ABSTRACT

HENRY JEKYLL, SHERLOCK HOLMES, AND DORIAN GRAY: NARRATIVE POLITICS AND THE REPRESENTATION OF CHARACTER IN LATE VICTORIAN GOTHIC ROMANCE

By Benjamin Daniel O’Dell

This thesis explores the function of iconic literary characters in late-Victorian gothic romance as expressed through the contemporary debates they embody as narrative types. Chapter 1 examines the paradoxical position of the Victorian gentleman’s public identity through a reading of Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Chapter 2 analyzes the relationship between Sherlock Holmes’s position on the social periphery and the tale of imperial corruption he exposes in Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Sign of Four*. Chapter 3 discusses the dandy’s ambiguous moral state as a product of economic and cultural changes among wealthier residents in London’s West End that were connected to debates about their group’s role in relation to charity, consumerism, and culture. These findings suggest characters that are often read as personifying complex literary aspirations may also be approached productively as vessels that are capable of addressing difficult issues on innocuous terms.
HENRY JEKYLL, SHERLOCK HOLMES, AND DORIAN GRAY: NARRATIVE POLITICS AND THE REPRESENTATION OF CHARACTER IN LATE VICTORIAN GOTHIC ROMANCE

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DEDICATION

To my parents, for their guidance, Mike West, for the education, and William Lane, for the inspiration. I am truly grateful for all.
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Introduction: The Function of Character in Late-Victorian Gothic Romance

The doctor, the detective, and the dandy. I begin with these terms because they not only represent three iconic “professions” or social types in the Victorian fin de siècle but because they are synonymous with three prominent literary figures: Henry Jekyll, Sherlock Holmes, and Dorian Gray. Such characters abound in English writing during the final years of the nineteenth century. This is a thesis about their composition and the debates they allow literary narratives to explore. Throughout the chapters that follow, I argue that late-Victorian gothic romance presented the conditions for a shift in the conception of how character works. During this period, the creation of prominent literary personae came to rely less on the personality of their fictional identities and more on their ability to stand in for and elicit reactions to complex social, political, and economic debates. By this I do not mean that these characters are “flat” in the sense E.M. Forster proposes when he states in Aspects of the Novel (1927) that such characters are, in their purest form, “constructed round a single idea or quality.”¹ What I mean is rather that the specific manner in which these characters are composed has been directed in such a way so as to deny the evolution of emotional, intellectual, and moral traits in favor of a narrative approach that employs fictional identity as a location for the representation of important social questions. In the final decades of the nineteenth century, character, I suggest, provides a particularly important site for writers to construct difficult arguments. Examining fictional identities with an eye for their manner of composition may provide a useful framework for mapping the narrative politics that inform the relationship between late-Victorian gothic romance and the historical moment it seeks to depict.

I approach this study well aware that the critical reception of Robert Louis Stevenson’s Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1886), Arthur Conan Doyle’s The Sign of Four (1890), and Oscar Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891) is extensive. The body of scholarly writing pertaining to these novels not only suggests that they represent three of the most discussed works of English literature from the 1880s and 90s but confirms that they have proven extremely competent in their ability to engender widely varying and highly innovative methods.

of interpretation. I begin this study aware of this heritage, admiring of it, but wanting to approach these texts in a different way. The terms for current discussions of Victorian romance, gothic or otherwise, a genre that includes not only these novels but also work from Henry Rider Haggard, Bram Stoker, Rudyard Kipling, and Joseph Conrad, range from studies concentrating on the extremely local, which tackle the psychological and sexual impulses and fantasies that these narratives explore, to more global readings that generally locate each novel’s position within the larger discourses of gender, Empire, and class. In the first category, Elaine Showalter, Stephen Arata, and Rachel Bowlby have used the pathologization of literary identities to draw upon a connection between these texts and the individuating dilemmas that inform their production, employing the Gothic’s valorization of the individual to identify a common preoccupation with accompanying issues of cultural purity and health. In much the same way, the relation between fictional London and its historical counterpart in the second category has provided a theoretical basis for scholars such as Joseph McLaughlin and Simon Joyce to give shape and coherence to the landscapes upon which these narratives take place, uniting fictional structures with the Victorian public sphere to configure fin-de-siècle London as a space that is both physically and rhetorically uncontrollable in the alterations it produces between individuals, groups, and their environments.

The common ground between these approaches undoubtedly rests upon the assumption that these novels are not isolated works of popular fiction but in fact rich cultural documents that contain a profound interest in the prospects of nineteenth-century British identity as it responded to an extensive list of concerns pertaining to the subject of cultural degeneration and decline. However varied their individual approaches may appear, each of these studies remains committed to the assertion that the most relevant material relating to these texts may not emerge from the narratives themselves but rather from the dialogues they participate in just beyond the

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Their efforts have consequently sought to establish these novels within their historical milieu and, in so doing, recreate a sense of the conditions that have influenced their production. Hence, in addition to making use of contemporary studies such as Max Nordau’s *Degeneration* (1892), Cesare Lombroso’s *L’Homme Criminel* (1895), and Havelock Ellis and John Addington Symonds’ *Sexual Inversion* (1897) as well as highly informative cultural histories including Judith Walkowitz’s *City of Dreadful Delight* (1992), Patrick Brantlinger’s *Dark Vanishings* (2003), and Seth Koven’s *Slumming* (2004), these scholars have engaged recent trends in critical theory to broaden the possibilities for interpretation, complicating popular assumptions of what these novels mean as they forge connections between late-Victorian romance and important contemporary trends such as the realignment of the imperial project, the spread of urban poverty, and the development of gay identity. As a collected whole, their work has, to no small degree, influenced the canon of Victorian studies thoroughly and completely.

In advancing further discussion of these three particular texts by Stevenson, Conan Doyle, and Wilde, my objective is, of course, neither to contest nor denigrate the merit of previous studies, as they represent the foundation from which my scholarship proceeds. Instead, I turn my attention to the same questions that have inspired those who have written before me in hopes that I might offer a perspective of some additional insight that will further expand the scope of critical debate. Specifically, then, this thesis begins with the assumption, widely reflected in current studies, that an enduring problem affecting the interpretation of late-Victorian gothic romance hinges upon the aesthetic distance that exists between these novels and their counterparts in the material realm; that is, that gothic fiction presents the construction of a world that is, in David Punter’s words, essentially “more ‘real’ than reality itself” (62). There is, it would appear, no theoretical framework that can fully address the issues that these narratives

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raise without first acknowledging their status as aesthetic objects. Having identified the primacy of fictional identities in these texts, I suggest that an emphasis on character may offer an opportunity to approach their interpretation in a different way.

The primary assertion of this thesis is that the central characters in late-Victorian gothic romance reveal a particularly complex set of narrative dynamics wherein fictional identities do not undertake any great change or display signs of psychological depth but function primarily as vessels that call into question social relations, particularly as they relate to economic class. This is not the same as suggesting that their position is allegorical. What it suggests is rather that each of these novels employs fictional identity in such a way so as to participate in contemporary discussions that cannot otherwise be so easily voiced. As we shall see, the debates these narratives take part in are historically specific and defy reduction to a single word or phrase. In thus calling for a renewed investigation of how character works, it is my intention to briefly pause and comment on the manner in which they allow us to expand our understanding of what these texts are about. For if characters, as I suggest, are less important for their position as fictional personalities that fascinate and entertain and more for their role as a critical vehicle for authors of late-Victorian gothic romance to communicate difficult concepts to their readers, it is important to consider how this feature modifies perceptions of the cultural work these narratives undertake.

The answer to this question will, of course, be revealed differently for each novel through an extended discussion of the strategies these authors implement in the construction of their texts. Turning, then, to a more precise breakdown of the chapters that lie ahead, I would like to briefly outline the analysis that follows. This thesis is divided into three major chapters, each focusing on one of the aforementioned characters with a short conclusion at the end. Chapter One explores the paradoxical position of the Victorian gentleman’s public identity through a reading of *Jekyll and Hyde*. Beginning with a short discussion of Stevenson’s reaction to John Singer Sargent’s *Portrait of Robert Louis Stevenson and His Wife Fanny* (1885), it establishes the author’s ambivalent relationship to questions of social form before moving on to a discussion of how his novel satirizes the rhetorical conventions of the professional class. The public roots of privacy, the politics of transgression, and the performance of class identity provide the immediate context for my interpretation of the novel as a crisis in cultural authority for Victorian
men of means. The main focus in this chapter is on how Stevenson’s representation of Jekyll as a figure who is composed through a diverse collection of narratives and reports undermines the potential for his character to exist as anything but an emblematic representation of class identity that contains little power on his own. Jekyll’s character emerges through this reading not merely as a product of psychological splitting but as a social construct whose appearance is subject to endless transformation and change. Because Jekyll’s identity contains no essence on its own, and because his character has ceased to pursue the important work of class performance, his public image takes on radically distorted shapes and connotations as it circulates in the city’s space of justification.

From a crisis of publicity in *Jekyll and Hyde*, the importance of Sherlock Holmes’s status as the world’s only “unofficial consulting detective” is discussed in Chapter Two. Unlike Henry Jekyll or Dorian Gray, Holmes’s position as a recurring character is essential to his composition in *The Sign of Four*. This chapter analyzes the performative aspects of the Sherlock Holmes canon by exploring the construction of narrative distance as it is presented through Watson’s first-person accounts. I discuss two scenes where Baker Street’s interior provides a foundation for the novel’s action: one in which Holmes defends his cocaine use before Watson in the introduction and another where he compels Jonathan Small, a disgruntled veteran of the East India Company who has just been apprehended for murder and theft, to describe systemic corruption in the British Empire in the conclusion. Both passages locate the source of Holmes’s detective power in his capacity to negotiate social space, providing an appropriate context for a reconsideration of the detective’s identity. By establishing himself on the social periphery as one who is capable of thinking beyond the discursive structures of the dominant culture, Holmes calls attention to the ideological contradictions at the heart of English national identity, combining the interlocking narratives of drug addiction, Empire, and class to turn responsibility for the nation’s crimes back upon the social conditions that allow deplorable behavior to occur. My interpretation suggests that Holmes’s alterity provides the basis for a more productive kind of reform in which the novel does not offer readers a clear set of values or standards upon which to model their lives but rather a figure whose unique ethics dismantles social and geographic distinctions that were previously thought to exist. As Holmes moves inward from his position on the fringe, he constructs a tale of imperial corruption that forces the nation to account for its sins.
Finally, then, the last chapter on *The Picture of Dorian Gray* brings together the key assertions of this thesis to address the creation of fictional identity as a form of consumption. With the creation of Dorian Gray, Wilde pays tribute to how character is constructed to play out its social issues, employing his novel as a representative example of the artistic method I find common to each of these texts. Dorian, a figure who blends the dandy’s pretension with the ineffectualness of the urban philanthropist, reveals the power of artistic representations to stand in for the social issues they convey while, at the same time, displaying no indication of personality on his own. The focus of this chapter centers upon how Wilde depicts Dorian as a disengaged figure when he interacts with the poor, and explores the implications behind the notion that his character’s attraction to charity, romance, and goodwill is always framed as a form of consumption. In positioning the novel against historical trends related to Wilde’s writing in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” (1891), an essay composed in response to a political speech given by George Bernard Shaw, the motivations for Dorian’s behavior are shown to be at least partially the product of economic and cultural changes among wealthier residents in London’s West End that were connected to debates about their group’s role in relation to charity, consumerism, and culture. This chapter draws from these concerns to explore how the novel represents cross-class relations as a form of spectatorship, transforming the city into a land of estrangement where illusion dominates as experience is commodified for those who can afford the price of purchase. It suggests that the effect of this process on Wilde’s representation of Dorian entails an evacuation of his character’s personality that renders his identity particularly susceptible to the rules of the marketplace. Dorian’s portrait thus appears as a reminder of the way in which material conditions are never divorced from consumer fantasies. It stands as a mirror to his character’s soul and an ironic metaphor for the method of consumption that structures his relationship to the world.

These chapters are followed by a short afterword that reflects on the implications of this study, designed to synthesize the core themes of this project and propose the terms for future work. Character, I suggest, has always been recognized as an important feature in the interpretation of late-Victorian gothic romance. But the substance of fictional identities in these novels is far more complex than has traditionally been assumed. In reading the composition of three of England’s most iconic literary figures from the *fin de siècle* as the material of
contemporary debate, I offer an approach that focuses on the techniques deployed in establishing literary narratives as representations that reflect, influence, and embody a range of contemporary dynamics. Characters are neither functions of their text nor political symbols but active cultural forms that respond to a wide range of historical considerations. To explore the composition of their identities is thus to explore the various ways in which ethical and material concerns manifest themselves in fiction. It is to identify a narrative “type” and question the substance that lies beneath.
Chapter One: Incidents and Letters, A Crisis of Publicity in Robert Louis Stevenson’s
Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde

One evening in the middle of 1885, several months before he began work on his most famous novel, The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Robert Louis Stevenson and his wife Fanny hosted the celebrated portrait artist and landscape painter John Singer Sargent at their Bournemouth home, on the south coast of England. The trio had met the previous year at the request of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Fairchild of Boston, Massachusetts, representatives of a growing legion of Stevenson’s fans who had commissioned Sargent in the production of a series of portraits designed to capture the author at home. The first, now apparently discarded, was widely recognized as a failure by all parties involved, prompting Sargent’s return to the Stevenson residence the following year in an effort to draft a more fitting representation. But views on his second attempt, the product of many months of sketches and revision, remained divided. For her part, Fanny Stevenson continued to express her frustration with the image, complaining to Sargent that “I am but a cipher under the shadow” in reference to her rather bizarre position behind an Eastern veil on the portrait’s right-hand side. In contrast, her husband—Sargent’s principal subject—was strangely enchanted with the piece, suggesting his growing preoccupation with contemporary philosophies of self-representation and public form.

Reflecting on Sargent’s portrait in a letter to Will H. Low, Stevenson announced his fascination as such:

6 Interestingly, despite the failure of the first portrait, Sargent appears to have made a significant impression upon Stevenson and his wife. Of the first portrait, Stevenson wrote “he represents me as a weird, very pretty, large-eyed, chicken-boned, slightly contorted poet. He is not pleased; wants to do me again in several positions; walking about and talking is his main notion. We both lost our hearts to him: a person with a kind of exhibition manner and English accent, who proves on examination, simple, bashful, honest, enthusiastic and rude with a perfect (but quite inoffensive) English rudeness. Pour comble, he gives himself out to be American.” Similarly, subsequent references refer to the couple’s fondness for the young painter, recommending his work to friends with the telling admission: “We liked him immensely.” The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson, 8 vols., ed. Bradford A. Booth and Ernest Mehew (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) 5: 50-51, 52.
7 Quoted in Bell 163.
Sargent was down again and painted a portrait of me walking about in my own dining room, in my own velveteen jacket and twisting, as I go my own moustache; at one corner a glimpse of my wife in an Indian dress and seated in a chair that was once my grandfather’s, but since some months goes by the name of Henry James’s for it was there the novelist loved to sit—adds a touch of poesy and comicality. It is, I think, excellent; but is too eccentric to be exhibited. I am at one extreme corner; my wife, in this wild dress and looking like a ghost, is at the extreme other end; between us an open door exhibits my palatial entrance hall and a part of my respected staircase. All this is touched in lovely, with that witty touch of Sargent’s; but of course it looks dam queer as a whole. (Letters 5: 137 italics mine)

Stevenson’s comments in this passage are bemused. He turns away from the iconic status he was rapidly coming to assume, thanks to the success of New Arabian Nights (1877-1880) and Treasure Island (1883), and reconstitutes the glamour of public life as an absurdity—something to be mocked and derided as unnatural. But in his effort to register the reality of his public identity as comic, Stevenson’s awe for Sargent’s recreation of his home’s interior—his “own” dining room, jacket, moustache, and wife—also betrays a distinct wariness of the risks of the appropriation of his identity in the public sphere.

Portraiture has often paired its subjects with objects from their personal lives in an attempt to convey a more complete knowledge of their identities to the viewer. As an artistic mode of expression primarily interested in fashioning a public identity for its subject, the portrait depends upon its ability to ground the viewer’s perspective within a given room or setting. The identification of an individual within a specific location—and the traditions and memories attached to that location—is essential in the construction of her or his identity through the qualities and associations it brings to the reception of the artistic work. In this sense, the portrait is a fundamentally dialogic medium, providing an arena for the exchange of meaning through the interaction of diverse objects across a canvas’s surface. Yet the portrait is, like all aesthetic objects, an expressive form that can be easily subverted when the continuity of its features is cut short, a characteristic that, when illuminated, threatens to raise significant questions about the authenticity of its content and draw attention to its motivations. When closely examined, the
portrait must inevitably display self-consciousness for itself and provide the instrumentation necessary to evaluate its subjects in turn.

The Portrait of Robert Louis Stevenson and His Wife Fanny depicts a pale thin man hesitantly moving across the dining room floor, his body set off on the left-hand side of the frame and his posture held in a state of mild apprehension. It is an image that has no central

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Las Vegas Casino owner Stephen A. Wynn and his wife, Elaine, currently house the The Portrait of Robert Louis Stevenson and His Wife in their private collection. The portrait was purchased for $8.8 million at a Sotheby’s auction in 2004, setting a record for the most expensive price paid for a piece of nineteenth-century American painting that was only recently broken in May 2008 with the sale of Thomas Moran’s landscape “Green River of Wyoming” for $17.73 million. See Lawrence Van Gelder. “Records Broken at Christie’s Auction.” New York Times. 22 May. 2008, night final ed.: E2.
focus but that shocks its viewers instead, pulling their eyes in multiple directions at once as part of a desperate search for meaning. Glancing back over his shoulder, Stevenson does not seem to accord with the image of the proud, robust man found in so many pictures of the bourgeoisie. He is a figure who appears uncertain of his body and, consequently, stands awkwardly before the viewer as if with something to conceal. If portraiture seeks to concentrate the complexities of an entire life into a series of connected images so as to present an accurate impression of its subject to an artistic public, Sargent’s decision to join Stevenson with the gothic connotations attached to the exposed stairwell, the blood-red interior, and the haunting presence of his wife, Fanny, seems deliberately designed to undermine the medium’s fidelity to artistic realism and expose the artificiality of the form. Precariously poised in the staging area between fact and fiction, Stevenson emerges through Sargent’s portrait not as a historical figure but as an idealized image living in an imaginary world. Sargent’s portrait is thus less important as an elucidation of the author’s identity and more as an elaboration of myth. From Stevenson’s correspondence with Low, we can infer that the production of that myth—and the sordid implications it posed—was, for him, a source of irony and wit. He identifies his interest in the portrait as an object of private consumption that parodies his life and alludes to its value as an engaging topic of conversation for his expansive circle of bohemian friends. It is an important aberration from the quiet pleasures of his daily life, an enigmatic portrayal of what others take him to be, and an uncanny expression of the postures and gestures we all assume, a composition that is thoroughly aware of how we create the illusion of depth in what could otherwise be viewed as a hollow and empty form.

Representations such as Sargent’s—previously employed by the upper classes as a source of status and distinction but redeployed as sources of satire and generic change—flourish throughout the nineteenth century, calling attention to the tactics that go into the process of identity production. Stevenson could feel comfortable in his appreciation of Sargent’s portrait because, when he penned his letter to Low, he wrote as an outsider to the rules governing the proprieties of the nation’s elite. A Scottish bohemian whose penchant for artistic circles precluded his presence in high society, the sardonic overtones that animate his letter also illustrate the distinctions that separate his life from the dominant narratives of Empire and class. Even if one grants, as Stephen Arata allows, that the 1880s were “a period of crisis and
transition” for the author—his health and professional ambitions forced him to return to the luxury of the privileged upbringing he had previously eschewed as the son of the famed lighthouse designer Thomas Stevenson—the persistent cynicism in his letter to Low implies that Stevenson would maintain his opposition to polite society whenever possible, laughing off its insidious demands (Fictions 45). His renunciation of etiquette proceeds from a position of personal autonomy gained through his individual distance from the structures of power that impact so many of his peers. Embodying a form of masculinity for which there was no appropriate signifier, this portrait enables us to examine a peculiar instance of misrecognition and a monstrous alteration to form in its blending of elements. But if we are to move beyond Stevenson’s privileged position on the social periphery and more effectively chart his portrait’s participation in a reevaluation of the late-Victorian project of subject fashioning, a reevaluation that redrew the boundaries between public and private and so effectively challenged the meaning of class, we must turn from the visual arts to a text that more fully engages the discourses of gentlemanly culture. In other words, we must turn to The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

The purpose of this chapter is to question two established cultural assumptions about Victorian public image for members of the professional class: first, that Victorian male elites had unique and unrestricted access to the tools of cultural production; and, second, that they resided in isolated communities that dominated the broader social sphere. In the paragraphs that follow, I attempt to remove Jekyll and Hyde from its comfortable position as a cultural myth outlining the internal tension between what Henry James first called the “difficulty of being good and the brutishness of being bad” and reconstitute it as a satirical text deeply amused with the production of the professional class through a set of self-defeating and debilitating performative tropes.9 Recent interpretations of Jekyll and Hyde have frequently acknowledged the importance of social and historical context to the novel’s reception, directing readers towards contemporary issues relating to domestic service, criminality, and the rhetoric of addiction in an attempt to advance debate beyond earlier discussions of gendered identities and narrative form.10 Yet few

10 The history of Jekyll & Hyde criticism is notoriously long. Early discussions of the novel from fellow authors such as Henry James and Vladimir Nabokov frequently overlooked
have commented on the novel’s preoccupation with public image and the circulation of texts, provoking continued uncertainty as to exactly how Jekyll’s identity matters and to whom.

In setting up Jekyll’s character as an assemblage of narratives and reports, I argue that Stevenson identifies the problem of the doctor’s social transgressions primarily with their reception in the public sphere. In so doing, he redeployed the rhetorical conventions of the professional class to initiate the downfall of one of its most privileged members. If public image centers upon the conscious act of display, Stevenson implies that it is just as dependent upon the filtering of impressions that takes place at the point of reception. What becomes scandalous in *Jekyll and Hyde* is thus not a particular action or being but a confusion of signs and a failed system of exchange. Hopelessly empty and surprisingly flat, Jekyll and Hyde emerge through this process to form the material of contemporary debate. They are a symbol of divided identities, a testament to modern acts of performativity, and a confirmation of shifting notions of cultural authority, iconic figures that gesture beyond themselves to assume a status that is larger than life.

**Characterizing the City**

Much as portraiture supplies a set of conventions that can be easily upset and cut short, the projection of class identity is subject to an endless potential for variation and reform. It is tempting to suggest that the late-nineteenth-century ideal of the Victorian gentleman met its decline as a result of political unrest, that the growing socialist movement that began in the 1870s, an extension of the political thought of William Morris and the socialist pursuits of John Ruskin and the liberal reforms of William Gladstone, was able to tarnish the image of economic powers; and that England’s class system maintained itself only through the incorporation of dissent as it reinforced its ranks to weather the social upheaval that spans the 1880s, eventually the novel’s content to center discussions on its style, structure, and tone. Their fidelity to aesthetics was drastically reversed, however, when Showalter drew attention to the novel’s shadows to suggest the existence of a latent homosexual subtext in the early 1990s. From there, cultural history has emerged to become the central preoccupation for most interpretations of the novel. Among notable recent essays of this kind, Marta Bryk and Jean Fernandez discuss the importance of the domestic economy, Lisa Butler and Thomas L. Reed, Jr. consider questions of alcohol and addiction, and Arata and Brantlinger explore the importance of criminology and contemporary theories of atavism.
culminating with the deaths of three workers and injuries of hundreds more at the Trafalgar Square Riots of 1887. Images of bourgeois corruption were a common staple of late-Victorian public discourse, assuming prominence not merely in the pamphlets and speeches commonly found in radical activity, but in popular novels such as Anthony Trollope’s *The Way We Live Now* (1875) and the daily writing of W.T. Stead for the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Patrick Brantlinger, in his study of mass literacy, has argued that the late-Victorian anxiety about increasing access to the tools of cultural production for women and members of the working class was a common preoccupation for Victorian men of means. As a forerunner to and agent of social change, the proliferation of written text by cultural others implied a proliferation of criticism, confirming the notion that the professional class could not brand itself an authority without also allowing rival parties to articulate their belief that the nation’s most privileged men had become agents of moral and economic corruption. The distribution of intellectual capital to marginalized groups meant that the narratives of bourgeois identity set forth by the professional class could be met with opposition from other counterpublics, that those publics would have an opportunity to reinscribe class identity on their own terms, and that an alteration to social relations could then occur as their voices melded together in the production of new modes of being.

Stevenson’s recognition of the mutability of class identities reflects a heightened awareness of the social transformations at work in late-Victorian England that give shape and meaning to the process of self-representation. His decision to place *Jekyll and Hyde* in London establishes the city as a key character, perhaps the most important character in the novel. Most interpretations of English history acknowledge that the late-Victorian period marked a high point in the development of the individual as a site of political importance. The triumph of personal privacy as an organizing principle for post-Enlightenment, western European societies was not

merely a response to technological advancement in the regulation of populations and the production and distribution of visual and print media, but of the increased concentration of diverse populations in urban centers as well. As metropolitan space altered to accommodate contemporary social actors, thanks to the rise of the New Woman and a steady influx of migration from the English countryside, the European continent, and the outposts of Empire, the course of public interactions took on a renewed sense of significance as London’s streets became reconstituted as “contact zones” for the clash of disparate groups in shifting relations of domination and subordination.\textsuperscript{14} It was not that any one group “controlled” these locations but that English citizens, operating within diverse networks of regulated and unregulated communities, used their position to modify the public commons and engage each other in significant ways.\textsuperscript{15} Their encounters—of commerce, language, sexuality, and desire—reside at the heart of Stevenson’s novel, laying the groundwork for significant battles of public form.

To enter \textit{Jekyll and Hyde} is to become a part of London. It is to observe the city’s streets and witness the development of new forms of social conduct. It is not merely to discover the vast accumulation of landmarks and buildings that have overtaken the urban landscape but to identify the points of interaction that transpire each day between widely dissimilar but otherwise entangled social groups. To enter the novel is, most certainly, to enter public space. Carefully woven throughout Stevenson’s representation of the city is a vast network of thoroughfares and side streets that serve to link residents together according to various hierarchies structured along the lines of race, gender, and class. Further stitched into the fabric of these routes is a latent anxiety about identity, a desperate longing for dignity, and an unmitigated fear of the cultural other that resides within the professional class. It is often noted that the gothic metropolis described in \textit{Jekyll and Hyde} portends the turn of late-Victorian fiction towards a romantic revival and the development of mystery as a modern genre for English writers. Substantially less attention, however, has been given to the novel’s interest in another tradition: the

\textsuperscript{14} In this sense, Stevenson’s concept of the city is very similar to the “contact zones” Mary Louis Pratt describes in \textit{Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation} (New York: Routledge, 1992).

carnivalesque. But allow me to posit a hypothesis: Stevenson’s London is not merely an architectural wonder of labyrinthine alleyways and indistinguishable homes; it is a pulsating, diverse life-system with a creative potential all its own. Just beyond the side entrance to Jekyll’s home—on a thoroughfare that is politely referred to as “quiet” by some in the neighborhood—throng of people take part in a “thriving trade” each day, buying, selling, and modifying their relationships to one another in a collective experience of economic and cultural exchange. Within their ranks, Stevenson observes tramps lined up outside the building’s storefronts, children skirting in and out of alleyways, and—in surprising contrast to most critical speculation—women, not just as producers and consumers, but in the “coquetry” displayed in newly-altered storefronts that alludes to the move by shopkeepers to invest their profits on visual advertisements and attractions featuring female models and spokespersons (*Jekyll* 8).

All of these features contribute to the impression of the city as a site of uncertainty where identities can be acknowledged, questioned, and transformed. They violate our notion of cultural authority through the sheer diversity of their presence, highlighting the gestures and movements that produce that unpredictable spectacle which we call urban life. In these passages, London is not the imagined community first envisioned by national officials and state-sponsored texts but

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16 In the introduction to *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1968), Mikhail Bakhtin examines the evolution of folk culture in European history. There he argues that the discourse surrounding this practice provided “A boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations opposed [to] the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture” (4). Through *ritual spectacles*, *comic verbal compositions*, and *billingsgates*, he charts the development of the carnival spirit, a form of representation that hovers between the ideal and the real, calling attention to the world without claiming to represent actual events (8). Drawing on Bakhtin’s argument to revise his ideas, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White’s *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986) have more recently asserted that the carnivalesque is in fact a mere instance in a wider framework of cultural practice, suggesting that “If we treat the carnivalesque as an instance of a wider phenomenon of transgression we move beyond Bakhtin’s troublesome *folkloric* approach to a political anthropology of *binary extremism* in class society” and develop a better picture of how transgression works as a form of social classification (23).


an organic, unrestrained theater of the masses that can respond to and alter official notions of public and private truth.\textsuperscript{19} Central to Stevenson’s conception of the metropolis is the notion that it is \textit{unruly}—that it enacts its own patterns and speaks its own languages, modifying official knowledge through the various systems of exchange that take place across sidewalks, newspapers, and public speech. Both the diversity of relationships inside the city and the contingency of cultural authority among its social actors undermine any notion of London as an orderly, well-regulated space. For neither the sporadic appearance of law enforcement following the death of Sir Danvers Carew nor the hint of gentrification in and around Jekyll’s home has allowed for the successful interpellation of individual citizens as static, recognizable beings. Instead, we are led to believe that the sheer volume of traffic that moves across the urban landscape each day distorts the accepted harbingers of self-representation, configuring social power on egalitarian terms to render conventional methods of maintaining distinction obsolete.

In other words, if London represents the central site of class destabilization, what is being enacted in London is the destabilization of the Victorian gentleman. As part of the aestheticizing process, Stevenson’s strategies of representation reinforce the manifest themes of carnival satire by challenging readers in their deliberations on the position of cultural authority vis-à-vis the interrelated issue of narrative form. By adapting the carnival spirit from a medieval celebration to a more general framework for indexing the daily politics of the urban, a framework similar to the theoretical model Peter Stallybrass and Allon White describe in \textit{The Politics and Poetics of Transgression}, Stevenson uses his unique blend of economic and national identities to imply that while the city is a site of gross economic disparities and alienation, it has also become a great leveling force on the matter of personal dignity and respect. Public interaction is always presented as a radical free agent in Stevenson’s novel. It attaches to city streets with surprising viscosity and afflicts those whose status is less than secure. Dr. Jekyll, the typical gentleman, finds himself subject to an involuntary transformation in Regent’s Park, for example, where he is not only mocked by a hansom driver who “could not conceal his mirth” but isolated by innkeepers who stand “quailing before his eye” as he denigrates the respectability of their establishment (\textit{Jekyll} 59). Here the doctor’s appearance is no longer subject only to the chemical

\textsuperscript{19} See Benedict Anderson, \textit{Imagined Communities} (New York: Verso, 1991). There Anderson famously argues that communities must be created through the production of text.
effects of the transforming draught but also to a humiliating psychological reaction that
overwhelms his person as he pines for a form of respectability he can no longer convincingly
hold. It is not merely that he has lapsed into a life of degeneracy but that his relationship to
others has become fundamentally skewed.

The fact that Jekyll cannot isolate the difference between the titles he claims and the
person that he sees in himself initiates his decline. But at all points, Stevenson implies that the
estrangement between body and mind is never any more important than the parallel movement
between body and city, for Jekyll’s monstrosity is always collectively exchanged—through
gestures, expressions, and the formal recognition of a public self:

I sat in the sun on a bench; the animal within me licking the chops of memory; the
spiritual side a little drowsed, promising subsequent penitence, but not yet moved
to begin. After all, I reflected, I was like my neighbours; and then I smiled,
comparing myself with other men, comparing my active goodwill with the lazy
cruelty of their neglect. And at the very moment of that vainglorious thought, a
qualm came over me, a horrid nausea and the most deadly shuddering. These
passed away, and left me faint; and then as in its turn the faintness subsided, I
began to be aware of a change in the temper of my thoughts, a greater boldness, a
contempt of danger, a solution of the bonds of obligation. I looked down; my
clothes hung formlessly on my shrunken limbs; the hand that lay on my knee was
corded and hairy. I was once more Edward Hyde. (Jekyll 58)

In this passage, the city catches Jekyll off guard. He loses control of his body and mind. And
reflecting on the uncertainty of what he has become, he observes how easily he can be
refashioned on radically different terms. Of course, to say that the professional class suffered
disproportionately from the theatricality of public life is, if not a gross overstatement, largely
beside the point. But it is less important to think comparatively here than to remember that the
late-nineteenth-century cultural landscape required scrupulous attention to form. The mask of
the Victorian gentleman, as James Eli Adams notes in his exhaustive study of nineteenth-century
masculinity, was a basic component in the elevation of the gentleman’s status above his
contemporaries. Confronted with a public social sphere too vast to be controlled, the gentleman used his isolation as a structuring tool to generate power and distinction. If public knowledge of the lower orders was absolute and could be found through the presentation of sanctioned and unsanctioned information evinced in the form of statistical data, union protests, and investigative journalism, the gentleman recognized that the assurance of an upper-class identity necessarily entailed some form of privacy if not secrecy. And if the discursive representation of poverty depended on tropes of exposure and vulgarity, the gentleman understood that, by contrast, maintaining the appearances of affluence would demand persistent control and restraint.

Making use of his access to institutional power through privileged associations to the official tools of cultural production in the medical, educational, political, artistic, and military fields, the Victorian gentleman paired his professional connections with others to confirm his place at the top of contemporary social hierarchies. But his power was not absolute, for while the gentleman could use his status to gain access to the centers of cultural production where he wielded considerable influence, that influence mattered little when it came time to defend his position at the basic level of the streets. As Adams notes in his study, at a certain point, the logic of a selfhood that can only be displayed through the practice of self-repression becomes extremely paradoxical, generating a crisis in representation for social performers who can no longer act. When men of the professional class fail to actively assert their dominance over the cultural landscape and, instead, turn inward to the isolation of secret societies and fraternal organizations, of private studies and their homes, the mask of the Victorian gentleman threatens to become the mask of shame.

Consider then, once more, Hyde’s experience at the inn as he waits for a meeting with Dr. Lanyon, who has retrieved the “solution” for Jekyll’s involuntary transformation in the park:

Thenceforward, he sat all day over the fire in the private room, gnawing his nails; there he dined, sitting alone with his fears, the waiter visibly quailing before his eye; and thence, when the night was fully come, he set forth in the corner of a closed cab, and was driven to and fro about the streets of the city. He, I say—I

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cannot say, I. That child of Hell had nothing human; nothing lived in him but fear and hatred. And when at last, thinking the driver had begun to grow suspicious, he discharged the cab and ventured on foot, attired in his misfitting clothes, an object marked out for observation, in the midst of the nocturnal passengers, these two base passions raged within him like a tempest. He walked fast, hunted by his fears, chattering to himself, skulking through the less frequented thoroughfares, counting the minutes that still divided him from midnight. Once a woman spoke to him, offering, I think, a box of lights. He smote her in the face, and she fled.

(Jekyll 59)

Between Hyde’s compulsive habits and the conditions that foment their appearance, Jekyll’s violent rampage through London reveals itself not as a source of agency so much as a desperate attempt to deny what he has become. For if the discipline of the aspiring gentleman depends upon a fundamentally consistent strategy of self-representation, Stevenson implies that Jekyll’s failure to maintain appearances sets forth a stunning shift in cultural authority that challenges English readers to address the flawed logic of an ideology that views economic standing as a metonym for moral superiority. By insinuating that Hyde is as uncomfortable among his peers as on the street, Stevenson asserts that there is no identifiable space that can alleviate his pain. The disruption caused by Hyde thus becomes inescapable; Jekyll fails because he purports to be something he is not. But as “the very pink of the proprieties” and a representative of his class, it seems fruitful to look further at the ways in which his identity—understood primarily through his profession and his class—can be interpreted through the discourse conventions that drive the sociological relationships between the various members of urban culture and explore how those relationships initiate his decline (Jekyll 10). For as part of the gothic landscape in which Stevenson immerses the late-Victorian professional class, the conditions that allow Hyde to run madly through the streets provide a central link in our understanding of the unification between aesthetics and cultural history.

First, let us consider Jekyll. Stevenson’s representation of his character as a physician is significant not merely because it implies a connection to the health of the nation but also because it points towards the institutional structures responsible for the production of national health. By portraying Jekyll as a hypocritical healer who brings salvation to the city by day and torments its
avenues by night, he not only anticipates the narratives that would accompany the Jack the Ripper scandal in London’s newspapers a mere two years later in 1888, but combines a contemporary interest in social reform with a reevaluation of the narratives of class.  

Representations of the benevolent gentleman came to prominence in the late nineteenth century thanks in part to a turn amongst Victorian men towards the growing project of philanthropy, a movement that assumed heightened importance for Londoners following James Greenwood’s 1866 description of “A Night in a Workhouse” for the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Operating through charitable giving and social organizations such as the Salvation Army, the Oxford House, and Toynbee Hall, the gentleman’s altruistic pursuits came to be understood through the social relations Matthew Arnold described in *Culture and Anarchy* (1867-68), with the elite carrying valuable cultural resources to the masses in carefully monitored systems of social exchange. The Victorian gentleman held that the presence of gross poverty and suffering among the nation’s poor confirmed his responsibility to the masses. With the institution of a common bond between the classes through monetary, cultural, and spiritual patronage, he attempted to raise the character of the national culture and quell the grievances of radical activists frustrated with the structures of inequality they found endemic to modern life.

But speculation as to the efficacy of philanthropy was a problem from the very beginning. Because charitable organizations were almost always connected to powerful social groups such as the university or the church, dissenting English citizens could not avoid their skepticism for the motives that drove their members to action. Rather than accept the philanthropic model as a panacea for the economic hardships that so afflicted the poor, their apprehension at piecemeal reforms marked a turn toward heightened criticism for the policies of the nation’s elite. It is helpful to view Jekyll, who “had always been known for charities,” as, at least in part, a symbol for the growing suspicion directed at members of the professional class, for the consistent allusions to his status as “one of your fellows who do what they call good” presents a number of obligations that his character consistently fails to meet (*Jekyll* 10, 29). The transformation that Jekyll endures in Regent’s Park is then, in this sense, not merely a reaction to his fear of retaliation for the murder of Sir Danvers Carew—what should be the primary source

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21 See Walkowitz, *City* 211.
22 For more on Greenwood’s series and the debates they inspired, see Koven, *Slumming* 25-88.
of his shame—but an immediate response to the “goodwill” he claims to assert in his efforts to wash the average citizen of their “lazy neglect” (Jekyll 58). That Jekyll cannot claim this position without self-questioning, and that the point of that self-questioning must occur in the public sphere, confirms the location at which the assurance of his position begins to collapse.

Contemporary sociology has consistently shown that the city is the space of justification for disparate social groups. We are often told that modernity has entailed the displacement of individuals to removed corners of society, where their interaction with rival cultures has become preconfigured and managed for risk. But it is not merely the case that spatial politics have been reworked in such a way so as to elide connections between rich and poor, relocating the structures of power to a privileged vantage point on the social horizon where they will be protected from external threats. For individuals—regardless of their standing—can always find select moments where they can “talk back” to the systems responsible for the conditions that determine their lives. The engineering process of social relations never takes place in isolation and, what’s more, it is never entirely complete. It is an ongoing process that demands not only a localized presence but an active system of cultural exchange. Whether or not groups ever engage directly with one another in conflict or conversation, they interact through their fidelity to a core set of values that can be either endorsed or repealed. When groups have no justification for what they believe, or when an inordinate amount of attention is projected in their direction, a contest for power can then ensue.

In Jekyll and Hyde, that contest forms the basic premise of the text. Despite the recognition of Stevenson’s subject as “Henry Jekyll, M.D., D.C.L., L.L.D., F.R.S., & c.” in the opening reference to his will, the transformation he endures—from “a large, well-made, smooth-faced man of fifty, with something of a slyish cast perhaps, but every mark of capacity and kindness” to a character who is “pale and dwarfish” and gives the “an impression of deformity

23 As an outgrowth of Pierre Bourdieu’s theories, the most relevant of which here can perhaps be found in Masculine Dominations (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), the concept of justification can be tracked through more recent studies of critical sociology, particularly in the works of Luc Boltanski. See, especially, The New Spirit of Capitalism (New York: Verso, 2007) and “The Sociology of Critical Capacity,” European Journal of Social Theory 2: 3 (1999): 359-377, which extend Bourdieu’s argument that conflict is primarily a point of tension that emerges within groups to the points of interaction that take place as groups realign themselves along one another by proxy.
without any nameable malformation”—provides the foundation for the novel’s action, rewriting cultural authority through a physical transformation that, as I will continue to suggest, is irrevocably and explicitly connected to the reception of the Victorian gentleman in the public realm (Jekyll 13, 17, 19). Stevenson implies that Jekyll is never any one thing but rather the product of what other people choose to believe. The source of his character’s significance thus rests not in an identifiable interior essence—the first signs of which do not appear until his closing narrative emerges in the final pages and which, in many ways, allow his character to remain ambiguous, conflicted, and confused—so much as the topics and debates he allows Stevenson to broach. In situating the Victorian gentleman at the point at which exclusionary identities must defend themselves in the public realm and at which the city composes itself around the acceptance and rejection of his character, Stevenson created a transparent figure that could demystify the concentration of power in a tenuous and uncertain age. Removed from our direct observation, Jekyll and Hyde flee from the page as iconic, prefabricated forms that are already ironically flat—a convention that was particularly common to writers of the 1880s and 90s. For as I will attest throughout the course of this thesis, the return to the socially marginalized and psychologically vacant character of eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century fiction formed a large part of the romantic revival in the Victorian fin de siècle, providing the aesthetic mechanisms for authors to enter debate in front of a mass audience in a way that complicated the relationship between life and art.

Thus far I have argued that Stevenson’s attempts to render the Victorian city gothic and so alter its political tone have cast urban space as a land of uncertainty that threatens to decimate formal representations of cultural authority; that Stevenson could identify alternative forms of social power that function beyond the centers of male-dominated institutions; and that Stevenson viewed the Victorian gentleman as an open category that could be evacuated and reworked in times of social crisis. Turning away from a general consideration of the representational issues at work in Stevenson’s conception of public identity to more specific analysis of the ways and forms they impact and affect the organization of urban space, I would like to look further at the degree to which Jekyll’s failure to meet the characteristics and obligations attributed to the Victorian gentleman, both in his life and as Hyde, realigns notions of cultural authority and reframes our conception of his character as an open, public text. My intention here is neither to
pinpoint a specific behavior responsible for Jekyll’s decline nor analyze the homosocial community of Victorian male elites. Instead, I would like to describe how the development of the Victorian gentleman as a form of cultural identity was a collaborative process that was not restricted to any one environment or space, but continuously identified, questioned, and reproduced in an open, public realm. By reading Jekyll’s physical transformation as emblematic of the problems Victorian publicity posed for members of the professional class, I suggest that we can use its lessons to begin to map the relationship between rich and poor so as to chart an important example of the ways meaning changes as it is produced in and between groups. For in articulating the importance of London’s streets in the process of identity production, Stevenson upset a contemporary ideology that identified the professional class with symbolic spaces of exclusion and rendered the performance of class identity a public fact. But to account for what is at stake in this development, and so attest to how Jekyll and Hyde employs our conception of the Victorian gentleman as a tool for reimagining the dominant narratives of class, let us first look further at the concept of publicity and how it may be implemented, modified, or reformed.

**Private Identities in the Public Realm**

“Publics,” as Michael Warner has observed, “are queer creatures”—they rarely express what we think they should (7). In his brilliant exegesis of publicity as a concept, Warner notes that the public moment takes place not in a particular setting or community but continuously across space and time, endlessly rewriting itself and redefining its limits because there is no singular object, experience, or place that can be identified as the source of public interaction. It is an etymological fact that public and private are not opposed but irrevocably linked through a set of overlapping and mutually dependent frames of reference. Publics do not exist in opposition to privacy, but supply the grounds through which that concept can be defined. Recognizing the interrelated components that comprise the very basis for our understanding of what these terms can potentially mean, the narrative aesthetic of Jekyll and Hyde proposes that we should pursue

the underlying implications of Warner’s argument, for while Stevenson’s novel is often represented as a text deeply concerned with majoritarian concepts of personal privacy, the meaning of that privacy is continuously violated and reworked throughout the course of the plot. It is, after all, not merely the case that Stevenson’s men lack the ability to physically conceal themselves from their surroundings but rather that their actions and appearances (as with their inactions and disappearances) are always accompanied by observations, retellings, and counternarratives from rival social groups.

To read *Jekyll and Hyde* as an act of carnival satire that allows us to rethink late-Victorian notions of class identity and the social relations whose construction they assist is thus to call attention to the ways in which these categories come together and fashion privacy on public terms. It is to accept the complexities that inhere in cultural definitions and explore the processes that govern the production of difference. Stevenson implies that there is a moral in *Jekyll and Hyde* for the inheritors of privileged identities who seek to situate themselves in a position of cultural authority. By forcing the private into the public, he challenges the assumption that status can be enacted through a deliberate policy of exclusion and suggests instead that class identity is most often, like gender, “a doing” in that it demands we delineate boundaries between ourselves and others to define the types of privacy that are available in public space.25

Stevenson initiates his discussion of the practices of resistance that accompany the performance of class in the novel’s opening paragraph with a passage that, despite its length, warrants careful attention for the sense of interiority it seeks to depict. In Stevenson’s words:

Mr. Utterson the lawyer was a man of a rugged countenance, that was never lighted by a smile; cold, scanty and embarrassed in discourse; backward in sentiment; lean, long, dusty, dreary, and yet somehow lovable. At friendly meetings, and when the wine was to his taste, something eminently human beaconed from his eye; something indeed which never found its way into his talk, but which spoke not only in these silent symbols of the after-dinner face, but more often and loudly in the acts of his life. He was austere with himself; drank gin

when he was alone, to mortify a taste for vintages; and though he enjoyed the theatre, had not crossed the doors of one for twenty years. But he had an approved tolerance for others; sometimes wondering, almost with envy, at the high pressure of spirits involved in their misdeeds; and in any extremity inclined to help rather than to reprove. "I incline to Cain's heresy," he used to say quaintly: "I let my brother go to the devil in his own way." In this character, it was frequently his fortune to be the last reputable acquaintance and the last good influence in the lives of down-going men. And to such as these, so long as they came about his chambers, he never marked a shade of change in his demeanour.

(7)

This, we are told, is the Victorian gentleman in the flesh. From the very beginning, Utterson is set forth as a quintessential representative of his class—a man who is public even in his privacy, comfortably displaying emotional reserve in a set of carefully planned appearances and highly stylized acts. The words that comprise his description not only provide the most salient image in the novel but present the thesis to which Stevenson will continually return and contest. The implication here is that, unlike Jekyll, Utterson can easily negotiate the cultural landscape without falling victim to the threat of gross improprieties. Lacking the “aversion for a life of study” that propels his friend towards “undignified” pleasures, Utterson thrives upon the mastery of the self (52). His actions are partially the product of self-denial and his moral framework, but they also speak to an inner longing for distinction through the valorization of his presence in the public sphere. It is, after all, not that Utterson passes his days in quiet seclusion, toiling over the law, but rather that he gains pleasure through his interaction with others, where he is given the opportunity to incorporate subtle alterations to his normally brusque form. In addition to the physical connection he receives from Sunday walks with his cousin Enfield—which comprise “the chief jewel of each week” despite their sparse conversation and singularly dull appearance—Utterson longs for tasteful moments where he can let down his guard and emit the impression of a private emotion covertly shared (Jekyll 8). Whether amongst colleagues or with his fellow citizens, he carries himself with the air of authority, deftly manipulating his features to ensure the viability of his status and respect.
With Stevenson having established his class identity through the discourse conventions of his peers, Utterson emerges through his interactions primarily as an image: a perfect, self-regulating ideal. But if he is a man that is known for his mystery, Stevenson implies that he is also a figure that is self-conscious about his mask. Like most of the novel’s characters, Utterson resides in that social network Elaine Showalter has called “Clubland”: an exclusively male sphere designed to reinforce the solidity of patriarchal values in an era of gendered uncertainty.\footnote{Of Clubland, Showalter writes that “Clubland operated as a lifetime training ground for men wishing to exclude women. Aggressively and urbanely heterosexual, even rakish in their discourse, the clubs were the stronghold and headquarters of opposition to women’s suffrage and practiced an ‘intermittent and localized misogyny.’ […] The London gentleman could spend his entire life moving through ‘a maze of clubs,’ athletic, political, and social; and professions from medicine and the law to ‘the best club of all—the House of Commons,’ [which] also imitated the structure of Clubland.” Showalter 12.} As an informal system of homosocial relations structured on long-standing bonds rooted in university educations, Clubland provides a restricted setting for men of power to meet and discuss the issues of the day. Here the reader discovers a vast collection of class markers—lavish dinners, expensive artwork, and vintage wines—not to mention a lingering sense that the novel’s characters have cut off ties to the outside world. Showalter, in her oft-cited analysis of the text, argues, for example, of the need to situate the novel within a narrow community of middle-aged bachelors who have “no relationships with women”—or for that matter, rival cultures—“except as servants” (108). Working from this assumption, she goes on to outline the “shadow of homosexuality” that overwhelms the community’s members and suggests its role in “revealing [the] forbidden emotions between men that constituted the dark side of patriarchy” (107). Showalter clearly succeeds in maintaining a keen eye for the biographical and historical context surrounding Stevenson’s life as well as in her efforts to effectively document a cultural shift in theatrical and film adaptations away from the novel’s suspiciously homoerotic plot. Yet despite these accomplishments, the basic foundation of her argument remains highly troublesome, for in privileging the territory that protects Clubland from rival groups, she operates on a fairly reductive notion of social relations that ignores the wealth of connections that Stevenson actively depicts. If we follow her on this course and read the novel in terms of the sexual corruption she finds in the “mating” between Jekyll and Hyde, we have little choice but to conclude that in investigating the matter and upholding the order of this tight-knit
community, Utterson is primarily an agent of *scientia sexualis*—affirming the value of privacy and coding the novel’s agenda in patently Victorian terms (109).27

But Stevenson’s novel is more complex. His characters do not merely occupy a bleak Foucauldian world where forced penetration and the observance of private spheres triumph continuously in the production of knowledge. Their lives are, rather, overcome with connections to each other that form the foundation for a common desire to act. Part of the problem with Showalter’s reading rests in her desire to offer a clear sense of limits; that is, to affirm Clubland’s position as a static, physical space that automatically confers status upon its members and ensures the order of power dynamics through the protection of information from the public sphere. Showalter fails to recognize, however, that in the novel gentlemanly culture has no fixed location or positioning; it exists only in its creative capacity to alter public space. In illustrating the importance of audience as a precondition for the performance of class identity, Stevenson pinpoints the ways in which social environments do not exist in isolation but are held together by the networks and thoroughfares that unite their constituencies. Given that historical investigations into Victorian domestic service have frequently observed the production of meaning that occurs through the negotiations that accompany the tensions and ambiguities of servant life, it is appropriate that, even inside Jekyll’s home, the housemaid, butler, cook, knife-boy, and footman labor in close proximity to the doctor, at first maintaining, then questioning the structures of cultural authority as they monitor his form.28 For failed cultural negotiations always take place in *Jekyll and Hyde* when private identities are publicly challenged—whether that public resides inside of Clubland or not.

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With the recognition of the gestures and appearances that supply the foundation for the Victorian gentleman’s identity, however, the location of cultural authority, already troubled by incursions upon Clubland’s spaces, splits further at those points at which the novel shifts back to the public realm. Midway through *Jekyll and Hyde*, Stevenson allows public speculation to reach its apex in the media blitz surrounding the death of Sir Danvers Carew, the respected Member of Parliament whom Hyde bludgeons to death during a brief altercation in the street. Often dismissed as one of *Jekyll and Hyde*’s many blind-alley subplots and narrative turns, “The Carew Murder Case” is in fact crucial to the course of narrative events, for Stevenson’s decision to cast the scene as a sensational newspaper account not only identifies a primary audience for Hyde’s performance in the London citizenry but begins the process of reevaluating his character in the public realm.

With the murder focalized through the eyes of a London maid (ironically enough, one of Jekyll’s own household), identities collapse here as the mechanisms of metropolitan cultural production confirm the crisis in cultural authority that, as I have suggested, plagues the images, locations, and interpretations of the professional class. For if we have previously been led to believe that Hyde’s violent outbursts are limited and that, with the exception of an occasional snarl, he can carry himself as a gentleman, his actions in this passage undermine all notions of his character’s authority, thrusting the vestiges of propriety that remain in his person into a realm of grotesque parody through the very transparency of his acts. Consider, specifically, Stevenson’s tone as he follows the maid’s account:

> She became aware of an aged and beautiful gentleman with white hair, drawing near along the lane; and advancing to meet him, another and very small gentleman, to whom at first she paid less attention. When they had come within speech (which was just under the maid’s eyes) the older man bowed and accosted the other with a very pretty manner of politeness. It did not seem as if the subject of address were of great importance; indeed, from his pointing, it sometimes appeared as if he were only inquiring his way; but the moon shone on his face as he spoke, and the girl was pleased to watch it, it seemed to breathe such an innocent and old-world kindness of disposition, yet with something high too, as of a well-founded self-content. Presently her eye wandered to the other, and she was
surprised to recognise in him a certain Mr. Hyde, who had once visited her master
and for whom she had conceived a dislike. He had in his hand a heavy cane, with
which he was trifling; but he answered never a word, and seemed to listen with an
ill-contained impatience. And then all of a sudden he broke out in a great flame
of anger, stamping with his foot, brandishing the cane, and carrying on (as the
maid described it) like a madman. The old gentleman took a step back, with the
air of one very much surprised and a trifle hurt; and at that Mr. Hyde broke out of
all bounds and clubbed him to the earth. And next moment, with ape-like fury, he
was trampling his victim under foot, and hailing down a storm of blows, under
which the bones were audibly shattered and the body jumped upon the roadway.

At the horror of these sights and sounds, the maid fainted. (22, italics mine)

This is the simulacrum Hyde: a figure that is more caricature than real. For in these lines we no
longer find ourselves in contact with the gruff figure first displayed in Enfield’s “Story of the
Door,” the elusive authority Poole notes in his conversation with Utterson, or even the foul soul
the lawyer sees for himself in his brief altercation with Hyde on the side street just outside of
Jekyll’s home. It is worth noting here that rather than expand upon our perception of Jekyll’s
double as a complex and engaging character at this crucial point in the narrative, which does, in
fact, mark his final appearance as a viable figure who can actively influence the novel’s events,
Stevenson forces us to associate Hyde with an abstract form that has fallen victim to the generic
limits of melodrama in his lack of emotional depth. In so doing, he suggests that the true source
of Hyde’s monstrosity rests not in what is hidden so much as what gets revealed and how. For
Hyde becomes in this moment, like Sargent’s Stevenson, primarily a portrait—a synthetic
projection that defines the individual even as it lacks the emotional and biological complexities
necessary to ensure an organic, spontaneous sense of self. Preconfigured as “the other,” it is
fitting that he does not speak in this passage, brandishing his cane instead to register his identity
in the public record with a single, representative act. There certainly appears, on the surface, no
need to embellish his psychological motivations, for the gestures that delineate his appearance
also determine his existence, employing the narrative of the real, as Hayden White contends, to impose a formal coherence on events.29

The public recognition of Hyde’s “monstrosity” allows Stevenson to pursue a shift in cultural authority from the presumed stability of Utterson’s agency to the reaction of the streets that threatens to transform our understanding of power dynamics in the late-Victorian cultural landscape for good. Upon leaving the narrative limits of the “The Carew Murder Case,” the novel describes, in the space of the city, an impassioned series of exchanges that defy our understanding of the gentleman’s ability to define himself in opposition to the public as a credible social force. Everything about the backlash to the murder suggests an uncontrollable proliferation of text that challenges our understanding of who speaks and with what authority. Initially, Stevenson observes how bold-faced newsboys scream out the headline—“Special edition. Shocking murder of an M.P.”—from their perch on the side of the street (27). From there, he goes on to detail the proliferation of handbills and the donation of thousands of pounds in reward for the successful apprehension of the culprit, whose actions have come to be regarded unanimously as a “public injury” and total violation of caste (28). But, interestingly, if we are initially led to believe that the mechanisms of justice are turning towards the formal prosecution of Hyde, and that London’s citizens, fed up with his violation of the social order, will seek violent retribution for his crimes, Stevenson implies that we have made a grave mistake. Confronted with the threat of a criminal who cannot be caught, the regulatory function of urban society exerts itself not through the formal structure of institutional power but the organic level of localized discourse with a set of conventions that manipulate identities as they enter public space.

“Sucked down in the eddy of scandal,” the “tales” of Hyde’s cruelty that emerge in the weeks that follow—“at once so callous and violent, of his vile life, of his strange associates, and of the hatred that seemed to have surrounded his career”—imply a turn away from vengeance towards a broader reevaluation of class (Jekyll 27-28). Both the lack of a viable history and a specific investigative report mark a detachment from literary realism and move towards an imaginative reworking of the shape and form of Hyde’s character. It is not so much that “From

the time he had left the house in Soho on the morning of the murder, he was simply blotted out” as Stevenson suggests but rather that Hyde’s existence only matters in the narrative realm as an object that bears no essential truth (Jekyll 28). The rumors that circulate regarding his behavior provide the material for the city to stretch and bend its conception of the Victorian gentleman, calling attention to and reworking the structures that allow its hierarchies to exist. Carew’s body fades from significance here as anything but a public memorial, lying in wait inside a city jail cell where he himself is similarly reworked. His value to the narrative comes thus, like Hyde, through the very ambiguity of his life, allowing his form to become incorporated in a pitched battle on the nature of citizenship. But whereas Carew is not only the victim of the crime but a respectable public force, Hyde’s extreme privacy—read here as a source of rumor and speculation—provides the foundation for a reconsideration of terms. In calling attention to the many meanings secrecy affords in the foundation of the Victorian elite and presenting the crime as a matter of public excitement, Stevenson collapses the cultural boundary between the Victorian gentleman and what had previously been identified as external to it: the urban culture at large. In its place, he reveals the ways in which the gentleman’s strategies might be converted to alter our perception of cultural authority in urban space. One accepts that the professional class has often been able to shield itself from the public light. But with the spread of public scandal in Jekyll and Hyde, Stevenson illustrates the ways in which the community can manipulate the Victorian gentleman’s construction of private space not merely through the act of investigation but the gross exaggeration and revision of certain narratives as they enter the subversive dialogue of the street.

Conclusion
The fine line between the praise attached to the Victorian gentleman and the grotesque distortions of his form are not unrelated points but parallel definitions of authorship that reveal Stevenson’s artistic aims. Jekyll’s humiliation at the threat of public scandal is clearly felt throughout the latter half of the text. It is not limited to the reprehension he receives from Utterson for his severe lapse in form but encroaches upon his habits to completely alter his perception of public life. Jekyll can no longer conceal his pleasures before others nor can he pick and choose his identities as they become socially convenient. Like Utterson, he learns that
to maintain the status of a gentleman is always to work towards the consistency of representation. Thus, if Jekyll, acting in an attempt to efface the presence of Hyde and so begin to salvage his name, is ever to be able to reconfigure his identity so as to establish an acceptable sense of who he is, he must return to the important work of class performance. But, of course, that performance fails. For in permitting Jekyll’s gothic double to reappear and thus stage a verifiable return of the repressed, Stevenson employs a *deux ex machina* to enact his novel’s moral and so confirms the purpose of its events. The logic of Jekyll’s return to intense feelings of isolation and shame, when coupled with his involuntary transformations both at home and in the park, combine to suggest there are some roles he can no longer effectively hold. Overlying the ruins of his broken identity, on which he has built his pathetically divided life, his retreat to the isolation of his laboratory heralds the termination of the text. For in the place of an identity that has become stripped of meaning, Jekyll has lost the security of his class.

Specifically, then, the arrival of “Henry Jekyll’s Full Statement of the Case” following Utterson’s penetration of the laboratory cabinet speaks to a last-ditch effort for Jekyll to refashion his identity on radically different terms. But while it would perhaps be easy to assume that the inclusion of Jekyll’s confession seeks to reclaim some semblance of his former self, and so bring the novel towards a moment of restoration in its closing pages, Stevenson’s use of the statement at this point in the narrative carefully reminds us that even as the doctor seeks to reassert the notion of privacy for members of the professional class, he is nevertheless still under the limits of our watch as members of the general public. We cannot help but recognize as readers that this Jekyll is as much as a construction as the other impressions we have come to observe, for Stevenson’s continuous allusion to the relocation of identity from a verifiable, internal fact to the images and narratives scattered throughout the novel’s pages purposefully reduce this moment of revelation—what Jekyll envisions as a point of clarity and truth—to yet another conflicted object in what is already a variegated stream of reports. There is, quite simply, nothing that Jekyll can reveal that will alter his position; he can only add his voice to the insurmountable collection of representations that are already beyond his control. Thus, in a confirmation of the novel’s purpose, Stevenson implies that in a world that is so completely overwhelmed with images that their place of construction cannot be assured, the location of power becomes displaced to such a degree that it can only be spoken of generally as the
discourse that fills the public realm. The city subsequently triumphs in *Jekyll and Hyde* because it is the space where those conversations occur. It destroys the private as a category, mirroring identities on multiple, overlapping, and fragmented terms to code the metropolis as a fundamentally egalitarian realm.

The preceding paragraphs have demonstrated how Stevenson’s attitude towards the Victorian gentleman reflects his interest in shifting notions of cultural authority in urban space. They suggest that we can trace *Jekyll and Hyde*’s interest in romanticism from the carnival tradition to a patently Victorian representation of the city. Like his literary predecessors, Stevenson celebrates the creative potential of the urban to right its own wrongs, advancing an alternative to the model of institutional power that resides behind Clubland’s gates. His novel’s immediate setting in the metropolis and recognition of the discourse that permeates that space serves, then, to combine the uncertainty of city streets, the theatricality of modern life, and the transformative potential of the carnivalesque. The questions that *Jekyll and Hyde* asks are therefore more relevant to late-Victorian urban culture than critics have historically believed. For if Stevenson’s characters could negotiate the public realm as well as they control the private, their problems would not exist. It is through the process of public identification that their struggles assume meaning, adding an important dimension to the assumption of cultural authority that places the individual alongside the collective to generate one of literature’s most important characterizations of the Victorian gentleman as a site of debate. Responding to the uncertainty that filled the nation’s streets, the dissemination of cultural authority that grants the city its unfathomable depth in *Jekyll and Hyde* might be understood to comprise a monster of a different kind.

Turning now towards *The Sign of Four*, the second installment of Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes series, one sees character function in a slightly different way. In this chapter, I move away from the absences found in Stevenson’s novella to examine how the composition of Sherlock Holmes assists in the adaptation of contemporary debate through the explicit presence of the detective’s character. By asserting that Holmes’s body supplies a physical marker for Conan Doyle to preface the reappearance of imperialism’s ghosts in the domestic sphere, I complicate the terms of his detective practice to foreground the novel’s ethical considerations.
and suggest that the novel is as affected by notions of theatricality and performance as by those of reason.
Chapter Two: Performing the Imperial Abject, The Ethics of Cocaine in Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Sign of Four*

An unlikely opportunity presented itself to Arthur Conan Doyle on August 30th, 1889. The editor of *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine*, Joseph Marshall Stoddart of Philadelphia, invited the aspiring author to London for an exclusive dinner to be held with the established essayist and poet Oscar Wilde. The dinner was at the premier Langham Hotel in London’s West End. While there, the trio set into motion plans for an English edition of Stoddart’s magazine, one which would eventually publish *The Sign of Four* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* the following year. For Wilde, whose literary fame was already assured, the meeting marked a final step in his ascendance to celebrity status. But for the more moderately successful Conan Doyle, the dinner provided more pressing gains. The author’s stories had done quite well in the United States, where loosely enforced copyright law permitted their dissemination amongst an eager public. At the same time, financial compensation still lingered beyond his grasp. With a contract to publish in *Lippincott’s*, Conan Doyle’s reputation as an author of considerable merit emerged for the first time, granting him the means to transfer his American popularity to English soil and secure artistic recognition with a single stroke of the pen.

Armed with the promise of £100 and possession of the story’s rights, Conan Doyle set out to revisit Sherlock Holmes, a loosely formed character first introduced in 1887’s *A Study in Scarlet*. Praise for the detective’s appearance there led him to consider the public’s seemingly insatiable appetite for mystery. But if he was going to revisit the detective’s chambers on 221B Baker Street, one thing was clear: Conan Doyle was going to need a hook. Apparently, he found one. When *The Sign of Four* went to press in 1890, it opened with these lines:

> 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 shirtcuff. 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

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point home, pressed down the tiny piston, and sank back into the velvet-lined armchair with a long sigh of satisfaction. (213)

There are few aspects of the Sherlock Holmes canon as troubling to literary criticism than the topic of Holmes’s cocaine use. Largely consigned to the biographical musings of committed Sherlockians, the subject was not treated seriously until the publication of Jack Tracy’s *Subcutaneously, My Dear Watson* in 1978. That work sought to position Holmes’s drug habit within the shifting context of late-Victorian debates regarding cocaine’s use as a recreational and medicinal substance. Tracy not only provided a wealth of information on chemical dependence in the *fin de siècle* but, in addition, he put to rest the question first posed by George F. McCleary in 1936: “Was Sherlock Holmes a Drug Addict?” Looking towards the relative dearth of references within the canon—of all the Sherlock Holmes tales, there are just five—Tracy concluded that speculations regarding Holmes’s drug use must not be too severe: yes, Sherlock Holmes used cocaine; at the same time, evidence of his dependence is slim (51-52).

Recent interpretations of the series have downplayed cocaine’s importance, most acknowledging the drug’s appearance in *The Sign of Four* only in relation to the novel’s concern for the precarious state of the British Empire. In these readings, cocaine is variously envisioned as a commodity fetish or a barbaric ritual, with either option designed to reveal uncomfortable points of comparison between the detective and England’s imperial subjects. Like the open

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32 See Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 33, for a discussion of commodity fetish, her term for the form of racism that converts “the narrative of imperial Progress into mass-produced consumer spectacle.” See McLaughlin, *Writing 53-78* for a discussion of *The Sign of Four*’s relationship to this term. In a slightly different approach, Jesse Oak Taylor-Idé provides a thoughtful analysis of ritual transformation in “Ritual and the Liminality of Sherlock Holmes in *The Sign of Four* and *The Hound of Baskervilles*,” *ELT: English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 48 (2005): 53-70. Most important to my reading is Taylor-Idé’s assertion that Holmes’s cocaine use in the novel’s conclusion “reaffirms his position as a solitary, celibate, and ascetic outsider who defends society without being a part of it,” a claim for which I wholeheartedly agree (67). Other treatments of the novel to employ postcolonial arguments include Kirby Farrell, “Heroism,
boundary Conan Doyle depicts between London and Agra, Holmes’s injection, critics contend, collapses the distinction between foreign and domestic, dismantling Victorian gentility to illustrate a savage core. But in making sense of *The Sign of Four*’s imperial subtext (if it can in fact be understood apart from the novel’s central concerns), it is important to note that Conan Doyle does not merely rehearse the uneasy sentiment regarding England’s place in international affairs so much as use the presence of cocaine and other artifacts to explore new relationships that have emerged directly as a result of imperial rule. No doubt the multiplicity of meanings attached to objects like cocaine has confused the novel’s readers in the past. Recently, however, many have called attention to *The Sign of Four*’s ambiguity to question Conan Doyle’s fidelity to the social order his writing purportedly seeks to uphold. Stephen Arata notes that while “openly jingoistic,” Conan Doyle’s fiction “cannot prevent even his overt defenses of empire from sounding like critiques” (140). Recognizing that a gray area between literary narrative and authorial prejudice exists, it seems pertinent, then, to ask not only how *The Sign of Four* might be approached apart from Conan Doyle’s well-documented conservatism but also what limits postcolonial interpretations may have in terms of providing a reading of the novel’s depiction of narcotic drug use.

What follows is less an attempt to recover some lost subtext of *The Sign of Four* than to reconfigure postcolonial readings so as to account for the ethics of Holmes’s drug use—that is, how cocaine impacts and informs the detective’s ability to interpret crime. When Holmes sinks back into his armchair following his first injection, Watson approaches soon after with intent to

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33 See Joseph Kestner, *Sherlock’s Men: Masculinity, Conan Doyle, and Cultural History* (Brookfield: Ashgate, 1997). In a similar vein, Kestner notes an apparent contradiction in the canon’s intended influence on masculine gender scripts and its actually effects, suggesting that “If the Sherlock Holmes tales recognize the conflicts involved in constructing and reinforcing manliness in the culture, it is also their function to advance concepts of masculinity, to police male behaviour, and to propose and endorse paradigms of maleness for the late nineteenth and early twentieth century” (25). It is the very origin of this contradiction that this chapter seeks to address.
intervene. By testifying to Holmes’s ability to sidestep, recast, and transmit his shame during their conversation, Conan Doyle effectively links the source of Holmes’s detective power with his ability to confront accepted truths. In doing so, he not only questions the efficacy of Victorian propriety to ensure its followers status but provides an interpretive framework for understanding Rosemary Jann’s previously unexplored claim that Holmes’s work ethic “appears to champion not the status quo, but a higher or finer code of justice than that insured by official law.”34 I will contend in this chapter that Conan Doyle uses Holmes’s status as the world’s only “unofficial consulting detective” as a means to foster the development of a more comprehensive understanding of social relations that thinks beyond the reductive categories Victorian social conditions permit.35 In presenting the detective’s social position as fundamentally paradoxical, residing somewhere between the poles of official and unofficial law, Conan Doyle grants Holmes unique access to the networks of crime and suggests that he is able to turn his discriminating gaze back upon institutional powers as well. Victorian identity has often been thought to reside within some kind of “imaginary, abstract, or actual” space—such as the house, the city, or the empire.36 But with the rise of a new form of detection in Holmes—who remains as critical of the social order he works for as are the individuals he helps punish—Conan Doyle announces the need to complicate social boundaries that may not hold. It is in this sense that the site of imperial insurrection, much like the space of addiction, becomes central to the novel’s understanding of shame: indeed, it is the theater in which deviant identities are acknowledged, incorporated, and transformed.

36 This line of reasoning is particularly evident in Ian Baucom’s Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), where Baucom connects the problem of English identity with geographic space throughout his study of nineteenth and twentieth century literary and political texts. Baucom notes that while “the primacy of the spatial is by no means absolute”—at various points in history racial and linguistic standards have eclipsed its importance—“Englishness has been generally understood to reside within some type of imaginary, abstract, or actual locale, and to mark itself upon that locale’s familiars” (4-5).
A Rumor of War

It may seem peculiar to argue that some of the most iconoclastic and morally ambivalent literary ethics to emerge from the Victorian fin de siècle come from a self-proclaimed reactionary whose literary preferences favored the dry comfort of the historical novel to the artistic possibilities associated with the realm of popular fiction. Yet it remains clear that radical transformations taking place across the Empire required Conan Doyle to reevaluate the course of British life in ways that defy overly reductive notions of his political identity. The conventional understanding of British involvement in India during the latter half of the nineteenth century states that the attack on the East India Company during the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857 illustrated the ideological restrictions underpinning England’s foreign policy.\(^{37}\) Indian sepoys, acting in sedition over their subservient position at the bottom of the British foreign chain of command, lashed out against imperial strongholds in an attempt to secure greater control of their homeland through military force. Though the causes of the rebellion were long-standing and complex, the troops were initially motivated out of their frustration with a demand that required them to violate Muslim and Hindu religious law and bite off the ends of recently issued paper rifle cartridges greased with beef and pork fat (Herbert, 3). When eighty-five men stationed alongside British troops at Meerut were court-martialed on May 9th for their unwillingness to comply with the new orders, the saga reached unexpected heights. Two days later, on May 11th, a group of dissenting soldiers marched off to neighboring Delhi to massacre scores of Europeans. Their actions set off a yearlong battle between native insurgents and foreign troops that reshaped the culture, tone, and legacy of British imperialism for generations to come.

The debates that followed the massacres at Delhi spoke to a long tradition of ethnic tensions. Prior to the rebellion, the East India Company’s relationship with India had centered upon principles of mercantile imperialism, a set of axioms that viewed the colony solely in terms of the opportunities it afforded English producers and consumers.\(^{38}\) But while an economic

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\(^{37}\) Sepoy refers to the Persian term for “soldier.” Much of the information that follows relating to historical data surrounding the Sepoy Rebellion and its aftermath is drawn from Baucom, Out of Place; Christopher Herbert, War of No Pity: The Indian Mutiny and Victorian Trauma (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); and Troy Boone, Youth of Darkest England: Working-Class Children at the Heart of the Victorian Empire (New York: Routledge, 2005).

\(^{38}\) See Baucom 44.
approach had achieved a moderate degree of stability in smaller land holdings in the British West Indies, where the presence of an English planter class better ensured the stability of colonial rule, the sheer scope of the Indian project and the complexity of the alliances and bonds formed there presented administrators with a set of tasks upon which the reductive policies of global free market capitalism proved wholly inadequate to the objective of maintaining British interests. The development of new markets inside India placed the Company in a demanding position where it found itself hovering between governmental and nongovernmental responsibilities without the cultural authority to properly assert control. In addition to signs of religious intolerance within the military, salary cuts for Indian sepoys, the loss of property belonging to Indian landowners, and a general disregard for the local caste system all contributed to an atmosphere of distrust between the native population and British troops. Acting in response to these concerns, Parliament acknowledged the need to relieve the East India Company of its administrative responsibilities in a decision that marked the creation of the Raj and, with it, the beginning of a more theoretically absolute conception of England’s claims to India, one that envisioned a line of continuity running directly from the House of Parliament to its most cherished imperial outpost.

Even as this move was drastically reconfiguring English national identity, it was apparent that the tenability of the new imperialism was by no means guaranteed. Historical inquiry into British culture in the latter half of the nineteenth century has encountered an obvious question: to what degree did the attempt to intensify the imperial project in the aftermath of the Sepoy Rebellion place English citizens in an uncomfortable position regarding their place in the imperial system? It is within the inescapable presence of this question—a question that no character in *The Sign of Four* can completely avoid—that Conan Doyle writes his novel. In presenting *The Sign of Four* as a work of popular fiction that is deeply concerned with the aftermath of the Sepoy Rebellion, Conan Doyle not only maintains the significance of foreign events for domestic life—he draws attention to England’s shame. The inability of the nation to efface the image of insurrection from the popular consciousness cannot be overestimated. Whatever had transpired on the Indian subcontinent during the “Great Mutiny,” the event

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retained a powerful grip on the British public’s imagination. Initially, the press sought to avoid favorable images of the Indian rebels in their reports. Yet even as they continued to propagate images of English heroism, a visible counterdiscourse of atrocities directed against Indians acquired new standing with the public, generating discontinuities in hegemonic thought through its very existence. It was not that details about the insurrection necessarily challenged imperial rule—in many cases, this information was presented alongside tales of glory in England’s newspapers and other mediums. Rather, it was that the acknowledgment of native opposition constituted a new dimension in the growing imperial debate in the domestic context, one that recognized the limitations of imperial power even as it fought to ensure the future of England’s presence in the world.

The late-Victorian breakdown in imperial ambition was the likely outcome of a flawed national ideology that found itself forced to acknowledge the existence of a subaltern class. Recent work in postcolonial theory has consistently shown that one of the problems endemic to imperial institutions, whether they are military or cultural, is that they threaten to undermine themselves almost as soon as they appear. Like all forms of exchange, the circulation of power depends upon equilibrium to subsist. When that equilibrium is radically overextended, either through military conquest or the exploitation of new markets, it risks buckling under the strain of its advance. As a novel, The Sign of Four recognizes and exploits this concern. Not only does the novel indicate that the presence of imperial subjects on London’s streets suggest the failure of the English military command to uphold the necessary boundaries required in the protection of the state, but it also appears to imply that in the attempt to reclaim Indian treasure by foreign agents working alongside former soldier and military amputee Jonathan Small, imperial activity has brought with it the deterioration of English masculinity into a lesser, disabled form rather than elevating England’s citizens to a better life. No doubt these details speak to Conan Doyle’s awareness of a certain reluctance to maintain the imperial project on the part of English citizens. But, perhaps more importantly, they also suggest that English national identity, increasingly

40 See Baucom 75 as well as Jenny Sharpe, Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
41 See McClintock. In mapping the relationships between race, gender, and class, McClintock notes that imperial power resists traditional binary formations between “strong” and “weak” in favor of a more open and uninhibited structure.
dependent upon its relationship to other cultures, must be understood not as a product of national origins but as a formation forged through its difficult—at times, humiliating—interaction with the world.

Regardless of his support for imperial campaigns in subsequent non-fiction publications such as The War in South Africa: Its Cause and Conduct (1902), a pamphlet that justified British atrocities during the Boer War, it is clear from The Sign of Four that Conan Doyle is willing to play upon contemporary concerns that threaten to undermine his own political beliefs in order to produce a good story. And as Victorian England braced itself for the turbulent 1890s, he was by no means alone in mourning and recounting the loss of imperial invincibility. The public discourse on the expanded imperial project reached its prominence in the late nineteenth century under the guidance of such figures as Benjamin Disraeli, Cecil Rhodes, and Joseph Chamberlain who, in their attempt to quell union activity and socialist uprising, repeatedly invoked rhetorical tropes of an English national identity constituted through imperialism to suppress coalitions that were forming along class lines.42 For England’s leaders, the nation’s future was to be understood in a trail of influence. It was believed that the installation of administrative buildings, social institutions, and other sites of English identity around the globe would not only raise the “character” of foreign populations, but provide opportunities for England’s workforce abroad.

Popular support for the new Empire came to rest on widely promoted assumptions about the motives and purposes of English national identity that confirmed the nation’s civilizing mission. But by the end of the century, the discursive limits of these arguments had become apparent as the Empire faced constant insurrection and war. Because many English citizens recognized global resistance to their endeavors as systemic, they could no longer rely on the stories they had been told. Rather, their interaction with the Empire necessarily entailed some form of modification to official rhetoric that acknowledged and incorporated documented limitations on imperial power. It is helpful to read The Sign of Four as one of many voices involved in the critical reevaluation of state policy. Despite Conan Doyle’s political beliefs, the

novel’s heightened awareness of the public reaction to foreign military campaigns mark one crucial voice in the transformation of military events away from what had historically been isolated occurrences towards the development of the modern “media war,” a complex sociopolitical dynamic in which public support for military action is every bit as important as the strategic situation abroad.

It is often assumed that the conception of modern propaganda through technological developments in visual and print media paired with work in sociology and social psychology to grant institutional authorities unprecedented control in their manipulation of the general public in the late nineteenth century. In recent times, this view has been no doubt heavily influenced by the overzealous argumentation of Edward Said, who in a horrendously casual generalization used *Culture and Imperialism* to claim that “there was scarcely any dissent, any departure, any demurral from” the core values of the imperial project by members of the English working class during the final decades of Victoria’s rule (53). But as is often noted in literary studies (indeed, one might argue that it is the very premise of Said’s work), one will not find what one refuses to see. It thus comes as little surprise that Christopher Herbert has recently challenged the unnecessarily reductive assertion of an unmitigated Anglo-European bias against the East to observe that “[t]he key characteristic of Victorian Mutiny literature […] is that it is not monolithic and cannot properly be read as anything like a confident allegory of British virtue and racial entitlement to rule” (17). Understanding Herbert’s basic point that the discourse of Mutiny—and consequently, Empire—resists rigid classification, what Conan Doyle’s writing suggests (and other examples more fully confirm) is that even as the discourse of public policy became more sophisticated in its administration, the avenues for the articulation of alternative social visions remained varied, often impacting and affecting the speech of unlikely candidates in strange and important ways.

It becomes important then for readers to pay attention to the *specific kind* of imperial message *The Sign of Four* presents to its readership. Certainly, Conan Doyle is neither a moralizing voice nor a mindless pusher of sensation; however, the specific motives of his novel warrant pause. Since Plato’s condemnation of poetry in the *Republic*, critics have often stressed

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43 Gabriel Tarde’s *Laws of Imitation* (1890) and Gustave Le Bon’s *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1897) are often credited as foundational works on crowd psychology, or “herd behavior.”
the ethics of popular literature because those works seem most likely to have a discernible effect on their audience. But cultural criticism has recently taken a slightly different approach to ethical reasoning, using ethics to respond to the collapse of the unified subject in poststructuralism. In January 1999, PMLA devoted an entire issue to the resurgence of interest in work of this sort. The journal noted that although there is currently no unified ethical movement, a single approach is slowly taking the lead. According to Lawrence Buell, ethical critics are increasingly “descrying an ethos of incipient ethical teleology implicit in specific discursive modes, genre templates, or formal structures at the level of individual artifact.” Phrased simply, such critics pursue how authors use formal or generic detail to inform reflection in their readers. Their approach reinvigorates the importance of authorship in soliciting a response towards desired action, yet, like other forms of criticism, it does not focus on authorial intent. Instead, ethical criticism addresses the tangible questions texts propose while acknowledging the importance of context to interpretation.

With regard to The Sign of Four, these questions are undoubtedly multiform and, as I will suggest, linked to Conan Doyle’s representation of vice. Moving away from a general consideration of the Sepoy Rebellion’s impact on English society to an exploration of a more specific example of the problems and difficulties its recollections pose, I want now to consider more fully the ways in which Conan Doyle suggests that the distorted cultural legacy of imperialism shapes English national identity in much the same way as the coercive politics of narcotic drug reform. Of the textual features that confirm a correlation between these points, I have chosen to inspect the performative function of Holmes’s cocaine injection in the novel’s introduction and Jonathan Small’s confession in the conclusion. By examining how Holmes modifies the rules governing the integrity of a vast network of social relations to gain access to a hidden cultural reality inhabited by Small, we can see how Conan Doyle uses his character’s relationship with abjection to precipitate the disturbing presentation of Jonathan Small’s story.

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44 See Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, The Turn to Ethics (New York: Routledge, 2000).
46 See Marita Sturken, Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, The AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997). By cultural memory, I am referring to Sturken’s term for “field of cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history” (1).
later in the novel and, subsequently, advances the production of a more nuanced form of English national identity that affirms the unsettling relationship between the nation and dishonorable acts. But if we are to understand how the shocking images found in these scenes not only complement each other but provide a critical lens through which to view the novel’s unique ethical system, we must take a closer look at *The Sign of Four* and its position amongst contemporary works of fiction.

**Positioning Holmes**

With the publication of *The Sign of Four*, Conan Doyle continues the cultural work of coding the imperial playing field on new terms. While his novel is not a form of protest literature, it does offer a reworking of historical narratives that threatens to modify the course of official history and aims to produce a dramatic shift in public opinion. In setting up the recovery of foreign treasure as an action taken by imperial subjects and expatriates in opposition to British military rule, Conan Doyle departs from the tradition of overconfident adventurism prominently featured in earlier novels of imperial conquest such as Sir Henry Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885). In its place, he recasts images of narcotic drug use, domestic purity, and foreign invasion from Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* (1868) in such a way so as to extend Collins’s playful warning against the dangers of English hubris towards the horrific sublimity found in later texts such as Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902). By altering Collins’s relatively favorable depiction of the three Hindu Brahmins who desperately seek to recover the moonstone and restore it to its proper home, Conan Doyle uses his deviant blend of Muslim, Sikh, Andaman, and English identities to imply that the religious purity found in the final pages of Collins’s novel has given way to the rise of a loosely formed network of criminal relations whose tactics bear no specific allegiance to national, racial, or religious boundaries. It is not just that London has found itself under attack, but that the very lines of battle have become irrevocably confused. Inside London, criminal elements blend into background, avoiding detection from the official police in what Joseph McLaughlin has recently termed the “urban jungle.” But outside of England, the problem has become even more severe,

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47 See Arata, *Fictions* 133-151, for a more detailed reading of *The Sign of Four*’s relationship to *The Moonstone.*
as political necessity has forced the development of unfavorable coalitions between English forces and foreign subjects.

It would be a mistake to elide the representational significance of these trends for our understanding of Conan Doyle’s ethics. The absence of both subaltern voices and a direct representation of the world outside London serve to bar any notion that The Sign of Four is a novel directly informed by imperial conflict. Instead, the Empire is simultaneously there and not there in Conan Doyle’s writing, attaching itself to a shared body of knowledge without conforming to a stable category that can be easily controlled—in essence, revealing itself as the actualization of the imperial perspective Said has called Orientalism by virtue of its constructed properties. In presenting the recognition of foreign experience as the central action in his novel, Conan Doyle applies the logic of cultural memory to the reconstruction of foreign events. Imperial subjects, highly conscious of a past and present that it is not entirely their own, must consistently acknowledge the divide between their personal experience and the complex geopolitical institutions that structure the determining conditions of their lives. At the same time, with such an enormous distance between the recollections of military men like Jonathan Small and the isolated experience of Londoners back home, Conan Doyle suggests that it will take an individual with unique access to the tools of cultural production to draw attention to these omissions. A “connoisseur of crime” with a penchant for all forms of knowledge, Holmes undertakes methods that supply precisely the interpretive framework needed for the recovery of these events (Sign 375). But interestingly, he is able to draw attention to the nation’s past only because he has disassociated himself from the formal conventions that have so utterly limited his peers.

This leads us back to the topic of cocaine. Let me be clear: Holmes’s drug use is complex. It is not only a literal representation of his vice but a highly symbolic act that reveals the foundation of his identity. As the second installment in the Sherlock Holmes series, The Sign

48 See Edward Said, Orientalism (1979; rpt. New York: Vintage, 1994). There Said states that “the Orient is not an inert fact of nature. It is not merely there, just as the Occident itself is not just there either […] both geographical and cultural entities—to say nothing of historical entities—such locales, regions, geographical sectors as “Orient” and “Occident” are man-made. Therefore as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other” (4-5).
of Four provides a unique opportunity to evaluate the development of Holmes and Watson as literary characters, for it is precisely here that their identities are first fleshed out in full. Understanding that the novel provides us with our first real look at Holmes and Watson as characters, Conan Doyle’s decision to place his creations in an extended conversation on the topic of substance abuse in the novel’s introduction seems deliberately designed to construct their identities around their differing responses to shame. The first modern medical theories of addiction, as Terry Parssinen has demonstrated in his study of narcotic drug culture in modern British society, began in the 1880s following a sharp rise in chemical dependence. The proliferation of cocaine and morphine use amongst the upper and middle class as a result of medical experimentation and the appearance of the hypodermic syringe brought with it an unprecedented era in public knowledge of the risks associated with narcotic drugs. Confronted with a commodity culture too vast to be controlled, reform-minded elites responded with a public awareness campaign that incorporated a range of institutional perspectives. Operating primarily through the government, organized medicine, the church, and the press, concerned citizens used their authority to develop the modern rhetoric of addiction. That members of privileged social groups often comprised the very target of substance abuse only intensified the disciplinary function of their aims. For the proximity between anti-narcotic advocates and drugs users allowed the reform movement to exploit their connection to the problem and gradually reconfigure public space through the development of social stigmas that would exclude known users from positions of authority.

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. Stranded on the streets of darkest London, described as “that great cesspool into which all the loungers and idlers of the Empire are irresistibly drained” in A Study in Scarlet, Watson stands out as a champion of middle-class temperance, upholding a semblance of normalcy in an otherwise uncertain world. In much the same way that public health reformers extended their

49 See Parssinen. All ensuing references to British narcotic history contained in this chapter reflect his research.

rule over common citizens’ lives through legislation such as the Pharmacy Act of 1868 and the Contagious Disease Act of 1869, Watson believes that the production of a healthy body depends on the capacity of social institutions to draw attention to and remove pathological behaviors from the day-to-day operation of their citizens’ lives. As a result, much of Watson’s initial discussion with Holmes encourages us to view his character through his profession. In establishing his ethos with Holmes “as a medical man to one for whose constitution he is to some extent answerable,” Watson attempts to defer the importance of his personal relationship with the detective and offer a strictly scientific prognosis (Sign 216). The medical field with which Watson identifies clearly states that cocaine use signals the start of a “pathological and morbid process” seated in biological tissue-change and borne socially in the “black reaction” that dominates the user’s appearance (Sign 216). Unless Holmes gives up the drug’s use, Watson informs him, the outcome could be severe—if not ostracism, perhaps death.

At first glance there is nothing terribly exceptional about Watson’s appeal. It seems to express the concern of a medical man who desperately fears the loss of his friend. It is, however, precisely in the dual nature of Watson’s position as both author and physician that the scene demands further attention, for it reveals the split between the immaculate operations of institutional power and the conflicted anxieties of his personal fears. If we return to the novel’s opening paragraph, we are immediately reminded that Watson’s account is anything but impartial. His meticulous presentation of Holmes’s injection relates a profane—almost masturbatory—description of the detective’s body that is at once both fascinated and repulsed.51 At the same time, it is important to note that the brilliance of Conan Doyle’s presentation rests not in the vulgar, but in his careful manipulation of the voyeuristic space between author, object, and audience. If Holmes’s body occupies a central position in the novel’s opening paragraph, we quickly learn that Watson’s furrowed brow designates the limits of our narrative vantage point, providing a discriminating filter through which to carefully interpret the event. For a moment, Watson lets down his guard. He reveals his relationship to Holmes. And standing exposed before our eyes, he allows himself to be shamed:

Three times a day for many months I had witnessed this performance, but custom had not reconciled my mind to it. On the contrary, from day to day I had become

51 See McLaughlin 53-55 for an interpretation of the visual erotics attached to this scene.
more irritable at the sight, and my conscience swelled nightly within me at the thought that I had lacked the courage to protest. Again and again I had registered a vow that I should deliver my soul upon the subject; but there was that in the cool, nonchalant air of my companion which made him the last man with whom one would care to take anything approaching a liberty. His great powers, his masterly manner, and the experience which I had of his many extraordinary qualities, all made me diffident and backward in crossing him. (Sign 213-214, italics mine)

Watson’s narrative occupies a carefully constructed space. Throughout the first chapter, we are consistently informed of the doctor’s emotions. At various points, Conan Doyle tells us that Watson is “annoyed” and “irritated”—that he enjoys a “slight feeling of amusement” when he asks Holmes to uncover the origins of a watch he has recently inherited from an alcoholic brother and a “considerable bitterness” when the detective eventually determines the owner (Sign 213-223). This newfound reliance on Watson’s subjectivity comes in stark contrast to Conan Doyle’s writing in A Study in Scarlet, where the narrative departs from Watson’s perspective midway through to document Jefferson Hope’s wanderings in Mormon Utah. What distinguishes the need for Watson’s account here is undoubtedly Conan Doyle’s heightened awareness of the narrative tension his character brings to the text.

Watson’s significance to Conan Doyle rests in the stark contrast he produces with Sherlock Holmes. By grounding his narration in the doctor’s cleverly composed first-person accounts, Conan Doyle grants his writing a physical dimension that privileges the importance of character, setting, and dialogue above strictly thematic concerns. So carefully demarcated are the observations Watson makes that, at times, his writing almost assumes the structure of a play.⁵² Recognizing the theatricality that his prose conveys to the reader, it is little wonder that

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⁵² See Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray, ed. Michael Patrick Gillespie (New York: Norton, 2007), and Henry James, The Awkward Age, ed. Cynthia Ozick (New York: Knopf, 1993) for comparison. In part, Conan Doyle’s “play writing” takes part in the generic shift that watched the nineteenth-century novel turn away from the multivolume “triple-decker” of midcentury and towards the sprightly contemporary writing to be found in Oscar Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray and Henry James’s modernist precursor, The Awkward Age. In this sense, it is representative of a broader trend that denotes the cultural status Victorian theater had
among the many adaptations of the Sherlock Holmes canon, the foremost has always been the stage. Watson’s reconstruction of narrative events plays upon the entrance and exit of characters as it dissects narrative scenery in the pursuit of visual truth. No matter how strongly he may prefer to squirm away from the series’ action, Watson is always forced to stay. The richness of characterization, voice, and scene that we gain from his account adds an important dimension to the novel’s representation of literary events. To produce his narrative effect, Watson must document his observations faithfully while concealing his personal bias within a series of carefully placed interludes. In most cases, Conan Doyle follows dramaturgical models to use Watson’s body as a conduit for the reader’s experience, allowing his presence to endure but never formally influence the narrative’s action. What is so unique about The Sign of Four’s opening, however, is that it presents the reader with a stunning reversal of this convention in that the principal agent of detection is none other than the good doctor himself.

But Watson’s intervention fails to produce its desired effect. Quite simply, Holmes refuses to acknowledge the doctor’s concerns. Instead of withdrawing from his activity under the embarrassment of exposure, Holmes uses the opportunity to articulate his ambivalent position in the social order. As a private detective, Holmes understands that he cannot produce the structural transformations required to save England from the corrupting influence of its various ills. At the same time, by removing himself to the social periphery through drug use, Holmes suggests that he is able to explore the world’s peculiarities with detached pleasure, coming in contact with institutional authority only when necessary and avoiding a personal stake in his work. In Holmes’s words:

> When Gregson, or Lestrade, or Altheny Jones are out of their depths—which, by the way, is their normal state—the matter is laid before me. I examine the data, as an expert, and pronounce a specialist’s opinion. I claim no credit for such cases. My name figures in no newspaper. The work itself, the pleasure of finding a field for my peculiar powers, is my highest reward. (Sign 217)

It is in this sense then that Holmes’s deviation from acceptable social norms becomes intentional—a highly stylized act that reveals a frequently overlooked aspect of his character.
Too often dismissed as a cold, calculating advocate of deductive reasoning, Holmes is also one of London’s great performers, donning a variety of costumes and expressions in an attempt to negotiate the social body. When Holmes reveals himself as the man behind the costume of an aged sailor during a brief encounter between Watson and Altheny Jones, the normally self-conscious Jones replies with an uncharacteristic acknowledgment of the detective’s talents, speculating that Holmes “would have made an actor and a rare one” had he continued in the life of the stage (Sign 321). But what Jones fails to realize is that Holmes does act routinely and often quite well. The “last and highest court of appeal in detection,” Holmes depends upon his ability to cast off his pretension and assume the point of view of his subjects whenever official law falls short (Sign 217). His irregular position may be an impediment at times, such as when Holmes is forced to endure the stubborn abuse of Altheny Jones, who routinely dismisses Holmes’s tactics as “theories”; but Conan Doyle implies that Holmes’s status is more often a source of agency, allowing the detective to maneuver back and forth across the threshold of abjection to interrogate deep-seated cultural assumptions from within (Sign 279).

With the public display of his transgression, Holmes forces normative culture—located here in Watson and, in a broader sense, Conan Doyle’s readership—to acknowledge the limitations of its high-minded propriety and consider the benefits new forms of existence present to current restraints. But in an ironic turn of events, Watson initially fails to properly classify the detective’s enigmatic traits. Instead, he allows himself to fall victim to popular prejudice. On the surface, Holmes’s thrice-daily injections should tell the story of a fallen gentleman desperately in need of more socially acceptable pursuits, thereby mimicking the argument found in earlier works such as Robert Louis Stevenson’s Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. The fact that the detective has remained busy—publishing manuscripts, maintaining contacts in France, and otherwise fighting the battle against mental stagnation—however, suggests the need to reconsider what acceptable pursuits entail. The discourse of productivity, as the veteran

physician Watson well knows, is frequently interpreted as a discourse of public image: manifesting itself in a steady stream of professional classifications that provide easy reference points for passing spectators in the realm of social exchange. That Holmes manages to succeed while rejecting these conventions suggests a possible end to their use as an acceptable form of identification.

Holmes’s work ethic is, of course, exceptional. In contrast to his contemporaries, his conception of labor is diffuse, interfering with nearly all aspects of his personal life so as to defy the notion that the detective is ever “at rest.” That Holmes’s drug use might be understood as a form of research challenges the prevailing assumption, well-documented in Parssinen’s study among other sources, that drugs must always be viewed as a source of pleasure or pain. For Holmes, cocaine is neither a poison nor a cure, but a decentering act essential to the development of his personality. Neither he nor Watson needs cocaine to stay up all night hounding the streets of London in search of the Agra treasure. Rather, the drug’s main benefit rests in its ability to nurture Holmes’s desire for “mental exaltation” (Sign 217). Like the Victorian urban spectator who adopts the appearance of an impoverished Londoner to infiltrate the city’s most disadvantaged neighborhoods, Holmes assumes the persona of the cocaine user to explore the cultural landscape and stimulate his mind.54 The control issues that emerge between his appropriations of the drug user’s identity are certainly important; however, they are somewhat less significant than the principle of disidentification Holmes establishes between his character

54 See Walkowitz, City; and Audrey Jaffe, “Detecting the Beggar: Arthur Conan Doyle, Henry Mayhew, and ‘The Man with the Twisted Lip,’” Representations 31 (Summer, 1990): 96-117 for a discussion of urban spectatorship. Interestingly, Walkowitz’s discussion plots a connection between the literature produced through such excursions and imperialist rhetoric. Drawing from Said, Walkowitz claims that “The literature of urban exploration […] emulated the privileged gaze of anthropology in constituting the poor as a race apart, outside the national community” (19). Through the act of observation, she asserts that urban investigators distanced themselves from their objects of study, producing comprehensive knowledge of their subject, the impoverished Other. Of the few studies that have dealt with this topic within the Holmes canon, Audrey Jaffe observes Holmes’s relationship to the urban spectator in “The Man With the Twisted Lip,” where he adopts the appearance of an opium addict in the novel’s introduction as part of his research methods, suggest that he is every bit as involved in the “disturbance in the social field” as the novel’s subject, Neville St. Clair, who leads a double life as a professional beggar in an attempt to boost his newspaper earnings (97). Jaffe’s reading provides a useful look at Holmes’s tactics, but her assertion that “Holmes ‘is’ his professional identity” ultimately fails to locate that identity on the social periphery in any tangible, meaningful sense (113).
and the dominant culture. Holmes is not a figure of authority. Rather, he employs something akin to “the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere” that José Esteban Muñoz describes in his analysis of the tactics queers of color use in contemporary settings to craft his unique approach to modern life.\textsuperscript{55} As Holmes turns away from the parlor room and enters the public realm, he does not conform to traditional notions of juridical power but generates a new position from which he can more effectively observe and evaluate crime.

The key to his approach appears to be that Holmes, a more careful reader of the cultural landscape around him than most of the policemen he assists, recognizes that the secret to good detective work lies in the careful extraction of information from known witnesses. Whether in his relationship with the Baker Street Irregulars or McMurdo the boxer, Holmes’s intricate knowledge of working-class and underclass cultures opens doors to environments where institutional authorities traditionally do not enter. When Holmes appears before Mrs. Smith to inquire as to the whereabouts of her husband, a steam launch captain, he convinces the captain’s wife to talk not through intimidation, but through a carefully constructed string of asides, refusing to broach the topic directly. In a later explanation of his methods before Watson, Holmes states that “The main thing with people of that sort […] is never to let them think that their information can be of the slightest importance to you. If you do they will instantly shut up like an oyster. If you listen to them under protest, as it were, you are very likely to get what you want” (Sign 301). Between his popularity with the public and the informal statement of his tactics here, Conan Doyle identifies the ethics of Holmes’s behavior.\textsuperscript{56} As arrogant as he may seem when dealing with men of his own class, Holmes rarely appears before the poor as a social superior. At all points, he reads the situation before him and modifies his approach accordingly. Holmes can do so because, despite the fact that he hails from a rival social sphere, he has rewritten—or more appropriately, abolished—the formal impediments governing traditional codes of knowledge. Initially, Holmes’s cocaine use leads Watson to suspect him of potential corruption and decline. But as the conversation between the two soon reveals, Holmes’s

\textsuperscript{55}José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) 4.

\textsuperscript{56}As Watson discovers when he stumbles upon the doorstep of Old Sherman, the bird-stuffer, late one evening, “A friend of Mr. Sherlock is always welcome” (Sign 285).
position—both at home with and bemused by all forms of abjection—allows him to see what neither Watson, in his condemnation of Holmes’s behavior, nor Altheny Jones, in the wrongful arrest of Thaddeus Sholto, is ever fully able to recognize: the “foreign” nature of England’s domestic crimes.

In charting the stigma of cocaine addiction first from the public institutions with which Watson closely identifies and then in the performative nature of Holmes’s response, I have attempted to show how the development of that essentially transparent and historically rooted concept of substance abuse depended in part upon the existence of an unassuming public that refused to challenge institutional authority at the site of local control. By considering Conan Doyle’s proposition of an alternative frame in which individual subjects like Holmes develop the ability to talk back to institutional powers through the public display of their opposition, I have also indicated that The Sign of Four is a novel closely aware of and interested in a larger project that involves the revision of existing cultural assumptions concerning public image, masculinity, and the conception of national identity. That is not the same as saying that Conan Doyle is anti-Empire or pro-cocaine. What it does say is that The Sign of Four is mindful of the deplorable state of the nation and that it understands the need to transform England’s failed social policies into something substantially closer to the rhetoric its politicians, reformers, and business leaders project. With the development of Holmes as a literary figure, Conan Doyle begins the process of mapping a course towards a better world through the critical reevaluation of contemporary standards in a literary context. In this chapter’s conclusion, I am less interested in exploring whether or not The Sign of Four actually realizes that world inside of the text—the ambivalence surrounding Jonathan Small’s arrest and Holmes’s return to the cocaine needle implies it does not—than considering how Small’s narration functions as a final act of self-presentation, one that implicates the novel’s readership in a critical reevaluation of contemporary identity in much the same way as Holmes’s earlier exchange with Watson.

Performing the Imperial Abject
To accept Small’s recollections of India as an act of collective shame in which Conan Doyle’s audience is given the opportunity for redemption by coming to terms with and reworking the failures of imperial ideology, we must return to our initial concern for the reception of the Sepoy
Rebellion and consider its impact on the novel’s events. In other words, we must ask Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s question: “can the subaltern speak?” Throughout the greater part of the text, we have been led to believe that Conan Doyle’s representation of his villains is one-dimensional, that like the bestial Tonga who kills Bartholomew Sholto with a poisoned dart, the group of men known as the Sign of Four are little more than the archetypal formulations of the colonial Other. It is a bit unexpected, then, to learn of the hidden depths of Jonathan Small’s character in the novel’s closing chapter. Although not a character of foreign origin, Small’s deplorable behavior in the British Army and subsequent kinship with Mahomet Singh, Abdullah Khan, Dost Akbar, and Tonga mark his collapse into the realm of cultural miscegenation. At the same time, neither embarrassed nor ashamed by the loss of his English identity, Small is able to shirk off the racist discourse touted by his fellow Englishmen and co-conspirator Major Sholto and transcend the boundaries of race to enter an informal brotherhood with the novel’s Eastern characters. In Small’s words: “Black or blue […] they are in with me, and we all go together” (370). It is clear from this statement that Small’s connection to the Sign of Four, unlike his affiliation with the British Empire, depends upon honor, begging the question as to the specific influences responsible for his descent into a life of crime.

Is Small the victim of an imperial ideology spun out of control or is he is merely the most common of thugs? In the novel, Conan Doyle eschews such questions, preferring instead to wrestle with the circumstances that contribute to the complexity of his situation. The final chapter of *The Sign of Four* begins with the news that Small has scattered the Agra treasure among the depths of the Thames River in an attempt to foil Scotland Yard in its recovery. Responding to the culprit’s efforts to undermine the process of the law, Altheny Jones states: “This is a very serious matter, Small […] If you had helped justice, instead of thwarting it in this way, you would have had a better chance at your trial” (346). But significantly, Small admits no wrongdoing. Not only does he refuse to recognize Jones’s authority, he responds with an unanticipated intensity that instantly transports the novel’s conception of legality beyond the reductive categories of English common law:

‘Justice!’ snarled the ex-convict. ‘A pretty justice! Whose loot is this if not ours? Where is the justice that I should give it up to those who have never earned it? Look how I have earned it! Twenty long years in a fever-ridden swamp, all day at
work under the mangrove-tree, all night chained up in the filthy convict-huts, bitten by mosquitoes, racked with ague, bullied by every cursed black-faced policeman who loves to take it out of a white man. That was how I earned the Agra treasure, and you talk to me of justice because I cannot bear to feel that I have paid this price only that another may enjoy it! I would rather swing a score of times, or have one of Tonga’s darts in my hide, than live in a convict’s cells and feel that another man is at ease in a palace with the money that should be mine.’ (Sign 346-347)

His catalog of grievances does not end here. As Small drops his “mask of stoicism” and descends into a fit of rage, the pure, unadulterated emotion in his account reveals the existence of a greater story that may provide the secret to his character’s motivations (Sign 347). In opposition to Watson and Jones, Holmes draws from his position on the social periphery to take an interest in this tale, detaining Small inside Baker Street until he is given the proper opportunity to speak. With the detective’s encouragement, the final installment of The Sign of Four latches onto Small’s narrative to depart from its previous course as a fantastically elaborate crime novel and embark on a surprisingly thorough consideration of English military activity abroad.

Not quite a confession, “The Strange Case of Jonathan Small” is more appropriately an indictment of the Empire’s integrity. Making use of the moral relativism endemic to imperial space, Conan Doyle displays the contradictions ingrained in England’s as-of-yet unfulfilled imperial vision. His representation of Small’s tale does not merely evoke disgust and pity so much as it attaches those reactions to the larger ideological structures that are, surprisingly, nowhere to be found in the transgressions that accompany English military activity abroad. It is often noted that the Sepoy Rebellion was primarily a literary event for the British public.\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{57} Herbert, for example, has argued that “the epochal impact of the Mutiny on Victorian and post-Victorian consciousness can only be meaningfully studied by considering it not as a geopolitical event but as a literary and in effect a fictive one—as a story recounted over and over, in one stylistic inflection and literary register after another, in various journalistic media, in the voluminous historical accounts that began appearing before the cannon had fairly ceased firing on the battlefields, in a spate of memoirs and biography, in pictorial imagery, and in the innumerable poems and fifty or sixty novels in which the Mutiny was reenacted in the nineteenth century” (3).
Because it was quickly suppressed and lacked the mass casualties found in other conflicts, the rebellion was more important to English citizens for its position in the symbolic realm as an object that could be reworked for political gain than for any immediate social effects. But despite the proliferation of claims regarding England’s revisionist memory, the rebellion did leave a visible stain on certain segments of the population. With few exceptions, the displaced working-class and middle-class soldiers involved in the insurrection found themselves implicated in the chaotic realization of their political leaders’ vision for which they were quite both physically and culturally underprepared. Although their individual responses to the event cannot be reduced to any one set of characteristics, Sepoy Rebellion veterans are inextricably linked in a shared experience that has often been dramatically altered in popular representations in the dominant culture.

In turning towards the recognition of the imperial realm as an unregulated space, at least from a metropolitan point of view, Conan Doyle highlights the class dimensions responsible for its existence and reconnects the imperial to the domestic. As he embarks on his recollection of the past, Small begins not with the story of Major Sholto’s corruption and deceit, but with his own origins as a boy in a small village in the heart of the English midlands. By establishing Small’s story within clear discursive limits as a transformation from a rotten young “rover” who “got into a mess over a girl” back home and quickly found himself “invalided out of the Army and unfit for any active occupation,” Conan Doyle cannot avoid drawing attention to the structures of power responsible for the veteran’s current state (Sign 347). In this sense, The Sign of Four is not so much a work of late-Victorian gothic romance as it is connected to emerging trends in naturalist thought. England’s mission abroad has historically entailed the expurgation of threatening social groups—convicts, the working classes, etc.—to distant lands. The ultimate form of social administration, the construction of imperial space not only allowed the nation to exert control over foreign cultures, it provided an outlet for population management as well. Excreted beyond the borders of known experience, the removal of certain groups was not so much a form of forgetting as a reimagining of national identity that excluded specific actors from the realm of the dominant culture. The true inheritors of the English tradition were not the foot soldiers in the campaign for global dominance but the protectors of the state who stood watch over domestic shores.
What is at stake in Small’s account then is nothing less than the formal recognition of working-class experience in the imperial realm. Unapologetically realistic, his character’s rendition of the “burning bungalows” lit up against the night sky and the mutilated bodies of English settlers “cut into ribbons, and half eaten by jackals and native dogs” speaks volumes about the environmental conditions that propelled him to act (Sign 349). For many working-class soldiers, the transformation away from the promise of economic prosperity to the chaos of insurrection necessarily entailed a compromise of individual values. But in Small’s case, his experience on the margins of imperial culture provides an especially unique path towards the collapse of his national loyalties. Discharged from the Army and stranded in India following the loss of his leg during his initial deployment in the 1850s, we are led to infer that Small’s reintroduction to military service at the time of the rebellion reflected little more than a petty pragmatism on the part of the East India Company to ensure its survival. Although the Company would not assist the veteran after his unfortunate run-in with a crocodile on the Ganges River, the persistence of the insurrection revitalized Small’s importance to their objectives, eventually allowing him to assume a position of responsibility as a gatekeeper in their besieged Agra Fort.

When read in light of the personal history Conan Doyle provides in this chapter, Small’s collapse into a life of corruption is not so much a sign of any innate quality on his part as a reflection of the Machiavellian policies that have come to plague all military ties. By constructing the imperial realm as an unregulated space where English virtue becomes transformed, Conan Doyle goes beyond the threat of foreign invasion to underscore the dearth of ideological substance in the nation’s empty rhetoric. Lacking the structural mechanisms to cultivate loyalty in its soldiers—both English and Indian—the Empire has lost the ideological power it once held and now stands exposed, hopelessly clinging to the charred remains of its original vision, ruined from the Mutiny’s advance. Commenting on the material conditions that propel him to take part in the theft of the Agra treasure, Small justifies his actions as such:

In Worcestershire the life of a man seems a great and a sacred thing; but it is very different when there is fire and blood all around you, and you have been used to meeting death at every turn. Whether Achmet the merchant lived or died was a thing as light as air to me, but at the talk about the treasure my heart turned to it, and I thought of what I might do in the old country with it, and how my folk
would stare when they saw their ne’er-do-weel coming back with his pockets full of gold moidores. (358)

And it is in the privileging of the individual over the collective that the operations of the Empire must ultimately be understood. If the central premise of the new imperial vision, implemented soon after Small’s initial arrest, was that the introduction of English military and political institutions to the colonies would provide a direct link between England and its imperial viceroyalties, Small’s immediate knowledge of the dishonesty and greed that permeates the Empire before, during, and after the rebellion ultimately reveals the hidden reality of English activity abroad. At no point does Small allude to the presence of a unified set of laws or principles governing the course of the Empire’s actions. Instead, his account testifies to the existence of widespread corruption, not only on Blair Island, where prison officials consort freely with inmates in drunken card games, but in the city of Agra as well, where the collapse of the East India Company has fostered the development of questionable economic and military alliances between British forces and the native population. Like the Indian Rajah who divides his treasure between native and imperial forces in an attempt to ensure the security of at least half of his wealth regardless of the conflict’s outcome, Small suggests that the Empire has lost sight of the standards it once held and can now do little more than stand back and watch as it facilitates the very conditions of its decline.

Small’s narrative is shocking, but perhaps the most surprising feature of his confession is that it fails to garner sympathy from the men of Baker Street. Following his speech, Small is briefly questioned by Holmes and ushered out of the door with little fanfare or celebration. Even Watson, a former military man himself, is not moved to any particular reaction beyond a general sense of disgust. The absence of reaction to Small’s words warrants pause. Hidden behind much of the ennui attached to his speech are the histrionics of his confession. Small does not speak to justify or alleviate his punishment. Rather, his actions are categorically designed to draw attention to and rework the institutional structures responsible for his condition. As with Holmes’s injection in the novel’s introduction, Watson’s narrative centers upon the embodiment, presence, and transgression of his speech. The resulting effect is a verifiable return of the repressed in which Small comes to perform the imperial abject. Bound and shackled before his captors, Watson tells us that Small’s “handcuffs [clank] together with the impassioned

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movement of his hands” as he speaks, thereby demonstrating “the fury and the passion of the man” around which the room has surrounded with interest (Sign 347). From his position at the center of attention, openly displayed before his captors upon an imaginary scaffold, the legless Small forms an emblematic representation of the monstrosity attributed to imperial history. The body of Small becomes a locus of forgotten atrocity as the markers of abjection—loss, age, etc.—bear out across his form. Small’s presence supplies a visible countertext to the comfort of the Victorian domestic interior with which he interacts through his speech.

What, then, are we finally to make of these events? Conan Doyle clearly implies that the importance of Small’s narration rests in the unforeseen connections it forms between India and London’s streets. Upon hearing the words that comprise his account, the men of Baker Street struggle to resist the associations Small demands, to remove the Empire from the domestic sphere, and to get back to the quiet luxury of the commodity culture their fidelity to mercantile imperialism once promised. Small’s narrative is therefore important for the way in which it threatens to disrupt the stability of the Victorian domestic realm by demonstrating its intimate relationship to contemporary networks of vice. But significantly, this is a threat that can only be identified through the advance of Sherlock Holmes. With the establishment of Holmes as an iconic literary figure who allows the narrative of narcotic drugs to commingle with the narrative of Empire, Conan Doyle frames the abject as a source of value and meaning. By enticing Small to speak, Holmes takes part in the construction of an alternative discourse of cultural memory that stands in opposition to the dominant narratives of Empire and class. The speculation, resistance, and contempt he finds in Small’s words carry the same potency as Tonga’s poison darts or, for that matter, his own cocaine needle in their ability to contaminate England’s perception of national identity. Holmes’s recovery of the imperial narrative, like his recovery of the narrative of drugs, forces Conan Doyle’s readership to reassess the emphases on purity in national identity and on the locations of English national identity that social powers have favored as standards of judgment for inclusion or exclusion as a member of the dominant culture.

Conclusion
When Arthur Conan Doyle sat down to write The Sign of Four in the autumn of 1889, he identified for the nation a set of social and political standards that would challenge his readers to
think. Within these guidelines, it was to the inspection of new social categories and national memory that he directed his audience’s attention. While Conan Doyle’s decision to pair the sensational presentation and subsequent questioning of narcotic drug use with the reaction to and destruction of imperial authority springs largely from his position as an author of popular fiction, his use of Watson’s subjectivity in the dramaturgical conventions employed in each scene also says something of the skepticism and self-questioning that had become an inescapable part of the popular reaction to institutional authority. The legacy of Foucauldian criticism has taught us that the production of knowledge takes place in the visual realm through formal and informal structures.\textsuperscript{58} The \textit{Sign of Four}, however, marks the recognition of this system’s creative potential. The scenes of shame that fill the novel allow Holmes and Small to define themselves in ways that employ their physical appearance as a tool for change. Their behavior exceeds the expectations of their audience. But in addition, it has a singular, expressive quality of its own.

\textit{The Sign of Four} is not jingoist propaganda but a popular fiction piece directed at a middle-class public that was distanced enough from the past that it could find entertainment in the narrative dimensions attached to the novel’s recollection of the Great Mutiny. Conan Doyle’s primary accomplishment in its publication is that he has found a way to make his audience aware of their involvement with the text as readers. It is certainly true that the presentation of shocking imagery does not guarantee reflection or contemplation in the viewer. But Conan Doyle insists upon the artificiality of his stories in order to demand that we reconcile the difference between literary and material realms. It is in this sense that it is appropriate that, following the arrest of Jonathan Small, Watson returns to the image of Holmes reaching up for the cocaine bottle in the novel’s final paragraph. Yet in this passage, unlike the first, it is Conan Doyle’s decision to cut the scene short that reveals the trick of his narrative construction, the words lingering helplessly above a sea of white space. And it is most certainly with this final turn that Conan Doyle transfers the burden of responsibility for his novel’s questions to his readers’ shoulders. No longer addicted to the spell of narration, with Holmes’s fingers perched

delicately in the air, the decision is ultimately theirs: to repeat past mistakes or—perhaps finally—enact reform.
Chapter Three: “How Different it Was With Material Things!” Consumer Culture and Social Responsibility in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

The preceding pages of this thesis have established a notable split in the representation of iconic fictional identities. In Chapter One, the physical absences accompanying the construction of Henry Jekyll’s public image were shown to be crucial in establishing his character’s participation in a reconsideration of the cultural authority the Victorian gentleman holds in the public sphere. Conversely, Chapter Two found that the physical presence of Sherlock Holmes’s body in *The Sign of Four* allows Conan Doyle to set the stage for the British public to formally acknowledge the legacy of imperialism. In this chapter, I look to Oscar Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Gray* to identify a third form of representation where Dorian, while physically present, appears so synthetic in his construction that the metaphoric link Wilde provides between his body and portrait disrupts the stability of class identity, calling attention to the artistic method I have been tracing all along to reframe notions of value and social responsibility.

“Charity creates a multitude of sins,” Oscar Wilde contends early in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” an essay that first appeared in the *Fortnightly Review* at around the same time he was concluding work on an expanded edition of his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.59

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59 Oscar Wilde, “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” in *Literature and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Talia Schaffer (New York: Longman, 2006) 356. For some, a brief biography may be of use here. While it is perhaps difficult to accept that one of the most iconic figures of the aesthetic and decadent movements would have reservations about late-Victorian material culture, it should be remembered that Wilde’s politics were influenced by a lifetime of radical thought. The son of Irish nationalists, who, despite their titles of nobility, openly challenged the authority of British rule, his biography is filled with references to the networks of labor and the oppressed. Wilde, as a student of Oxford University in 1874, famously assisted then-Professor of Fine Art and prominent socialist John Ruskin in the construction of a road through the campus’s marshes as part of a project to teach progressive students the value of hard labor. Later, working as a prominent member of London’s thriving literary scene, he befriended fellow authors and well-known radicals such as William Morris and George Bernard Shaw, forming correspondences that would last throughout his career. In the sense that these details begin to challenge our iconic perception of Wilde as a dandy, it is less important that we view them as a source of contradiction that to remember that regardless of photographs displaying his body cloaked in the most elaborate of contemporary fashions, Wilde could remain perceptive and even critical of the processes in which he actively partook. To say that one is skeptical of capitalism’s structures is not to suggest that they lack an interest in material things. For, if nothing else, Wilde’s politics is not the type of tightly bound dogmas and predetermined views but the
Captivated by the ironic power of this observation, Wilde dedicates much of his attention in the opening paragraphs of his essay to unpacking the flawed logic of a failed social policy with his distinctive artistic wit. The “sins” in question are, of course, the product of a labor-intensive effort to better the lives of the poor without addressing the fundamental issue of structural change. Moving away from the accepted policies of the upper and middle class, Wilde implies that privileged Londoners sympathetic to the plight of the underclass should be suspicious of any method of formal assistance that seeks to remedy economic inequality while failing to provide common access to the tools of cultural production. Underscoring his commitment to progressive and libertarian thought, Wilde goes on to articulate his position that London’s problems cannot be solved without granting citizens the means to create and produce for themselves; that is, to become “individuals” who are not defined through the presence or lack of material things but rather by their commitment to higher ideals of beauty and reason. The current vogue for charitable organizations in London’s East End does not, in Wilde’s opinion, allow the poor the opportunity to elevate their position, as he believes it should. Instead, he suggests that it attempts “to solve the problem of poverty, for instance, by keeping the poor alive; or, in the case of a very advanced school, by amusing the poor” with a fundamentally misguided attempt at goodwill (Soul 356). Charity, Wilde tells us, is a practice through which the nation’s economic problems are continuously disguised as members of the upper class reinvent themselves as solving a problem that has been created by the very system whose benefits they enjoy. It fails because it allows the underclass to remain economically and intellectually impoverished while the nation’s elite, emotionally fulfilled from the illusion of contributing to social improvement, is granted the opportunity to passively consume tales of woe.

By beginning with the assertion that charity is not a productive form of social policy but a selfish reaction to images of suffering and poverty, Wilde advances a different understanding of the motivations that structure England’s economic relations than if he were to target the operations of industry specifically. Because his essay is an ironic, carefully structured meditation on national culture, he is able to distance himself from the divisive power of contemporary debates. His conception of London’s class problem accounts for the widely held desire among the nation’s elite to feel that it has influenced the world for the better. The accumulation of “things and the symbols for things” has, in Wilde’s view, failed to provide individuals with an adequate sense of personal satisfaction (Soul 360). Instead, it has cheapened the national culture, impacting and affecting the upper and middle class to produce intense feelings of frustration, anxiety, and guilt. To remove the nation from the debilitating effects of its unnatural attraction to objects, it is necessary, Wilde insists, to shift the dominant culture’s attention from the immediate signs of human suffering to a broader analysis of the social practices that undermine individual happiness, and to consider not merely the material needs of the underclass but the spiritual demands of the culture as a whole.

This chapter, focusing on The Picture of Dorian Gray, takes up the way Wilde’s novel also reflects upon how consumer culture erected boundaries between individuals. It explores how consumer culture contributed to the practice of spectatorship, so crucial to the Victorian fin de siècle, in altering the urban subject’s relationship to class experience; and, in addition, it suggests a connection between consumerist tendencies and Wilde’s own ambivalence about the artistic realm’s ability to alleviate the nation’s spiritual dearth. With the creation of Dorian Gray, a figure who is as much a caricature as a fully developed literary agent, Wilde employs what I would call the late-Victorian revision of character to address these concerns.

**Picturing Dorian Gray**

Given Wilde’s attraction to the intersections between charity, consumerism, and culture, it should come as no surprise that the title character of The Picture of Dorian Gray is not only one of the nation’s budding philanthropists but an avid consumer as well, for the misguided approach of London’s upper-class population to the topic of social responsibility was clearly on Wilde’s mind in the 1890s. Wilde concentrates the interrelated ideologies of material culture upon
Dorian in such a way as to allow the novel to follow the argument of this thesis and employ his character as a site of contemporary debate. I suggest that Wilde’s representation in *Dorian Gray* of the troublesome boundary between vulgar materialism and art signals an important modification to the argument in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” in that Wilde, working through the figure of Dorian, comes to deny the possibility of a separation in spheres between artistic and material economies, staging a crisis in late-Victorian “ways of seeing” and thrusting the discourse of philanthropy into a state of flux. By framing our impression of Dorian as one who defines himself through his detached relationship to objects and experiences, Wilde connects his character’s involvement with “high” and “low” culture to the problem of Dorian’s inability to craft an emotional response. Dorian suffers, we are told, precisely because he assumes his sins can be masked through the strategies of consumption that form such a crucial component of his life. His attempts at goodwill, whether formal or informal, are not based upon empathy with the poor so much as a self-centered desire to alter his perception of what he has become. Exploring *Dorian Gray* with an eye for character, I believe, may help us better account for what is at stake in the novel’s treatment of class.

But of course, to say that *Dorian Gray* is about reexamining late-Victorian theories of cultural materialism—and the zeitgeist they reveal—is first to acknowledge the conditions of the novel’s publication. In writing of the connection between charity, consumerism, and culture, it should be clear that I am speaking not merely of the need to identify a representational debate on the linguistic value of these terms but of a more historical urge to define the period from 1880 to 1914 “as a kind of interregnum,” as Raymond Williams has previously named it. Extremely interested in the way words evolve to assume new and often unexpected definitions as they mature throughout the various stages of industrialization, Williams attempted to provide an etymological study that recognized the multiple spheres that govern the relationship between

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60 By “way of seeing,” I am referring to John Berger’s assertion that visual culture comes before all other forms of experience. In *Ways of Seeing*, Berger draws upon Walter Benjamin’s essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” to explore the uneasy parallels between public advertising and the discourse of the art object, which he suggests “use similar, highly tactile means to play upon the spectator’s sense of acquiring the real thing which the image shows” (141).

material and intellectual concerns. In the introduction to the revised edition of *Culture & Society: 1780-1950*, he stressed that the purpose of his project “was organised around the new kinds of problem and question that were articulated not only in the new sense of culture but in a whole group of closely associated words” (ix). By advancing the need to modify and extend the horizons of leftist critique, Williams sought not merely to suggest that culture emerged in opposition to contemporary values—that is, that it worked as a rival form of perfection that could be attained through the study of the arts—but rather to demonstrate that the rise of “new kinds of personal and social relationships” functioned variously “both as a recognition of practical separation and as an emphasis of alternatives” to the dominant interest in the accumulation of wealth (xviii). What Williams discovered, in other words, was nothing short of the theoretical strand that would later be expanded upon first by Pierre Bourdieu and then John Guillory, among others, to form the basis of the concept of “cultural capital,” essentially the argument that there are multiple avenues of hierarchical relationships that revolve around the principles of material inequality but cannot be reduced to questions of economic capital on their own.62 And it is with an eye for this distinction, so crucial to Wilde’s context, that we can index his novel’s participation in an ongoing reconsideration of terms.

It should be noted from the outset that the need for this discussion is great. While *Dorian Gray* is obviously concerned with the moral battle between aesthetics and ethics, there has been a tendency amongst recent critics to complicate the novel’s politics beyond questions of philosophic intent, casting the text as a reflection on Irish nationalism, a Lacanian tale of aging, and a narrative aesthetic of crime to confirm Regenia Gagnier’s previous assertion that “we must shift our analysis from the artwork alone to encompass a number of interrelated phenomena of the time.”63 Such observations have undoubtedly played an important role in advancing the


effort to reclaim a text that was long-overlooked as a flawed or merely autobiographical work. In the process, they have also drawn attention to the world of complexity behind Wilde’s deceptively simple narrative approach. It is, after all, hardly an exaggeration to suggest that in its treatment of culture and class, *Dorian Gray* confirms David Punter’s contention that works of the literary Gothic provide “a very intense, if displaced, engagement with political and social problems.” What is frightening about Wilde’s novel is precisely its uncanny ability to work as a site of estrangement, calling attention to subtle differences from our own world as it traps us in the narrative redolence of its plot. As readers, we must accept that *Dorian Gray* is disorienting; it asks us to suspend the rules of the material world. But, as critics, the lingering presence of contemporary markers raises questions for us, challenging our abilities to isolate a distinction between content and context in our ongoing examination of the novel.

In reading *Dorian Gray* with an eye to the representation of philanthropy, commodity form, and the conceptualization of experience, this chapter intends to continue that work. I seek to expand upon previous studies by Rachel Bowlby and Jeff Nunokawa that have suggested the importance of consumer culture to the novel’s aims. My approach differs, however, in that, rather than merely collapse the boundary between economic and non-economic realms—which I take as a given—I propose that we have an opportunity to use these categories to unite the theme of social responsibility with how characters are constructed, pairing cultural and formal approaches to extend the purview of the novel’s concerns. My argument, again, is essentially that the creation of Dorian as a flat character who oscillates between shifting tactics of domination and subordination is part of a subversive strategy that allows Wilde to play with assumptions of control commonly associated with what we now call the consumer experience. But rather than view this aspect of his character as tangential or cursory, I suggest that it is an

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integral component in the novel’s argumentative aims. If the discourse of philanthropy depends upon the dissemination of influence that has been acquired through the accumulation of material things, the inability of Dorian to do anything but pollute and consume in the latter half of the novel indicates that ideology’s discursive limits. Dorian’s “passion for sensation” does not allow his character to gain personal satisfaction or improve England’s health. It demonstrates, instead, the destructive power of the most significant of late-Victorian fictions: the desire to separate oneself from others through the collection of goods.

As I make these claims I recognize that it has become common to suggest that late-Victorian patterns of consumer culture reveal themselves in alterations to shopping as a cultural practice. But it remains crucial to bear in mind that commerce thrived in the fin de siècle not just in the aisles of department stores and arcades but on the pages of catalogs and magazines, in print advertisements, displays, and the development of a highly theatrical visual realm. It is often noted that the division between the acts of production and consumption that accompanied the movement of retail processes away from the operations of manufacture and assembly not only created a culture of disassociation between workers and consumers but a shift in how objects were valued as well. In order to expand the scope of trade so as to generate a market for items that were increasingly designed to appeal to a leisure class, whose upper- and middle-class backgrounds supplied the primary target for such changes, retailers turned the discourse of material goods away from the “use value” of products—that is, the specific function they fulfill in labor or life—to the abstracted sense of desire that they produce. Marx had, of course, asserted in Capital, Vol. 1 (1867) that “a commodity is […] an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies wants of some sort or another” in his attempt to apply the rules of logic to consumerism’s advance. But with the creation of items such as the mass-produced camera and the gramophone, not to mention the marketing strategies applied to older commodities such as  


68 A typical summary of these changes can be found in Michael Ball and David Sunderland, An Economic History of London, 1800-1914 (New York: Routledge, 2001) 121-144.

tobacco, pharmaceuticals, and soap, the concept of “need” had become an increasingly relative concern.

With Dorian Gray, Wilde employs this shifting realm of value to create a figure that embodies an elite culture’s worst fears about the development of the dandy as a member of the leisure class. The synthetic properties attributed to his identity—both in his portrait and descriptions of his immaculate, unspoiled body—position his persona alongside cultural trends that identify the conceptualization of the self as a kind of commodity form. Because Dorian is set up as a philanthropist, Wilde also speaks to the dissemination of influence and the social risks of viewing people as things. I examine the novel’s engagement with questions of social responsibility in three key moments that, Wilde suggests, provide the narrative logic necessary to track Dorian’s relation to these trends: first, the introduction of Dorian to his portrait in a scene where the commodification of identity begins; secondly, Dorian’s description of his relationship to Sibyl Vane as it is mediated through his vantage point in the theater; and, finally, Dorian’s attempt to preemptively save another love interest, Hetty Merton, from disgrace in the novel’s final pages. In each of these scenes, I track a process at work that precludes the development of interior depth. Dorian is not united with his surroundings as a social actor but a passive spectator, espousing a philosophy of the senses that stands in opposition to Wilde’s conception of individuality, community, and a larger spiritual realm. But in order to identify how Dorian’s approach to life pairs up with the questions of philanthropy the novel raises, it is necessary to pin point the novel’s relationship to material culture.

A World of Things

Dorian Gray is a creative work. A commitment to style and form binds the novel to its narrative aims. We cannot help but acknowledge that the text stands firmly within the tradition of Wilde’s writing in that it displays the author’s standard attention for the importance of dialogue and movement in its arrangement of formal elements including character, action, and scene. In thus considering exactly what Dorian Gray accomplishes in this context, we must first acknowledge the function and purposes of its setting and props, for the image of the West End that Wilde describes in the novel is not composed through individual people so much as it is a product of their association to objects and things. Dorian Gray’s center in the most privileged section of
the city is significant in that it is both a realm of abundance and a mediating space that allows Wilde to point towards the proliferation of material goods while denying access to the conditions of production that presuppose their existence. Objects in Wilde’s West End are never hard, abrasive, or rough, as they might be if one could observe their location of origin. Instead, they are plush, textured, smooth, and ornate, filled with the wealth of experience that allows characters to slip into the Elysian paradise of consumer bliss. Basil Hallward’s studio, the location of the novel’s opening scene, captures this sentiment perfectly in its ability to unite the scent of freshly cut roses, lilacs, and pink-flowering thorn with Lord Henry Wotton’s cigarette smoke. But if this room is a realm of pleasure in the atmosphere it conveys, it is also an \textit{extraordinarily cluttered} narrative space. Here we look on as Lord Henry observes his friend at work from his comfortable position atop a divan of Persian saddle-bags in the corner of the room. A piano with sheet music rests across from him while long tussore-silk curtains hang from floor to ceiling, capturing the movement of birds outdoors to produce a subtle “kind of momentary Japanese effect” (Picture 5).

The cumulative effect of these things is essentially two-fold: they impact narrative aesthetics and plot. On the one hand, Wilde’s description of objects and sensations privileges surface above depth, turning our attention away from the interior processes of characters’ minds to the movements and conversations that are inscribed upon the novel’s page. But on the other, they also denote a process of estrangement that allows characters momentarily to lose track of their place in the material realm. To come into contact with anything that can be bought, sold, or exchanged in \textit{Dorian Gray} is immediately to become mesmerized and controlled. It suggests that one is able to use the scopophilic satisfaction of that encounter to enact a fantasy of purchase, allowing material culture—that is, the manufactured objects that form a sense of cultural identity—to stand in as a substitute for the experiences that one might expect it to facilitate instead. Given the emphasis that Wilde places on handcrafted goods and organic pleasures, it would, of course, be inappropriate to suggest that \textit{Dorian Gray} confirms the “sex appeal” Walter Benjamin associates with the mass-produced.\textsuperscript{70} Yet nevertheless, we do well to

observe that the novel frequently renders the organic inorganic simply by calling attention to its form.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in a well-known reading from *Epistemology of the Closet*, has suggested that the brilliance of Wilde’s queer subtext rests in the fact that it uses the depiction of objects such as opium to convert the most basic desires of the novel’s characters into material objects, transporting abstract expressions and emotions to a more accessible realm of exchange. But because that process of conversion is so diffuse, and because the displacement of sexuality to material things is not essential to a queer reading of the text, we must also recognize that consumption functions more generally as a strategic approach to life. Looking to the first scene I have chosen to examine, a scene that describes the completion of Basil’s portrait of Dorian in the final paragraphs of the novel’s second chapter following a brief conversation between Dorian and Lord Henry in the garden of the painter’s home, one immediately observes these tactics at work. The scene hangs upon the image of Dorian reflecting upon the gracious and comely form of his painting with a deep sense of fascination, “as if he had recognized himself for the first time” (Picture 25). In this passage, Dorian’s thoughts cycle through the various stages of identification, eventually leaving his initial sense of satisfaction to acknowledge the horrific truth: the portrait is more perfect than himself and, in its aesthetic superiority, represents everything that he would like to be. As we leave his character to this revelation, we move on to a brief exchange between Basil and Lord Henry that further advances the need to objectify his form. Emphasizing how deeply Dorian has come to impact his sense of experience, Lord Henry testifies to his desire to purchase the portrait, asserting, “It is one of the greatest things in modern art. I will give you anything you like to ask for it. I must have it,” a telling statement that not only anticipates his ensuing collection of photographs featuring Dorian but also his subsequent comparison of Dorian to a “toy” (Picture 25, 34). Then, ostensibly completing the process, Basil confirms the portrait’s connection to the marketplace as “property”

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71 Specifically, Sedgwick contends that Wilde was able to accomplish for his period “the performative work of enabling a European community of gay mutual recognition and self-constitution at least partly by popularizing a consumerism that already derived an economic model from the traffic in drugs.” See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 173.
even as he denies the possibility of its sale, stating that it has been set aside for Dorian as a gift (Picture 25).

At a certain point here, we are no longer talking about painting. The intimate connection this passage describes between subject and object, as it is displayed through the relationship between Dorian and his portrait, is essential to our interpretation of the text. Wilde suggests that it not only provides the contiguity necessary to chart the novel’s interest in questions of surface and depth but that it also confirms the importance of authenticity and adaptation within a vaster economy of material exchange. We are initially told that Basil’s portrait is designed to recognize the value of Dorian’s influence and recreate the beauty he has witnessed for his friend. Because Dorian has shown him a side of the artistic world that he had not previously known to exist, he hopes to return the blessing and use his portrait to reveal to Dorian a side of himself that is as much a product of aesthetics as fact. But in making Dorian’s portrait too beautiful, Basil allows Wilde to suggest that the conversion of identities into a system of material exchange is ultimately a source of destruction and sin. The portrait, at its very core, is a distancing mechanism in that it threatens to injure artist and subject, overlooking interior complexities in the construction of an exterior self. By thus subjecting his characters to a dissociative mode of thought that allows Dorian’s portrait to take precedence over the real thing, Wilde captures the ideological framework he needs to code Dorian’s perception of reality on highly simulated terms. For it is as such that Dorian’s famous lament (“How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young […] If it were only the way! […] For that—for that—I would give everything”) does not merely enact a supernatural transformation that allows Wilde to craft a moral tale so much as it filters his character’s aspiration to “give everything” for perfection through economic principles in order to pay for his youth (Picture 25). Dorian, Wilde suggests, does not desire the object: 

he becomes the object at precisely this point, relocated to the dimensions of the canvas’s surface, dimensions that match his body. Whatever tincture may come upon his soul, his body will escape its visible signs, for, as the novel states, “the portrait was to bear the burden of his shame” (Picture 88).

What are we, as readers, to make of this scene? It would, at least in part, appear that Dorian’s position as an object that is subject to transformation employs the material economy as a basis for its significance. Rachel Bowlby, in an important reconsideration of the novel, has
commented extensively on the economics of hedonism that allow Dorian’s character to translate his pleasure into quantifiable units of trade.\(^\text{72}\) By identifying a language of exchange that unites Dorian’s behavior with the ideological structures that support its existence, she positions his character as an integral component in the capitalist framework, disrupting the boundaries between cultural, moral, and economic realms to show the points where those categories overlap. Bowlby is no doubt correct in her assertion that Wilde’s novel hangs upon the economic discourse of advertisement, desire, and exchange. But recognizing that her interest in “Promoting Dorian Gray” is primarily to identify the psychological conditions of the marketplace, her treatment of material economy falters when we look at the novel’s cross-class relationships; that is, those “border crossings” that are so essential to my interpretation of the text.

How does one become a consumer? If in possession of capital, it is easy enough. But Bowlby implores us to read Sibyl Vane’s relationship to Dorian in terms of her participation in the same consumer culture that Dorian takes part in and, in order for this interpretation to work, we must to some extent ignore the power dynamics that structure their relationship, power dynamics that most certainly place her character at a disadvantage in terms of what she can buy. Wilde’s explicit representation of their relationship through the context of trade, and subsequent comparison of Sibyl’s condition to slavery (e.g., we are told that she is “bound” to the theater’s proprietor) implies that there is a clear difference at work in their lives, bringing us back to the question of social responsibility with which I first began (Picture 49). It is necessary to look beyond the boundaries of desire and exchange to the other issues with which consumerism interacts, issues that I believe are embodied in Dorian’s aesthetic form. For understanding that questions of sale and purchase cannot be separated from social responsibility, cultural capital, or any number of interrelated material concerns, what is perhaps most impressive about Dorian Gray is that the novel provides a figure that unites these trends.

If we return briefly to Wilde’s introduction, we are instantly reminded of Dorian’s position as a narrative “type.” Dorian enters the novel leafing through a volume of sheet music

\(^\text{72}\) More precisely, she observes that “The prescription of Dorian’s hedonistic lifestyle can be compared to a perceptible reorientation of economic theory” found in Alfred Marshall’s Principles of Economics, published concurrently with the first version of Dorian Gray in 1890 (14).
in Basil Hallward’s studio, more preoccupied with his own enjoyment than his missed performance alongside Lord Henry’s Aunt Agatha in London’s East End. Central to our initial conception of his character here is the fact that he epitomizes the philanthropist’s casual attitude towards questions of poverty in his own self-interested approach to the world. His connection to the lower class has everything to do with the fact that while Dorian is initially set up as a source of purity and salvation, he is increasingly forced to acknowledge that his relationship to society is not based upon a desire to do good but rather a wish to pursue his own self-interest as a casual spectator of urban life. It is this tension—the tension between action and expectation—established so early in the narrative, which is continuously played upon through the course of the text.

By beginning this discussion of Wilde’s interest in charity, consumerism, and culture with a focus on the West End, I have attempted to position our impression of Dorian as a participant in the consumer realm who finds the commodification of identity essential to his interpretation of life. In the paragraphs that remain, I intend to expand upon this position by turning to the strategies Dorian employs in his interactions with the underclass, both in the East End and England’s countryside. Wilde uses Dorian to reveal the manner in which late-Victorian methods of cultural interpretation could potentially become forms of adaptation that undermine, deny, and obscure the importance of economic class. My intention in exploring this aspect of his character is to propose the terms necessary to reevaluate Dorian’s importance to the novel. Dorian, I argue, blurs the line between philanthropy and consumerism; he is at once a paragon of purity and a destroyer of innocence. Consequently, if literary characters in this novel stamp the text with emblematic personalities that stand in for specific qualities in the culture, Wilde’s decision to have Dorian play a part that is continually composed and redrawn throughout the course of the novel calls attention to the thinly protected ideological ground upon which his personality rests. Dorian is not “like” other characters; he is purposefully set apart from the novel as exceptional in his ability to negotiate widely disparate social, economic, and culture realms. His importance is thus not a product of his individual transgressions so much as his ability to connect those transgressions to the competing discourses of consumerism and social responsibility. Turning now to the novel’s involvement with the underclass, I will identify the distancing mechanisms Wilde employs in each approach.
Picturing the East End

If Wilde constructed Dorian as an agent of social responsibility, the kind of social responsibility that he describes in the novel is not limited to the charitable organizations that operate in London’s East End. *Dorian Gray* is, after all, not a novel about philanthropy but about the power of transgression and influence. Although conversations about charity and reform spring up repeatedly, Wilde rarely expands in any great depth upon the references that he makes and, what’s more, he often employs these asides in contradictory ways. One example is having Lord Henry parrot his view from “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” that the East End exemplifies “the problem of slavery and we try to solve it by amusing the slaves”: a statement that, in this context, radically modifies the original meaning of the phrase with its suggestions of nihilistic complacency (*Picture 37*). But however troublesome the opinions on philanthropy and social reform Wilde depicts may be, when one reflects upon the sheer number of allusions to charity that line the novel’s pages and, perhaps more importantly, considers the novel’s historical proximity to such important cultural touchstones as the labor movement of the 1880s, which saw mass demonstrations all over London, and the publication of William Booth’s best-selling text in support of the Salvation Army, *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (1890), the question of philanthropy materializes as one of the novel’s central concerns. Recognizing that the expanded edition of *Dorian Gray* entailed further descriptions of London’s working poor, including the addition of the opium den and the establishment of Sibyl Vane’s brother, James, and that Wilde deliberately positioned these chapters against additional scenes depicting elaborate dinner parties and a shooting expedition in the English countryside, it becomes clear that it is less important to discern a specific authorial voice that speaks out on the issue of social reform than to identify the narrative strategies that weave the novel’s interests together as one.

As in the novel’s introduction, space, of course, is essential here. It most frequently appears in *Dorian Gray* as that which divides the novel into chapters and scenes, and functions more generally to bestow parameters upon the novel’s action within these realms. If Wilde’s London is an environment that is governed by the boundaries of difference, we are also led to believe that it is a place that recognizes the exploration of those boundaries as a source of value and meaning. The impulse behind the exploration of London’s impoverished neighborhoods,
whether in the form of Dorian’s slumming or the philanthropy of Lord Henry’s Aunt, is always based upon the assumption that “there is something going on” in the area where the underclass lives, that the elite have a responsibility to investigate this territory, and that the poor have little say or choice as to how or when this process occurs. It is in this sense that the East End is not separated from the dominant culture so much as it is revealed through specific methods of interaction, the foremost of which operate on the general principles of trade. By setting up the relationship between rich and poor in terms of a hierarchical form of interaction in which the poor are passively observed while the rich freely enter and exit this space of inequality, Wilde upholds the prior metaphor of commodification found in Dorian’s portrait to imply that there is a similar kind of adaptation that takes place. It is not, Wilde implies, that the privileged observer is given an opportunity to bear witness to the “real” experience of how the other half lives but rather that their brief exposure to the conditions of poverty functions as a form of tourism, transforming the cultural landscape into a spectacle that can only identify the underclass on superficial terms.

Moving to the second scene I wish to examine, a scene where we are introduced to Dorian’s relationship with Sibyl Vane by virtue of a conversation he holds with Lord Henry, the question of authenticity and consumption is raised once more. Dorian tells Henry that he enters London’s East End with a “wild desire to know everything about life” (Picture 44). The city is a “labyrinth of grimy streets and black, grassless squares,” each filled with absurd spectacles for the privileged viewer to take in (Picture 44). Clearly, this episode in the novel is meant to preface Dorian’s personal change. But it is important to bear in mind that his character’s travels to the slums are not important for what happens initially so much as for the romantic narrative they will eventually allow him to construct. In slipping off to the darkest corners of the city, to what Lord Henry has previously referred to as “this grey, monstrous London of ours, with its myriads of people, its sordid sinners, and its splendid sins,” Dorian hopes to unveil his commitment to the project of a “new Hedonism” and confirm that, along with his newfound awareness of his ability to exert dominance and control, his life has become a form of art, granting him excursions to a land of strange inhabitants and exotic delights (Picture 44, 23). As an environment that stands beyond his immediate realm of experience, the East End fulfills Dorian’s longing for sensation, desire, and action. His immersion in the urban slum, and the
accompanying fantasy he creates, is therefore significant in that it propels his character to a mental state wherein the problem of poverty no longer exists despite our recognition as readers of the inescapable presence of its most visible signs.

In other words, fascinated with the sense of “danger” that we know he should abhor, Dorian commodifies his experience a second time (*Picture 44*). But unlike his initial encounter with his portrait, Wilde implies, this passage is most significant for the social questions that are at stake. In positioning Dorian within a culture of recreational spectators who slip in and out of impoverished neighborhoods to observe the poor, it would appear that his character has lost interest in the important project of doing good, not merely as a philanthropist but as a productive citizen committed to higher ideals of beauty and aesthetic form (*Picture 44*). True, Dorian has not *physically isolated* himself from the underclass; however, he has *converted his relationship* to the city into a self-interested form of consumption that remains detached from the basic goals of human interaction on all relevant points. Dorian does not seek to achieve, nor is he ever fully capable of, empathy with the people who inhabit London’s East End. Instead, he battles their vulgarity with his wit, constructing a boundary between himself and others as he assembles the conditions for his fictional world.

“I determined to go out in search of some adventure,” Dorian states bluntly to Lord Henry at the start of his tale (*Picture 44*). In the lines that immediately follow, he distorts the city’s slums with a touch of mockery and burlesque. Drifting through the narrow alleyways of East London past the decrepit buildings that hover atop this tenuous foundation, Dorian encounters the existence of a community he is not a part of and which he aspires to critique. To the extent that his pretensions supply a basis for his perception of the East End’s novelty, Wilde reveals the ostentation that accompanies his condescending account of the scene:

I don’t know what I expected, but I went out and wandered eastward […] About half-past eight I passed by an absurd little theatre, with great flaring gas-jets and gaudy play-bills. A hideous Jew, in the most amazing waist-coat I ever beheld in my life, was standing at the entrance, smoking a vile cigar. He had greasy ringlets, and an enormous diamond blazed in the centre of a soiled shirt. ‘Have a box, my Lord?’ he said, when he saw me, and took off his hat with an air of gorgeous servility. There was something about him, Harry, that amused me. He
was such a monster. You will laugh at me, I know, but I really went in and paid a whole guinea for the stage-box. To the present day I can’t make out why I did so […] Well, I found myself seated in a horrid little private box, with a vulgar drop-scene staring me in the face. I looked out from behind the curtain, and surveyed the house. It was a tawdry affair, all Cupids and cornucopias, like a third-rate wedding-cake. The gallery and pit were fairly full, but the two rows of dingy stalls were quite empty, and there was hardly a person in what I suppose they called the dress-circle. Women went about with oranges and ginger-beer, and there was a terrible consumption of nuts going on.  (Picture 44-45)

Dorian is clearly amused by the images contained in these lines. His character not only identifies the artifacts that compose this scene but takes pains to embellish all of the details in this passage with a collection of carefully chosen adjectives, metaphors, similes, and asides. The building, its decorations, its inhabitants’ clothing, and the like are purposefully included to establish a sense of the theater’s cultural lack. Dorian’s pleasure, in this sense, would appear to manifest itself through the framework of narrative control; for the process of storytelling is a linguistic power that functions here to construct difference retroactively through the deployment of what Judith Butler has called “excitable speech.”73 So vivid are the details Dorian provides that it is at times difficult to discern whether there is a greater performance at work on stage or in the crowd. It is appropriate, then, that Wilde plays upon this particular tension by reframing the distinction between performer and audience as he toys with the boundaries of theatrical form.

Because the plays Dorian observes, both on this night and his subsequent returns, are all shortened adaptations of Shakespeare’s work, they are designed to produce the greatest possible affect in the shortest possible time, reduced not even to their essential dramaturgical structure so much as their most memorable parts. It is as such that Dorian becomes captivated with the vivid contrast that exists between the strength of Sibyl’s performance on stage and the extreme degradation of her surroundings, latching onto the power of these scenes to piece together a favorable impression of her talents as a result of a few well-practiced exchanges. Sibyl, we are

73 See Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997). There Butler writes “to be injured by speech is to suffer a loss of context, that is, not to know where you are,” a statement that would appear to capture the fantastic dimensions of Dorian’s narrative here (4).
led to believe, affects Dorian precisely because she lacks a stable connection to her script. Her character is essentially her own cultural form, strategically constructed and filtered through Dorian’s perception to become a performer in a narrative he can enact. What is perhaps most surprising, however, is the nature of the story Dorian selects for this play. Fresh under the guidance of Lord Henry, he transforms his previous interest in charity from a sign of boredom to a romantic tale of adventure that allows him to follow Sibyl’s nickname for his character and position himself as “Prince Charming” in attempting her rescue from the vile grip of her proprietor’s hands. In this representation of his moral obligation, it is not that Dorian must salvage the lives of London’s East End inhabitants but rather that he will penetrate the space of corruption to extract the one treasure that lay beneath it. Commenting on his aspirations, he frames his plans for Lord Henry as such:

I want you and Basil to come with me some night and see her act. I have not the slightest fear of the result. You are certain to acknowledge her genius. Then we must get her out of the Jew’s hands. She is bound to him for three years—at least for two years and eight months—from the present time. I shall have to pay him something, of course. When all is settled, I shall take a West End theatre and bring her out properly. She will make the world as mad as she has made me.

Dorian’s use of the future indicative here is revealing. In this moment of affection, a moment that is as much a product of narrative as his brief encounters with Sibyl following her performances each night, Dorian is not in love with a person but the intimate ritual that allows him to withdraw from reality and take part in an intoxicating form of psychological escapism. Dorian’s affection for Sibyl is based more upon her theatrical roles more than the “real” Sibyl Vane, yes, but in the sense that “one evening she is Rosalind, and the next evening is Imogen,” Sibyl allows Dorian to fall in love with something other than a character in As You Like It (Picture 46). As a performer whose plays are never fully enacted and, consequently, never entirely complete, she is a cultural sign without a clear referent. But although Dorian initially fantasizes at the thought of becoming her savior, as he moves in his position from theater patron to the hastily betrothed, he becomes unnerved by the romantic fiction into which he has bought.
The failed performance of *Romeo and Juliet* Basil and Lord Henry attend leaves Dorian in a state of shock. With it, Wilde initiates a dramatic reversal in Dorian’s conception of the scenario, in which Dorian, momentarily aware of reality, acts out a form of “buyer’s remorse” that leads to the verbal altercation whose aftermath not only spawns Sibyl’s suicide but Dorian’s collapse into a further state of withdrawal. In his initial reaction to Sibyl’s death, we are told that Dorian struggles to come to grips with his loss, reverting from his own lack of emotion back to the theatrical metaphors that have accompanied his relationship all along, at one point suggesting to Lord Henry that “It seems to me to be simply like a wonderful ending to a wonderful play. It has all the terrible beauty of a Greek tragedy, a tragedy in which I took a great part, but by which I have not been wounded” (*Picture 84*). Then, upon responding to Basil’s concern for his ambivalence, he confirms his newfound commitment to Henry’s philosophy of the senses in his assertion that “A man who is master of himself can end a sorrow as easily as he can invent a pleasure. I don’t want to be at the mercy of my emotions. *I want to use them*, to enjoy them, and to dominate them” (*Picture 91*, italics mine). In pursuing a strategic approach to life in which emotions convert themselves into instruments of control that can be managed alongside identity, achievement, and sin, Dorian not only changes from a character that is more interested in experience to one that is more interested in objects but also from a character who initially longs to sense and to feel to one whose primary objective is simply to be made numb. This transformation makes the central events of the narrative less about Dorian’s loss of Sibyl and more about, as I have been suggesting, the strategies of coping he adopts in an effort to avoid coming to terms with responsibility for the damage he has wrought.

The second half of *Dorian Gray* is filled with narcotic sedation and the accumulation of things as Dorian undertakes an eccentric form of collecting that bears a striking resemblance to the behavior of Des Esseintes in J.K. Huysmans’s novel, *À Rebours* (1884). Wilde holds onto *Dorian Gray*’s central themes of spiritual fulfillment by contrasting the novel’s earlier emphasis on dialogue with the addition of several, lengthier narrative scenes to deliver an impression of Dorian that stresses the metamorphosis that has occurred. Like Des Esseintes, Dorian’s method of consumption is notable for the way in which he moves so quickly from object to object. Perfumes are discarded for music; music is discarded for jewels; jewels are discarded for embroideries; embroideries are discarded for religious paraphernalia; and religious paraphernalia
is discarded for books. So uninhibited is the transition that takes place between these forms that one cannot help but notice that the approach remains the same no matter how severely the medium may appear to change. As in the Freudian theory of displacement, Dorian’s tactics rewrite an existing identity, delineating new associations for his character and creating a feeling of control.74 However unnerved or frightened Dorian may be at either his own behavior or the transformation that is borne across his portrait’s visage, he finds solace in his intensified relationship to things. “For these treasures,” Wilde tells us, “and everything that he collected in his lovely house, were to be to him means of forgetfulness, modes by which he could escape from the fear that seemed to him at times to be almost too great to be borne” (Picture 117). To consume, for Dorian, it thus appears, is consequently to avoid the difficult work of accepting responsibility for the damage he has caused, to fabricate an existence that defies a feeling of responsibility, and to cultivate a form of sensory experience removed from the realm of moral responsibility. If it is a form of desire, what his character desires in objects is primarily fiction: myth, anecdotes, and tales that provide the illusion of meaning without the burden of social responsibility.

But significantly, Dorian never eliminates that burden completely. Turning now towards the third and final scene I wish to inspect, a scene that emerges in an important and often overlooked chapter following the death of James Vane, a figure who has haunted Dorian for the latter half of the text, Dorian returns to the question of social responsibility with a newfound desire to do good. Having revealed to Lord Henry his frustration with the connection between “Charity and corruption,” he speaks of his relationship with a girl from the countryside named Hetty Merton:

I can tell you, Harry. It is not a story I could tell to anyone else. I spared somebody. It sounds vain, but you understand what I mean. She was quite beautiful and wonderfully like Sibyl Vane. I think it was that which first attracted me to her. You remember Sibyl, don’t you? How long ago that seems! Well, Hetty was not one of our own class, of course. She was simply a girl in a village.

See Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), trans. A.A. Brill (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1997). Here Freud refers to displacement as where an “indifferent experience substitutes itself for the psychologically important one,” producing a lingering affect that continues to impact and influence the psychological subject’s dreams (80).
But I really loved her. I am quite sure that I loved her. All during this wonderful May that we have been having, I used to run down and see her two or three times a week. Yesterday she met me in a little orchard. The apple-blossom kept tumbling down on her hair, and she was laughing. We were to have gone away together this morning at dawn. Suddenly I determined to leave her as flowerlike as I found her. (Picture 173)

One immediately notes that Dorian continues to view his relationship to the underclass in terms of domination; he still struggles to identify the emotion he feels to have “spared” somebody as in fact a form of love, emphasizing his “certainty” in a rhetorical move to mask the ulterior motives his portrait will eventually reveal. Yet at the same time we cannot escape the sense that he does in fact appear to have altered in some significant and notable way. Dorian is no longer oblivious to the repercussions of his behavior but has come to acknowledge the severity of his wrongs. He has transformed his lack of concern for his responsibility in the death of Sibyl Vane to his pragmatic awareness for the power of influence he holds over Hetty Merton’s life. As Dorian comes to identify himself as someone who is not merely a passive voice in his nation’s affairs but a figure with the potential to do good, a notable shift has occurred: Dorian has acknowledged his need to pursue forms of emotional and spiritual growth. Rather than continue the pursuit of the sensual pleasure he receives from his casual observations, he will identify a form of morality that transfers his painting’s sins to himself. He will, in other words, create a soul.

Wilde’s jest, and indeed what one might call the “real stab” of the story, rests in the ceaseless transition between portrait and body that accompanies Dorian’s final narrative act. In forcing Dorian to accept that his soul has not been saved but further tarnished through the vanity, hypocrisy, and curiosity that accompany his desire to do good, Wilde brings the narrative full circle to offer his portrait as evidence of the degree of arrogance he has assumed. The decision to spare a young woman’s corruption cannot stand in place for the accumulation of sin Dorian has accrued. Dorian fails here because he cannot recognize that there are some things that rest outside the boundaries of commodification and exchange. As he transports his sins back to his body with a final narrative stab, the novel is brought to its appropriate halt.
Looking beyond the relative simplicity of this scene, Dorian’s death is a significant point of narrative insight in which we discover that the same object that he has used to free himself from responsibility for his sins does not stand apart from his body as a projection of his soul but is in fact inextricably linked to the objectification of identity he had previously formed as a source of agency. It is a disruptive moment that breaks through the depthless, artistic fantasy of Dorian’s beauty to expose, in a final fit of glory, the true nature of what he has become. The transformation from inorganic to organic proceeds from a reversal in terms of cultural authority and control. Dorian can become human only by separating himself from the discourse that allows him to possess his powers of influence. His portrait, restored to its beauty, will hang as an ironic reminder of the authority he possessed in the past. But its function will not be a form of identification but adaptation for the difference it reveals from what its subject has become.

Conclusion
In conclusion, the objects, experiences, and actions amassed throughout Dorian Gray ultimately suggest that the intensification of late-Victorian consumer culture existed in conjunction with other forms of cultural exchange as part of a conceptualization of experience that depends upon the assertion of individual control. In situating Dorian at the location in which artistic, economic, and moral authority unite, Wilde employed his character as a challenge to the assumption of privilege granted to certain social powers. The “sins” of philanthropy are, in Dorian Gray as in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” not a matter of intent but of practicality and perception. Like social reformers in the late Victorian era who heavily publicized the problem of poverty but failed to enact structural reform, Dorian’s good deeds are partial and cut short. Writing as a public figure who, despite his economic and cultural privilege, resided upon the fringe of British culture for reasons concerning his politics, sexuality, and ethnic background, Wilde successfully satirizes this tendency. As in the case of Stevenson’s Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and Conan Doyle’s The Sign of Four, he projects his title character as a canvas for the dominant issues of the day. While private and psychological interpretations greatly assist our interpretation of the novel, there is also value in identifying Dorian not as a character but, as the novel presents him, primarily a portrait. For Wilde, a better artist than Basil, it would seem, clearly recognized the debilitating assumptions that accompany his form.
In analyzing the composition of Henry Jekyll, Sherlock Holmes, and Dorian Gray, I have argued that the substance of literary character in late-Victorian gothic romance, what produces reverberations on a larger cultural scale, is not the product of narrative tension or psychological depth but in fact the capacity for fictional identities to embody contemporary debate. To be more exact, I have argued that characters who have been read as personifying complex literary aspirations may also be approached productively as little more than vessels that rarely surprise readers in terms of the consequences they reveal about thinking or acting as they say and do. Character functions in the fin de siècle as the ultimate narrative device; it is that which connects these texts to the conversations that inform their production. In the 1880s and 90s, some British novelists identify the emptiness accredited to central characters as an important narrative tool to play out overlapping and interrelated concerns that require a physical shape. Wilde so completely recognized the importance of this practice that he portrays the distance between artistic method and identity as the founding premise of his text. But his tactics in this regard, while inventively explicit, are not unique. As I have demonstrated throughout, the cultural work assigned to each of these characters can be read as an inscription of dialogue upon a recognizable aesthetic form.

At the end of the nineteenth century, against a national backdrop of dialogue, movement, and change, Stevenson, Conan Doyle, and Wilde responded to their emerging status as public figures with the creation of fictional personas who betray the rules of realism to lend expression to topical issues that require a carefully structured method of representation. The space that exists between the appearance of these characters and their potential to acquire meaning related to conversations about the performance of class, Empire, and consumerism acknowledges the foundation of their identities as open markers in the public discourse.

The fundamental importance of the construction of iconic literary identities in the Victorian fin de siècle to their involvement with key social issues and debates, dramatized in each of these novels, testifies, then, to the reevaluation of cultural identity through the development of a popular literary aesthetic. By reworking contemporary conceptions of character to establish a strategy of representation that depends as much on its absences as on its
presences, Stevenson, Conan Doyle, and Wilde invest their characters with an aura of significance that stands in opposition to the values most frequently associated with high literature. In presenting the public dialogues late-Victorian gothic romance participates in through the composition of its central characters—and so accepting their aesthetic deficiencies as an invitation to extract meaning—I suggest that an awareness of the construction of literary figures offers a path to a more complete recognition of the cultural dynamics informing late-Victorian gothic romance and its participation in various strains of contemporary discourse that relate to the responsibilities of economic and social class. Future work in the Victorian fin de siècle, I conclude, should not hesitate to expand upon the conception of what character means as it responds to generic conditions in a state of transition. For reading late-Victorian gothic romance with an eye for the points where formal and cultural properties meet enables interpretations of popular literature to proceed from a site of narrative focus that acknowledges the substance of literary texts. Ultimately, it suggests that, upon scrupulous examination, “fascinating” fictional identities are in fact most interesting for the material that lies beneath.
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