

Saussure and Sherlock, Derrida and the Detective:  
A Semiotic and Deconstructive Interpretation of the Classic Detective Fiction Genre

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## I.

After reading his flatmate's eyewitness account of how a thrilling double murder mystery was solved, Sherlock Holmes's response, characteristically intolerant of less than perfection, is:

Honestly, I cannot congratulate you upon it. Detection is, or ought to be, an exact science and should be treated in the same cold and unemotional manner. You have attempted to tinge it with romanticism, which produces much the same effect as if you worked a love-story or an elopement into the fifth proposition of Euclid. (*The Sign of Four* 100)

The subject of Holmes's criticism here is *A Study in Scarlet*, the first story ever published featuring the activities of the classic Baker Street detective.<sup>1</sup> Fortunately, Dr. John H. Watson does not allow this criticism to discourage him from continuing to chronicle Holmes's adventures, and thousands of readers and fans, who undoubtedly disagree with Holmes's assessment, continue to thank him to this day.

Holmes was created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, a Scottish doctor who wrote across numerous genres but is best remembered for his famous sleuth. Over the course of forty years, from 1887 to 1927, Conan Doyle would produce fifty-six short stories and four novellas about Holmes ("General Introduction"). Contained in this period, however, was a ten-year hiatus engendered by Conan Doyle's decision in 1893 to kill off Holmes in "The Final Problem," the epic story in which Holmes squares off against his arch-nemesis, Professor Moriarty, in a battle that ostensibly sends both men tumbling over Reichenbach Falls in Switzerland. To the great relief of fans everywhere, however, Conan Doyle decided to revive the detective in 1903, explaining that Holmes had actually gotten the best of Moriarty in their fight and never gone

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<sup>1</sup> I use the word "story" here in the sense of "tale" or "narrative," because *A Study in Scarlet* is actually one of the four Holmes novellas (*A Study in Scarlet*, *The Sign of Four*, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, and *The Valley of Fear*).

over the cliff himself. Holmes picks right back up fighting criminals of all kinds, with the dependable Watson by his side to chronicle their adventures.

Despite the success that Conan Doyle's stories have enjoyed, Holmes's injunction cited above that "Detection [...] ought to be an exact science" reflects, albeit indirectly, an accusation sometimes associated with classic detective fiction written in the Victorian and Edwardian period: relying on predictable, repetitive formulas. This criticism, among others, can cause these stories to be condemned to the lower category of "popular literature" ("Introduction: Crime Fiction and Detective Fiction"). It is undeniably true that classic detective fiction tends to follow certain patterns and rules. Does this mean, however, that no deeper critical significance can be extracted from these stories?

The answer to that question is, in my opinion, a resounding "no." In this paper, I will read detective fiction, particularly from the Holmes canon, in light of two linguistic and philosophical theories: the theory of semiotics expounded by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) in his book *Course in General Linguistics* (originally published in 1916); and French philosopher Jacques Derrida's (1930-2004) theory of deconstruction, particularly as it pertains to Saussure's semiotics, which was articulated in several books, including *Of Grammatology*, published in the late 1960s. Through these perspectives, I will demonstrate how detective fiction parallels and allegorizes these theories, revealing subtle facets and complexities of a genre that is much more than predictable whodunit plots.

First, the parallels between Saussure's semiotics and detective fiction will be examined to illustrate the many similarities between the theory and the genre. Once that identification is made, the stage is set to consider how Derrida's deconstruction principles might map onto detective fiction, given the intimate interaction of deconstruction with semiotics. Specifically, the ways in

which stories from the Holmes canon embody deconstructive interpretations of two classic binary oppositions, speech/writing and presence/absence, will be discussed. This will be followed by a close reading of a particular Holmes story, “Silver Blaze,” that illustrates the important role of absence in a genre that is nevertheless ultimately presence-centered. Finally, the importance of these theoretical applications will be proved by showing how the essential relationship of classical detective fiction, that of detective/criminal, allows the genre to allegorize deconstructive theory, arguably with greater success than any other type of literature. Yet even as the detective/criminal binary is being destabilized to allegorize the deconstructive principle, I will show how this destabilization acts in support of the justice/injustice hierarchy, ensuring that detective fiction remains planted in the world of Justice and that its heroes, like Holmes, are worthy of the adoration they receive from fans.

## II.

At first glance, Saussure’s theory of semiotics and the genre of detective fiction may not seem to have much in common. Upon closer examination, however, the theory of signs expounded by the linguist maps nicely onto the role of clues in the criminal genre and onto the role the detective plays in deciphering those clues. Even where the parallel falls short, the discrepancies between the theory and the genre bring attention to general patterns—and perhaps even weaknesses—in the detective fiction tradition. On the whole, Saussure’s semiotics matches up well with the criminal genre.

In his theory of semiotics, Saussure identifies spoken language as made up of individual signs, which are in turn composed of two constituent parts. The first of these is what he calls the “sound-image,” which he describes as “not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our senses” (“The Linguistic

Sign” 36). Saussure calls the sound-image the “signifier” in his theory of semiotics (37). The second part of the sign is the “concept,” according to Saussure, and this is the idea, so to speak, that is invoked by the sound-image. The concept is called the “signified” in Saussure’s terminology (37). These two, the signifier and the signified, taken together, make up the whole that is the “sign.”

This theory maps well onto the function of clues in detective fiction. The object or occurrence which is designated as the “clue” is equivalent to the signifier, and the meaning or explanation of that clue in the context of the crime or mystery is the signified.<sup>2</sup> For instance, in the 1907 novel *The Red Thumb Mark*, by R. Austin Freeman, the medico-legal specialist and amateur detective Dr. John Thorndyke considers the most significant clue of a burglary, the titular thumbprint (signifier), and correctly arrives at the explanation (signified) that the crime was committed by a man named Walter Hornby. It is the job of the detective to match the correct signified with the signifiers that he is given; in other words, he must interpret the meaning of each clue in order to solve the crime.

But this is not always such an easy task—if anyone could interpret the clues at first glance, there would be no need for the masterful detectives who grace the pages of the genre’s fiction. Instead, the great sleuths generally must consider clues within a larger context of information about a crime in order to understand them.<sup>3</sup> For instance, in the first Sherlock Holmes story ever published, *A Study in Scarlet*, a Scotland Yard detective finds a woman’s

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<sup>2</sup> Subsequent to formulating this section of my thesis, I discovered by reading William W. Stowe’s essay “From Semiotics to Hermeneutics: Modes of Detection in Doyle and Chandler” that I am not the first person to compare the detective’s process of unravelling clues to semiotics. Stowe considers the way in which signs and clues align, how this makes the detective a semiotic interpreter of sorts, how the detective must weed out the relevant from the irrelevant when deciphering clues, and how the detective’s vast knowledge assists in these activities. However, I feel that take a more detailed view of this argument by discussing these elements in terms of specific passages from Saussure’s writing; additionally, the principles of arbitrariness and immutability, which I discuss later in this section, are not mentioned at all in Stowe’s work.

<sup>3</sup> As Stowe notes, “[Holmes’s] job therefore is not only to discover the truth by reading its signs but also to screen out those competing, misleading signs intentionally emitted by his adversaries” (Stowe 369).

wedding ring at the scene of a crime, and therefore assumes that a woman was present at some point during the proceedings. However, through his simple observation that only two sets of footprints, both belonging to adult men, are to be found anywhere near the crime scene, Holmes knows that one of these must have possessed the ring instead, and therefore rules out the idea that a woman was directly involved. By comparing the ring as a signifier to the crime scene's other signifiers (the footsteps), Holmes matches it with the correct signified.

This need for comparative analysis as a means of deriving meaning finds its counterpart in Saussure's theory as well. As Robert E. Innis explains in his introduction to Saussure in *Semiotics: An Introductory Anthology*, "Both [signifiers and signifieds] are defined by and within a system of contrasts from other signifiers and signifieds"; hence, the signifier "apple" corresponds to the concept of "apple" because it does not correspond to the concepts of "orange," "banana," "strawberry," etc. (25).<sup>4</sup> This aspect of Saussure's theory also maps onto the oft-seen instance in detective fiction (evident in the previous example from *A Study in Scarlet*) where the official police force misinterprets clues—does not match the correct signified for the signifier—because they neglect to consider the relational situation of a certain clue to the other facts and clues of a case.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the misinterpretation of a clue features prominently in the plot of *The Red Thumb Mark*. In the novel, the police experts on fingerprints believe the print in question to have been made when the suspected thief cut his thumb and accidentally left an impression in blood on a piece of paper in the process of a robbery. Dr. Thorndyke, however, discovers through his careful and scientific investigation that the thumbprint on the page cannot have been

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<sup>4</sup> As Saussure says, "The respective value of the pieces depends on their position on the chessboard just as each linguistic term derives its value from its opposition to all other terms" (*A Course in General Linguistics* 88).

<sup>5</sup> Stowe makes a similar point: "The difference is that while the prefect [police official in Poe's "The Murderers in the Rue Morgue"] translates the signs separately, Dupin [the story's detective] never stops looking for the message they convey as a whole" (Stowe 371). Stowe does not, however, directly link this observation to Saussure's system of comparative analysis in interpreting signs.

made in such an accidental fashion by the suspected criminal. He realizes that the print is of a larger scale than a real thumbprint of the accused man; that it has an irregularity which demonstrates that a paper fiber stuck to the thumb when the print was made, and that no such fiber is missing from the paper containing the print found at the crime scene; and that the print cannot have been made by a real bloodied finger because the lines would have been blurred by the liquid. By considering the relationship of the signifier to other signs, the doctor is able to determine the correct signified by comparison—namely, that the print has been produced from a stamp. He then considers all the people who had access to the copy of the suspect's thumb print from which the stamp was created and determines which of these people have the technical knowledge necessary to produce the stamp; these additional contextual considerations result in his discovery of the true thief, Walter Hornby. Though other (inferior) agents of justice had matched an incorrect meaning to this important clue, Dr. Thorndyke interpreted the correct signified for the signifier by comparing it with other signs, and thereby successfully solved the case.

The importance of this kind of comparative analysis when interpreting signs in detective fiction is further highlighted by a problem one encounters when attempting to apply Saussure's semiotics to the literary clues. One of Saussure's main principles of the theory of signs is the "arbitrariness" of the association of any given signifier with its signified. As he explains:

The idea of 'sister' is not linked by any inner relationship to the succession of sounds [...] which serves as its signifier in French; that it could be represented equally by just any other sequence is proved by differences among languages and by the very existence of different languages. ("The Linguistic Sign" 38)

Applying this principle to clues in detective fiction would therefore dictate that any arbitrary “clue”<sup>6</sup> (signifier) could serve to explain a certain aspect of the crime (signified). However, the opposite occurrence is in fact observed; that is to say, while any arbitrary “clue” (signifier) at the scene of a crime cannot be linked to an explanation of the crime, any number of arbitrary explanations (signifieds) could be assigned to a given clue outside the context of the crime itself. In other words, a large number of explanations—an art project, a criminal registry, a way of signing a document—can be assigned to a red thumb print considered in isolation of any specific circumstance, but the explanation that Walter Hornby is the thief cannot be derived from a large number of arbitrary “clues”—the color of the walls, the position of the furniture—at the scene of the crime. While this interesting reversal does not derail the application of Saussure’s semiotic theory to detective fiction, it does emphasize the importance of comparative analysis for the interpretation of any clues: because a red thumb print could be matched with any large number of signifieds, the detective must evaluate it in the context of a particular crime to determine the correct match.

Understanding how detective fiction reverses Saussure’s theory of the arbitrariness of the sign leads to a further realization that the parallel between semiotics and detective fiction is not exact. This new breakdown occurs over the principle of immutability that Saussure delineates concerning his signs. The principle essentially states that, even though the choice of signifiers for each sign is perfectly arbitrary, and therefore ostensibly could be changed at will, the reality is that convention and history prevent this from occurring; thus, it is nearly impossible to decide

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<sup>6</sup> I place the word “clue” in scare quotes because I am using it here to mean an object or occurrence that does not necessarily have any actual bearing on the crime itself, rather than the traditional definition which posits that the object/occurrence has a definite explanatory value in relation to the crime. I do this to illustrate why Saussure’s theory of the arbitrariness of signifiers cannot be applied to detective fiction, the reason being that not every possible object has the explanatory value that makes it a clue—objects are not in that way equivalent to the “succession of sounds” of language.



that the signifier “apple” will now be linked to the signified “orange,” and vice versa (40-41).

The correlating observation in detective fiction should be that a certain clue—to take an example from a Conan Doyle story, scratches around the keyhole of a watch—should always match to a certain meaning—that the owner of the watch is drunk at night when he winds it up (*The Sign of Four* 102-104). Indeed, it is this kind of reliable “deduction,” as Holmes would say, that enables him to perform his frequent tricks where, by observing a few physical characteristics of a person or object, he correctly guesses facts about them or it.<sup>7</sup> The immutability principle of Saussure thus seems to be upheld, to a certain extent, in Conan Doyle’s texts. As previously discussed, the arbitrariness of the connection between signifier (clue) and signified (explanation) mandates that clues must be placed within their proper context, and analyzed in a comparative fashion, in order to gain any information from them. But Holmes in particular often provides demonstrations where this arbitrariness does not seem to exist, and in its place is a one-to-one ratio of clue to meaning. Even though it would seem that, based on the principle of arbitrariness, many explanations could be possible for the scratches around the keyhole of a watch, Holmes always seems to simply *know* the true solution.

An explanation for this seemingly fantastic immutability of clues in Conan Doyle’s stories may perhaps be furnished by taking into account Holmes’s formidable knowledge of criminal history, seeing as history and convention are the roots of the immutability principle for Saussure’s sign. As the linguist explains, “No society [...] knows or has ever known language other than as a product inherited from preceding generations, and one to be accepted as such,”

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<sup>7</sup> As Holmes himself writes in an article titled “The Book of Life,” which Watson scoffs at (unaware of the author’s identity) in the very first Conan Doyle story: “By a man’s finger-nails, by his coat-sleeve, by his boots, by his trouser-knees, by the callosities of his forefinger and thumb, by his expression, by his shirt-cuffs—by each of these things a man’s calling [occupation] is plainly revealed” (*A Study in Scarlet* 17). Throughout the canon, Holmes frequently makes use of these very observations to miraculously deduce professions and other life details of his clients and visitors.

and, therefore, “A particular language-state is always the product of historical forces, and these forces explain why the sign is unchangeable, i.e. why it resists any arbitrary substitution” (*Course 71-72*). In other words, the signifier is linked to the signified because it has been linked previously in times past. The correlation, in the Conan Doyle stories, comes from Holmes’s familiarity with criminal history, which occasionally enables him to reconstruct an apparently impenetrable crime by comparing the fragments of evidence to similar cases that have been solved before. As Watson notes in *A Study in Scarlet*, when he is making a list of Holmes’s strengths and weaknesses, “He appears to know every detail of every horror perpetrated in the century” (15). This knowledge, in turn, often allows Holmes to correctly match the signified to some vexing signifier; as he says once to a blundering Scotland Yard detective, after asking the man if he’s read about a particular case from nearly fifty years ago, “Read it up—you really should. There is nothing new under the sun.<sup>8</sup> It has all been done before” (24). Although a more benign example that is not exactly criminal, the pocket watch deduction can in fact be attributed to Holmes’s previous experiences: as he explains to Watson, “What sober man’s key could have scored those grooves? *But you will never see a drunkard’s watch without them*” (*The Sign of Four* 104, emphasis added). Perhaps, then, it is this encyclopedic knowledge of past cases and evidence which enables Holmes to so confidently match a certain explanation to a given clue that, at first glance, could have many different meanings.<sup>9</sup>

But even with this history-based explanation, the immutability of clues in detective fiction can be problematic in that it still requires a certain suspension of disbelief from the reader. After all, it seems a little uncanny that Holmes is almost always right about the meaning of a

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<sup>8</sup> Here Kyle Freeman, who provides the notes for the edition of the Holmes canon referenced throughout this paper, has a footnote: “From the Bible, Ecclesiastes 1:9: ‘There is no new thing under the sun’ (King James Version)” (24).

<sup>9</sup> Stowe also notices that the detective’s specialized knowledge plays a role in his ability to interpret signs, although he does not connect this observation to Saussure’s theories about the role of historical precedent in semiotics (Stowe 367).

particular clue when it seems as though multiple explanations are possible. For instance, in the episode involving Watson's pocket watch, is it not equally possible that the owner of the watch was afflicted with some sort of palsy, and therefore his hands shook as he inserted the key at night to wind the watch? Why is it such a safe assumption that the scratch marks around the keyhole are the result of a drunken hand? (Watson, of course, confirms Holmes's prediction as correct.) In these displays of mental acumen in the Holmes stories, the (correct) solutions he derives from his observations *are* always logical—it just seems as though multiple logical solutions could be viable. Nevertheless, it is this power of deduction which is such a large part of Holmes's character and, arguably, his popularity. Furthermore, he sometimes backs up this apparent wizardry by referencing previous cases in which the same clues lead to the same explanations. Still, when this less-than-realistic immutability of a signifier occurs, the suspension of disbelief required marks what can be considered a weakness in the genre.

Conan Doyle, it seems, recognized this weakness and, taking it in stride, used it as a principle theme in the brief tale "How Watson Learned the Trick," one of two Sherlock Holmes parodies the author wrote. In this story, Watson seeks to prove to Holmes that his "methods [...] are easily acquired," his "tricks" really rather "superficial" ("How Watson Learned the Trick" 674). To do so, he embarks on a Holmesian chain of reasoning whereby, from the detective's unshaven face, a letter which makes him groan, and the particular coat he has chosen to wear, Watson deduces that Holmes is preoccupied (because he has forgotten to shave), upset because a case is not going well (the client must have written about the failure in the letter), and that he is expecting a visitor (because of the fancy coat). Watson's efforts seem equal to any of the numerous and similar assays made by Holmes throughout the series, and yet he is, alas, doomed to fail. Holmes explains that: "I did not shave because I have sent my razor to be sharpened. I put

on my coat because I have, worse luck, an early meeting with my dentist. His name is Barlow, and the letter was to confirm the appointment” (675). With a wink and a nod, Conan Doyle admits the fact that the immutability of some of the signifiers from which Holmes makes deductions is a bit uncanny, and the reader is left to simply embrace this aspect of the fiction.

A final note on the comparison between semiotics and detective fiction: for Saussure, it is the spoken type of language that reigns supreme and is language’s true form, as opposed to the written representation of language. In his view, “Language and writing are two distinct systems of signs; the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first” (*Course 23*). Therefore, it is the “sound-image” of “apple,” and not the graphic “a-p-p-l-e,” that constitutes the true signifier in Saussure’s definition of the sign. As a reminder, this sound-image is “not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our senses” (“The Linguistic Sign” 36). And while in the majority of instances this conception of the signifier as sound-image is applied to the idea of the clue in a metaphorical sense, it proves to be a literal and apt representation of a key clue in what is widely considered to be the first short story of detective fiction, Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Murderers in the Rue Morgue.”

In Poe’s famous work, proto-detective C. Auguste Dupin solves the macabre double murder of a mother and daughter in an ostensibly locked room by correctly determining that an orangutan, escaped from its master, has climbed into and then exited from an open window to perpetrate the atrocities. Dupin arrives at this solution in part by examining the testimonies of numerous witnesses who ascended to the women’s room after hearing cries of distress. When he explains to his unnamed friend (the story’s narrator) how he has solved the crime, the first link in Dupin’s chain of reasoning concerns the testimony of the witnesses regarding two voices heard

in or near the room where the crime was committed. The witnesses all claim to have heard the voice of a Frenchman and a second voice, described variously as “harsh” and “shrill,” prior to the time when they broke down the chamber’s locked door and discovered the room empty, save for a corpse. The testimony concerning the second voice is, however, rather unusual. As Dupin summarizes:

But in regard to the shrill voice, the peculiarity is—not that they disagreed—but that, while an Italian, an Englishman, a Spaniard, a Hollander, and a Frenchman attempted to describe it, each one spoke of it as that of a foreigner. Each is sure that it was not the voice of one of his own countrymen. Each likens it—not to the voice of an individual of any nation with whose language he is conversant—but the converse [...] No words—no sounds resembling words—were by any witness mentioned as distinguishable. (Poe 108-109)

The inference Dupin draws from these testimonies is that this second voice was not speaking any human language at all, which contributes to his determination that an orangutan is the guilty party. And the key that allows him to reach this point is, in essence, the “sound-image” of the second voice: the “impression” it makes on those who hear it of being a language which they do not speak and of which they can decipher no words. Because he was not present at the time, it is not the literal “sound” of this voice that is the clue for Dupin—just as the signifier is not merely an auditory phenomenon—but rather the way that this sound impacted the witnesses psychologically. In this instance, then, the clue (the testimony regarding the mysterious voice) aligns quite literally with Saussure’s idea of the signifier as sound-image; the explanation of that clue, however, retains a more metaphorical relationship with the signified. For nearly all other

examples in detective fiction, both signifier and signified share this more metaphorical relationship, rather than a literal one, with clues and their explanations.

Mapping Saussure's system of semiotics onto detective fiction thus provides several interesting points of comparison between the genre and the theory, often revealing parallels that illustrate the many elements the two entities have in common. But even though the differences seen between the theory and the genre concerning the principles of arbitrariness and immutability introduce some complexities into this reading, on the whole it does not really enrich one's understanding of the genre—while a semiotic perspective on detective fiction might reveal a weakness of the literature, it does not seem to provide dynamic new readings of the fiction. However, thinking about detective fiction in terms of Saussure's semiotics opens up the idea of reading the genre through the lens of deconstruction, a perspective that does yield interesting critical results. Analyzing detective fiction from Saussure's perspective is therefore valuable because it casts the genre in a certain light that will engage with deconstructive theory in fruitful ways, just as the dialogue between semiotics and deconstruction has produced exciting new understandings historically in the linguistic and philosophical disciplines.

### **III.**

Saussure's system of semiotics, along with several mainstays of Western philosophy, would be turned on their collective heads in the 1960s by the theories of French philosopher Jacques Derrida—theories that, in practice, came to be known as “deconstruction.” While deconstruction is far too broad a critical theory to discuss in full here, several of its basic tenets interact with the ideas of Saussure (and Western philosophy) in ways that are particularly illuminating when applied to detective fiction. In fact, detective fiction can be shown to embody

the principles of deconstruction in several respects. To illustrate this point, I would first like to consider how one Holmes story, “The Adventure of the Illustrious Client,” supports a deconstructive reading of the traditional binary of speech/writing. Then, I will consider the binary of presence/absence, fundamental to the formulation of semiotics, and the ways in which Derrida’s deconstructive take on this hierarchy plays out in the pages of detective fiction.

As previously noted, spoken language occupies the highest pedestal in Saussure’s linguistics, while written language “exists for the sole purpose of representing [spoken language]” (*Course 23*). Jonathan Culler, in his book *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (1982), explains the traditional rationale behind this ranking, which he notes is not exclusive to Saussure but rather “as old as philosophy itself”:

Speech is seen as in direct contact with meaning: words issue from the speaker as the spontaneous and nearly transparent signs of his present thought, which the attendant listener hopes to grasp. Writing, on the other hand, consists of physical marks that are divorced from the thought that may have produced them. It characteristically functions in the absence of a speaker, gives uncertain access to a thought, and can even appear as wholly anonymous, cut off from any speaker or author. Writing thus seems to be not merely a technical device for representing speech but a distortion of speech. (Culler 100)

Derrida, however, takes this hierarchical binary of speech/writing, in which “speech” is the privileged term, and in a characteristically deconstructive move, inverts it by revealing that speech can actually be thought of as a lesser or derivative form of writing. Culler quotes Derrida himself to explain:

“If ‘writing’ means inscription and especially the durable instituting of signs (and this is the only irreducible kernel of the concept of writing), then writing in general covers the

entire domain of linguistic signs.[...] The very idea of institution, hence of the arbitrariness of the sign, is unthinkable prior to or outside the horizon of writing” (*De la grammatologie*, p. 65/44). Writing-in-general is an *archi-écriture*, an archi-writing or protowriting which is the condition of both speech and writing in the narrow sense.

(Culler 102)

Speech is thus shown to be dependent, in a way, on the fundamentals of writing, an inversion that upsets the traditional hierarchy, which posits speech as the more essential vehicle of communication. This kind of thinking—demonstrating how a traditional binary can be reversed, by proving the dominant term to be dependent on the inferior concept or to exist as a derivative form of the inferior concept—characterizes deconstructive theory.

Interestingly enough, the Holmes canon contains a story that deals with this very binary opposition. “The Adventure of the Illustrious Client” demonstrates through its narrative a deconstruction of the traditional speech/writing binary by showing how writing can provide the most transparent, immediate access to truth, while speech can, by contrast, work to obstruct truth—a reversal of the traditional attributes of each term.

In the story, Holmes is approached by an aristocrat to prevent the marriage of a young lady, Violet de Merville, to a slick Austrian named Baron Adelbert Gruner, a man who “undoubtedly murdered his last wife” (“The Adventure of the Illustrious Client” 503). Although the Baron’s shady past is well-known, he has “explained” his personal history to Miss de Merville “in such a way as to make himself out to be an innocent martyr,” and the young lady believes him because “he has completely and absolutely won her heart” (499-500). His dominion over her is attributed to the fact that he is “extraordinarily handsome, with a most fascinating manner, a gentle voice, and that air of romance and mystery which means so much to a woman”



(499). In his attempt to awaken Miss de Merville to the reality of her situation, Holmes first dredges up a fallen woman named Kitty Winter, one of the Baron's (numerous) previous mistresses who has been laid low in life by him. Holmes takes Miss Winter to meet Miss de Merville, that she might hear firsthand of his cruelties from a real, live predecessor. But Miss de Merville, who has been prepared against such evidences and arguments by the Baron, is impervious to Holmes's pleading and Miss Winter's remonstrance. Holmes then decides that they must try to get through to Miss de Merville by showing her a book the Baron keeps which documents all of his affairs with women, a literary work described as something "no man, even if he had come from the gutter, could have put together" (504). Holmes is first made aware of the book by Miss Winter, and also learns from her that the book is closely guarded by the Baron, making it necessary to plan an elaborate burglary to gain it. The theft comes off, although not without certain unfortunate complications, and Miss de Merville ultimately comes to her senses after seeing the book's contents, calling off the marriage.

The first way in which this story challenges the traditional speech/writing binary is in its depiction of speech's ability to obscure the truth rather than bring a listener closest (out of all possible forms of communication) to the truth. As has been previously noted, Culler explains the traditional privileging of speech by describing how "[s]peech is seen as in direct contact with meaning" because "words issue from the speaker as the spontaneous and nearly transparent signs of his present thought" (Culler 100). By contrast, writing can be viewed as "a distortion of speech," and, therefore, meaning, because of the distance usually inherent in the written form between the communicator of a message and its receptor (100). In a deconstructive move, "The Adventure of the Illustrious Client" demonstrates the opposite of these traditional views: here, it

is speech, not writing, which is used to “distort” the truth of a situation and distance the listener from it.

For example, Baron Gruner has personally told his intended fiancée “every unsavoury public scandal of his past life,” but has shaded his account so that he remains innocent in her eyes (499). Though these details are communicated orally, through speech, nothing could be further from giving Miss de Merville “direct contact” with the truth of the situation. In fact, the text suggests that it is precisely because the Baron is communicating face-to-face with her that the young lady is taken in; he arrogantly describes to Holmes how he has essentially hypnotized her with his magnetic personality into believing whatever he says (503). Miss Winter confirms this tendency of the Baron’s speech, describing how his “poisonous, lying tongue [...] explains and soothes” away any concerns about his character (504). When Watson encounters the Baron for the first time, he too notes the villain’s personal charisma, saying that “His voice was engaging and his manners perfect” (511). The portrait that emerges is one of a man who can hide the truth from any victim, provided that he is personally speaking to her—a portrait of speech, as opposed to writing, as the vehicle of deception which divorces representation from significance.

In addition to actively working to subvert the truth, speech is also shown in this story as an insufficient, less-than-convincing method of conveying truth. While it is traditionally writing’s lot to be characterized by “absence, misunderstanding, insincerity, and ambiguity,” in the episode where Holmes and Miss Winter try to reason with Miss de Merville, these attributes are instead transferred to speech (Culler 101). Holmes describes his verbal efforts, and their effects, in his interview with Miss de Merville as follows:

But I really did plead with her with all the warmth of words that I could find in my nature.

I pictured to her the awful position of the woman who only wakes to a man’s character

after she is his wife [...] I spared her nothing—the shame, the fear, the agony, the hopelessness of it all. All my hot words could not bring one tinge of colour to those ivory cheeks or one gleam of emotion to those abstracted eyes. (“The Adventure of the Illustrious Client” 506)

Miss Winter similarly fails to elicit any reaction, even though she is much more heated in her exhortations to the young lady regarding the true nature of the fiancée’s character. There is an “absence” of understanding on the part of Miss de Merville, even though she is receiving the message via speech (in theory, the most direct, reliable method of transmission possible). In fact, she also doubts the “sincerity” of the communication, an aspersion more traditionally cast on writing, when she remarks to Holmes that “Possibly you mean well, though I learn that you are a paid agent who would have been equally willing to act for the Baron as against him” (506). Thus the story not only presents speech as a truth-obscuring method of communication, via the example of the Baron, but also as an inadequate means to convey truth, ineffective and insincere.

“The Adventure of the Illustrious Client” comes full circle in the deconstruction of speech/writing by following its dismissal of speech as the privileged term of the binary with an elevation of writing. This primarily occurs via the Baron’s illicit book, which Holmes describes as a “lust diary” (514). Miss Winter is more descriptive:

I tell you, Mr. Holmes, this man collects women, and takes a pride in his collection, as some men collect moths or butterflies. He had it all in that book. Snapshot photographs, names, details, everything about them. It was a beastly book—a book no man, even if he had come from the gutter, could have put together. But it was Adelbert Gruner’s book all the same. ‘Souls I have ruined.’ He could have put that on the outside if he had been so minded. (504-505)

In the story, this book (writing) is the most direct access to the truth of the Baron's character.

While he disguises his malignancy with his speech, his writing presents the reality; Holmes notes that "It is in his own [hand]writing. [Miss de Merville] cannot get past it" (515). Exposing the unfortunate young woman to it accomplishes Holmes's mission—the marriage is broken off.

The Baron's downfall is that he allows his true character to be represented in the book because he believes that no one else will ever see it, and so the truth will remain hidden. In front of his victims, he easily maintains his façade of innocence through his speech. The suggestion that emerges is deconstructive in its implications: speech is almost always used to communicate with another person (people rarely talk aloud to themselves), and it is therefore inherently performance-based, meaning that a speaker is inevitably cognizant of the effect of their words on others. This, in turn, leads to the obvious potential for the "modification" of speech in order to achieve a particular effect on the listener; hence, the Baron's ability to disguise his character through his words. Writing, by contrast, can frequently be done for one's own consumption rather than for public display—for example, note-taking, journaling, etc. Therefore, writing can be a more direct representation of truth than speech because it can communicate while operating under the belief that no one will ever see the message. This assertion of writing's role as the method of communication that gives the most direct access to truth contrasts the traditional philosophical view, and thus falls in line with Derrida's deconstruction of speech/writing.<sup>10</sup>

This Holmes story does not, however, escape entirely from the traditional preference of speech over writing. Following Holmes's interview with Miss de Merville, the Baron

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<sup>10</sup> Of course, it is possible to write a deceptive letter that deliberately misrepresents the truth of a situation to the reader—the point of deconstruction is not to throw down the dominant term from its throne and install the traditionally inferior term in its place, but rather to illustrate how the inferior term *can* occupy the dominant position. This story therefore embodies the deconstructive interpretation of speech/writing because it demonstrates how writing *can* be a superior vehicle for communicating the truth, as compared to speech; I am not, however, arguing that this story proves that writing is always the superior vehicle for communicating truth (although the tradition of Western philosophy against which deconstruction pushes does hold speech as *always* being the superior vehicle of communication).

orchestrates a violent attack on Holmes in an attempt to dissuade him from continuing with the case. Although the detective is truly injured, he desires that his injuries be greatly exaggerated in the public knowledge so that the Baron relaxes his guard against him, a move which will later enable Holmes to successfully execute the theft of the incriminating book. Thus “The bulletins were very grave and there were sinister paragraphs in the papers” concerning Holmes’s health for a week, even though Watson’s “continual visits assured [him] that it was not so bad as that” (509). Indeed, “On the seventh day the stitches were taken out, in spite of which there was a report of erysipelas<sup>11</sup> in the evening papers” (509). Here then, would appear to be an example of the traditional characterizations of the speech/writing binary: in person, Watson knows the truth of Holmes’s condition and that it is not so serious; in writing, however, which is separated from the source, the truth is distorted.

And yet, even within this example of Holmes’s injuries are planted the seeds of a deconstructive reading. While Watson does know that Holmes is doing much better than the reports in the papers would suggest, he also “had suspicions at times that [Holmes] was really finding himself faster than he pretended even to me,” noting by way of explanation that “There was a curious secretive streak in the man which led to many dramatic effects” (509). Watson does possess some evidence to back his suspicions. Holmes had noted previously, when outlining his scheme to exaggerate his illness, that his surgeon “shall see the worst side of me” and so support the idea that Holmes is gravely ill (508). Thus, while writing’s potential to distort reality is demonstrated by the incorrect reports of Holmes’s health in the papers, personal speech is also discounted in this episode as a reliably true method of communication by Holmes’s false representations of his status to Watson and to his surgeon. But even this seeming contradiction concerning which is the best vehicle for communicating truth, speech or writing, supports a

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<sup>11</sup> Here Freeman has a footnote describing erysipelas as “Inflammatory skin disease” (509).

deconstructive reading because the narrative is showing how both speech and writing can be fallible. The goal of deconstructive theory is to destabilize a hierarchy, not permanently overturn it, and throughout the course of “The Adventure of the Illustrious Client,” both writing and speech are represented, at times, as the best and worst ways to communicate truth, effectively destabilizing the hierarchy. The fact that writing is (for the majority of the story) given such a prominent role via the Baron’s book, however, works to combat the entrenched, traditional speech/writing binary in such a way as to give the whole story a deconstructive tone.

The kind of thinking represented by the deconstruction of the speech/writing hierarchy is also applied by Derrida to the traditional binary of presence/absence, which he sees at work in Saussure’s semiotics and, given its “logocentric” basis, in Western philosophy at large.<sup>12</sup> As has been previously discussed, because the arbitrary relationship of signifiers to signifieds precludes any sort of innate identification between these two elements of the linguistic sign, meaning is derived via differentiation; to use an earlier example, the signifier “apple” matches with the signified “apple” simply because it does not match with “orange,” “banana,” etc. Derrida seizes upon this aspect of Saussure’s theory as contradicting its supposed articulation of a logocentric, presence-based philosophy: instead of emphasizing the “presence” of signs and their meanings, language is instead reliant upon the constant “absences” of other signs to derive its significance (Culler 98-99). This is, essentially, Derrida’s theory of the “trace,” which refers to the presence, through their absence, of other signs in the connection of every signifier to its signified.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Culler defines logocentrism as “the orientation of philosophy toward an order of meaning—thought, truth, reason, logic, the Word—conceived as existing in itself, as foundation” (Culler 92). He also quotes Derrida on the relationship between logocentrism and presence: “Logocentrism would thus be bound up in the determination of the being of the existent as presence. [*De la grammatologie*, p. 23/12]” (93).

<sup>13</sup> As Culler quotes, from Derrida: “‘Whether in written or in spoken discourse, no element can function as a sign without relating to another element which itself is not simply present. This linkage means that each [sign] is constituted with reference to the trace in it of the other elements of the sequence or system [...] Nothing, either in the elements or in the system, is anywhere simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces.’ (*Positions*, pp. 37-38/26)” (Culler 99).

Absence is thereby shown to be a necessary condition of presence in semiotics, and the hierarchy presence/absence is, in a sense, reversed.

Derrida does not, however, argue that this paradox of Saussure's theory altogether negates the idea of a logocentric semiotic system in which presence is a necessary component. Instead, as Culler explains, the entire purpose of the sign is to make "present" for an interpreter particular concepts or meanings, which is achieved by the action of the sign (99). And, "in order to distinguish one sign from another, in order to tell when material variations are significant, the linguist much assume the possibility of grasping signifieds [making "present" the meaning of signifieds], making them his point of departure" (99). In this way, presence continues to play a vital role in Saussure's depiction of semiotics, so that even though "much of his analysis does work [to undermine or deconstruct the presence/absence hierarchy], he explicitly affirms a logocentric conception of the sign and thus inscribes his analysis within logocentrism" (100). Here, we see confirmation of the notion that deconstruction does not seek to permanently unseat the dominant term of a hierarchy (in this case "presence") with the traditionally inferior term ("absence"); instead, the image that emerges is one of a cyclic struggle or constant play, in which presence and absence vie for supremacy within Saussure's system of semiotics.

Detective fiction, in turn, embodies this play between the privileging of presence and absence in many ways. Taking the idea of "presence" first, it becomes clear that detective fiction, like Derrida's conception of Western philosophy and Saussure's semiotics, attempts on the surface to foreground presence over absence.<sup>14</sup> Noting the ubiquity of the philosophy of presence in our everyday lives, Culler states that "The notions of 'making clear,' 'grasping,' 'demonstrating,' 'revealing,' and 'showing what is the case' all invoke presence" (94). It is

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<sup>14</sup> This categorization is fitting, given the fact that Section II of this paper is devoted to illustrating how Saussure's semiotics and detective fiction are parallel in many respects.

difficult to imagine more apt descriptions of detective fiction; its entire structure revolves around a detective “grasping” the truth of a crime and subsequently “making clear,” “demonstrating,” “revealing,” and “showing what is the case” to others. Indeed, a genre focused on arriving at the truth of a mystery via careful and logical reasoning would seem to encapsulate the logocentric philosophy.

And yet, as in Derrida’s readings of Saussure, absence emerges upon closer examination as a necessary—even defining—characteristic of detective fiction. Let us begin with an element of narrative. Traditional detective fiction relies on the absence of the crime’s “plot” until late in the story to preserve the suspense and reader’s interest.<sup>15</sup> The reader (and detective) receives clues throughout the story, but it is only near or at the tale’s denouement that the full picture of how the crime occurred and who committed it emerges. In the Holmes canon in particular, the revelation of the criminal and crime is frequently presented as a succinct, complete narration given by Holmes himself at the end of the story; this “story within a story” helps one to visualize the narration of the crime as a tangible entity—a plot—which has been absent prior to that point in the tale. Without this absence, the detective would have nothing to detect, and so the absence of the crime’s plot becomes a necessary condition of the genre. Of course, in keeping with the constant play between absence/presence, it is worthwhile to note that the eventual presence of this plot is also generally a necessary characteristic of the genre, if the detective is to succeed in solving the case. As Culler would say, the genre remains “inscribed” within the philosophy of

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<sup>15</sup> By “traditional,” I mean stories, such as those in the Holmes canon, in which the reader is not given (unless he or she has correctly guessed it) the “plot” or narrative of the crime until the end of the story. R. Austin Freeman (1862-1943), author of stories featuring detective Dr. John Evelyn Thorndyke, is credited with inventing the “inverted detective story,” in which the reader is first presented with a narration of the events of the crime and then, subsequently, with an account of how the detective solves it (McAleer 151). The reader thus knows, from the very beginning of the detective’s investigation, who perpetrated the crime and how exactly it was committed. As John McAleer explains, “This is plotting which centers not on *whether* the criminal will be caught but *how*” (151, emphasis added).



logocentrism despite the necessary role that absence occupies—a theme that will recur throughout our consideration of the role of presence/absence in detective fiction.

Another key absence frequently seen in detective fiction is that of the story's criminal. Whether "absent" in the sense of unknown, or absent in the sense of not-yet-apprehended (physically absent), the story centers on the detective's attempts to make the perpetrator present in both senses. For instance, in *A Study in Scarlet* Holmes concludes his investigation of the crime scene by making a gift of some of his conclusions regarding the criminal to the two Scotland Yard detectives<sup>16</sup>:

There has been murder done, and the murderer was a man. He was more than six feet high, was in the prime of life, had small feet for his height, wore coarse, square-toed boots and smoked a Trichinopoly cigar. He came here with his victim in a four-wheeled cab, which was drawn by a horse with three old shoes and one new one on his off fore-leg. In all probability the murderer had a florid face, and the fingernails of his right hand were remarkably long. (*A Study in Scarlet* 27).

By painting a visual image of the murderer, Holmes is making him "more present," in the sense of easier to visualize or more "known," to both others in the story and to the reader. He is also working to literally make the man present because a strong physical description increases the likelihood of his capture. Later on in the story, Holmes will attempt twice to apprehend (and thereby make physically present) the culprit, a man named Jefferson Hope. In the first instance, Holmes knows that Hope dropped a wedding ring with great sentimental value at the scene of the crime, and so he advertises for the owner of a recently found wedding ring, to be applied for in

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<sup>16</sup> "Gift" is perhaps not a wholly encompassing term, because the display largely comes across as an attempt to prove to the official men how superior Holmes is as a detective, and how clueless they are by comparison. He is, to a degree, showing off here; by saying that "These are only a few indications, but they may assist you," Holmes is mocking the Scotland Yarders' incompetence (*A Study in Scarlet* 27).

person at 221B Baker Street. The detective is unsuccessful in this endeavor—Hope sends an accomplice to recover the ring instead—but Holmes ultimately gets his man by posing as a customer asking for Hope, who is a cabby, by name. Thus, much of the narrative of *A Study in Scarlet* is devoted to making Jefferson Hope “present” in the story, but, as always, this possibility is necessarily predicated on Hope’s absence, both literally and in the abstract sense of “unidentified,” for a majority of the text.

Many detective stories revolve around the recovery of stolen property, an obvious instance of the presence/absence binary at work. But in the Holmes canon in particular, these stories sometimes push this tension to higher levels, offering increased opportunities for interaction between the two opposing terms. For instance, in the famous tale “A Scandal in Bohemia,” which represents one of the few misses in Holmes’s career—at the hands of a woman, no less—Holmes is called upon to burgle a compromising photograph from the former lover of a king. Depending on which way the situation is read, this is either an inversion or confirmation of the established hierarchy: on the one hand, Holmes is seeking to make an absent photograph present for the king by stealing it from his former lover; on the other, he is seeking to render an absence of the photograph from its proper place in the woman’s home. Perspective determines which side of the binary Holmes’s actions belong to. It is perhaps interesting—given another traditional hierarchy, man/woman—that from the point of view of the man, the King of Bohemia, Holmes is acting on behalf of presence, while from the point of view of the woman, Irene Adler, he is bringing about absence.<sup>17</sup> Thus, whichever way one chooses to read the story, the parallel positions between man/woman and presence/absence are upheld (man-presence/woman-absence).

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<sup>17</sup> “Whether or not it is the paradigm of metaphysical oppositions, man/woman is certainly a distinction whose hierarchical structure is marked in an endless number of ways, from the genetic account in the Bible where woman is created from man’s rib as a supplement or ‘helpmeet’ to man, to the semantic, morphological, and etymological relations of *man* and *woman* in English” (Culler 165).

While the role of absence in the story opens it to a deconstructive reading that reverses the presence/absence binary, this alignment of the dominant and lesser terms of two traditional hierarchies reminds the reader of the power the privileged term of each grouping has historically exerted over its “lesser” counterpart.

The resolution of “A Scandal in Bohemia” provides a further, and perhaps more deconstructive, instance of play between presence/absence. Irene Adler, realizing Holmes has learned the location of the photograph, leaves England with her new husband the night before the detective attempts to recover the picture. In the secret recess where it was contained, she instead leaves a photograph of herself in evening dress and a letter “superscribed to ‘Sherlock Holmes, Esq. To be left till called for’” (“A Scandal in Bohemia” 203). Holmes has, therefore, accomplished his goal of making a photograph “present” for his royal client—it is simply the wrong photograph. While this picture of Adler is not a clue per se, it still demonstrates beautifully the importance of differences, or absences, in deriving meaning in the detective genre, similar to the constitution of signs in the theories of Derrida and Saussure. The photograph, simply a picture of a woman when considered in isolation, is meaningful precisely because it is not the compromising photograph that was being sought—the absence of the compromising photograph colors this picture’s presence with meaning. The story therefore concludes with an illustrative example of Derrida’s “trace,” adding an additional layer to a text full of the tension between presence and absence.

“The Adventure of the Second Stain” is another “stolen object” story in the Holmes canon that features a tension between presence and absence, but with a unique psychological twist. In this tale, a woman has stolen an important diplomatic paper from her husband, but later regrets her indiscretion. She is able to recover the letter, but is at a loss for how to restore it to

him without betraying her guilt. Holmes, sympathizing with the woman's motives, counsels her to replace it in the safe from which it was originally stolen. He then gives his opinion to her husband, his client, that "The more I think of the matter the more convinced I am that the letter has never left this house" ("The Adventure of the Second Stain" 226). The client examines his safe after Holmes's urging and, lo and behold, discovers the document. Here, Holmes seems to be relying on the traditional privileging of presence over absence to pull off this deceit; even though the man says that it is "impossible" that he could have overlooked the letter in his safe and that checking for it now is a "farfical waste of time," when he finds it in the safe, he is suddenly willing enough to believe that he must have simply overlooked the letter initially, and that it has never been stolen at all. Perhaps this is because the client, like many people, lives in a logocentric world that prefers presence to absence, and this philosophy exerts a type of psychological influence that enables him to assume that the letter was present all along (since presence is the dominant reality) rather than having been stolen (absent) as he had thought. The presence/absence hierarchy is therefore exploited in this story to achieve the unusual denouement, although the text stops well short of deconstructing itself—after all, the resolution depends on a denial that any absence ever existed, a blatant depiction of the ideal logocentric world.

One of the most deconstructive aspects of the Holmes stories might be the detective's philosophy towards detection itself, which certainly betrays the type of play between presence/absence that defines Derrida's trace. As Holmes admonishes Watson in *The Sign of Four*: "How often have I said to you that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth?" (*The Sign of Four* 126, emphasis original). The idea of arriving at the truth is, of course, perfectly logocentric and presence-based, and given that it is the detective's job, the genre appears to privilege presence. However, Holmes clearly

states that, for him, the truth is “true” because it is not any of the ideas which have been proven false—a methodology that corresponds exactly to Saussure’s differential system of divining the meaning of the sign, whereby “apple” is “apple” because it is not “banana.” This means that, just as Derrida identifies it at work in Saussure’s semiotics, the trace can be seen in Holmes’s philosophy of detection as well, where any true idea contains the absences, the traces, of all the false ideas that it is not.

Finally, the important role of absence in detective fiction can be seen in the narrative function of clues in the genre. As previously discussed, the “plot” of the story’s crime is generally absent until the end of the text. Clues, however, are usually sprinkled in throughout the narrative so as to tease the reader with the ultimate solution, giving him or her the opportunity to match wits with the detective. But this fragmentary dispersal of hints to the crime’s plot emphasizes the absence of the complete account of the crime; additionally, while the physical clues themselves might be present (a red thumbprint is found at the scene of the crime), their explanation or meaning is frequently absent at first, until the detective, and possibly the reader, works out their significance. Clues therefore represent an additional instance of the play of tension between presence/absence in detective fiction.

The detective fiction genre is thus well-suited to embody deconstructive principles as they relate to the traditional hierarchy of presence/absence. This suitability is fitting, considering the many ways in which the genre parallels Saussure’s system of semiotics, which serves as a focal point for Derrida’s deconstructive theories about presence/absence. Several aspects of detective fiction—such as the absence of the crime’s narrative, stolen object stories, and clues—demonstrate the necessity of absence in a seemingly presence-centered genre. But at the same time, the dominance of presence is ultimately affirmed throughout the stories—the crime will be

solved, the criminal caught, the stolen object recovered—and so detective fiction, like Saussure’s semiotics, according to Culler, remains “inscribed” within a logocentric philosophy despite its deconstructive tendencies.

#### IV.

I would like to turn my attention now from the ways in which detective fiction embodies deconstructive readings of presence/absence on a broad scale to examine a specific Holmes story, “Silver Blaze,” that treats the theme of absence in a particularly clever manner. The fact that “absence,” as a theme, receives such special treatment is an additional proof that it is a very significant element in a genre that, nevertheless, remains presence-centered. In this story, absence plays an important role on two levels: that of narrative (it features in the story’s plot), and that of metaphor (it allegorizes the function of clues in the genre). In order to access the meaning of absence on the metaphorical level, I will apply a theoretical framework expounded by John A. Hodgson in his 1992 article “The Recoil of ‘The Speckled Band’: Detective Story and Detective Discourse.”

In his article about the Holmes story “The Adventure of the Speckled Band,” Hodgson demonstrates how a critical reader may take on the role of a detective when certain elements of a story appear amiss. Hodgson argues that Conan Doyle has committed a literary crime of sorts as the author of “The Adventure of the Speckled Band” because several elements of the story are implausible, causing it to violate the “rules” of the detective genre and realism in a criminal-like way. These violations primarily center around the impossible existence of the story’s murderous snake, which is described as being a member of a non-existent breed, drinking milk from a saucer, hearing low whistles, and climbing up bell ropes—all characteristics, Hodgson notes, that

are absurdly unreal. Ultimately, however, Hodgson concludes that this criminal act on Conan Doyle's part makes the story more like "a critical work masquerading as a literary one: it is not about detecting crime, but about defining a crime-detecting genre" (Hodgson 318). Hodgson argues that the flaws in the story which make it "criminal" function on a deeper level to reveal inherent truths about the genre of detective fiction: "We, [...] in order to discover the deeper, satisfactory resolution of this apparently flawed story, must read its literal clues figuratively, recognizing them as features not of an actual scene, but of a textual one" (317).

How can the literal clues of the story be read figuratively? As Hodgson explains, "the secondary instruments of Roylott's [the story's criminal] plot figuratively evoke the generic plot of detective fiction itself" (317). For instance, a dummy bellpull located at the scene of the crime, despite its inability to produce sound, nevertheless "'rings a bell' of summons and alarm in Holmes's mind," as Hodgson notes, because it is one of the key clues that enable Holmes to solve the case (318). Hence the dummy bellpull is both a literal and figurative clue: its presence literally suggests to Holmes's mind the method of the crime, and figuratively represents the effect that clues have on detectives in the larger structure of detective fiction. Using this type of interpretative framework, Hodgson argues that the story can be read on two levels, which "correspond exactly to what narratology discriminates as 'story' [...] versus 'discourse' [...]" (319). On the one level, the "story" level, the text simply narrates the tale of how Holmes foils a doctor's insidious criminal scheme. On the other level, the "discourse"<sup>18</sup> level, Conan Doyle's problematic elements of the story can be interpreted as representing larger conventions of the detective fiction genre. This carefully-crafted double significance is what makes "The Adventure of the Speckled Band" one of the greatest Holmes stories, according to Hodgson.

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<sup>18</sup> In order to avoid confusion given the various meanings of the word "discourse," in my own analysis I refer to this level of the story as "metaphor."

While the criminal act committed by Doyle is different in “Silver Blaze” than in “The Adventure of the Speckled Band,” the same process is nevertheless at work: Doyle commits a “crime” as the text’s author that, rather than cheapening the story, works on a more symbolic level of discourse to define and reflect the detective fiction genre—particularly, the role of absence in the genre.

Perhaps the most famous clue of the Holmes series comes from the story “Silver Blaze.” In the tale, Holmes is summoned to King’s Pyland, a racehorse training facility located in Dartmoor. He is asked to solve the mysterious disappearance of Silver Blaze, one of the stable’s horses that had been favored to win the upcoming Wessex Cup, and the tragic murder of the horse’s trainer, a man named John Straker. Ultimately, Holmes arrives at the correct solution that Straker himself stole the horse from the stable, after drugging the stable boy on watch that night, with the intention of nicking one of the animal’s tendons to prevent it from running in the race. Straker stood to win money if the favorite did not run—hence the motivation for the crime. In the end, Holmes correctly deduces that the horse fatally wounded the trainer as the man tried to injure it. He also locates the lost and unharmed horse, which goes on to win the race.

The well-known clue enters the story as one of Scotland Yard’s (classically) capable-but-inferior detectives asks Holmes if there are any points of interest he has observed about the case to which the official detective’s attention should be drawn, and Holmes responds,

“To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time.”

“The dog did nothing in the night-time,” [says the official detective.]

“That was the curious incident,” remarked Sherlock Holmes (“Silver Blaze” 413).

While this exchange is noteworthy for introducing a popular proverb into the common lexicon, it has a much deeper meaning when viewed in a critical context: it represents a “crime” of sorts



committed by Conan Doyle.<sup>19</sup> It is up to the reader to follow Hodgson's example and act the part of a detective in order to discern the correct critical meaning of this "criminal" clue.<sup>20</sup>

The crime committed by Conan Doyle in "Silver Blaze" first comes to light in the exchange between the official detective and Holmes that concerns the curious incident of the dog that didn't bark. Holmes deduces from the dog's silence during the night, while the crime was occurring, that the animal was familiar with the criminal and, from that inference, eventually determines that it was the trainer himself who kidnapped the prized racehorse. Unlike the normal pattern in detective stories, whereby certain present, material clues (signifiers) allow the detective to reconstruct the crime (determine the signified), here it is the omission of a clue, and not its presence, which is key. Absence, therefore, plays an important part in this story on the level of narrative, contributing to Holmes's ability to solve the case.

But the value of the dog's silence as an important clue—it is later confirmed by Holmes to be the second major clue that allowed him to solve the case—is complicated by the fact that it has not been properly introduced to the reader before this point at all. Indeed, Conan Doyle has committed a crime by relying on it, as its inclusion in the story violates the conventions of the genre. For instance, in S. S. Van Dine's "Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories," the very first rule is: "The reader must have equal opportunity with the detective for solving the mystery... [a]ll clues must be plainly stated and described" ("Willard" 300).<sup>21</sup> In "Silver Blaze," the main facts of the case are presented to the reader when Holmes summarizes them for Watson

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<sup>19</sup> As Kyle Freeman states in a footnote: "[This exchange is the] source of the expression 'The dog that didn't bark'" ("Silver Blaze" 413).

<sup>20</sup> "[...] the transition [to this] relationship is a natural one, for reading is itself a form of detection. The analogousness of reader to detective is thus central to any poetics of the genre" (Hodgson 314).

<sup>21</sup> S. S. Van Dine was the pseudonym of Willard Huntington Wright (1888-1939), who authored a series of detective novels featuring the character Philo Vance, beginning in 1926 ("Willard" 296).

on the way to the scene of the crime.<sup>22</sup> In this presentation, the only mention of a dog is in connection with the mysterious visit of a stranger to the stables on the night of the crime:

“‘So you’re one of those damned touts!’ cried the [stable] lad [to the strange man]. ‘I’ll show you how we serve them in King’s Pyland.’ He sprang up and rushed across the stable to unloose the dog [...] A minute later, however, when [the boy] rushed out with the hound [the stranger] was gone [...]” (“Silver Blaze” 402)

The reader therefore knows that there is a dog on the premises, but the animal’s function as a reliable watchdog is not really made explicitly clear. After all, the reader does not know how far away the animal is kept from the horses’ stalls, and so it is not a given conclusion that the dog would have been aware of a stealthy stranger in the stable on the fateful night of the crime. Then, as regards the creature’s silence in the nighttime, the only indication given to the reader is that “The two lads who slept in the [...] loft above the harness-room [...] had heard nothing during the night, for they are both sound sleepers” (402). This evidence that the two stable hands had heard nothing in the night is not specifically made in reference to the dog, but instead follows a passage about how the horse’s stall was found empty the next morning—thus, the logical inference is that the thief has removed the horse quietly, rather than that a watchdog has not barked. Additionally, the reliability of the silence during the night is discounted by Conan Doyle when it is explained that both stable hands are sound sleepers. These two incidents are the only evidence in the story presented to the reader with which he or she should theoretically be able, according to Van Dine’s rules, to discern the true significance of the dog’s silence. The next time the fact is mentioned is when Holmes endeavors to draw the official detective’s attention to it,

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<sup>22</sup> Holmes even notes, as he does so, that “[...]othing clears up a case so much as stating it to another person, and I can hardly expect your cooperation if I do not show you the position from which we start” (“Silver Blaze” 400). By this logic, Conan Doyle should “hardly expect” the cooperation of the reader given that he is about to criminally obfuscate one of the story’s most important clues.

and the reader must surely feel cheated because the important clue has not been properly introduced. Granted, it is the detective's prerogative to seem nearly omniscient in his ability to determine the correct signified from each signifier, and the reader is merely amazed at his ability to interpret correctly the clue that others misconstrued. The detective is even permitted to observe clues that all others have overlooked—but in that instance, he must share his observation with the reader. The reader at least expects to be told what each clue is, even if he or she cannot correctly interpret it; hence, the failure to properly present the clue of the dog that does not bark is a criminal act on Conan Doyle's part.

The dog's silence in the night is the second clue which Holmes identifies as enabling him to solve the crime. The "first link in [his] chain of reasoning" is the fact that the stable hands and trainer had all eaten curried mutton for dinner on the night of the crime, as only a strong dish like curry could have hidden the taste of the opium powder used to drug the stable hand (415). Holmes also admits that, when the significance of the curried mutton finally occurred to him he "[marveled] in [his] own mind how [he] could possibly have overlooked so obvious a clue" (415).

And obvious it was. The detail that the stable hand ate curried mutton for supper is mentioned twice in Holmes's initial description of the night of the crime to Watson, even when in the second mention, a less-specific term like "supper" would have sufficed. And a more generic reference to the stable hand's meal is, in fact, made two additional times in Holmes's recounting. Even if the reader does not make the connection between the strength of the dish and the fact that it effectively concealed the opium's taste, he or she cannot complain that the necessary information was in any way withheld. Although this clue is identified by Holmes as the first light which put him on track to solve the crime, and the silent dog is identified only as

the second key clue, there remains nonetheless an appreciable discrepancy in the emphasis placed on each that seems disproportionate. This disproportionality, in turn, emphasizes the way in which Conan Doyle's treatment of the dog's silence, in the context of detective fiction, is a sort of literary crime.

This crime can be classified as one of omission, which resonates nicely with the fact that the clue itself relies on absence—that it is the lack of something which is significant. The classification is important, as it is an indication of how this literary crime, rather than being an unfortunate oversight on Conan Doyle's part, can instead be taken on the level of metaphor as symbolic of the structure of detective fiction as a genre. After all, as has been previously discussed, absence is a key tenet of detective fiction, including in the functioning of clues (which tease the “absent” narrative of the crime and whose explanation must be “absent” until the detective or reader solves them). Conan Doyle's criminal omission of the key clue that the dog didn't bark in the night, especially when the clue itself is significant by virtue of omission, thus draws the reader's attention to the larger role of absence in the detective fiction genre.

A closer reading of “Silver Blaze” both confirms this comparison and illuminates it further. For example, while the lack of clear references to the fact that the dog did not bark in the night is so severe in the story as to constitute a literary crime, there are several instances of much subtler references that do reflect the truth. When Holmes and Watson lose the horse's trail as they are tracking it across a moor, Holmes “stood pointing, with a look of triumph on his face,” when he rediscovered the tracks, echoing the way in which hunting dogs “point” out the direction of their quarry (410). The idea of a guard dog for a stable is reintroduced when Holmes arrives at Mapleton, the local rival horse farm, and the stable hand threatens him to “Be off, or you may find a dog at your heels” (410). This warning from the Mapleton stable hand also

resonates ironically because it is exactly what any person attempting to solve the mystery should hope for—that the all-important dog would pursue and worry him or her until its correct significance has been realized. A few paragraphs later, after Holmes has revealed that he knows this stable hand is guilty of hiding the missing horse, the man is described as “cring[ing] along at [Holmes’s] side like a dog with its master” (411). These references all occur shortly before Holmes reveals that the curious incident of the dog in the night is an important clue, and serve as very subtle hints that a dog is important in this story. Less overt than the references to the curried mutton supper, these veiled signs reflect the larger role of clues in the detective fiction genre. If Conan Doyle’s criminal omission regarding the dog’s silence represents the absence (until the case is solved) of key information about the crime seen in most detective stories, then these textual clues to the dog’s importance—which the reader must look carefully to find—represent how the author in the genre must weave clues into his story that lead to the solution, but not too obviously. As Van Dine suggests, “[...] if the reader, after learning the explanation for the crime, should reread the book, he would see that the solution had, in a sense, been staring him in the face—that all the clues really pointed to the culprit [...]” (“Willard” 300). Thus, once the reader knows the significance of the dog’s silence, he or she can reread the preceding text and detect the subtle emphases on dogs it contains; a very astute reader, perhaps, sees these repeated references in the first reading and therefore already considers what significance the dog may have.

In this way, the treatment of the dog that does not bark in the night in “Silver Blaze” mimics the way clues are handled in the detective fiction genre as a whole, a vein of observation similar to that identified by Hodgson in the story “Speckled Band.” The reader, noticing that something is amiss in the story, must task him or herself with interpreting this problem on the level of metaphor rather than narrative. Conan Doyle’s decision to render absent the key

information about the dog might, on the first reading, seem like an unfair trick that violates the expectations of any fan of the detective fiction genre. But without that criminal obfuscation, the deeper critical meaning of the story may have passed unnoticed, and so the crime is, in a sense, justified. The result is a clever piece of literature that feeds into the Derridean tension between presence/absence, seen in all detective fiction, by emphasizing how important absence really is to the genre—so important, it practically has an entire story dedicated to it.

## V.

But cleverness aside, why does it matter that Saussure's semiotics and, subsequently, Derrida's theories of deconstruction map well onto detective fiction? In my opinion, placing detective fiction in these contexts illustrates how it, uniquely among literary genres, can allegorize the deconstructive principle. While many aspects of the genre—such as the important role of presence/absence—fit together nicely with deconstructive theory, detective fiction is ultimately well-suited to allegorize deconstruction because of the necessary presence of two components in every classic detective story: the detective and the criminal. Practicing deconstructive theory requires two related terms, one traditionally “dominant” and the other “inferior,” whose order can, in fact, be proven to be reversible. Detective fiction provides these two terms, which are traditionally ordered hierarchically as detective/criminal, but also provides, in the Holmes canon, examples of reversal and play (in the Derridian sense) between these terms. This unique set of circumstances allows detective fiction to successfully allegorize deconstructive theory, creating a new layer of complexity for a genre often dismissed as formulaic or predictable.

The detective/criminal binary, including instances when it is reversed, has been explored previously in critical work.<sup>23</sup> The differences between the two terms are obvious: a detective seeks the truth in his investigations, while the criminal seeks to obscure it; a criminal creates chaos by his actions, and the detective seeks to impose order on that chaos, via an explanation; the detective is accepted by the society in which he lives, while the criminal is rejected for breaking legal or social codes; the criminal works against justice, and the detective works for it. These characteristics, in turn, lead to the traditional privileging of “detective” over “criminal.” However, the genre is also full of instances where this binary is blurred—to quote Hodgson, “Opposed though they may be, these characters (detective and criminal) have, as is widely recognized, much in common” (Hodgson 312).<sup>24</sup> Hodgson continues:

At the very least, detection often depends upon the detective’s imaginative ability to identify with his opponent, if only temporarily. Thus Poe’s Auguste Dupin solves the mystery of “The Purloined Letter” by identifying his own intellect with that of his opponent (Poe 1978: III, 984); and Holmes similarly reminds Watson (in “The Musgrave Ritual”), “You know my method in such cases . . . I put myself in the man’s place, and, having first gauged his intelligence, I try to imagine how I should myself have proceeded under the same circumstances” (Doyle 1930: 395). Toward the extreme—or the epitome—of the genre, detective and criminal approach very close to a shared identity. So it is with Holmes and his great adversary, Professor Moriarty. “What will [Moriarty]

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<sup>23</sup> See Hodgson 312-313, excerpted below, as an example.

<sup>24</sup> I recognize that the “blurring” of a binary—which I define as the mixing of attributes traditionally associated with one term or the other—is not the same as a full-blown “reversal” of a binary—when the inferior term becomes (provisionally) superior to the traditionally privileged term, often by encompassing it or being shown as necessary to the privileged term’s existence. However, I feel that the blurring of a binary calls into question the superiority of the privileged term, even if it stops short of a reversal, by illustrating instances where the dominant term doesn’t seem so different from the inferior term after all. In other words, when the detective possesses traits normally identified with the criminal, the line between the two begins to appear somewhat arbitrary, and calling that line into question is a movement in the deconstructive direction, even if it is not a full deconstruction.

do” Watson asks, in “The Final Problem.” Holmes knows the answer: “What I should do. . . Moriarty will again do what I should do” (ibid.: 476). And so it is in “The Purloined Letter” with Dupin and the villainous Minister D—, who are pointedly doubles of each other, perhaps even brothers (Wilbur 1962: 380; Babener 1987 [1972]: 46-50; Hoffman 1972: 131-32; Derrida 1975: 109). At the very extreme, finally, detective and criminal are one and the same. [...] The classic instance of the detective as criminal, of course, is Oedipus. (Hodgson 312-313)

In addition to his ability to think like a criminal in order to solve crimes, the detective also occasionally blurs the binary between himself and the criminal by looking on the official police as antagonists, a position that would seemingly align the supposed agent of justice with the lawbreaker. In “A Study in Scarlet,” Holmes says of one policeman, “He knows that I am his superior, and acknowledges it to me; but he would cut his tongue out before he would own it to any third person” (“A Study in Scarlet” 21). Later, Watson narrates that the policemen watch Holmes’s detective work “with considerable curiosity and some contempt”; shortly after, when these men ask for his opinion on the case, Holmes replies, “You are doing so well now that it would be a pity for anyone to interfere,” a statement uttered with “a world of sarcasm in his voice,” according to Watson (27). To cap it all off, at the end of “A Study in Scarlet,” the official police receive all the credit in the newspapers for solving the crime, even though it was entirely Holmes’s achievement and success—a scenario repeated frequently throughout the canon (96). Thus, while both sides are theoretically working towards justice, there often exists a type of antagonism between the detective and the police that aligns him, in a way, with his binary opposite: the criminal.



The binary is also blurred when the detective breaks the law in order to solve a case. For instance, in the Conan Doyle story “The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans,” Holmes breaks into a suspect’s house without a warrant (which he claims could not have been obtained, based on the lack of concrete evidence), and discovers as a result both how the murdered victim’s body has been disposed of, and the existence of a secret communication method used by the suspect and his accomplice. Lestrade, Holmes’s primary Scotland Yard contact, says to him later in response, “We can’t do these things in the force, Mr. Holmes...*No wonder you get results that are beyond us.* But some of these days you’ll go too far, and you’ll find yourself...in trouble” (“The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans” 430, emphasis added). Lestrade’s statement conveys the idea that it is precisely Holmes’s ability to blur the binary with the criminal, through his illegal actions, that allows him to be so successful. In fact, this instance demonstrates a full reversal of the traditional binary: here, acting as a criminal enables Holmes to be a good detective, thereby privileging the traditionally inferior term.

Detective fiction thus provides an ideal allegory for deconstructive theory because it requires the presence of two terms, detective/criminal, which are traditionally ordered in a hierarchy that is, nevertheless, subverted in several instances. However, this capacity for subversion—and particularly for reversal—raises an important, if somewhat nihilistic, question: if the line between the detective and the criminal can be seen as arbitrary, are the lines between ideals like justice and injustice, morality and immorality, or legality and illegality equally suspect? If Holmes sometimes seems to act more like a criminal than a detective, are readers left questioning the validity of a distinction between living within the bounds of the law and straying outside of it?

The question seems particularly valid when considering those instances in which Holmes's actions are, at best, extralegal and, at worse, utterly criminal. After all, Conan Doyle frequently reminds his readers that Holmes views his detective work as an "art" or "game," which is hardly the same thing as acting purely out of concern that the British law be upheld.<sup>25</sup> In fact, in his introduction to *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*, a series of Holmes stories from the post-Reichenbach<sup>26</sup> half of the canon, Freeman argues that the resurrected detective "aggressively pursues his own justice, actively breaking the law on several occasions and coming close to morally censurable conduct on several others" ("Introduction to Volume 2" xxiv). Freeman cites several stories from this series to prove his point, charging Holmes with various improprieties ranging from accepting a bribe to being complicit in a murder. Such accusations seem to bolster the argument that detective fiction's capacity to blur or reverse the detective/criminal binary must cause readers to question the validity of the legal/illegal hierarchy—if Sherlock Holmes, paragon of the detective, can't be troubled to stay on the right side of the law, can anyone? And is the inevitable result of this seeming anarchy a fiction which encourages its readers to give up the privileging of right over wrong?

I would argue that the deconstructive aspects of detective fiction that play out in the detective/criminal binary are not so destructive in their consequences and that, far from destroying the distinction between right and wrong, detective fiction assures the continued

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<sup>25</sup> Some examples of these descriptions: "Holmes, however, like all great artists, lived for his art's sake [...]" ("The Adventure of Black Peter" 97); "'Come, Watson, come!' [Holmes] cried. 'The game is afoot'" (The Adventure of the Abbey Grange 191); "It may surprise you to know that I prefer to work anonymously, [Holmes said,] and that it is the problem itself which attracts me" ("The Problem of Thor Bridge" 586); "My life is spent in one long effort to escape from the commonplaces of existence [says Holmes]. These little problems help me to do so" ("the Red-headed League" 224).

<sup>26</sup> In 1893, Conan Doyle meant to kill off Holmes in "The Final Problem," a story wherein the detective and his arch-nemesis, Professor Moriarty, plunged to their deaths at Reichenbach Falls. However, Conan Doyle revived the detective ten years later in a new series of stories; ultimately, a little more than half of the total short stories in the canon would be written in this second period. The first few of these new stories make up *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*.

implementation of this distinction. Instances in the Holmes canon wherein the detective/criminal binary is blurred or reversed may call into question the absolute validity of the legal/illegal binary; however, these instances always occur, ultimately, in the service of maintaining the justice/injustice (or right/wrong) hierarchy. Thus, all of the examples cited by Freeman can in fact be seen as instances of Holmes upholding Justice when to do so requires the sacrifice of “justice.”<sup>27</sup> As such, the occasions when the detective/criminal binary is reversed tend to reveal the weaknesses of “legal” as the privileged term of the legal/illegal hierarchy. But at the end of the day, detective fiction always remains firmly enshrined in the values of Justice and Right.

The story “The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton,” discussed by Freeman in his introduction, provides an instructive example of this situation. In the story, Holmes battles against the titular character, who Holmes describes as the “worst man in London” because he is “the king of all the blackmailers” (“The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton” 113). Holmes has been engaged by the Lady Eva Blackwell, who has had “several imprudent letters [...] written to an impecunious young squire in the country” fall into Milverton’s hands on the eve of her wedding to another man (114). Her fiancée is a high aristocrat, the Earl of Dovercourt, and if he were to read the letters, it “would suffice to break off the match” (114). Milverton demands a large sum of money from the Lady Eva, or else he will send the Earl the letters. Holmes has been employed to “make the best terms [he] can” for the unfortunate woman, but after bargaining with (and threatening) Milverton to no effect, he resolves to burgle the man’s house in order to destroy the compromising documents. However, as Holmes and Watson are in the middle of the burglary, opening the safe in Milverton’s house, they hear approaching footsteps and must hide themselves behind a curtain. From this vantage point, they witness a

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<sup>27</sup> Here, I am using Justice (with a capital “J”) to refer to the broad category of “the right thing being done,” while justice (with a lowercase “j”) refers strictly to the rules of the British law. From this point forward, this distinction of capitalization will carry this meaning.

midnight appointment (unanticipated by Holmes and Watson) Milverton had arranged with a woman he believes to be an aristocrat's servant looking to sell compromising letters. As it turns out, the woman is not a servant at all, but one of Milverton's previous victims who was unable to pay his price; as vengeance for her husband, who the woman says "broke his gallant heart and died" when Milverton revealed her compromising letters, the woman shoots Milverton repeatedly in the chest until he is dead. Although they could not possibly have prevented the initial shots, Holmes holds Watson in their hiding place as the woman continues to shoot, waiting until she has fled the scene to make his exit from the premises with Watson. Prior to leaving the room, Holmes destroys all of the letters in Milverton's safe, ensuring that the Lady Eva will be free from scandal in the future. He and Watson are nearly caught by a gardener as they escape Milverton's property, and Lestrade arrives at Baker Street the next morning asking Holmes to investigate the crime, which the police are convinced was committed by two men (in reality Holmes and Watson) seen fleeing the grounds by eyewitnesses. Holmes refuses to assist, however, citing the fact that he thinks Milverton received his just desserts, and the matter is left at that.<sup>28</sup>

Freeman refers to this story as a "troubling case" in terms of what he identifies as Holmes's propensity in the later stories to "actively [break] the law [...] and come close to morally censurable conduct" ("Introduction to Volume 2" xxiv, xxv). Here is his evaluation of the story:

In [this] story Holmes abandons the moral code he followed in previous stories. First, while spying on Milverton [in preparation for the burglary], Holmes pledges to marry

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<sup>28</sup> Of course, Holmes must also refuse to investigate given the fact that he and Watson are the prime suspects—based on Holmes's character displayed throughout the canon, it seems like a fair inference that he couldn't bear to "play dumb" and intentionally fail to solve the crime, and yet he obviously cannot afford to set the police wise to the truth of the matter.

Milverton's housemaid in order to get information out of her about her boss. When Watson reacts with shock to this admission, Holmes nonchalantly replies, "You can't help it, my dear Watson." Then before he and Watson break into Milverton's house (no talk of a search warrant here!), Holmes tells Watson that they will "take no articles save those which are used for an illegal purpose." Later, however, when he empties the contents of Milverton's safe into the fire, he doesn't stop to examine which papers are for such purposes and which are not. Most serious of all, he stays Watson's hand when a wronged woman pulls a pistol on the blackmailer and shoots him; then Holmes refuses to cooperate with the police in finding her. Milverton may have been what Holmes calls him, "the worst man in London," but blackmail is not a hanging crime. Holmes admits that Milverton got "the best of the first exchanges" between them [referring to his initial attempt to bargain with and threaten Milverton], then vows, "but my self-respect and my reputation are concerned to fight it to a finish." Holmes seems to act out of revenge for his wounded pride, the law be damned. (xxv)

I would argue that, rather than illustrating Holmes's moral degradation or revengeful nature, this story demonstrates how the detective/criminal hierarchy can be reversed in order to uphold Justice. However, first we must work from an accurate assessment of the story—there are several flaws in Freeman's diagnosis that cause Holmes's actions to appear more severe than they really are. For instance, while Holmes does engage himself to Milverton's housemaid so as to learn the layout of the home and the routines of its inhabitants prior to the burglary, the girl will not be as bereft by the trickery as Freeman suggests: following his comment that "You can't help it, my dear Watson," Holmes explains, "However, I rejoice to say that I have a hated rival, who will certainly cut me out the instant that my back is turned" ("The Adventure of Charles Augustus

Milverton” 117). The reader therefore knows that any temporary disappointment on her part should be quickly assuaged. Additionally, Freeman blasts Holmes’s indiscriminate destruction of the papers from Milverton’s safe—an apparent contrast to Holmes’s earlier avowal to take only the letters to be used for blackmail—as though the detective has simply, on a whim, decided to abandon all restraint. Freeman neglects to mention that when Holmes and Watson finally get the chance to steal the letters, Milverton has just been shot and his entire household is aroused, meaning that the duo has precious little time in which to accomplish their mission, forcing them to forgo the time-consuming task of sorting through a safe full of letters. Furthermore, since Watson describes the safe as containing “the reputations of many fair ladies,” it is fair to assume that many of the documents Holmes destroys by cleaning out the safe are used for illegal purposes, making their destruction justifiable (121). Lastly, when Freeman describes how Holmes stops Watson from intervening in Milverton’s murder, he does not include Watson’s explicit statement that “No interference upon our part could have saved the man from his fate,” a statement which makes it clear that Holmes is not in any way responsible for Milverton’s death (123).

But even with these overly-harsh accusations cleared up, Freeman still has the points that Holmes commits burglary and then helps to cover up a murder by withholding his eyewitness account—arguably two of his most serious charges. However, these criminal activities can both be shown to have been committed in order to serve the ends of Justice, and so even though they represent reversals of the detective/criminal hierarchy, the justice/injustice pairing remains intact. In terms of the burglary, Holmes himself explains his actions:

Let us look at the matter clearly and fairly. I suppose that you will admit that the action is morally justifiable, though technically criminal. [...] Since it is morally justifiable, I have

only to consider the question of personal risk. Surely a gentleman should not lay much stress upon this, when a lady is in most desperate need of his help? [...] There is no other possible way of regaining these letters. The unfortunate lady has not the money [to pay off Milverton], and there are none of her people in whom she could confide. To-morrow is the last day of grace, and unless we can get the letters to-night, this villain will be as good as his word and will bring about her ruin. I must, therefore, abandon my client to her fate or I must play this last card. (118)

Holmes's reasoning clearly explains how his criminal action, burglary, supports the ends of Justice. While stealing is the goal, he will only steal that which has already been ill-gotten (since the letters do not rightfully belong to Milverton in the first place), and he will only do so in the interest of preventing a crime (blackmailing the Lady Eva). As Holmes says, the crime is "morally justifiable," and therefore works to uphold Justice and cannot fairly be considered "wrong." Thus, even though the detective/criminal hierarchy will be reversed—Holmes must become a criminal in order to do his work as a detective—and even though this reversal may place the legal/illegal binary on tenuous ground, these reversals will not, in turn, upset the justice/injustice hierarchy.<sup>29</sup>

The most serious accusation against Holmes in this story is, however, that of covering up a murder. Watson describes the end of the murder scene as follows:

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<sup>29</sup> Interestingly enough, Holmes and Watson are quite cognizant of the illegality of their actions. After Watson makes it clear to Holmes that he will not be left behind in this adventure, the detective remarks, "We have shared this same room for some years, and it would be amusing if we ended by sharing the same cell" (118). Later, Watson notes that, the moment he and Holmes set foot in Milverton's house, "we had become felons in the eyes of the law" (119). This self-consciousness of the illegal nature of their actions displayed by Holmes and Watson forces the reader to acknowledge that the detective/criminal hierarchy has been reversed—there is no tiptoeing around the fact. The forcefulness with which Holmes's criminality is asserted, however, reinforces the idea that the reversal of detective/criminal does not throw the reader into a world where justice/injustice or moral/immoral has been lost: Holmes is clearly a full-fledged criminal here, and yet Justice is served by this illegality.

No interference upon our part could have saved the man from his fate, but, as the woman poured bullet after bullet into Milverton's shrinking body I was about to spring out, when I felt Holmes's cold, strong grasp upon my wrist. I understood the whole argument of that firm, restraining grip—that it was no affair of ours, that justice had overtaken a villain, that we had our own duties and our own objects [destroying the incriminating papers], which were not to be lost sight of. (123)

Here, simply allowing the murder to take place as it naturally would have, had Holmes and Watson not been hiding in the room (again, the two men could not have prevented it), is explicitly connected to the administration of justice to “a villain.” It makes perfect sense, then, when Holmes refuses to assist Lestrade in the investigation of the murder on the grounds that “there are certain crimes which the law cannot touch, and which therefore, to some extent, justify private revenge,”—or, we might say, “private Justice” (125). To round out this case for Justice, earlier in the story Holmes explains precisely why applying to the British law for relief would not work:

What would it profit a woman, for example, to get [Milverton] a few months' imprisonment if her own ruin must immediately follow?<sup>30</sup> His victims dare not hit back. If ever he blackmailed an innocent person, then indeed we should have him, but he is as cunning as the Evil One. No, no, we must find other ways to fight him. (114)

Milverton's death thus appears to be entirely justified, and therefore Holmes's decision to withhold information about the murder from police, while technically a criminal act under British law, is done in service of the larger ideal of Justice. Therefore, in “The Adventure of

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<sup>30</sup> As Freeman notes when discussing this case, blackmail is “not a hanging crime,” meaning that Milverton would only serve a certain amount of time before he would be free again to squeeze his victims. Thus, the reader sympathizes with the murderer's reasoning when she exclaims, just prior to shooting Milverton, “I will free the world of a poisonous thing” (123).



Charles Augustus Milverton,” though Holmes crosses the line into the criminal realm on two distinct counts, burglary and withholding evidence, the reversal of detective/criminal *maintains* the sanctity of justice/injustice as a hierarchy, rather than destabilizing it.

Arguably, more formidable problems with the reversal of the detective/criminal hierarchy are presented by the story “The Adventure of the Priory School.” In this story, Holmes is called in to find the missing and, presumably, kidnapped, son of the powerful Duke of Holderness. Through his sleuthing, Holmes discovers that the boy met someone in the woods near his boarding school by appointment one night, and that this person carried the boy off on horseback. While the boy was meeting his “companion” outside of the school, the establishment’s German teacher saw these events unfolding and, realizing their nefarious significance, pursued the boy and kidnapper some five miles on his bicycle before being bludgeoned to death by the kidnapper. The boy was then delivered to a local inn, where he was kept prisoner for several days. Holmes has just fit together these facts, and decided that the Duke’s secretary played a role in the kidnapping, when he witnesses the Duke and his secretary secretly visiting the boy at the inn; the next morning, Holmes taxes the Duke with these events. In return, the Duke explains the truth of the situation. The Duke’s secretary is, in fact, his illegitimate son, a young man who is jealous of his younger half-brother because he wants to inherit the family fortune himself, an impossible desire under the Victorian social laws that did not recognize illegitimate heirs. This oldest son devised the kidnapping plan with a confederate to pressure his father into breaking the order of succession; however, he had not been aware that his confederate killed the German teacher during the flight and, as soon as he learns of it, he is so horrified that he confesses his crime to the Duke. He then asks his father to leave the younger son at the inn for a few days—as though the crime has not yet been solved—so that the guilty confederate might have a chance to get

away and avoid hanging for his murderous crime. The Duke assented, but had gone to see his youngest child as soon as he learned of his location, and this was the reunion Holmes had witnessed. Holmes, however, has already learned the confederate's identity, and caused him to be arrested despite the grace period the older son contrived for his escape. But when Holmes is told that the Duke's older son will leave the country and separate from the family forever as punishment for his crime, he simply accepts a large check in payment for his services and agrees to keep quiet about the son's involvement in the kidnapping plot, as well as the son's (and, because of his agreeing to leave the young boy "kidnapped," the Duke's) attempt to aid the escape of a murderer. Without any hints from Holmes, it is implied that the official police force will never see beyond the one murderous confederate's involvement, and will mistakenly believe that the whole crime was that one man's idea and execution, with ransom money as the motivation.

At first glance, then, Holmes's behavior in this story seems questionable at best. As with "The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton," here Holmes's crime is withholding information from the police—namely, that the Duke's secretary/son is the mastermind of the plot, and that the Duke and secretary/son essentially aided the murderer in his (attempted) escape. However, unlike in the Milverton story, here it is not so certain whether the ends of Justice are being served by Holmes's criminal action. Is this story, then, an example of how reversing the detective/criminal hierarchy leads to an overturning of the justice/injustice hierarchy? Freeman seems to think so, describing Holmes's behavior as "rather shocking," and arguing that there are no "extenuating circumstances here" which would make the reader sympathize with Holmes's choice to shield a criminal ("Introduction to Volume 2" xxiv). "Holmes's acceptance of an enormous check could be seen as a bribe," Freeman says, and "When we compare this with his

acid-toned retort in [another case]—“‘My professional charges are upon a fixed scaled,’ said Holmes coldly. ‘I do not vary them, save when I remit them altogether’”—it looks as if Holmes has sold out here” (xxiv).

Upon closer examination, however, Holmes’s actions do, in fact, serve the ends of Justice rather than his own greed. For instance, a reward of £6,000 for the recovery of his son and identification of the criminals responsible for the kidnapping was offered from the outset by the Duke (who did not know the true state of affairs until several days into the investigation). Thus, when Holmes tells the Duke he must write him a check for £6,000 at the beginning of their confrontation, he is not demanding a bribe, but rather claiming that which he has a right to have.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, the check becomes “enormous,” as Freeman describes it, when the Duke—with no prompting from Holmes—suggests that the reward money be doubled in exchange for Holmes to remain silent about the whole affair. However, Holmes’s response to this proposition is: “I fear, your Grace, that matters can hardly be arranged so easily. There is the death of this schoolmaster to be accounted for” (92). When the Duke protests that his secretary/son did not know about or encourage the murder, Holmes remains firm: “I must take the view, your Grace, that when a man embarks upon a crime, he is morally guilty of any other crime which may spring from it” (92). The Duke, in turn, responds with this explanation:

Morally, Mr. Holmes. No doubt you are right. But surely not in the eyes of the law. A man cannot be condemned for a murder at which he was not present, and which he

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<sup>31</sup> And while Holmes is clearly excited by the prospect of gaining £6,000 (Watson notes that Holmes “rubbed his thin hands together with an appearance of avidity which was a surprise to me, who knew his frugal tastes”), his decision to open the conversation with the Duke by asking for the monetary reward is very much in keeping with his love of drama when revealing the solution to a mystery, rather than simply springing from greed (91). Holmes frequently employs dramatic gestures to announce that he has solved a case, and when this story is considered in light of the whole canon, asking for the check first appears more like one of these gestures than avarice.

loathes and abhors as much as you do. The instant that he heard of it he made a complete confession to me, so filled was he with horror and remorse. (92)

Thus, Holmes is not obstructing Justice by remaining silent about the secretary/son as regards the murder, because even if he shared the information with police, the man would not, as his father points out, be legally guilty of any charges related to the murder. As Holmes says, the man might be “morally guilty,” but this is not a crime for which the British law can punish him. When Holmes is wrapping up his interview with the Duke, he essentially tells the aristocrat that he should banish his son from his household to prevent further tragedy, and the Duke confirms that he has already arranged for this to happen. Holmes is, therefore, helping to mete out Justice where the British law would fail: by encouraging the young man’s banishment, he is arguing for some kind of punishment, which is more than what the legal system could do. Concerning the secretary/son’s indirect responsibility for the murder of the German teacher, then, Holmes breaks the law (by keeping silent) in order to punish wrongdoing which would have been overlooked by the legal system. The justice/injustice hierarchy is preserved through the reversal of the detective/criminal binary, rather than being destroyed by it.

However, the murder is not the only crime for which the secretary/son bears some kind of guilt. The young man is also guilty of masterminding the kidnapping plot and delivering the message to his younger half-brother that led the boy to meet a stranger outside of his school late at night. In this instance, the British law could likely conceive of some punitive measures for the secretary/son. However, the fact that Holmes essentially shields the young man from the law does not mean that Justice is not served. For one thing, the man does not appear to be a general criminal—his crime had a very specific motivation and purpose—and thus, by removing him from the Duke’s family, which provided that motivation and purpose, it seems unlikely that he

will offend again. Furthermore, the young boy is, in the end, restored to his family, meaning that the negative effects of the crime have been largely erased. Lastly, removing the secretary/son from the Duke's family is a fairly severe punishment for the young man, as it cuts him off from his benefactor and security. For all of these reasons, Justice is served through the punishment suggested by Holmes and inflicted by the Duke on his secretary/son, despite the fact that the official legal system is not called into play. Once again, Holmes's criminal action in withholding information, while destabilizing the detective/criminal binary, does not affect the sanctity of the justice/injustice binary.

Finally, there is the criminal decision, on Holmes's part, to keep quiet about the Duke and his son's involvement in allowing the murderer a chance to escape the law (although Holmes successfully thwarts this escape attempt). Here too, Holmes's criminal action reveals itself as not incompatible with the administration of Justice. After all, because the inn where the young child was being held hostage belonged to the murderous confederate, as soon as the boy was rescued, the murderer's guilt would become apparent. Therefore, if following his confession, the secretary/son had simply allowed the Duke to reclaim the child immediately and without warning to his confederate, it would be the same as condemning the man to death. The secretary/son and the Duke thus give the murderer an opportunity to escape to avoid having blood on their own hands. Taking this into consideration, as well as the fact that the murderer is ultimately arrested thanks to Holmes's efforts, Justice appears to win the day: the murderer is captured and punished, but the Duke and his elder son are not castigated for their refusal to condemn the man to death themselves.

Holmes summarizes his position at the end of "The Adventure of the Priory School" well: "I am not in an official position, and there is no reason, *so long as the ends of justice are served,*

why I should disclose all that I know” (95, emphasis added). Indeed, this philosophy applies to all instances when the detective, through his actions, inverts the binary and paradoxically becomes the criminal in order to “serve the ends of justice.” It is true that serving justice in these cases frequently requires the inversion of the legal/illegal binary, and a result of these destabilizations might be that the reader begins to question the validity of that particular hierarchy. However, this destabilization casts the British legal system, rather than Holmes’s own morality, into question. In his introduction, Freeman provides some biographical information about Conan Doyle that may help explain this phenomenon:

It stems in part from Conan Doyle’s exasperation with the English legal system. Because people assumed that the author of the Sherlock Holmes stories was every bit as clever as his fictional creation, Conan Doyle often received requests to solve mysteries or to set straight the course of justice gone awry. A prominent example, although it occurred in 1906, after the publication of [the stories, including “The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton” and “The Adventure of the Priory School” contained in] *The Return*, illustrates the kind of thing that frustrated him. George Edalji, the son of an Indian minister, was convicted of killing farm animals on evidence that was obviously trumped up. His main crime seemed to be that he was Indian at a time when there was much anti-Indian sentiment in England. Conan Doyle took up his case, collected evidence overlooked by the investigators, interviewed witnesses not called at trial, and for years made speeches, wrote articles, and badgered officials to set the poor bloke free. He did the same a few years later for another man framed for murder, Oscar Slater. In each case it took nearly twenty years before either man got any justice from the legal system. Holmes reflects his creator’s impatience with letting an obviously flawed human

institution decide crucial questions when it's clear to any intelligent person what the outcome should be. ("Introduction to Volume 2" xxv-xxvi)

In fact, Holmes himself essentially conveys this precise attitude in one case, "The Adventure of the Abbey Grange," when he decides to let a murderer go free because he acted in self-defense and was killing the malevolent, violent husband of the woman whom he loved. Holmes says: "Once or twice in my career I feel that I have done more real harm by my discovery of the criminal than ever he had done by his crime. I have learned caution now, and I had rather play tricks with the law of England than with my own conscience" ("The Adventure of the Abbey Grange" 203). Thus, the deconstructive play that characterizes detective fiction when the detective/criminal binary seems to cyclically invert itself does not jeopardize the justice/injustice (or moral/immoral) binary. While it may call into question the legal/illegal hierarchy at times, detective fiction remains firmly located in a universe where Justice rules. While it is always difficult to speculate on what gives a literary work enduring popularity, given human nature's propensity for order over chaos, it is hard to believe that the Holmes stories would continue to find such a large audience if they allowed for deconstructive reversals of justice/injustice—or, worse, if such reversals caused readers to question the point of differentiating between Right and Wrong at all. The film, television and stage adaptations, as well as the continued popularity of the original texts, all suggest, therefore, that the justice/injustice hierarchy is preserved.

## VI.

Detective fiction is not as straightforward a genre as it might at first glance seem. Although it can be repetitive and formulaic at times, reading this literature in light of other critical theories, such as Saussure's semiotics and Derrida's deconstruction, leads to the

discovery of new facets and complexities within the genre. Particularly in the case of deconstruction, detective fiction's ability to allegorize theoretical concepts—especially the Derridean tension between two terms struggling to dominate a binary—helps to clarify concepts that are often difficult to grasp. On the other hand, reading these theories into detective fiction illuminates the genre in fresh, exciting ways. By way of conclusion, I would like to suggest how the classic story of Holmes and his archenemy, Professor Moriarty, lends itself well to fresh interpretation when viewed as an allegory for the Derridean tension inherent in all binaries.

While Hodgson notes the existence of several stories where the detective actually *is* the criminal, the closest the Holmes canon comes to melding the two terms is introduced in “The Final Problem” in the form of the infamous and nefarious Professor Moriarty.<sup>32</sup> Moriarty was intended to help Conan Doyle usher Holmes out of existence; as the author (somewhat ironically, in hindsight) explained:

[...] it was still the Sherlock Holmes stories for which the public clamoured, and these from time to time I endeavored to supply. At last, after I had done two series of them, I saw that I was in danger of having my hand forced, and of being entirely identified with what I regarded as a lower stratum of literary achievement.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, [...] I determined to end the life of my hero. (“Two Essays by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle” 684)

In “The Final Problem,” Holmes first reveals the existence of Moriarty to Watson, and gives him to understand that the professor is “the Napoleon of crime,” a master criminal whose elimination would enable Holmes to retire in peace. Holmes describes the supervillain as “an antagonist who

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<sup>32</sup> Arguably, to have the detective actually be the story's criminal would not be a deconstructive act anyway—instead of reversing the hierarchy, it simply destroys it by collapsing the two terms.

<sup>33</sup> Although it is for Sherlock Holmes that he is primarily remembered, Conan Doyle authored many other literary works in his lifetime, including in the historical fiction, science fiction and nonfiction genres (Grella). Conan Doyle believed that if he had not written the Holmes stories, which he felt “tended to obscure my higher work,” he would have a “more commanding” “position in literature” (683 vol. 2).



[is] my intellectual equal,” and in his introduction to the volume, Freeman describes how “When Holmes contemplates Moriarty, he sees an image of himself reflected in a perverse mirror” (“The Final Problem” 560; “Introduction to Volume I” xxxi). Hodgson, as has been previously noted, references Holmes and Moriarty’s relationship as an example of a time in the genre when “detective and criminal approach very close to a shared identity”—in other words, the ultimate example in the Holmes canon of the way in which the line between two binary opposites can be blurred (Hodgson 312).

But as has been discussed, “blurred” is not the same thing as “reversed,” and so the mere existence of Moriarty and Holmes as characters is not fully deconstructive. However, the Holmes/Moriarty relationship does provide an excellent example of the Derridian concept of “play” or “tension” between the two terms of a hierarchy—terms which are constantly struggling for supremacy. Hodgson notes (although in support of a different critical conclusion) the “imagery of retaliatory undercutting” present in “The Final Problem” (321). He cites a portion of this passage, but I have reproduced it more fully because it contains several representations of this constant battle between the two men:

He [Moriarty] saw every step which I took to draw my toils round him. Again and again he strove to break away, but I as often headed him off. I tell you [Watson], my friend, that if a detailed account of that silent contest could be written, it would take its place as the most brilliant bit of thrust-and-parry work in the history of detection. [...] He cut deep, and yet I just undercut him. (“The Final Problem” 560)

Throughout this story, Moriarty chases Holmes across Europe, seeking revenge for the fact that, through his detective work, Holmes has essentially crippled the master criminal’s gang. Eventually, at Reichenbach Falls in Switzerland, when Watson and Holmes are separated

(through one of Moriarty's tricks), tragedy seemingly strikes. Watson leaves Holmes at the edge of the falls, having been called away under false pretenses, and when he returns two hours later, Holmes is gone. After reading a note left behind by Holmes that confirmed Moriarty soon joined him at the precipice, Watson narrates the apparently inevitable conclusion of the encounter:

An examination by experts leaves little doubt that a personal contest between the two men ended, as it could hardly fail to end in such a situation, in their reeling over, locked in each other's arms. Any attempt at recovering the bodies was absolutely hopeless, and there, deep down in that dreadful cauldron of swirling water and seething foam, will lie for all time the most dangerous criminal and the foremost champion of the law of their generation. (570)

While it is not an allegory for all aspects of the deconstructive process, this competition between the two giants in their respective—but, importantly, opposite—fields, culminating with them tumbling “locked in each other's arms” down the falls, does epitomize the struggle that emerges in deconstructive theory between the two competing terms of a binary. Both Holmes and Moriarty win small battles in their larger war, and thus act out this cyclical motion in a way that further illustrates the aptness of detective fiction as an allegory for deconstruction. Allegorizing the relationship between Holmes and Moriarty, in turn, illustrates how reading detective fiction against deconstructive theory can provide fresh interpretations of classic stories.

Of course, by way of postscript, one must say that tragedy “seemingly strikes” Holmes in Switzerland because in “The Adventure of the Empty House,” published ten years after “The Final Problem,” Watson and legions of fans learned that the great detective had, in fact, won the war with Moriarty and not plunged to his death.<sup>34</sup> Far from negating the capacity of Holmes and

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<sup>34</sup> Freeman commented on the situation in his introduction to Volume 2: “When in 1893 Sherlock Holmes tumbled to his apparent death over the falls at Reichenbach in Switzerland, locked in the embrace of the sinister Professor

Moriarty's relationship to allegorize the Derridean binary tension, however, this turn of events simply reminds the reader that, for all its deconstructive tendencies, detective fiction (like Saussure's semiotics) ultimately remains firmly planted in logocentrism. But seeing as in this situation, allowing the traditionally dominant term, detective, to maintain its privilege over its opposite means that Holmes lives to inhabit dozens of additional stories, it seems like a privileging that perhaps even Derrida could support.

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Moriarty, readers all over the world were stunned and saddened. Letters poured in to Arthur Conan Doyle and to his publisher, the *Strand Magazine*, urging the revival of the beloved detective. Conan Doyle was adamant he wouldn't do it. 'I couldn't revive him if I would, at least not for years,' he wrote to a friend, 'for I have had such an overdose of him that I feel towards him as I do towards *pâté-de-foie-gras*, of which I once ate too much, so that the name of it gives me a sickly feeling to this day' (Baring-Gould, *The Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, vol. 1, p. 16; see "For Further Reading"). Then seven years later, after a young friend told him a legend from Dartmoor about a supernatural hound, Conan Doyle relented by writing *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. He was careful, however, to make it a reminiscence, not a resurrection, of his famous consulting detective. [...] The resumption of writing about his most famous creation must have set into motion something in Conan Doyle's soul [...]. It wasn't long before Conan Doyle decided—perhaps after a wistful look at his bank balance—that the enforced absence of his sleuth had gone on for too long" ("Introduction to Volume 2" xxiii).

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