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## History is Good Drama: BBC's "Copper"

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# History is Good Drama: BBC's "Copper"

## **Abstract**

BBC America's programming covers a wide range of genres, presenting characters, and settings that appeal to viewers around the world. In 2012, BBC began airing *Copper*, a period drama set in the ethnically diverse, crime and disease-ridden Five Points neighborhood in New York City in the late-Civil War years. The title, taken from the slang term for a police officer, centers on police detective work in the rapidly growing urban center. The characterizations, as well as the situations presented are not far off from historical fact. For various reasons, many of the characters have returned to the Five Points, and their experiences in war have ended, though the war itself rages on. As a result, their attitudes take on an historical tone of post-Civil War society, though the show takes place in the late-war years of 1863 and 1864. This is not an anachronistic flaw in the show, but rather depicts the characters' own struggles to carry on in American society through the late-war years now that they have returned from war, and that their combat experiences have come to an end. Therefore, the following questions arise: what post-Civil War themes does "Copper" depict for television audiences, and how does the show contribute to the surge of both print and mass media in relation to the American Civil War? In this segment, we will consider the themes found in the show in terms of the post-war sentiments expressed by characters. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, BBC, Copper

## **Disciplines**

History | United States History

## **Comments**

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# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### History is Good Drama: BBC's "Copper"

April 28, 2014

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BBC America's programming covers a wide range of genres, presenting characters, and settings that appeal to viewers around the world. In 2012, BBC began airing *Copper*, a period drama set in the ethnically diverse, crime and disease-ridden Five Points neighborhood in New York City in the late-Civil War years. The title, taken from the slang term for a police officer, centers on police detective work in the rapidly growing urban center. The characterizations, as well as the situations presented are not far off from historical fact. For various reasons, many of the characters have returned to the Five Points, and their experiences in war have ended, though the war itself rages on. As a result, their attitudes take on an historical tone of post-Civil War society, though the show takes place in the late-war years of 1863 and 1864. This is not an anachronistic flaw in the show, but rather depicts the characters' own struggles to carry on in American society through the late-war years now that they have returned from war, and that their combat experiences have come to an end. Therefore, the following questions arise: what post-Civil War themes does "Copper" depict for television audiences, and how does the show contribute to the surge of both print and mass media in relation to the American Civil War? In this segment, we will consider the themes found in the show in terms of the post-war sentiments expressed by characters.



*Copper* follows the story of Union Army veteran, Kevin "Corky" Corcoran, as he returns to civilian life, and takes up police detective work – a job through which he is never wanting for a case in the Five Points. Central to Corky's characterization is his identity as an Irish-American. Though he is depicted as a trustworthy character in the neighborhood, it is clear that through some of

the language used by other native-born Americans, there is a sense of mistrust between the former and the latter. Corky interacts with characters that represent the diverse ethnic

makeup of the Five Points in the nineteenth century, including other Irishmen and women (particularly poignant because of the inclusion of sectarian insults), a Jewish shopkeeper, a Prussian prostitute, and an African American family striving to carve out a successful life. These interactions are believable, as historically, the Five Points would have included an ethnically diverse demographic, as well as immigrant workers seeking employment in various fields.

In the show, characters' attitudes depict a post-war perspective of the American Civil War in four key ways: the futility of war, the contributions of immigrant soldiers doing their bit during said futile war, the brotherhood amongst veterans, and the restructuring of society. Appearing to take a deeply contemporary social stance on warfare, the Civil War is depicted as having been a slaughter that left many of the main characters deeply scarred because of their combat service, or as a result of facing the social dangers faced on the urban North's home-front (i.e. Corky's wife is left to fend for herself in Five Points).

While war-bashing is not frequent in the show, there is an underlying sense of uncertainty among the characters, not about the meaning of the war, but of the meaning of their efforts. Post-Civil War literature, and regimental histories in particular, tend to paint the war in a positive, patriotic, and proud way, while a lesser-interpreted genre of not-quite-as-enthusiastic soldiers' letters did indeed weigh down war era mail carriages (both emotionally, and in ). It was through the hopes of being remembered well, bravely, and patriotically, that the get-us-in-the-fight letters were preserved and sent to local newspapers to be printed for mass consumption. As a result, the fact that not all characters in *Copper* look upon their combat service in a chest-thumping manner, is not out of the question. It is likely that there were Union veterans who questioned their contributions in the grand scheme, just as Corky broodingly does at various times.

Corky emigrated from Ireland in an unspecified year before the April 12 bombardment of Fort Sumter in 1861, and therefore before the start of the Civil War. Like many immigrants who arrived before, or during the war, the able-bodied men (typically) were motivated to join the Union Army (when considering the major ports were in the North) with promises of steady monthly pay, and a \$100 bounty for enlisting. Corky served in the Union Army, and audiences can assume he arrived at a port in New York City, thereby making his experience as an Irish enlistee into the Union Army his personal narrative of *becoming* American. Throughout the first season, Corky thinks back to, and verbalizes, his service during the war. In particular, he mentions "what happened at Gettysburg" as an event that changed him. A high volume of immigrant-veterans make their way into and out of the dialogue, some of whom cite their services as reasons why native-born Americans should treat them fairly. Viewers assume that Corky did his bit during the war, and by the second season, audiences can begin to draw a deeper understanding of what his complicated service record entailed.

After the Civil War, organizations such as the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) were formed by veterans and supporters to create a space for those who had served to continue notions of unity of comrades, as well as cementing a brotherhood amongst Union veterans. While the show doesn't set any of the action in a GAR post, there are multiple instances where many veterans feel a connection to their old comrades-in-arms. In one particular episode, a veteran told Corky that he had served in the 69<sup>th</sup> New York, and though Corky was not in the same regiment, they had a connection as men who had fought and bled for the Union. Further still, some veterans (still wearing their uniforms as they frequent public houses) even cite their services to avoid arrest when Corky or his detective compatriots come to remove them from a similar establishment. One veteran, in fact, while sitting on a wine barrel, and wearing an eye-patch to cover what audiences assume is a war-wound, chides Corky that "he's all copper now," and that a true Union man wouldn't arrest "a brother soldier." It is interesting to note that the idea of the *brother soldier* also permeates socio-economic classes. Where Corky is clearly a lower working-class police detective, he served with, and continues a friendship with son-of-a-wealthy-businessman, and amputee, Robert Morehouse. This friendship speaks also to the final key depiction of the post-war era: a restructuring of society.

Never does Morehouse speak of his monetary dominance over Corky, but instead that their shared war services would change the societal structures of the urban North. He represents a divergent characterization, as Morehouse even asks Corky to serve as his best man during his marriage to wealthy English philanthropist, Elizabeth Haverford. Haverford, even, represents the social prowess of a woman with monetary stability, and how such a woman might put her socio-economic power towards a cause. Haverford had worked in abolitionist circles, playing into the nineteenth century ideals of societal reform, and staying within the boundaries of such reform in which women were able to take part in cities like New York.

In terms of racial restructuring, *Copper* treats the African American Five Points experience better than could be expected from a television drama series. The Freeman family represents the African American struggle to find a place in American society, and incidentally have a part in restructuring post-war society. Matthew Freeman, trained as a medical doctor, successfully cares for many patients, and during a fouled-water disease outbreak, cares for a racially and ethnically diverse population of the sick and dying. Audiences expect Matthew and his wife, former slave Sara Freeman, to be respected by fellow African Americans in their neighborhood for their advancement, but instead draw opposite reactions. Matthew in particular is chastised for being "too white" in taking on a profession as esteemed as medicine, and is inferred to be a traitor to the African American community. All the while, the New York Metropolitan Police, and therefore Corky, are tasked to keep some semblance of law and order amidst growing corruption in a growing and rapidly changing city.

All things considered, it's clear that *Copper* addresses and interprets various post-Civil War themes throughout the show, both through characterizations as well as through character interactions. Though the show is set in the late-war years, the fact that the war is over for the characters who returned to Five



Points in terms of combat experience plays into the illusion that they are living in a post-war society. As a result, the action of the show is driven along the four themes outlined above through the mindset of post-war Americans of various races, ethnicities, and creeds. The complicated, and in-depth depictions of characterizations and motivations create a world of rapidly changing social norms in ethnically diverse neighborhoods such as New York City's Five Points. *Copper* does an admirable job in not only presenting a period drama that is entertaining to interested viewers, but by keeping to believable historical details that also allow for non-Civil War era fans to take a visualized peek into a small segment of Civil War era America. How then does BBC's *Copper* contribute to the American Civil War in modern memory? Check back soon to find out!

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Images:

Corky and Matthew. Image found on: [www.craveonline.com](http://www.craveonline.com).

Group character shot from *Copper*. Image found on: <http://www.empireonline.com>.