CABALLEROS ANDANTES”: IDEALES E ILUSIONES EN EL
RETRATO DE UN CABALLERO DEL SIGLO XIV REALIZADO POR
ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE**

RESUMEN. *En The White Company (1891) and Sir Nigel (1906) Arthur Conan Doyle recreó el siglo XIV e investigó la cultura y las visiones de la caballería. Inventó caballeros diferentes para examinar la mente y la conducta del tipo histórico. Se ocupó de su faceta romántica y de la humana, y estudió los conflictos causados por las obligaciones divergentes del deber impuesto desde fuera y los deseos personales. La reflexión se centra en el juego terrible e ilusorio de caballeros como Nigel Loring, el exponente más peculiar y notable de la caballería idealista y delirante plasmada en esta ficción medieval. En la juventud y edad adulta del personaje vemos tensiones entre los dos mundos que habita. Su vida es una lucha por la virtud y el honor mientras oscila entre sus responsabilidades como noble de Eduardo III en la Guerra de los Cien Años y su afán por cumplir con la caballería.*

Palabras clave: Conan Doyle, caballería, ideales, ilusiones, delirios, obligaciones.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the 1890s, Arthur Conan Doyle pursued his literary career under the conviction that a recognizable mastery in the genre of historical fiction was not beyond his professional capacity. He was confident that, by assuming the duties of an honest historian, he would be able to cope with the task of separating myth from reality when digging into the archives and primary sources. He was aware that he must check the flights of his imagination and his powers of invention so as to meet the principles of historical accuracy when given priority in the portrayal of an epoch and his types. He felt that both his intellect and talent could tackle the challenge of blending the realms of history and the novel in such a way that not only middle-class readers but also critics would be favourable in their response.

One of the historical types that were painstakingly reconstructed by Doyle in his medieval novels –*The White Company* (1891) and *Sir Nigel* (1906)– was the knight. Although chivalry was represented by many different characters in the novels, an English knight called Nigel Loring was the author’s main concern, as his personality, morals and behaviour were central to the meditated depiction

of the fourteenth century that he wanted to share. In several critical episodes, the mind and the actions of this protagonist became the focus of attention, because through them Doyle’s views on key matters, such as family, education, social order, and warfare, were set forth. Such an important role deserves a sane, dependable hero, but Nigel Loring cannot be regarded as a good example of that. When the knight’s psyche is subjected to close scrutiny, signs of mental disorder are detected. Conventional and romantic, yet quite peculiar and eccentric at the same time, Nigel Loring’s characterization was probably intended to raise questions and provoke discussion about chivalrous masculinity both in Medieval and late Victorian times.

Nigel Loring is a mid-fourteenth century English squire (later a knight) created by Doyle in *The White Company* and *Sir Nigel*. As they comprise the central decades of his life, these novels can be viewed as a portrait of Loring’s psychological development, or, more specifically, as a study of the mental peculiarities of a man driven by chivalry and romance to seek deeds of arms and glory. Although no diagnosis of his mental condition is sought, the dissection of the knight’s thinking and conduct can certainly lead to insights into Doyle’s construction of chivalry as a historical and contemporary ethos. This two-stage analysis of Loring’s mind and behaviour first focuses on his youth, when he was a squire in his early to mid twenties eager to win his spurs, and then on his mature age, when he was a reputed knight, about twenty years later.

In the hands of Doyle, the knight is often treated with derision, as a rather ridiculous figure who enthuses over vain knightly heroics amid the gruesome realities of the Hundred Years War. Yet the novelist respects the classic tenets of chivalry and believes in the example of true knights. In the novels, readers can perceive this tension between mirth and esteem with regard to the hero, who is a man animated by chivalric ideals, loyal to the culture of his rank, and conditioned by the truths and myths of the landed gentry of basinet and blazon. The extraordinary complexities and glaring contradictions of Doyle’s Nigel Loring will be the focus of interest in the following pages.

2. YOUNG NIGEL LORING

This analysis of Nigel Loring’s psyche begins with an examination of his dreams and ideals as a dashing young squire who aspired to gain his lady’s love and his knighthood by performing at least three deeds of arms in the wars between the Kings of England and France around the year 1350. In the first chapters of *Sir Nigel*, Doyle makes clear that for his hero traditional chivalry has become an internalised responsibility, and it is strong enough to determine his

orientation and all of his aims. The hero's moral and practical intentionality soon becomes quite plain to the reader; it is easy to perceive in the resolve and conduct which characterise him in the opening episodes of the novel. Straightforwardness could have been a good feature in Loring, but it acquires quite a weird tint as explicitness regarding what he intends to achieve and how he grows. Yet, undeterred by emerging doubts about the sensibleness and viability of classic chivalry in the mid fourteenth century, Doyle infuses coherence and assertiveness into the discourse that his hero constructs to expound his reasons and justify his ends. Although a nobleman's successful military career in the context of the Hundred Years War still implied rewards and honours coloured by the now fading and ethereal spirit of chivalry, Loring needs much more, and so he obstinately sticks to his own conception and remains faithful to all the motives and customs deriving from it. The fact that chivalry is for Loring a necessary, vital, and inherently satisfactory pursuit (which naturally leads to epic quests, tests of moral endurance, and noble, manly endeavours) does not annoy seasoned warriors like Sir John Chandos, one of the characters used by Doyle to counteract his hero's silly, idealistic, knightly drives and his delusions of romantic heroism: "You have a fashion of speech which carries me back to the old men whom I met in my boyhood [...] There were some of the real old knight-errants left in those days, and they spoke as you do. Young as you are, you belong to another age" (Doyle 1906: 61-62).

Nigel Loring's rigid adherence to the tenets of chivalry and his obsession with honour and knightly prowess cause confusion and concern as the extent of their influence upon his conduct is revealed in episodes humorously arranged by Doyle.¹ The household literature and education to which, for many years, Nigel has been exposed have given rise to fabulous visions of heroism and a strong desire for feats of arms. Doyle's personal sympathy for him does not stop criticism, and characters in the novel as well as any rational and sensible reader consider him too foolish or naive enough to think that he will encounter in reality the world of chivalry contained in ballads and legends. This twenty-year-old aspirant to the spurs of knighthood has allowed the power of illusion and fantasy, originating in epics and romance, to grow so much in his mind, that it now pervades his personal ethic and worldview. Doyle relates his hero's stubborn will and obstinate determination to shine in chivalry to a certain inability to use reason, and it all leads to numerous instances of blatant stupidity,

¹ This is clearly shown, for example, in chapter IX of *Sir Nigel*, where Doyle relates "How Nigel Held the Bridge at Tilford." The author often uses his ability for comic invention to check the disastrous potential of chivalric illusions.

the first one being the passage of arms next to Tilford Bridge. This comical encounter of Loring (for the first time in armour and on horseback) with the stark reality of arms and fighting existing beyond his domestic culture is not used by the writer to shatter his hero’s hopes and illusions. Harder tests of confidence and courage await him across the English Channel, in the realm of war, where principles and ideals inevitably collide with the pressures of ambition, arrogance, and wrath.

Loring goes to the wars in France in search of honour, following his own free will rather than his duty to the King and England. In spite of his youth, he considers himself to be a capable, well-trained squire, with the skills and confidence necessary to survive. Dauntless and unafraid of the very hostile and perilous environment of armed conflict, he is truly anxious to taste combat; he craves for chances to prove himself as a warrior instead of shrinking back with fear, as many others would do in the face of extreme violence. This eagerness to reach the battlefield and risk his life for glory can be interpreted as a sign of insanity. Unlike Doyle, the reader may recoil at such a display of intrepidity by a man so eager to encounter the hazards of war and to expose his body to the slashes and blows of the battlefield, a man so willing to crush instinctual self-preservation while driven by ethereal ideals he allows to grow more powerful than common sense. For people nurtured in later stages of European civilization, individuals who rush headlong into warfare and feel inspired by the ethos of epic champions and Arthurian knights cannot be mentally sane. We can see Loring’s strange mind in his response to the war-torn lands of France.

But there was no sadness in the young heart of Nigel ..., nor did it seem to him that Fate had led him into an unduly arduous path. On the contrary, he blessed the good fortune which had sent him into so delightful a country, and it seemed to him as he listened to dreadful stories of robber barons, and looked around at the black scars of war which lay branded upon the fair faces of hills, that no hero or romancer or *trouveur* had ever journeyed through such a land of promise, with so fair a chance of knightly venture and honourable advancement. (Doyle 1906: 231).

This reaction can be deemed unnatural and aberrant and be taken as evidence of some sort of mental disorder. Its cause could be traced back to Loring’s grandfather and father, who were also fanatics of chivalry and met the same fate fighting gallantly for England and the King. This insanity may be in the blood -in the noble but tragic blood of the Lorings- and it runs through Nigel’s veins making him proud of his lineage and desperately keen to honour the legacy of faith and dedication to chivalry that he has inherited. The possible

parental origins of mental disorder have been explored by Doyle's biographers and it is a hypothesis worth considering.²

The reader will probably be perplexed by the fact that at the end of *Sir Nigel*, young Loring is not chained in a mad house but rewarded by his lord, the English Prince, with knighthood for his courage at the battle of Poitiers. Some historical figures, such as Sir John Chandos, Sir Robert Knolles, and the Black Prince himself, have been used by Doyle to embody the external control that has saved Loring from his foolhardy audacity, an inclination resulting from his blood and his chivalric convictions. Had they not urged him to comply with the rules of the army under royal command, he would have been engulfed by knightly extremism. His idealistic or romantic desires, uncontrolled by rational duty, would have propelled him into madness after crossing the border into the lands of war. However, Loring's first campaign shows that external regulations are not always imposed, but often willingly accepted, if they match personal orientation. He assimilates his discipline and function as a noble soldier hired by the English Prince in spite of the restraints that the military contract imposes upon men who, like him, are bent on the pursuit of chivalry as a personal duty and absolute priority. Having said all that, we are left to wonder to what extreme his madness would have got in his years of youthful passion, had he not adopted this behavioural regulation.

3. ADULT NIGEL LORING

In *The White Company*, Sir Nigel Loring has reached middle age and is presented as a frank, good-tempered, good-mannered husband and father who enjoys quite a harmonious and stable atmosphere at home. However, as a fanatic of chivalry he feels that he must leave his family once more in search of conflict and combat. When the princes of England and France start war again, he cannot resist the urge of leaving the domestic haven. He is so keen on arms and fighting, that the delights and comforts of family life cannot hold him. He is propelled into action by external duty, and he assumes every legal and ethical obligation. Yet, the tasks that he has to carry out as a contracted captain serving the Crown may not be compatible with the kind of actions that he still wants to perform as an unrelenting devotee of chivalry.

² Dr. Andrew Norman's investigation of Doyle's psyche -*Arthur Conan Doyle: Beyond Sherlock Holmes*- is particularly recommendable. He uses the author's factual and fictional writings to explore his mental development, and he gives priority to the influence of Charles Altamont Doyle, his father.

Age and experience could have increased Loring’s capability for critical introspection and self-analysis, but, instead, time seems to have confirmed him in his almost neurotic obsession to advance his individual honour serving the purposes of chivalry. He has not lost faith in its tenets, and he still keeps the strong motivation deriving from them in spite of the acute dilemmas that he must confront. Since the appeal of chivalrous challenge and adventure has not diminished in him, Loring revels in the sounds and sights of an impending war across the Pyrenees. This man, aged “six-and-forty”, finds armed confrontation as exhilarating as in his youth and cannot resist a new call to arms (Doyle 1891: 132-133). Doyle lets his hero be driven by this ruling passion for war and chivalry. He craves for their trials and perils undisturbed by any moral doubts related to the origins and effects of military action. Had his sanity and sense been stronger, he would have reacted to the egotism and ambition of rival princes and to the calamities that war spreads over the poorest people. But Loring’s rational powers are easily overridden by an inner compulsion to fight and excel in chivalry.

Feeling rather proud of Loring, Doyle underlines his sense of knightly honour and assures us that his dedication to patriotic duty is as strong as ever. His acceptance of the code of chivalry has not faltered, and his loyalty to England remains firm after his long struggle with reality. He is aware of the external obligations that he has to fulfil as a reputed knight. His freedom to pursue chivalry as he sees it must be curtailed by social demands and military duties which often require a postponement of his self-determined behaviours and goals. He must assume responsibility for the functions of his birth and rank even though they distract him from his devotion to the causes of chivalry. As a result of the novelist’s amity towards his hero, adult Loring is an agreeable man, with noble qualities and gentle behaviour, who is respected and loved by family, peers, comrades, and subordinate people, both civil and military. But the evils of immoderate chivalry are a part of his life and personality, and Doyle decides not to change that. He can tackle the contradictions: a conscientious person, with a high sense of responsibility regarding his household, *but* who feels no obligation to remain peacefully at home when his pledge and commitment to the Crown must be honoured seizing a new opportunity to act as a brave knight; a man who knows his duties as a husband and a father, *but* who will not let them stop him from displaying his unswerving loyalty to the English monarchy and the ideals of chivalry.

Loring is portrayed as a reliable man who is trusted by his family and his subordinates, and who, without tarnishing his honour or arousing doubts about his inner stability, can temporarily abandon his feudal and domestic obligations when the troops of England march into battle again. He respects external duty, but, as a self-disciplined man, he follows his own laws, the old code of chivalry which

he learned in romances and ballads and in fireside conversation with his firm and severe grandmother, a maternal figure inspired by Mary Doyle, the author's mother (Stashower 2000: 108-109; Lycett 2008: 24-25; Miller 2008: 130). Although a high degree of independence and self-motivation as a free man can be seen in Loring, Doyle makes clear that some female figures are crucial to his attitude and goals. Besides his grandmother, his fiancée (later his wife), Lady Mary, exerts a strong moral and spiritual influence he can accommodate into his chivalric ethos (Doyle 1906: 143-145). However, he is inflexible in the sense that he will not yield to any woman's pleas to leave the profession of arms. He does not tolerate anybody trying to convince him that he has done his duty well long enough. So, Doyle first fashions his hero into a model of perseverance (adding some mad streaks), and then lets him confront difficulties arising from the fact that his perception of the world is distorted by the absurdities of his internal world, a world of illusory chivalry.

As an adult man, Loring could have been expected to thoroughly reflect upon his ideas, his feelings, and his experiences. Age and reflection could have revealed new pursuits different from the intrepid and perilous endeavours of his youth. But the truth is that he has not changed much and still prefers to rejoice in his fate tied to moral imperatives that push him toward actions which are heroic and honourable for the idealistic knight, but may be construed as signs of mental ailment by the rational judge.

4. SENSE AND ODDITIES IN LORING'S THINKING AND CONDUCT

After this succinct glimpse into the life of Nigel Loring, the crucial question must be faced: did Doyle create an individual with an abnormal mind and behaviour? Is his hero crazy or mad, or simply foolish and silly -to be treated as an object of ridicule? Can we call him a lunatic, or is he mentally retarded? Should he be rejected as deranged, dangerously insane or psychotic? The answer is not easy, probably because Doyle had the intention of thwarting any quick conclusions about his protagonist. A more meticulous examination is required to gain further insight into the peculiarities of Loring's mind and behaviour. His complex relationship with the past and present culture of chivalry must be subjected to thorough scrutiny.

There is abuse and dependency in Loring's relationship with chivalry. On the one hand, he abuses the tenets of chivalry in order to fulfil his particular desires concerning honour and love; and on the other hand, he is quite dependent upon chivalry, for without this *creed* he would lead a hollow, meaningless life. Thanks to chivalry, his life is full of truth and purpose, but it abounds in illusions

too. Loring’s mind obstinately pursues dreams of noble manhood and heroism which are beyond the scope of normal judgement and conduct. After many years of intense experience with the realities of the mid fourteenth century, he still has the illusion that chivalry can exist and thrive outside literature. Doyle is not obstructive; he has no intention of inhibiting his hero from acting under the influence of legend and romance, despite the fact that a mind so filled with old chimeras must perceive the world wrongly.

Instead of yielding to more orderly perceptions of the world, adult Loring perseveres in his personal struggle for self-fulfilment as a knight, which involves indulging delusional tendencies. He fights for ideas and beliefs that most people of the same age and rank dismiss as illogical and unreasonable. Reading the first chapters of *Sir Nigel* enables us to say that as a result of cognitive schemes built up during his education at home, Loring’s worldview is dominated by chivalry; and throughout his career he remains under the delusion that he is a true knight, shaped by the tenets of chivalry and destined for honour and glory in his noble vocation. In spite of opposition from individuals whom Doyle endows with finer intellectual powers and more rational judgement, the idealist maintains his stance. His delusional traits are scoffed at, but he holds firm to his faith in chivalry. Laughs and criticisms fail to make him revise his interpretation and practice of chivalry, and he persists in the delusion that he is right and England and the world need knights like him. In adulthood, Loring remains a romantic and continues to inhale almost the same delusional air that swayed his judgement when he was a squire, during the early years of his career as a soldier, when, with the natural enthusiasm of youth, he strove after knighthood in the midst of the grim wars between England and France.

Doyle shows delusional excesses in other characters, most significantly in Edward, Prince of Wales, who, both in his young and adult age, conceives himself as the ultimate crusader and the conqueror of the entire world (Doyle 1891: 292-294; Doyle 1906: 85-86). Loring follows this leader without hesitation, for he does not perceive any mental abnormality in a man who, for the sensible reader, is obviously affected by delusions of grandeur, invincibility and heroics. Both the belligerent prince and the keen knight absorb a delusional power that keeps them from forming a proper understanding of the world. They are saved from failure and shame by a model of sense, caution and intelligence that is cleverly used by Doyle to counteract knightly and epic fancy: Sir John Chandos.³

³ This historical knight is seen by the author as the embodiment of a form of chivalry which has left behind the silly aspirations that Loring retains. Doyle needs Chandos to ensure that his hero does not go over the limit of rationality to the extent that he can bring disgrace or dishonour upon himself.

Loring's illusory and delusional streaks are often treated humorously by the writer. Both in youth and adulthood the knight plunges into episodes of curious boldness and temerity where he risks his life in the name of chivalry. The trances of audacious nerve become comic scenes in the hands of Doyle. But there is also moral concern, as, in order to alleviate the evils of war at least in his hero, he provides enough honour and gentleness for Loring to resist the frenzies of hatred and rage, which push men of a lesser moral restraint into violence and depravity. In the midst of war, chivalry infuses serenity into Doyle's hero, while others are seized with terror or cruelty.

Although young knights tend to reckless behaviour in their eagerness to perform deeds of arms, more mature pursuers of chivalry may improve their self-possession. But, if the obsession with a place in the annals of chivalry persists, even an adult, like Loring in *The White Company*, will undergo variations in his moods, his emotional states being affected by the unstable perception of his own status in the world of honour and arms to which he belongs. The individual's noble bearing and gentle manners may turn into fury and roughness when his expectations of fame and recognition are not fulfilled.

By characterising Nigel Loring as an agreeable, honest, and resolute man capable of heroic conduct following noble causes, Doyle tried to mitigate his likely psychosis. To a certain extent, Loring has lost touch with reality. He does not reject the external world entirely, but he is ready to oppose it in order to remain faithful to his own reality, shaped by an inflexible interpretation of chivalry and romance. To argue that Loring is not really out of touch with reality as a result of his mental condition, he must be seen as an individual living in two different realities: the world of the fourteenth century and the world of venerable epics and chivalric romance. It is difficult to say whether Loring is really *one* individual (a single personality or identity) living in two worlds, or a man struggling with a multiple self. Doyle shows how the acute pressure of fulfilling orders or exercising command during a military campaign causes the seasoned-captain-side to control Loring, while as soon as the situation changes and he regains full possession of his freedom, the chivalrous-knight-side emerges from the depths of his psyche to dominate body and soul. If the hero cannot be regarded as a single unified person, dramatic oscillations and switches in attitude and behaviour can be expected.

After the preceding paragraph, some people may say that the threshold of schizophrenia is not far. We have noted delusional traits in Loring inasmuch as he is devoted to an internal world, created under the influence of chivalric literature, which often collides with the rational norms of the external world. Unlike the hallucination-ridden Don Quixote, who would submerge himself

completely in his delusions, Loring can put a limit on their influence, so as to retain his role and position in the historical world. Chivalric ideals and heroic visions must have a confined space in his mind if he is to avoid the shame and dishonour of being considered unsuitable for service in the King’s army, in real war.

The sensitive reader may be disturbed by the fact that the terrible realities of the medieval world do not seem to affect Loring. His strong assumptions about chivalry and his honour as a nobleman keep him from experiencing anxiety in adverse and menacing circumstances, or when he comes in contact with men whose behaviour is extremely violent. Long exposure to the hell of human degeneration in war could have made him lose sanity. Such horrors could have altered his mind and weakened his moral restraint, rendering him incapable of controlling his actions. In the proximity of the hero, other knights, without chivalry or humanity, commit crimes that their impaired conscience no longer abhors. Loring’s probity remains intact after an experience which could have filled him with extreme fear with disastrous effects on his mind. He does not seem to perceive any threats to his moral stability, while around him many lose it and cease to shun evil.

Loring must represent an incomplete view of man, because he is used by Doyle to address moral issues, and particularly to prove that there are disgraceful human tendencies which can be effectively stopped when the individual possesses a firm code of conduct. As Michael Dirda says, Doyle wants the best knights from the past reconstructed in his medieval novels to inspire men like himself, decent children of the Victorian era, “to become paragons of chivalric virtue: brave, courteous, heroic, trustworthy, stoic, self-controlled, sportsmanlike” (2012: 75-76). Loring rejects aspects of human nature that contradict the principles of chivalry, and he desperately clings to this ethic and the worldview founded on it to keep sin and fault away. Reality would be bleak and unbearable for him if he had to abandon his faith in chivalry. His life is full of hope, energy, and action thanks to chivalry. However, there is a point where it ceases to be a positive force –a fair motivation, a source of noble aspirations– and becomes a real problem: when the obsession for challenge and risk prevails and jeopardises individual reputation and status.

5. HIGH AND LOW OPINIONS OF LORING

Doyle’ attitude towards his hero can be explored by looking at what other characters think or say about Loring. His discourse and conduct are construed by some as symptomatic of mental illness. The opinions of Loring found in

various contexts and circumstances must be examined, for it will certainly improve our understanding of the knight and of the author's own ambivalent feelings about him. We know that Nigel's first home is dominated by his inflexible grandmother, who is responsible for the young man's education and takes pride in the success of her formative work. And later, in the adult years, Doyle makes another woman crucial for the understanding of Loring. Lady Mary, his sensible wife, disagrees with him in some respects, but does not question his mental health. Although she finds some of his ideas quite excessive, Doyle does not allow her to defy patriarchal authority. And regarding Loring's daughter, Doyle lets her praise her father as an honourable knight, brave and dedicated to duty (Doyle 1891: 152).⁴

Family support is not enough for Loring. He wants his reputation to grow among his peers. Despite his unwavering dedication to an obsolescent and rather impractical code of chivalry that often causes him to be out of touch with reality, Loring is esteemed by more worldly knights and soldiers, who tread the paths of history rather than those of romance. It should not be forgotten that the epitome of knightly and military balance, Sir John Chandos, warned young Nigel Loring that the myths of chivalry must not interfere with his duty as a soldier in the King's army. Yet, in Loring's adulthood we still find passages that illustrate how the chivalric customs that he follows may contradict common sense and reason.

Sir Nigel bent his knee devoutly as he put foot on land, and taking a small black patch from his bosom he bound it tightly over his left eye.

"May the blessed George and the memory of my sweet lady-love raise high my heart! And as a token I vow that I will not take this patch from my eye until I have seen something of this country of Spain, and done such a small deed as it lies in me to do. And this I swear upon the cross of my sword and upon the glove of my lady."

"In truth, you take me back twenty years, Nigel," quoth Sir Oliver [...] "After Cadsand, I deem that the French thought that we were an army of the blind, for there was scarce a man who had not closed an eye for the greater love and honour of his lady. Yet it goes hard with you that you should darken one side, when with both open you can scarce tell a horse from a mule. In truth, friend, I think that you step over the line of reason in this matter."

"Sir Oliver Buttethorn," said the little knight shortly, "I would have you to understand that, blind as I am, I can yet see the path of honour very clearly, and that that is the road upon which I do not crave another man's guidance." (Doyle 1891: 232-233).

⁴ Lady Maude, who is closer to her father's gallant, passionate disposition than to her mother's prudence, stresses her father's dauntlessness as a knight true to his principles and to the King. This favourable judgement has been brought about by her love of fanciful stories and her vivid imagination.

On arrival in France for a new campaign, Loring’s decision of covering one of his feeble eyes prompts his fellow knight’s remark that he steps over the line of reason. However, Oliver Buttethorn is far from an example of prudence and judgement: we are told that his main reason to join the Prince’s expedition is to indulge his gastronomic appetite. It is plain to see that Doyle opts for a comic madness in his treatment of some knights, like the two in this scene, which may create distance but certainly not repulsion, for there is no malevolence or ill, perverse design, but, in the case of Nigel Loring, an honest resolve to live as a true knight ought to. This is the kind of life which the seasoned knight wants his young squires to follow, and it is central to his role as an instructor for aspirants to knighthood.

And first I would have you bear very steadfastly in mind that our setting forth is by no means for the purpose of gaining spoil or exacting ransom, though it may well happen that such may come to us also. We go to France, and from thence I trust to Spain, in humble search of a field in which we may win advancement and perchance some small share of glory. For this purpose I would have you know that it is not my wont to let any occasion pass where it is in any way possible that honour may be gained. (Doyle 1891: 180-181).

Although he is a religious man, Loring’s relationship with the Church is far from perfect, particularly in his youth, when he accused the local clergy of appropriating his family’s estate and offending and insulting his lineage. The Church respects knights on condition that they respect ecclesiastical law. Doyle clearly supports Loring in his conflict with the clergy, and the idea that a man who opposes an abbot’s authority must be crazy or controlled by demons or evil spirits fails to convince readers. Doyle soon leaves clerical influence behind and focuses on other issues. He draws our attention to the lowborn people’s judgement of chivalry and his keen defenders, and we find some expressions of disrespect towards the knight, his manners and actions, which come from the assumption that reason cannot be on their side. “Those crazy knight errants”, says the man-at-arms Black Simon (Doyle 1906: 225), when he is told that Loring intends to rescue some women imprisoned on a bleak island. This uncouth man cannot understand the foolish dreams of chivalry, and he thinks that soldiers must strive for the success of the campaign unaffected by romantic visions. Doyle tolerates such coarse criticism aimed at his hero by men whose moral or mental superiority can be easily questioned. As Doyle is neither an elitist nor an uncompromising supporter of commoners, neither the aristocrat’s nor the yeoman’s critical comments are entirely dependable to establish the extent of Loring’s chivalry-induced madness.

6. CHIVALRY AND WARFARE

The violence and crime of medieval warfare are graphically depicted in the novels. In some episodes, the implication that atrocities are committed by people suffering from mental disorders exists (Doyle 1891: 144-145).⁵ Violence and crime are part of Loring's life, not because his mind is in disorder but because, due to his noble blood and knightly nurture, his occupation must be the practice of arms serving the King. Linking violence and crime to the pursuit of chivalry as he views it would be quite unfair. As a knight, he avoids indiscriminate aggression, for he abides by rules meant to restrict and modulate violence in society and at war. As a supporter of chivalry, he needs a solid moral sense to counteract the effects of the real madness reigning over the domains of war. The author's sustained involvement in the wars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is a fascinating issue that has kept scholars occupied for several decades (Symons 1979: 61-67, 102-123; Barsham 2000: 190-230; Pascal 2000: 93-104; Lycett 2008: 259-280, 378-399), and their research can certainly help us understand his outlook on medieval warfare and chivalry.

Chivalry as understood and practised by Loring is not necessarily a form of crude, harmful insanity. Aggression is not the prevailing drive in this individual, whereas in others, both higher and lower in the social order, violence might have a pathological origin or be regarded as *natural*, for it is an inherited privilege of class. Doyle wants Loring's masculinity to be governed by a fair and gentle disposition whereby the aggressive virility related to social dominance can be checked. In the lands of war, where the propensity to fighting is freely indulged by violent individuals, the strength of that disposition enables the often ridiculed hero to guard against depraved actions or outbursts of wrath. Immoral and destructive passions certainly drive Doyle's medieval tales, and he exploits the dramatic moments which men who indulge them unscrupulously can provoke. A different breed of characters is then necessary to limit the damage that unrestrained passions can cause, and Doyle believes that a moderate chivalry –conveniently purged of illusion and egotism– is the best counterbalance to cruelty, barbarism, and derangement at war.

Doyle's most chivalrous heroes are not driven by cruel violence. Young Loring in *Sir Nigel*, and adult Loring and his apprentice Alleyne Edricson in *The White*

⁵ Men like the foot soldier called Black Simon are not only used to criticise romantic chivalry, but also to expose the evils of revengeful violence, which war can exacerbate reaching the extremes of derangement. One of Doyle's main ideas is that the romantic chivalry which men without idealism find so foolish can actually restrain violent behaviour when war rages.

Company, do not enjoy brutal violence and find no pleasure in inflicting damage upon other individuals. They are not forced by violent insanity or impulsive aggressiveness to engage in offensive actions or perpetrate harmful acts. Doyle uses them to prove that men can control and channel their energies into something noble under the direction of chivalrous morality. For Doyle, the noble motivation of chivalry is stronger than the foul tendencies in the nature of man.⁶ Loring needs and seeks violence to play his heroic role, but this does not reveal an authorial intention to depict the knight as a mentally ill person. Doyle prefers mental illness to be associated with crime or antisocial behaviour, but not with chivalry. However, the reader may hold the notion that Nigel Loring is violent because he is a knight, not because he is mentally ill. Doyle could refute accusations of criminality against his hero on the grounds that he uses violence correctly, complying with the law and with his rules of honour, thus setting an example of how adherence to the tenets of chivalry ensures self-control and keeps man from engaging in vile activities that may tarnish his reputation.

In the chapters devoted to war, Loring is a strangely kind combatant, who has a courteous, gentle word for *every* foe and makes no distinction between brutes and knights. He is not driven by revenge, although his father was slain by the French, and his death has been one of the causes of the decline of the house of Loring. Loring does have vengeful feelings against the local clergy, because they have ruined his house. Doyle applies one of the traditional reasons for revenge: the defence of one’s family and honour. This concern reaches fabulous proportions in Loring’s mind, and it shapes a sense of justice where violence is not omitted. However, young Loring’s vengeful performance at the beginning of *Sir Nigel* is quite comical, for instead of wielding sword and fire against the abbey, he puts a pike in the abbot’s pond to kill his favourite fish (Doyle 1906: 10-13).

Although Doyle could be criticised for his leniency with the follies of his idealistic knight, he deserves praise for his determination not to let wrath and lust for revenge dominate his mind. Loring exemplarily refuses to act in a destructive way antithetical to gaining honour. Revenge is a strong passion in other characters, in low born soldiers and in great lords too, each of them with reasons and justification that they deem perfectly acceptable. But Doyle moves

⁶ Over the years biographers have been quite competent in the study of Doyle’s views on man’s moral conflicts both past and present, but reading the author’s own autobiography *Memories and Adventures* (1924) is still necessary for a more direct understanding of his works. Moreover, Doyle’s letters and his interviews and recollections (published by J. Lellenberg, D. Stashower and C. Foley, and by H. Orel, respectively) also deserve reading for further insight and enlightenment.

Loring in a rather different direction, seeking the stimulation of *noble* fighting. Of course, men can respond to fierce overstimulation with emotional tension or stress, and this can lead to extreme or irrational acts in which the individual risks his life and others'. In both novels, we can see that Nigel Loring is not overwhelmed by the tremendous overstimulation of war. His enthusiasm is strong, particularly in his first campaign (in the second part of *Sir Nigel*), and his performance often verges on stupidity. However, he soon learns to enjoy fighting without rashness and lack of self-control in grim lands where others go mad or shrink back with fear. Presented as a model of chivalrous masculinity in which heroic illusions exist but are normally grappled with satisfactorily, Loring is expected to be calm and resist neurotic impulses even amid the most appalling calamities of war. Doyle does not want the reader to trust his hero completely, though; and the threat of a clash between his loyalty to the ideals of romantic chivalry and his commitment to the obligations of his external world is always near.

7. INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL WORLDS

The impending *clash* mentioned in the last lines of the previous section makes clear that the study of Doyle's knight would be incomplete without a consideration of the idea of conformity, or his readiness to change his behaviour in response to external pressure. In spite of the strength of Loring's personality and his profound convictions, he cannot deny the fact that the majority exercises pressure on the individual to behave in a certain way or to adopt certain beliefs. Loring follows self-imposed norms, but he must also respect socially or culturally determined rules. The author cannot let his hero become a fanatic, because he must be ready to sacrifice his system of ideals, marked by old traditions and tied up with an inherited worldview that determines his aims and conduct, in order to fit in the external world shaped by the dominant powers of the Crown and the Church. His commitment to chivalry and his sense of morality cannot be too radical, for they must co-exist with his compliance with external rules that he is supposed to respect. Doyle's proposition that duty to the King does not prevent his knight from feeling free to follow his own hopes and dreams is not easy to accept. Heroic illusions in his internal world must be eliminated if he is to tread the paths of acceptable behaviour. Emphasising the mature advice of men like Sir John Chandos, Doyle attempts to persuade the reader that chivalrous idealists like Nigel Loring can become more reasonable and reduce their private drives in such a way that they can conform to a more conventional perception and understanding of the world.

As we have seen, Doyle’s hero perceives the world of the mid fourteenth century in a very particular way, according to an inner reality which is based on chivalric romance. Although he is susceptible to historical influences, he does not let them contradict his vision. Due to his concept of chivalry and the needs that he must fulfil, he sometimes comes to the verge of madness. He is subject to blood and tradition, whereas others consider themselves to be autonomous, free from birth or class determinism, and quite content in an illusion of individual liberty. We must bear in mind what determined Loring’s personality and behaviour; they developed under the influence of a conservative grandmother, and through years of experience his mental life evolves little.

Doyle is pleased with the fact that Loring’s *domestic* education determined his morality and goals, which are based on a traditional construct of chivalry. Thanks to this mental structure, he is quite sure of the kind of life he must lead. Although he has leaders to follow (many of whom are real), experience and time will turn him into a leader, capable of attracting other people to his vision. Having *a vision* and pursuing it usually characterise leaders positively. However, Loring is not entirely conscious that his vision will not come true in a world where chivalry is becoming an irksome absurdity. Yet, like Doyle himself, he tries to project his construct and vision onto other people. He is always ready to speak and act in defence of his notion of virtue and honour, which can certainly be directed towards duty to the Crown or the nation. There is sheer satisfaction in the fulfilment of this obligation, but it cannot release him from the stiff obsession of performing deeds of chivalry: he is more concerned with his personal goals than with his duties as a captain who leads troops under a royal banner. Doyle permits this in both novels, but makes sure that his hero’s conduct does not really disrupt the prevalence of rationality, which is strongly represented by his most emblematic figure of military responsibility: Sir John Chandos.

8. CONCLUSIONS

Arthur Conan Doyle felt proud of *The White Company* and *Sir Nigel*, because they enabled him to share his personal reading of the Middle Ages, his reconstruction of the knight, and his views on chivalry. He was a writer of historical fiction with patriotic and moral purposes, as well as with sense of humour and a taste for virile adventure. Despite the empathetic and affectionate portrayal of Loring, the reader notices that his mind is fraught with heroic visions and romantic delusions resulting from a full internalization of the creed of

chivalry. Doyle watches soberly as his idiosyncratic knight expresses and also proves his readiness to risk his life for ideals which are feeble outside literature.

Doyle recreates a time of impoverished knightly ideals, where heroic imagination declines and the eccentricities of its last followers are either comic or bothersome rather than a serious or educative reflection on the long struggle between reason and passion in the heart of man. Nigel Loring's goals related to love, honour, and loyalty can be accepted, but the activities in which he engages to attain them are probably too close to madness for a modern audience. Loring needs to demonstrate how authentic his assimilation of chivalric culture is. This is a merit for him, but a sign of his sheer lunacy for many others. The fact that moral rather than material rewards are the main motivation for his behaviour may not be enough to tolerate it. Doyle wants his heroes to be examples of masculinity and patriotism, but in Loring the practice of chivalry raises doubts and causes derision rather than admiration or praise. This requires a careful consideration of the hero's psyche, where external obligations and personal desires pull in so different directions. The struggle for balance is probably the knight's most heroic endeavour.

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