Seeing Returned Colonials and Poor Whites: Retributive Ghosts in Conan Doyle’s Detective Stories

Ming-fong Wang
MingDao University, Changhua, Taiwan

In Conan Doyle’s detective stories mainly including “The Resident Patient,” “The Gloria Scott,” “The Adventure of Blanched Soldier,” and “The Crooked Man,” featuring the master sleuth character Sherlock Holmes, he depicts the return of the colonials from British colonies, mostly India, with physically deformed or ravaged body and traumatic past that haunt and trouble his characters’ present life. Doyle allegorically uses returned colonials or poor whites who turn into figures of retributive ghosts that function as pathetic memories and inner fears from British colonies. The seeing of ghostly figures and haunting past events delineated in these stories cause characters’ sense of uncanny horror and remind them of their past trauma. These monstrous returned colonials or poor whites often create a fear and a social menace that must be appropriately dealt with when the master sleuth is commissioned to pin down the truth of client’s cases. Why are these bodies of ghostly figures so “irregular” and ravaged? What do these deformities signify? How can returned colonial’s or poor white’s traumatic past be related to retributive ghost? This paper attempts to probe into these issues in order to find out possible answers.

Keywords: Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holmes, detective, poor white, returned colonial

Introduction

In some Doyle’s detective stories mainly featuring the master sleuth Sherlock Holmes, Doyle’s characters’ inner fear and sense of horror are aroused mainly by seeing returned colonials or poor whites with ghostly appearances (deformed or ravaged body) and by their remembrance of traumatic and pathetic past in British colonies when they return to England. Strangely enough, why are these detective stories emphasizing rational and scientific ratiocinations and investigations accompanied by seemingly irrational and supernatural story plots? The story plots of mystery and horror in Doyle’s detective writing seem to be affected by the narrative of his contemporary gothic stories writers like Sheridan Le Fanu1 and even Bram Stoker,2 whose stories are usually intertwined reasonable suspicion with supernatural tales. Likewise, Doyle often places the story plot of gothic

---

1 Sheridan Le Fanu was an Irish writer of gothic/horror tales and mystery novels. He was a leading gothic story writer of the nineteenth century and was central to the development of the genre in the Victorian age. Three of his best-known works are *The House by the Churchyard* (1863), *Carmilla* (a story about a female vampire) (1864), and *Uncle Silas* (1872).
2 Although Bram Stoker, the writer of the famous vampire novel *Dracula* (1897), and Conan Doyle did not know each other very well. They were friends and still shared acquaintanceship. Yet, reader can find the mutual influences among their works. The scientific and rational investigation in Stoker’s *Dracula* and the case of a mother’s “bloodsucking” of her baby in “The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire” can demonstrate this relevance. See Cottom (2012), “Sherlock Holmes meets Dracula.” *ELH*, 79 (3), 537-567.
horror and eerie ambience into his detective narratives of scientific inquiry (Cook, 2014, p. 15). He adumbrates gothic settings in his detective stories which “[link] him with the theme of the occult and/or spiritualism” (Palmer, 2013, p. 177) and brings about a diverse development of detective fiction and an innovation of ghost stories. Seen in this light, the irrational gothic settings are unavoidingly akin to using of imagination in Doyle’s writing.

In Doyle’s stories, the detective’s “backwards” narrative of telling the truth of a murder mystery functions as a delayed revelation. The murder mystery “stimulates the imagination yet keeps the observer aware of his or her own ignorance and vulnerability, aiding observation by keeping the senses sharp” (Mahaffey, 2007, p. 82). As Holmes remarks about a case he is investigating in *A Study in Scarlet*, he mentions: “There is a mystery about this which stimulates the imagination; where there is no imagination there is no horror” (Doyle, 1986a, p. 39). Holmes must be able to use imagination “to find the missing links he needs to prove his theory” (Hoffmann, 2013, p. 86) when he probes into a case. In Doyle’s detective stories, the narrator who most promotes mysteriousness is Watson, who regards Holmes himself as a mystery. In addition to wondering about Holmes and his methods, Watson also exclaims about the mysteriousness of the case Holmes is investigating. Being supremely rational, formidably observant, unconventional, and quick-witted analyst, Holmes actually models an approach to the problem of finding the truth and practice a scientific use of the imagination. Viewed in this perspective, Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes observes and practices the art of backwards reasoning, gradually provoking his master detective to use imagination for pinning down the truth.

If rationality and reason are contrary to imagination and passion, Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes remains a passionate private sleuth who uses his ability of observation and imagination to deduce the truth of crimes, owing to the fact that Doyle creates “a fair society without the intervention of the official police and that the police play a neutral” (Pepper, 2016, p. 5). With this individual/imaginative deduction, Doyle becomes an advocate for “the shrunken state and for individual liberty” (Pepper, 2016, p. 108) by writing detective stories featuring the private sleuth Sherlock Holmes. Holmes appears in many stories as even a surrogate policeman or state auxiliary. The relationship between private sleuth and official police is much less hostile. That is, Holmes can be regarded as a quasi-official force and this makes possible a link between his personal ratiocination and the logic of bureaucratic Scotland Yard of the British Empire. Besides the private sleuth’s deduction, ghostly return colonials and poor whites also occupy a social space where the national bureaucracy shrinks and even dissociates for accommodating Holmes’s intervention of a non-official manipulation of his rational observation and ratiocination.

**Seeing “Ghosts” and Haunting Past**

The theme of rational observation is proved to be a key issue in Doyle’s detective stories. Yet, the “irrational observation,” or the seeing of revenging and ghostly figures in Doyle’s detective stories, is also highlighted and linked to “a kind of visionary trance in which the corporeal eye is sealed and inner sight is activated “ (Srdjan, 2010, p. 134). Thus, ghost-seeing can be regarded as a “spectral delusion” attributed to certain disease of the brain, such as delirium and insanity, often experienced by healthy persons under circumstances favorable to the

---

renewal of external impression related to the state of brain and of the external sense. Henceforth, the ghost, or the apparition, is a visionary perception and a past feeling renovated with “an effect that occurs both in the mind and the eye, yet does not correspond to anything physically present at the moment when it experienced” (Srdjan, 2010, p. 24).

In Conan Doyle’s detective stories mainly including “The Crooked Man,” “The Resident Patient,” “The Gloria Scott,” “The Adventure of Blanched Soldier,” the detective novella The Hound of the Baskerville, and The Sign of Four, featuring the master sleuth character Sherlock Holmes, he depicts the return of the colonials from British colonies with deformed or physically ravaged body that haunt his characters’ present life. More relevantly, these monstrous/ghostly figures function as a sort of past feeling and even a ghost-inducing optical disease stimulating his character’s “imagination” of seeing ghost and arouses a sense of horror. These Doyle’s detective stories actually combine gothic imagination with traumatic past in British colonies which “incessantly returns to haunt the present” and “has resurrected the ghost of the past” (Srdjan, 2010, p. 131).

The issue of poor whites with personal pathetic past stories in British colonies actually highlights the “anxiety about the possible ungovernability of colonial subjects” (Siddiqi, 2008, p. 50). Doyle delineates the uncategorized poor whites returning from British colonies as neither colonizing white nor colonized native due to the fact that they resemble none of the feature of civilized British citizens but turn out to be seemingly hideous and bestial savages. These poor whites returning from British colonies may form social menace that threatens to collapse the stability and consolidation of the social order and security of London, the political and economic center of the British Empire. They also haunt and trouble his foes’ (their old associates’ or old comrades’) present peaceful life and remind them of their unpleasant and horrible memory. Doyle uses the poor white with irregular and ravaged bodies which turn into retributive ghosts (or ghostly figures) that function as a metaphor for empire and a threat from overseas colonies. In this sense, the returned colonials serves as “a nemesis-like figure returns to exact revenge for a past injustice” (Cook, 2014, p. 53) and arouse their foes’ sense of fear and guilt for their past crimes and evil deeds.

In Doyle’s stories, characters often serve in military service, and the bodies of characters from the colonies are wounded, bearing the mark of battle or some form of violence. Watson, Sherlock Holmes’s friend and assistant, can instance the most outstanding figure of this kind. Also, among many examples in the short stories are the vengeance of John Turner in “The Boscombe Valley Mystery” (1891) on his blackmailing Charles McCarthy; the remarkable tale of Henry Wood in “The Crooked Man” (1893) and his betrayal at the hand of Colonel Barclay in Punjab, India; and the fate of Blessington in “Resident Patient” (1893). In these stories, the returned colonials, or later the poor whites, appear as retributive ghosts and return to “haunt” his foe, his old acquaintance who escapes from lawful punishment in overseas colony and is “still living under the shield of British law” (Doyle, 1986g, p. 682). These haunting “ghosts” have one thing in common, they are all poor Englishmen who return to England from British colonies and degraded or regarded as helpless and monstrous figures; they are poor whites.

---

4 See John Ferriar’s An Essay Towards a Theory of Apparitions (1813). Ferriar’s explains that the apparition are occasionally revision of thing previously seen and sense impression that have temporarily been brought back to life. He concludes that although ghosts are not supernatural, they are more than particularly visual memories. The apparitional image does not correspond to anything present in front of the observer’s eyes, he or she nevertheless “see” something, the so-called “spectral delusion.”

5 Watson is described as a “returned colonial,” a wounded soldier discharged from army service, in Afghanistan and returned to London in the beginning chapter of A Study in Scarlet.
These degraded colonials discredit the mythology of European racial supremacy, but their ambiguous appearance also confuses the boundary between European and native identity. In “The Crooked Man,” the story is about two returned colonials from many years ago during the time of the Indian Mutiny.\(^6\) Having been betrayed by Sergeant Barclay, Henry was captured by the mutiny enemy. After years of torture and pain, he returned to England a broken man with “an indescribable impression of deformity” (Doyle, 1986d, p. 657) and by chance met Nancy, his old lover, who now married to Barclay who has risen to the rank of colonel. As he tells Sherlock Holmes that he wandered for many years in India, and at last “came back to Punjab, where [he] lived mostly among the natives and picked up a living by the conjuring tricks [he] had learned (Doyle, 1986d, p. 660) in India. He, as a poor white, still now lives on this conjuring tricks to earn little money in London. Yet, at the very moment when Nancy sees Henry, he is like a ghost because she thinks that “he [has] been dead this thirty years” (Doyle, 1986d, p. 655). Determined to confront Barclay, Henry followed Nancy home like a dead man walking. What frightens Barclay to death is how he feels when he encounters with Henry the familiar but ghostly figure that leads to what Freud called the sense of \textit{uncanny}.\(^7\)

This seeing of these poor whites and returning colonials as retributive ghosts can elaborate the “defiance of binary oppositions such as presence and absence, body and spirit, past and present, life and death” (Srdjan, 2010, p. 14). This conception of the defiance, the \textit{inbetween-ness}, can be psychologically interconnected with the \textit{uncanny}, the mental state in an ambiguous and in-between realm.\(^8\) According to Stephen T. Asma, this nature of \textit{inbetween-ness} gives rise to “the idea of a liminal being, something between categories” (Asma, 2009, p. 40) which disrupts a human subject’s reasoning framework and accordingly makes the human “imagination” bound up with the seemingly haunting appearance of monstrous or ghostly figure and turn out to be a sense of loathing sense of \textit{abjection}. Again, in “The Crooked Man,” Henry’s spectral appearance dressed in rags of Indian beggar. He appears monstrously and ghastly, and Barclay has death on his face as if he had seen a ghost at the moment of their encounters.

In “The Resident Patient,” Doyle describes a story about Blessington, a bank robber who turned informer against the rest of the gang, one of which was hanged and the other three sentenced to fifteen years. The former gang members manage to gain access to Blessington’s residence. Subsequently, he was found hanging from a ceiling hook in his own bedroom. Holmes depicts that his shocking experience of seeing the hanging dead man is like seeing an inhuman and ghostly figure with an irregular and ravaged body.

\begin{quote}
It was a dreadful sight which met us as we entered the bedroom door....
As he [(Blessington)] dangled from the hook it was exaggerated and intensified until he was scarce human appearance. The neck was drawn
\end{quote}

\(^6\) The Indian Mutiny is also regarded as Indian Rebellion in 1857. It was a major uprising in India during 1857-58 against the rule of the British East India Company.

\(^7\) Freud explains the “uncanny” in terms of a problematic relationship of the individual subject and his/her past. This relationship can be further developed into as \textit{unhomely} not only in an individual sense but in relation to the nation. The poor whites’ alienation from their mother country forces an engagement with a self has become estranged from its native matrix.

\(^8\) Kristeva argues in \textit{Powers of Horror} that certain experiences, like bodily experience of loathing and repulsion, may undo the very modalities of subject/object experience and tend to draw the self to the place where meaning collapses and lead to the loathing feeling of the \textit{abjection}. She tells us that the \textit{abjection} refers to an ego’s (a subject’s) losing the ability to represent an object (an other). This \textit{abjection} can indicate an ambiguous mental realm of a cognizing subject caught in an in-between state and illuminate the cause of fear and horror. See her “Power of Horror.” \textit{The Portable Kristeva}. New York: Columbia UP, 2002. 229-293.
Holmes concludes that three of the former gang members are involved in murdering him through the faked suicide. The death of Blessington is yet another parody of the course of justice. The ghosts of retribution from Blessington’s past inflict the same punishment on him as he consequentialy did to his old fellow gang members. Both Henry’s ghostly and ravaged body in “The Crooked Man” and horrible dead body of Blessington hanged from the ceiling hook correlate haunting inhuman figures, and the purposes of these haunting affiliate a “return injustice with a form of justice” (Cook, 2014, p. 58) and bring a sort of horrible effect to people who unexpectedly see them. Viewed in this light, many Doyle’s detective stories operate on the margin between detective fiction and ghost story. They contain a device of supernatural story, the figure whose purpose is to exact revenge for a wrong doing in the past (Cook, 2014, p. 62).

In “The Gloria Scott” a protagonist called Trevor, also a returned colonial, is disturbed and blackmailed by an old comrade called Hudson for an old crime, a wrong doing in the past, when they were comrade in British colony Australia. Hudson is described as “a devil” (Doyle, 1986e, p. 590) by Trevor’s governor and an old guy with “a lived face and two venomous eyes which uttered more threats than his tongue could do” (Doyle, 1986e, p. 591) by old Trevor’s son. The returned colonial’s animal-like appearance and ravaged bodies function like ghostly figure images which haunt his old associate’s mind by reminding his foe’s old criminal deed in British colony.

In “The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier”, Godfrey Emsworth, the pseudo-leprosy (considered as leper until Holmes’ doctor friend gives the right diagnosis) patient, returning to England from South Africa, has been confined to a secret room by his family and considered gone and missing by his old comrades and friends. To the returned colonial Godfrey, the horrible memory of military service in South Africa becomes his traumatic past memory. He cannot forget his miserable situation in leper hospital in South Africa, where people were “twisted or swollen or disfigured in some strange way” (Doyle, 1986b, p. 554). Yet, he never thinks that he will bring other people the same disfigured and strange impression as the South Africa people gave him in the past.

When his old acquaintance Mr. Dodds comes to his residence and probes into the truth of his being dead or alive in London, Godfrey comes to the parlor room window staring at Mr. Dodd like the gazing of a ghostly figure. Mr. Dodd tells Sherlock Holmes what he saw at that horrible night:

> The window came down to the ground and I could see the whole length of it, but it was his face which held my gaze. He was deadly pale, never have I seen a man so white. I reckon ghosts may look like that. (Doyle, 1986b, p. 545)

The recurrent image of these haunting/abject bodies suggests the fact that the imperial subject has become a beggar-like poor white with ghostly or distorted figure, who haunts his old acquaintance with traumatic past in British colonies. The poor whites in Doyle’s stories are questionable whiteness, he symbolically affiliates with non-European native in British colonies. In Doyle’s detective stories mentioned above, the “whiteness” of Englishmen who occupy the lowest level of imperial society becomes doubtful due to the fact that these poor whites resemble more the uncivilized natives in overseas colonies with unpleasant or animal-like personality and spectral appearance. Such seeing of revenging ghost figure and deformed appearance are not unusual in Doyle’s
stories, which present the Englishmen who have returned from the colonies as “retributive ghosts” and also constitute an evil force that tends to deteriorate state stability and social order in relation to the nation, the British Empire.

**Imperial Abject and British Empire**

As Patricia Pulham argues, Doyle’s stories can be regarded as “a form of the uncanny” (Pulham, 2013, p. 162). She further contends that Doyle himself “arguably engaged in a form of Victorian revival....[and] suggests that the neo-Victorian engagement with the past is kind of return ‘home’” (Pulham, 2013, p. 162). Similarly, this story plot of the returning colonials’ “returning home” posits neo-Victorian society as a social background in an unhomely (uncanny) form. Viewed in this light, these aforementioned Doyle’s detective stories oscillate between the margin of detective fiction and that of ghost story. They contain the device of supernatural story, and the purpose of positing retributive and ghostly figures in these stories is to revenge for a bad deed in the past.

*The Hound of the Baskervilles*, “a detective story with supernatural touch of ghost story in detective-fiction format” (Srdjan, 2010, p. 133), posits “a tension between rational control and supernatural horror” (Gryll, 2017, p. 153) and delineates a ghost story setting which features remote and inaccessible places like the moorland of Britain Dartmoor and the mystique, the horrible legend of a haunted fierce hound. The Dartmoor, under Doyle’s depiction, is described as a ruin that has been existing since the pre-historical era and even associated with scenes of violence and murder. Besides the haunting of a monstrous hound, the ghostly figure which Holmes and Watson see on the moor is the hapless convict, Selden, the younger brother of Eliza Barrymore, the housekeeper at Baskerville Hall. When Watson and Sir Henry catch up with him, he is described as having a spectral and monstrous countenance.

The visual presentation of Selden as a ghost is emphasized by his status as an escaping convict, “an individual who has been placed outside the conventional social sphere, doomed to haunt the bleak landscape as a fugitive” (Cook, 2014, p. 84). The “seeing of ghost,” to Holmes’s rational intelligence and disbelief in ghost, proves to be an organic derangement, or an optical illusion arising from a disordered condition of the eyes. Doyle actually uses the allegory and hybrid figure of the poor whites and the natives to lay stress on the theme of colonial self and other of colonial violence in his detective stories. That is, the visual perception, the seeing of poor whites and returning colonials from British overseas colonies as ghostly and spectral apparitions resembles a pathological optical disease that has to be cured and made disappear from the healthy state of a human body. More precisely, the ghostly haunting of the irregular shapes and monstrous body of these poor whites and returning colonials is able to associate with the invasion of diseases to the stable and healthy state of the British Empire. The detective functions like a doctor who must find out (detect) the truth of these ghostly (inhuman) and uncanny figures (the real cause of the disease) and explain away all irrational mysteries with scientific investigations and ratiocinations (cure the patient with appropriate treatments) to restore the social order for resuscitating the stability (the healthy state) of the British Empire.

---

9 See “The Adventure of Sussex Vampire.” Although Conan Doyle knows Bram Stoker, the author of *Dracula*, and the story plot of the vampire novel, he still understands that vampire does not exist in this detective/vampire story (Doyle, 1986c, p. 535). In this story, Holmes finally finds out that a mother’s love of her baby is mistaken to be a vicious blood-sucking behavior like a vampire does due to a house servant’s optical illusion, a disordered condition of the eyes.
As an escaping convict, Selden’s fate shares the sameness of the return colonials and the poor whites. He is regarded as a social outcast and a ghostly figure hiding in eerie forest and scaring all intruders away. He also embodies the imperial *abjection*\(^{10}\) that must be excluded from the native matrix to consolidate the stability and security of the British Empire at that time. It is not surprising to find that he must be, although he is first mistakenly identified as Sir Henry, bitten to die by the monstrous hound of the Baskervilles. The “poor devil death” (Doyle, 1986f, p. 125) is described again as an inhuman body “with beetling forehead [(and)] sunken animal eyes” (Doyle, 1986f, p. 124). Watson feels relief for restoring order and peace of the empire by saying that “[t]he tragedy was black enough, but this man had at least deserved death by the law of his country” (Doyle, 1986f, p. 124).

In this story, the appearance of a spectral hound manifests a supernatural and gothic horror which provokes primitive fear that befuddles the big sleuth’s rational mind and scientific investigation. The description of eerie Dartmoor landscape and Holmes’s absence in Dartmoor and being left behind in London for six consecutive chapters of this novella elaborate “the terror, suspicions, and chilling uncertainties that lie beyond the reach of his rational mind” (Grylls, 2017, p. 153). About the painting, the portraits of Stapleton’s ancestors, they symbolize “the unwelcome return of the past” (Grylls, 2017, p. 155) that becomes a focus for the representation of supernatural potential. Like the ancestral castle owners’ gloomy staring eyes of their supernatural portraits in classic gothic novels, the portraits of Stapleton’s ancestors make Watson feel that Sir Henry’s house is not a cheerful place. He tells Holmes:

> A dim line of ancestors, in every variety of dress, from the Elizabethan knight to the buck of the Regency, stared down upon us and daunted us by their silent company. (Doyle, 1986f, p. 57)

Nonetheless, the gothic portrait of these ancestors is a key to find out the truth of the puzzles of the murder mystery and a means by which Holmes confirms his suspicions and enables him to close the case. It is the portrait of Sir Hugo, Sir Henry’s ancestor, who inspires Holmes the notion of reincarnation of this ancestor as Stapleton to link him to descendants of Baskerville family and consequently to realize that he is the real murderer behind the scene. In this sense, Stapleton is depicted as the spirit of Sir Hugo reincarnate due to his evil purpose to regain the lost inheritance of the Baskerville estate. He represents the embodiment of another type of retributive ghost “[in] an endless search for gratification against the legitimate forces” (Cook, 2014, p. 87) of inheritance in return and seeks to take revenge on Baskerville family members for their past “wrong” doings and evil deed.

The similar retributive ghost figure can be also found in other Doyle’s detective stories with more deformed and ravaged body. Jonathan Small, a returned colonial from India, in *The Sign of Four* has a wooden leg and an inseparable companion, Tonga, who is described as a homicidal savage. More important, he is also an inhuman and monstrous figure with contorted look seeking revenge for his white master. Watson describes the horrible and animal-like Tonga, stating:

---

\(^{10}\) Kristeva suggests that it is the *Symbolic* father who gives a child a boundary of a (self’s) clean and proper body after a baby child is separated from its “symbiosis”—the pre-Oedipal maternal body. Thus, a baby child must suffer a sense of “abomination” (feeling unclean and improper), the *abjection*, toward a maternal body because it will remind it of the “incest taboo” with its mother. See her “Power of Horror.” *The Portable Kristeva*. New York: Columbia UP, 2002. 229-293.
Never have I seen features so deeply marked with all bestiality and cruelty. His small eyes glowed and burned with a sombre light, and his thick lips were writhed back from his teeth, which grinned and chattered at us with half animal fury. (Doyle, 1986e, p. 204)

In a similar vein, his white master is also adumbrated as an animal-like and inhuman figure. Small loses his position in Indian army after a crocodile bites off his leg. He is able to find work as an overseer on a plantation, but his job ends with the outbreak of the Mutiny. His subsequent participation in murder schemes marks him as a criminal and an outlaw. When he returns to England, he becomes a poor white who earns his living by living with an aboriginal Andaman Islander and later his faithful servant Tonga, who “eats raw meat and dances his war dance: so they always [have] a hatful pennies after a day’s work” (Doyle, 1986e, p. 233). As part of his physical body has been destroyed, some of his human qualities are also reduced to be animal-like and become ghostly figure. For the rest of Jonathan Small’s life he must “bear the physical evidence of this diminished humanity for all to see” (Goldsmith, 2012, p. 30). He becomes another retributive ghost and “[lives] only for vengeance” (Doyle, 1986e, p. 231) and seeks to revenge for a past injustice. When he confesses his crime and how hard he earns the Agra treasure in fever-ridden swamp and filthy convict-hut to Holmes, he questions Holmes about the justice, snarling:

Where is the justice that I should give it up to those who have never earned it? Look how I have earned it......[Y]ou talk to me of justice because I cannot bear to feel that I have paid this price only that another may enjoy it. (Doyle, 1986e, p. 213)

For this reason, he will never be satisfied if he fails to see the sign of justice and the death of the guy who betrays the sign of four before he is “taken to the grave” (Doyle, 1986e, p. 233).

The cripple and ghostly Small forms an emblematic representation of the monstrosity attributed to imperial history and performs the imperial abject (Odell, 2012, pp. 993-994) due to the fact that he can be regarded as both European and native inhabitant of the British colony, which obscures the differences between the colonizer and the colonized. These returned colonials have become alienated from the culture of their mother country and finally turns into poor whites who occupy an underdog position at the bottom of the social status at that time. Their return to England is disturbing because it forces an engagement of a self that has become estranged from its native matrix. They actually oscillate between the colonizing self and colonized other as well as a civilized citizen and an uncivilized native. That is, the in-between, or the ambiguous status, tends to draw the self to the place where meaning collapses and into an abject figure. The abject is unlike the object, which stabilizes the subject in a reciprocal relationship of otherness. Kristeva suggests that the abject has a social character, it exposes the fragility of the law. More accurately, the social character and aberrant behaviors of the returned colonials infringe the criminal code of the Victorian society. The ravaged bodies and ghostly figures of returned colonials and later poor whites are reminders to the national body that it is not whole and robust, but divided and damaged. The return colonials disturb the psychic and social orderliness of the British Empire and trouble the consciousness of the nation. As a consequence, they are like the diseases which must be detected to be found out and made disappear from the healthy body of the British Empire.
Conclusion

The poor whites and returned colonials from British colonies in Doyle’s detective stories function as an allegorical trope. It emphasizes an arbitrary and rational control of the governmental British Empire that explains away the imperial fear of the haunting past about monstrous/spectral poor white who may obstruct the consolidating order of the British Empire. Although Doyle’s life can be regarded as “both the creator of the ratiocinative detective and a convert to spiritualism and fairy belief”, he is still presented as “a patriot, lover of justice and prophet” (Wynne, 2013, pp. 6-7) of the superiority and rationality for the governmentality of the empire. Maybe Holmes’s words near the end of the story “The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire”11 can elucidate Doyle’s rational and scientific attitudes toward his late-Victorian or Edwardian society and the disbelief of the supernatural ghost. In the end of this vampire setting story, Holmes concludes that there are no vampires in Sussex and only a mother’s selfless love and brave protection for her beloved baby, saying that “[t]he world is big enough for us. No ghosts need apply” (Doyle, 1986c, p. 594). Henceforth, Doyle’s disbelief in “ghosts” exemplifies his characters’ fantasy and ghostly projection of their past feeling, a traumatic past and a sense of guilt for returned colonials or poor whites from the British colonies, which haunts their present life. Put it another way, these returned colonials, or the so-called monstrous and ghostly poor whites, often create a sense of fear and become social menace that must be appropriately dealt with when a master sleuth is commissioned to pin down the truth of client’s cases.

The recurrent images of damaged and distorted bodies and the memory of haunting past in Doyle’s detective stories suggest a concern about the vulnerability of Englishmen in the colonies, and their troublesome and outcast nature when they return from British colonies. The psychological conceptions of uncanny and of abject characterize the disturbing aspect of returned colonials and poor whites (with past traumas) in these stories. These poor white colonials, with deformed bodies and traumatic past threaten to disrupt the distinction that organize colonial identity and colonial rules. The seeing, or visual perception, of these ghostly figures delineated in these stories produce characters’ horrible feeling and psychic disturbances.

The psychic disturbances established by these returned colonials or poor whites in these Doyle’s detective stories lead his characters to be afraid that the social order is fragile, and that a pre-existing disorder will break through. More importantly, the issue of returned colonials and poor whites can inspire us to redefine the distinction between the self and the other because of the superior whites whose upper or even privileged social status may deteriorate to a lower social position like that of the misery non-white natives in British colonies. If the once non-white people (the once other) or the immigrant natives in England climb up to a higher social position, the predicament of present ignorant and survival-struggling poor whites (the once self) should deserve our deeper and introspective thinking.

References


11 The story is about a mother’s sucking her baby’s neck and the blood appears on the mother’s mouth and the baby’s neck. Could this be the evidence of a vampiric mother? It is the first case that Holmes really probes into a world of supernatural or fairy-tale fantasy.


