

# Undisciplining Englishness : Narratives of Colonial Encounter in Conan Doyle's *The Sign of Four*

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Sherlock Holmes is perhaps the most famous English detective of all time. Serialized in *The Strand Magazine* from 1891 after the publications of *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) and *The Sign of Four* (1890), the Sherlock Holmes stories created a huge fandom and were later adopted in more than 160 films and a wide variety of movies, TV series, and documentaries.<sup>1)</sup> Holmes's silhouette outlining his cape, deerstalker, and pipe is now a world icon that immediately evokes English decency. English heritage tourism actively uses the locations featured in Holmes's stories to promote an Englishness of stable, harmonious rural countryside.<sup>2)</sup> This Englishness, or the domestic national origin of the English detective, however, comes under question when we look at his "sinewy forearm and wrist, all dotted and scarred with innumerable puncture-marks" of cocaine injections alluding to his addiction to coca, a plant imported from the West Indies (Doyle 93).

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1) *The Arthur Conan Doyle Encyclopedia*.

2) Berberich 1-2 and Ellis's essay.

This article explores how Conan Doyle's *The Sign of Four* undisciplines Englishness—English national character constructed through the nation's racial politics in history from the Reform Act and beyond the New Imperialism of the late nineteenth century—by drawing upon the trendy Victorian studies' call for "undisciplining." After the Reform Act passed in 1832, many liberals began to think of "the people" as a mass population not limited to one single class, but ordinary English men whom they believed to embody the idea of "self-reliance" in accordance with the "democratic thinking about the self-governing capacities of the English people" (Mandler 53).<sup>3)</sup> In the late nineteenth century, however, the centrality of "self-reliance" in the English national character was threatened by industrialization and urbanization, which increased slum populations and displaced the people into the streets instigating chaos.<sup>4)</sup> In poverty-stricken London of the late Victorian era, the ordinary Englishmen no longer looked like self-controlling individuals, but like an animalistic mass undergoing degeneration.<sup>5)</sup> As these "Anxieties about the degeneration of national character" spread across the country when the British Empire expanded scattering English people abroad, conservative Tories as well as Liberals found an alternative national character in institutions and empire

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3) See Peter Mandler's *The English National Character* 27-58 for the self-regulating individuality that characterized the English national character in the mid-Victorian era and 106-42 for the turn toward imperialism in the late-Victorian era. For a quick review of the changing definitions of Englishness throughout the nineteenth century, see Ebbaston's "Englishness and the Victorians."

4) As slums were becoming ubiquitous in the East End of London, the London County Council established in 1889 continued slum clearance conducted by its predecessor Metropolitan Board of Works (est. 1855), clearing the overcrowded slums such as Monmouth Street and Seven Dials. See White 54-60.

5) The American novelist Jack London describes the East Enders in *The People of the Abyss* (1903): "They reminded me of gorillas [. . .] They are a new species, a breed of city savages. The streets and houses, alleys and courts, are their hunting grounds [. . .] The slum is their jungle, and they live and prey in the jungle" (London 92).

that promised a greater sense of belonging (Mandler 123). By the late nineteenth century, Englishness became a racial, cultural construct based upon hierarchical binaries distinguishing between “us” and “them,” the civil English man and the colonized savage, and the virtuous English woman inside the home and the conspicuous female native in lands abroad.<sup>6)</sup>

Englishness, then, is a racial construct created for the purpose of clearing out a space for an imagined sphere of the comfortable home secured from outside forces of colonial encounters, a home that purportedly self-reliant, ethnically-white English emigrants should return to.<sup>7)</sup> The static picture of domesticity, rationality, and civilization, implied in the conventional image of Englishness, is artificially produced under the necessity of uniting the “peoples of the English diaspora” with their homeland and of separating them from the colonial Others (Young 1). The imperial hierarchical binaries of Englishness, however, have never been solid. As Simon Gikandi has noted, “Margins, boundaries, and peripheries are not muted spaces in which the dominated act out their resentment or even resistance; on the contrary, they are key ingredients in the making of the implosive center itself” (37). Saree Makdisi, in his book *Making England Western*, argues that “The borders between ‘here’ and ‘there,’ ‘us’ and ‘them,’ were for some time rather more amorphous, even porous, than we might have imagined” (xi), suggesting that the conception of Englishness as purely “Western”—identified as a set of values located at the forefront of the progressive development—is artificially constructed.

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6) See Mandler 106-42. For information on this latter version of Englishness in relation to postcolonial studies, see Robert Young’s *The Idea of English Ethnicity* and Simon Gikandi’s *Maps of Englishness*. On how conduct literature and domestic womanhood helped establish Englishness, see Poon’s *Enacting Englishness in the Victorian Period*.

7) Such a racial, cultural hegemony of Englishness eliding the differences between England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland is what distinguishes it from Britishness, a term that refers to the national identity in legal, civil aspects only. See Poon 4-6.

This contestation of Englishness as the pure essence of the safeguarded metropole is a topic much discussed in recent criticism of *The Sign of Four*. Christopher Keep and Don Randall have read that in *The Sign of Four* the “distinction between Occident and Orient is so radically confused as to trouble any fixed sense of ‘being in place’” (213); Benjamin O’Dell has drawn attention to “English national identity [. . .] as a formation forged through its difficult – at times, humiliating – interaction with the world” (983); and Jesse Oak Taylor-Ide points out that the novel characterizes Britain as “an increasingly hybridized entity through the influx of foreign influences” (56). I will contribute to this previous scholarship by bringing in the city’s role in fermenting diverse colonial encounters that blur the imperial binaries constituting Englishness. London in Doyle’s times, despite the city’s radical urbanization aimed at “Making England Western” in the early- and middle-nineteenth century,<sup>8)</sup> never became a fully polar opposite to the Orient, as evidenced by the presence and expansion of the London Docks that imported colonial resources, as well as the increased populations of foreigners and the racialization of the urban poor.<sup>9)</sup> Doyle’s novel reveals how the city conflates the exotic colonial elements with the presumably stable cultural, racial purity of Englishness.

Alongside this focus on urban space, my article examines the ways in which Doyle’s novel undermines Englishness in narrative space that entangles colonial encounters and contests the surveillance of the definite omniscient closure. A traditional line of critics have suggested that Doyle’s novel establishes social order by silencing colonial elements in disciplinary narrative form through “a successful purging of the novel’s ‘wild, dark’ Indian elements

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8) See Saree Makdisi’s book titled as such for information on the urbanization projects motivated by the desire to convert the racialized working class into civil, self-regulating English individuals.

9) For contemporary references, see John Thomson and Adolph Smith’s *Street Life in London* (1877) and William Booth’s *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (1890).

from its national and narrative borders" (Mehta 635), "the blatant triumph of the British over the foreign" (Taylor-Ide 67), or the "preserv[ation of] the unified fully intelligible self of realism" (Jann 705).<sup>10</sup> Unlike such critics, I will argue that the novel's narratives *undiscipline* Englishness and challenge the order they seem to restore. D. A. Miller argues that the very structure of the novelistic genre begets a disciplinary power, which governs and controls readers' perspectives.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the novel enacts the gaze of "surveillance" and "discipline," which, by implementing an ideological construct in readers' minds, makes readers complicit with the state regime in their society. In his analysis of the novels produced in the nineteenth century, which he calls "the age of discipline" (19), Miller points out that omniscient narration serves as an "ideal of the power of regulation," because it "institutes a faceless and multilateral regard" by forcing readers to take the omniscient narrator's perspective (24). Though I partially agree with Miller, I oppose his interpretation of novels as proponents of control and discipline. Together with Pablo Mukherjee, who claims that the rhetoric of crime in the English detective novel interrogates both colonial ideology and state authority, I will argue that novels not only uphold but also critique the imperialistic and domestic hegemonies of nineteenth-century Britain.<sup>12</sup> In the English detective novel, "closures have disturbed as well as enforced 'discipline'" (Mukherjee 85).

In this respect, I want to investigate how Doyle's novel "undisciplines" Englishness through narratives creating fissures in that otherwise smooth

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10) Keep and Randall provide a contrasting view by showing failures in the narrative attempts to create a sustainable social realm safeguarded against colonial elements.

11) For a brief review of criticism which supports the novel's affiliation with the police system of governing and control, see Mukherjee 4, 83-85.

12) See Mukherjee 37. Mukherjee argues that the rhetoric of crime was used to justify Britain's colonization of India, though he points to the fact that this very same rhetoric disjoined the colonial ideology that supported their occupation.

national character, by re-interpreting “undisciplining,” a term that Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Christoff and Amy Wong proposed in the Spring 2020 *Victorian Studies* special issue (“Undisciplining Victorian Studies”). Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong—three Victorian scholars of color who first gathered as a reading group and edited this special issue—argue that Victorian studies as a discipline has foregrounded the exclusion of race and racialization despite the fact that the Victorian era was the period when the modern idea of race was established. They urge us Victorianists (of color) to come together to “undiscipline—radically renovate, rethink, and even un-make—Victorian studies itself” (371) by promoting interdisciplinary interactions between Victorian studies and other fields like Black, African American, Asian American, Latinx, Postcolonial, and Indigenous studies. Providing a space for “a collective negotiation with not-being-common with the existing norms of scholarship” (382), they also propose reconsidering the politics behind aesthetic forms taught in universities as well as expanding the scope of geography and literary form beyond white liberalism.

At their call to rethink the field’s assumed white readership as a norm, I suggest that we take this action to reconsider Englishness implied or contested in the form of Victorian novels to move beyond the “aesthetics” complicit with “racial hierarchies” (Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong 380). Miller’s use of Foucault’s idea of “discipline” in *The Novel and the Police* postulates three conditions: “an ideal of unseen but all-seeing surveillance,” “a regime of the norm” and “various technologies of the self and its sexuality” (viii). In his view, the novel establishes the disciplinary power of governing and control through the invisible omniscient gaze of surveillance widely diffused in individual self-consciousness in the realm of everyday life. Fusing Miller’s attention to the surveillance and norms of disciplinary narratives and Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong’s inclusion of race and racialization in Victorian studies, I

define “undisciplining” as an act of undermining the disciplinary racism sustained by novelistic form. Thus, in my reading of *The Sign of Four*, I examine how the novel *undisciplines* Englishness—i.e. places the nation’s assumed isolated superiority in relation to unregulated colonial encounters negating racial hierarchies and criminality in terms of form—by discussing the narrative failures in arranging all the colonial elements into a stable closure.

## I

At the beginning of *The Sign of Four*, the racially pure and rationally secure English supremacy is threatened by the most famous English detective’s addiction to cocaine. The novel starts as follows:

### Chapter 1 The Science of Deduction

Sherlock Holmes took his bottle from the corner of the mantelpiece, and his hypodermic syringe from its neat morocco case. With his long, white, nervous fingers he adjusted the delicate needle and rolled back his left shirt-cuff. For some little time his eyes rested thoughtfully upon the sinewy forearm and wrist, all dotted and scarred with innumerable puncture-marks. Finally, he thrust the sharp point home, pressed down the tiny piston, and sank back into the velvet-lined armchair with a long sign of satisfaction. (93)

Of special interest is the way that the tension between the whiteness of the English detective and the darkness of contagious colonial influence becomes prominent in the image of Holmes’s white body injured by the drug shots: “the sinewy forearm and wrist, all dotted and scarred with innumerable puncture-marks.” Cocaine, which is derived from coca imported from the West

Indies, intrudes into the white body of the detective and leaves the trace of its invasion all over his skin. The English detective voluntarily subjugates himself to the effect of the colonial product, as it is with his “long, white, nervous fingers” that he injects cocaine into his body. In this scene, the high human capacity of reason, which Watson calls, “those great powers” (94), is put into danger, and the representative figure of English supremacy sinks into the mere pleasure of addictive desire, suggested by the “long sigh of satisfaction.”

It is through institutional responsibility that Watson criticizes Holmes’s addiction to the colonial drug. Upon seeing Holmes’s addiction to cocaine, Watson cautions him against the danger of losing his “great powers” of rationality and reminds Holmes of the fact that he speaks “not only as one comrade to another but as a medical man [. . .]” (94). As a “medical man,” Watson gives himself an agency of constitutional authority with which he could control the risk of the colonial factor. Watson associates the task of restoring the social order against colonial influence with the institutional power of omniscience that controls the drug use.<sup>13)</sup>

This institutional perspective, in which Watson invests his narrative, mainly centers on Holmes’s logic of deduction. Holmes’s detective logic takes a form of theory that assigns each discrete element to an appropriate position in the entire sequence. “The science of deduction,” as implied in the chapter title, sets up the whole narrative as a site of overarching principles of governance. As suggested by Watson’s question, “how does all that fit into your theory?” and Holmes’s answer, “Confirms it in every respect” (124), “all” episodes should be firmly rooted into a particular position in the narrative sequence of the events. As his use of the verb, “confirm” indicates, his theory comes first, and

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13) O’Dell writes: “A sociological reading of *The Sign of Four* would suggest that Watson is the ultimate form of institutional power through his strong associations with medicine and the military” (985).



the rest should be incorporated into the realm of his logic. Holmes also reveals his interest in the rhetoric of causality that creates a unidirectional explication, when he says, “This unexpected occurrence [. . .] has caused us rather to lose sight of the original purpose of our journey” (126). “This unexpected occurrence,” which deviates from the previously-designed frame implied by the phrase, “the original purpose,” creates a disjuncture in the chain of events. Holmes’s preference for deduction produces the necessity of starting with a theory that highlights the cause-effect relationship among discrete episodes.

In this context, Holmes’s logic of deduction visualizes the omniscient gaze of surveillance implied in the disciplinary function of the narrative in D. A. Miller’s model. As the abovementioned conversations have shown, Holmes renders all the disconnected elements into a cohesive unit of control. He constructs a theory that can locate each episode at a particular stage of the development by presupposing a particular direction, which this narrative is geared towards. Principles and purposes decide the meaning of each event and put them inside the grand framework of coherent logic. In this process of arranging events into Holmes’s overarching theory, we find Miller’s emphasis on “surveillance,” which observes all the events under the rubric of control.

Watson uses a similar pattern of narrativization of colonial disorders in order to create a domestic realm of Englishness not contaminated by colonial encounters implied in the crime. After escorting Miss Morstan back home, the distraught Watson turns back and gets a glimpse of a “tranquil English home”:

As we drove away I stole a glance back, and I still seem to see that little group on the step—the two graceful, clinging figures, the half-opened door, the hall-light shining through stained glass, the barometer, and the bright stair-rods. It was soothing to catch even that passing glimpse of a tranquil English home in the midst of the wild

dark business which had absorbed us. (127)

In this passage, Watson connects the task of establishing social order with that of securing a space of Englishness against “wild, dark” colonial intruders. Miss Morstan, when she first appears in front of Watson, is described as wearing “a small turban,” an exotic cloth, yet she still has “plainness and simplicity” (99), which are typical of a middle-class white woman. The celebration of middle-class women’s domesticity—their stabilizing location in the domestic sphere, engagement with house chores, and inconspicuous body—in mid-century Victorian conduct literature promoted the nation’s identity as a collection of domestic households governed by decent, civil English women who are moral, self-contained, not to be sexually displayed.<sup>14)</sup> This domestic, virtuous femininity characterizing “England’s women” associated with the domestic home was a core constituent of Englishness that was gradually figuring as “a ‘fortress’ to be defended,” “hearth and home” in the face of New Imperialism at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>15)</sup>

As the novel progresses and Watson gets more disturbed by the influx of episodes and characters from colonies, Miss Morstan provides a comfortable home of peace and rest, safeguarded from colonial entanglement outside. In the scene above, elegant lady figures with illuminating light in the background create a vision of a “tranquil English home in the midst of wild, dark business

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14) See the subsection titled “England’s Women” in Poon’s book chapter “English Homebodies: The Politics of Spectacle and Domesticity in Mid-century Victorian Conduct Literature,” 21-34.

15) Ebbaston summarizes the development of Englishness into four stages: “administrative reforms which clarified or emphasized notions of region, country, and so on”; “the landscape and history of England” promoting country landscapes in response to the growth of cities; “England as a ‘fortress’ to be defended”; and “hearth and home” in the late Victorian era (1410).

which had absorbed us" (127). As opposed to the uncivilized savage-like colonial factors—"wild" and "dark" meaning not civilized, not tamed, defying the rules of the Enlightenment ideas, the Englishness is imagined as a space of calmness, neatly arranged by the social order that offers comfort and peace. His use of the verb, "absorb," suggests that he is immersed in the turmoil of colonial events, over which he has no control. Labeling the vision of tranquility of social order and home as belonging entirely to the "English," Watson makes a binary opposition between "us"—the civil, courteous Anglo-Saxon English in the metropole—and "them"—uncivil, conspicuous colonized people and colonial products from the outside.

Once he establishes a separate realm of Englishness constituted by the calm domestic home where virtuous English ladies reside, he describes the rest of his experiences, which are mainly involved in colonial factors, as a threat to the social order of Victorian England. Immediately following the scene above is Watson's brief summary of the "wild" and "dark" colonial encounters, which intrude into English society in the form of crime. He recollects what has happened so far, and tries to understand the sequence as a closely-arranged entity that leads one episode to another with a clear explanation of cause and effect. Saying, "And the more I thought of what had happened, the wilder and darker it grew" (128), Watson reinforces the image of the "wild" and "dark" aspect of the colonial factors in the crime case and describes them as objects to be reformed for the establishment of the order of Enlightenment and civilization. Labeling an episode as "the original problem" and referring to the chain that "[leads] us to a deeper and far more tragic mystery[,] The Indian treasure, [. . .]" (128), Watson tries to render colonial factors in the story into a graspable whole, which is under the binary frame of orderly England at home and the disturbing colonial Other from the outside.

By mapping the marriage plot that involves this vision of "tranquil English

home” onto the detective narrative of constructing order from the turmoil, Watson “disciplines” Englishness—displaying the three components of disciplining, i.e. “surveillance,” “norm,” and subjectivity. The Englishness grounded in the feminized domestic home of Enlightenment and civilization offers an overarching perspective that serves as a gaze of “surveillance” by controlling the episodes in the novel. It becomes part of a “norm” in a way that it is diffused into the domain of everyday life through the marriage plot. Watson thus interiorizes the necessity of obtaining this vision of Englishness inside his consciousness and becomes a subject of the omniscient disciplinary power. The Englishness “disciplined” in this way seems to incorporate colonial elements—which become more visible in later episodes—into the detective logic by assigning them the role of threat to the social order, agency of crime, objects to be reformed. Yet another narrative that flows against Watson’s skillfully constructed narrative suggests otherwise.

## II

The other narrative vying for dominance is the narrative of the chapter headings. Each chapter heading in *The Sign of Four* self-consciously selects a main event in each episode. At first it seems to build a unified perspective in support of surveillance. This omniscient viewpoint monitoring the chief components of the detective fiction, however, soon gives way to the sequential display of small encounters, which seem to be minor to the grand detective story. The chapter headings of *The Sign of Four* are as follows:

1. The Science of Deduction
2. The Statement of the Case

3. In Quest of a Solution
4. The Story of the Bald-headed Man
5. The Tragedy of Pondicherry Lodge
6. Sherlock Holmes Gives a Demonstration
7. The Episode of the Barrel
8. The Baker Street Irregulars
9. A Break in the Chain
10. The End of the Islander
11. The Great Agra Treasure
12. The Strange Story of Jonathan Small

Early chapter headings contribute to the formation of surveillance that is complicit with detective rhetoric, by presenting components of detective fiction as the main focus of the chapter. The title of the first chapter sets up the overall tone of the novel as the “science” of constructing a theory that arranges discrete episodes into cohesive units of the theory. The second chapter, entitled “The Statement of the Case,” delivers Miss Morstan’s report of the mystery. The third chapter describes the short trip, which Holmes and Watson take in order to accompany Miss Morstan, as the “quest of a solution.” The fourth chapter offers the important background of the Indian treasure, and the fifth chapter highlights the murder case so that it becomes a hinge point of another background of the colonial treasure. While the components needed for the detective rhetoric are illuminated by the title of each chapter, the other episodes are treated as minor, out of sync with the grand narrative of solution. Thus, the narrative of detective fiction flows smoothly, leaving out Watson’s love story and colonial factors—for example, an Indian servant and oriental decoration of the house—and creates an illusion that every episode, however trifling, finds an appropriate position that contributes to the overarching logic. This illusive impression makes major characters and their actions subject to the

gaze of supervision.

The chapter titles in the latter half of the novel, however, destroy this vision of omniscient narration, which complies with the task of solving the crime, by bringing forth the once-minor episodes of colonial encounters to the center of discourse. From the detective perspective, the major event in Chapter Eight should be the task of searching for Jonathan Small. The title says, however, “The Baker Street Irregulars,” and instead emphasizes the presence of the street Arabs—the racialized poor children who were regarded as foreign to their national culture and identity.<sup>16</sup> Chapter Nine, entitled, “A Break in the Chain,” points to the failure of Holmes’s regulating perspective by revealing the process in which the traditional detective logic is challenged by the introduction of the global transport system—the steam launch—and the colonial geography it entails. Chapter Ten’s title emphasizes the death of Tonga rather than the capture of Jonathan Small, which should be more relevant to the detective framework. The last two chapters shift the focus of the entire novel from England as a home for homogeneous white English culture to England as a flux of colonial encounters such as the colonial product of the “Great Agra Treasure” and Jonathan Small’s adventures in the colonies.

In this sense, the narrative of chapter headings challenges Englishness disciplined by Watson’s narration so that the first quality of the disciplinary power—i.e. the omniscient gaze of surveillance—cannot function properly. The

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16) Makdisi reviews the racialization of the urban poor at the time when London was being Occidentalized into a space of progressive, linear time developing into a modern metropolitan center of Western civilization in the nineteenth century. The term “street or City Arabs,” which refers to the poor children roaming in the city by setting them apart from English whiteness, was widely used in the book titles published in the 1870s and made them and their spaces look “culturally, racially, and civilizationaly foreign and hence exterior to the space of the nation,” highlighting both the “exteriorization of interior populations and spaces” and the necessity of educating them into English citizens. See Makdisi xiv-xvi, 75-79.

shift in focus from the elements working for the development of the detective logic to the minor characters and episodes, which seem not to be main actors of the crime, disrupts the thoroughly-designed structure of surveillance. The close relationship between the detective logic of surveillance and the marriage plot, which Watson has built to characterize the concept of Englishness as a feminized domestic home to return to, is no longer visible in the narrative that flows along the chapter titles. The narrative of chapter titles disjoins the cohesive design of Watson's narration, and thereby "undisciplines" the notion of Englishness established as such.

As the novel progresses, Englishness becomes "undisciplined" because the norms and subjectivity, which form the disciplinary power, are no longer at work. In Chapter Ten, entitled, "The End of the Islander," we find a tension between the chapter title and Watson's perspective: while the chapter heading highlights the significance of Tonga's death, Watson attempts to suppress the horror it brings to the domestic scene of England. According to the traditional logic of detective fiction, as shown in the early chapter headings, the main event should be the capture of Jonathan Small, as a significant portion is devoted to the description of the search for the convict. The title of this chapter, however, chooses the death of Tonga, which the narrator Watson tries to marginalize by rendering him into an object to be despised and demolished. Watson describes Tonga as a "savage, distorted creature" (155), expelling Tonga from the frame of civilization and making him not acceptable to the norms of society. Watson also points to the "features so deeply marked with all bestiality and cruelty" (155), and identifies Tonga more with an animal than a human being. To Watson, Tonga is a creature composed of different body parts such as "face" and "tangled disheveled hair" (155), and never a human being who has the interior consciousness of other characters in Watson's story. By describing Tonga as an animal figure made of physical components located

outside civilization, Watson excludes Tonga from the story he makes of talking, conscious, civil human characters.

The location of Tonga's death also makes visible the city's global scale, highlighting the English connection to colonies intruding into England through the Thames. Right before Holmes and Watson detect Tonga and Jonathan Small in the steam launch, there comes the scene of the suspenseful river chase:

We had shot through the pool, past the West India Docks, down the long Deptford Reach, and up again after rounding the Isle of Dogs. The dull blue in front of us resolved itself now clearly into the dainty *Aurora*. [. . .] At Greenwich we were about three hundred paces behind them. At Blackwell we could not have been more than two hundred and fifty. I have coursed many creatures in many countries during my checkered career, but never did sport given me such a wild thrill as this mad, fling man-hunt down the Thames. (154-55)

The scene of the "West India Docks" in the "Isle of Dogs" and the reference to the Pool of London highlight the connection between the international realm of colonies and England in the domestic vista. The pool of London was the area between London Bridge and the Tower, and was London's main port. In the eighteenth century, international trade expanded tremendously and the population in London increased dramatically. In the nineteenth century, many products imported from colonies—coca, sugar, rum from the West Indies, tea, drugs, pepper from the East Indies, tobacco from America, etc.—were brought to Britain through the Thames. The Thames has been the gateway to the international network because of its critical role in the global trade between Britain and colonies. As Peter Ackroyd writes, "It has always been the river of commerce" (530). As it became necessary to solve the delays in discharging of cargoes and secure the goods from theft,<sup>17)</sup> docks were extended to the four



sites including the Isle of Dogs.<sup>18)</sup> The West India Docks, which were built for this demand in the early nineteenth century, signify England's connection to the overseas colonies and the influx of colonial products and resources into the heart of London through the Thames.

The chase moves further and further away from the heart of London and goes to "Greenwich" and "Blackwell," and thus opens a broader vista of England on the global scale. At this point, Watson also implies his connection to the colonies in the imperial mission, by recalling his old days in "many countries during [his] checkered career." Yet this chase along the Thames, on the site of arteries of London, creates a "wild thrill"<sup>19)</sup> that none of his

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17) At this moment of tension between the global trade and the theft, the River Police system was introduced. The necessity to establish a new police system in charge of marine affairs was suggested by John Harriot and Patrick Colquhoun, and the Thames River Police came into force in 1798 as a one-year project. It continued and was incorporated into the new Metropolitan Police Force in 1839. For information on the history of the Thames Police, see "Thames Police: History."

18) For a map of the Pool of London, see "Map of Port of London." For a brief history of the West India Docks, see "The West India Docks: Introduction." As the port became more clamorous due to the growth of commerce, a proposal to extend docks on four sites—at St. Katherine's, Wapping, the Isle of dogs and Rotherhithe—was made, and this was enacted in the early nineteenth century. For a description of the process of constructing major docks—the West India Dock, the East India Dock, and the London Dock, see Ackroyd 536-39. Ackroyd writes: "In 1799 the West India Dock Company Act was passed, and the whole Isle of Dogs began its transformation into its home. It was followed by the London Dock at Wapping, the East India Dock at Blackwall and the Surrey Dock at Rotherhithe. It was the largest single, privately funded enterprise in the history of London" (536). Ackroyd describes the history of the docks and their impact on commerce and culture in Britain in the nineteenth century. The construction of the docks along the River Thames brought a huge sensation among the public because the size of this project was unprecedented. There came wharves and warehouses along the river, and they became the sites of wonder, which tourists came to visit. Ackroyd writes, "The history of the docks is in fact the central story of the commercial Thames in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (539).

previous service in the colonies has brought. The narrative description of the Thames and the trace of international trade at this river manifest the influx of colonial encounters into the interior of England. To be more exact, England has never had its own interior domestic space. It has always been connected to overseas colonies through the Thames.

Since the shift of the focus to the city shows that the time and space of the global stage shrink to Thames that runs across London, the “regime of the norm,” where principles of social orders and cultural customs are widely accepted and adopted in daily life (Miller viii), cannot be prominent in this extended time span and space. The concept of Englishness that Watson has built was engraved in the common sphere of domestic life inside home, where social manners and customs prevail. Once the Thames opens up the possibility of broader, cosmopolitan social realms, the norms of daily life can no longer serve as the medium through which the disciplinary gaze intervenes in common affairs. In other words, the global scale of the Thames overwhelms the realm of norms.

Similarly, the principles of the “self” or subjectivity (Miller viii), which

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19) One of the factors that create this “wild thrill” is the development of steam boats as transportation system. The traditional transportation system on the Thames before the nineteenth century was watermen boats. The Watermen’s Company worked to protect the privileges of its watermen. In 1818, however, steam-powered boats were introduced and they began to replace the traditional watermen system of the Thames. The speed was enormous compared to the watermen boats, and there were “‘almost daily’ collisions between rival steam boats” (Picard 12). For a description of this transition moment from the watermen system to the steamboat system on the Thames, see Picard 10-13. For an explanation about the development of the transportation system of steamboats on the Thames, see Flanders 67-69. Flanders says, with the proliferation of steamboats on the river, the Thames became “‘the leading highway of personal communication between the City and the West end,’ with thirty-two trips an hour, 320 a day, carrying more than 13,000 passengers daily: this ‘*silent highway*’ is now as busy as the Strand itself” (67).

Watson has interiorized in his narration of his romance in support of the national domain of Englishness, get lost when we read the trajectory of the plot offered by the chapter headings. The subjectivity complicit with the dominant regime needs a locus of perspective inside the individual consciousness, but the narrative of chapter headings, by referring to events happening on the common sphere disjointed from individual affairs, situates the locus of individual perspective outside Watson and Holmes, who are generating and interiorizing the regime of surveillance. Neither does it provide an alternative character that can contribute to the consciousness complicit with the disciplinary power. The city also further disrupts the centralization of perspectives in the extended global scale. In this sense, the novel's chapter headings and urban setting undermine the disciplinary structure of Watson's narratives shown in his romance and logical deduction.

### III

Englishness becomes further undisciplined in the last chapter of the novel, where the white civilizing English character intermingles with the criminal colonial factors. In Chapter Twelve entitled "The Strange Story of Jonathan Small," Jonathan Small's narration of the background of the whole story supports the defiant gesture of the chapter titles as opposed to Watson's systematic construction. Jonathan Small's narration gradually eats up the whole narrative domain, which was originally governed by Watson's perspective, and almost takes up the position of the first-person narration and works as a dominant gaze in the last chapter, till Holmes interrupts and screws it up. Though readers can find some traces of Watson's perspective implied in his interpretation of the case and his sympathetic description of Jonathan Small's

appearance, they soon give way to Jonathan Small's uninterrupted storytelling about his family background and his involvement in the crime. His narration continues as if it were a monologue, without any reference to the interlocutors' presence during the process. It becomes the story told by Jonathan Small in its entirety.

Jonathan Small, once he takes the position of the first-person narration (I want to call it so though his statements are bracketed by quotation marks), provides information about the colonial affairs more than required for the detective purpose. He brings so many details about his experience in colonies to the account of his adventures; he talks of the Ganges, where he has lost his leg by a crocodile, tells of the great mutiny in India, the city of Agra, and expands the colonial geography by elaborating on his trajectory that spans from Agra to Madras, Blair Island in the Andamans. Among these, what is directly related to the Agra treasure is his encounter with Mahomet Singh, Abdullah Khan, Dost Akbar, with whom he later coins the sign of four, and perhaps his encounter with Major Sholto in the Andamans. Yet he brings all these inessential episodes to his story and complicates the otherwise-calm site of white Englishness created by Watson's perspective.

Those abundant colonial elements in his story are actually supposed to defend the pure white supremacy implied in the English ideal, but they rather reveal that the essence of Englishness, imagined as such, can be altered. After telling his story, Jonathan Small claims that he has tried to reveal all the episodes and characters and to "hold back nothing" in order to prove his "innocence," i.e. the idea that the white English is always in the realm of civilization and Enlightenment (178).

"[. . .] All this is the truth, and if I tell it to you, gentlemen, it is not to amuse you—for you have not done me a very good turn—but it is

because I believe the best defence I can make is just to hold back nothing, but let all the world know how badly I have myself been served by Major Sholto, and how innocent I am of the death of his son.”

“A very remarkable account,” said Sherlock Holmes. “A fitting windup to an extremely interesting case. [. . .]” (178)

Here, Jonathan Small uses the rhetoric of civility in order to associate himself with the presumed image of Englishness characterized by the pure and superior civilization; by addressing “gentlemen,” he makes his story of lower orders and colonial crime a dialogue with the upper-class audience. He also claims his innocence in the crime, as implicated in the statement, “how innocent I am of the death of his son” by insisting that it was Tonga who planned and killed Bartholomew Sholto and he himself was frustrated by that hideous murder. Against his original purpose, however, the colonial factors he presents suggest that the presumed essence of Englishness can be altered by colonial encounters. The distinction between exterior criminality and interior innocence is blurred as Jonathan Small moves deep into the circle of the colonized’s conspiracy against captains of the British Indian Army.

To this elaborate defense that reveals multiple colonial factors interjecting the acclaimed purity of Englishness, Sherlock Holmes and Watson try to cover up uncomfortable scene of colonial intrusion and invasion by referring back to the purpose of the systematic detective narrative and of the domestic marriage plot. Holmes bluntly wraps up Small’s detailed narration by labeling it as “A very remarkable account [. . .] A fitting windup to an extremely interesting case.” In doing so, Holmes renders the complicated story of Jonathan Small and all the details of the story into a brief singular account worthy of attention not because it is important but because it is unexpected, as implied by the adjective “remarkable,” and is “interesting,” which seems to serve against

Small's original purpose "not to amuse [Holmes and Watson]." As indicated by Holmes's statement that Jonathan Small's story is, "A fitting windup" to the crime case, Holmes makes Small's detailed narration, which itself could have been a story in its own entirety, look like an adjunct to, or a component of, the grand narrative of his detective logic. Watson also attempts to return back to the original plot structure that nicely lines up the marriage plot with the detective narrative, by referring his upcoming marriage as the ending of the whole story: Watson claims, "there is the end of our little dreams" because "Miss Morstan has done me the honour to accept me as a husband in prospective" (179). In this way, the narrative fissures caused by Jonathan Small's overwhelming episodic account are immediately sealed up by Holmes's awkward gesture toward the systematic surveillance and Watson's invocation of domestic households composing the nation.

Yet this abruptly restored vision of white, lawful and domestic Englishness is undisciplined when Sherlock Holmes again reaches out for the cocaine-bottle for reward. At the very end, Watson says:

"The division seems rather unfair," I remarked. "You have done all the work in this business. I get a wife out of it, Jones gets the credit, pray what remains for you?"

"For me," said Sherlock Holmes, "there still remains the cocaine-bottle."  
And he stretched his long white hand up for it. (180)

Watson emphasizes the reward he gets ("a wife") and the official police receives ("the credit") from the crime case, and by doing so tries to confirm the intimate tie between the marriage plot and the omniscient rhetoric of detective fiction in the matter of restoring the Englishness made of domestic family homes and state regulation. Yet, what Holmes gets as a reward is the

colonial product, the “cocaine-bottle,” which appeared at the very beginning of the novel; the cocaine in the first chapter shows that the white English detective’s high capacity for reasoning depends on a product imported from the West Indies. Just as the white skin dappled by cocaine shots visualizes the intrusion of the colonized into Englishness, the last scene in which Holmes’s “long white hand up for [the cocaine-bottle]” suggests that Englishness can never be disciplined as an entity separate from colonial encounters.

In this respect, the image of Englishness exemplified in the last scene merges the disrupting details of Jonathan Small’s adventures in colonies into metropolitan England, and no longer appears as disciplined by the gaze of surveillance. In the version of Englishness described in Jonathan Small’s story, Watson’s marriage plot and his narration interiorizing state-regulation are no longer at work. Instead, a vision of undisciplined Englishness, which exists in the dispersed realm of colonial encounters, comes to the front. Holmes’s and Watson’s gestures towards the original backbones of Englishness abruptly combine Jonathan Small’s colonial episodes with the narrative of the detective logic and the marriage plot. Yet this awkward combination does not exemplify the concept of Englishness as successfully as Watson’s perspective did earlier in the novel. Conan Doyle was considered “one of the great Victorian apologists of empire,” as attested by his later writings which celebrated and promoted the nation’s involvement in the Boer War and World War I.<sup>20</sup> *The Sign of Four* (1890), however, hints at Doyle’s ambivalence towards the empire in the initial stages of his career, and the narrative failure which he could not control enables the critique of the racialized Englishness.

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20) During the Boer War, Doyle worked as a doctor for the British Army. He wrote *The Great Boer War* (1900) and *The War in South Africa* (1900), which recorded or defended the righteousness of the war. Doyle also composed a pamphlet, *To Arms!* (1914) to encourage recruitment for World War I. See Thompson 66-68. The quotation is from page 68.

The Spring 2020 *Victorian Studies* special issue (“Undisciplining Victorian Studies”) has reinvigorated the racial stake in the field by creatively putting it in relation to Black, Postcolonial, Asian American, Latinx, or Indigenous studies. My article extends this interdisciplinary questioning into a conceptual one by reconsidering the cultural construct that was born out of the Victorian racial politics that marginalized non-white people and culture as criminal threats to the nation. Doyle’s second Sherlock Holmes novel reveals how Englishness is a product of conflating interactions between rather than protection against colonies that were believed to exist outside the purview of English national character which was constructed through the racialization of the colonial Other. As my analysis has shown, “undisciplining” might be understood as the act of reconsidering the racially constructed Victorian concept of Englishness through literary form. The novel’s alleged affiliation with the disciplinary power makes it possible to see the process of this (de)construction. The metropolitan city ferments this disorder in its structure.

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## Undisciplining Englishness:

Narratives of Colonial Encounter in Conan Doyle's *The Sign of Four***Abstract**

Ji Eun Lee

This article explores how Conan Doyle's *The Sign of Four* undisciplines Englishness—English national character constructed through the nation's racial politics from the Reform Act and beyond the New Imperialism of the late nineteenth century—by drawing upon the trendy Victorian studies' call for "undisciplining." I define "undisciplining" as an act of undermining the disciplinary racism sustained by novelistic form and examine how the novel *undisciplines* Englishness—i.e. places the nation's assumed isolated superiority in relation to unregulated colonial encounters negating racial hierarchies and criminality in narrative and urban space. Doyle portrays Englishness as a racial construct created for the purpose of clearing out a space for an artificially imagined sphere of the comfortable home secured from outside forces of colonial encounters. Episodes and characters imported from colonial India disturb the seemingly seamless narrative that incorporates them into England. I argue that the colonial elements in the novel—the British Indian Army, Jonathan Small, Indian jewelry, and Tonga—do not build toward the establishment of the superiority of Englishness, but instead reveal an unstableness and artificiality of that ideological construct. While Watson's first-person narration endorses a form of disciplinary power, other narrative flows dissemble the narrative components working within that frame so that they cannot fit into the logic of the definite omniscient closure, and thereby reveal an undisciplined vista of Englishness, interfused by colonial encounters.

► Key Words: Englishness, undisciplining, novel, colonial, London, Doyle

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