

# The sign of four and stevenson's history essay

[History](#)



In this assignment we will be looking at the representation of different colonial territories and their influences in Conan Doyle's *The Sign of Four* and Stevenson's *The Beach of Fales*. In order to effectively discuss this topic, we must recognise that the long-term British colonial project in India that heavily influenced Doyle's text differs greatly from the setting of the less established German, British and American influence in the Samoan islands, on which Fales is modelled. The experience of colonial rule radically unsettled conceptions of loose categories like home and abroad in nineteenth-century fiction due to the realities of trade, imperial expansion, emigration and settlement. Many Victorians felt uncomfortable with this increasingly intricate relationship, often expressing a tendency to uphold their own ideals as the hallmark of civilisation and integrity. The first text we will look at is Doyle's *The Sign of Four*. In approaching this text, we must consider one prominent Historical event that shaped the representation of the Colony within this text- the outbreak that took place 10th May 1857. The vehement rebellion of Indian soldiers and civilians against British East India Company rule is customarily referred to as the Indian Mutiny and lasted until 8th July 1858, and is regarded as the first serious challenge to British control in India. As was the case with a lot of writers of his day, Doyle had never actually been to India, relying instead on accounts from other writers and journalists written three decades after the event took place. For British readers on the home front, the Mutiny was, in fact, a series of literary reinterpretations that turned historical fact into popular mythology. Many authors, such as Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins, added forcefully to the shaping of the Mutiny in the British popular consciousness, representing Britain as a fair ruler unexpectedly usurped. Reinterpretation of the events of <https://assignbuster.com/the-sign-of-four-and-stevensons-history-essay/>

the Indian Mutiny had started before the outcome of the conflict was even certain, and the British nation received subjective and sensationalist feedback from the press encouraging within. Doyle, when he came to write *The Sign of Four*, had much material to refer to upon myths of martyrdom and colonial betrayal, by now deeply ingrained in British popular memory, and told and retold many times through histories, memoirs, verse, fiction and the visual arts. Doyle's depiction of Small's account (p 135-7) was solidly aimed at British readers at home. The representation of the colony of British in India is presented as just- the narrative assumes an unproblematic relationship between British and India, never, for example, questioning the legitimacy of British rule. Small states in his account of the Mutiny and the cruellest part of it was that the men that we fought against, foot, horse, and gunners, were our own picked troops (p. 136-7), typically overlooking any wrong-doing the British may have done. Hand in hand with the sensationalised Mutiny literature came a series of colonial assumptions amongst the Victorian public regarding India as a land of mystery and financial opportunity. In *The Sign of Four*, as with much literature of its time, the Indian natives are represented as animalistic in a land brimming with menace, corruption and injustice compared to the supposed civility of the English. Small describes the rebels as dancing and howling and a swarm of bees. (p. 136), and compares his life in India before the Mutiny to the comfort of domestic life in the Home Counties of England (p. 134). The barbaric characteristics described of the Indians are in direct contrast to the calm representation of the two seemingly passive characters in a grizzly murder, resembling that of a wild animal attack- Mrs Dawson is described as being Cut into ribbons while Dawson is lying on his face, quite dead.

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(p. 136), providing the reader with vivid gore and a sense of injustice. As well as the assumed danger, India was also regarded as a land of rumoured financial opportunity, often described as 'The Jewel in the Crown' of English colonialism at the time of The Mutiny. Indian tobacco, as referred to by Holmes ('black ash of Trichinopoly' p. 52), was one of the goods central to Britain's imperial trade as an imported and widely consumed commodity. Furthermore, Doyle's depiction of the murder of Achmet and the theft of the Agra jewels by Small and his Sworn Sikh accomplices during the Mutiny in Agra is quite possible- looting was well known to be widespread within India during the Mutiny, promoting the colonial assumption of monetary possibility, with many British soldiers and their Indian allies settling tallies by raiding the wealth of the rebel cities they recaptured. If London in the Sign of Four represents, on the surface at least, the comfortable world of family homes, warmth, and emotional order, then India is portrayed as its polar opposite; a land of extremes of wealth and poverty, danger, lawlessness and, predominately; financial opportunity. The second text we will look at is 'The Beach of Falesa', concentrating on the superstition represented in the Colony and meeting of the cultures through a 'contact zone'. Although Falesa does not exist in reality, the place it is heavily based on the Samoan islands. Stevenson had recently started a new life in the Pacific during the time he wrote this novella, consciously engaging with the peoples, cultures, and places that he encountered. The colony in Falesa is represented with much more realism than Doyle's Mutiny, which we can see through Stevenson's use of Pidgin English in Samoans and his travel narrative. In his opening paragraph, for example 'The land blew in our faces' and 'the smell of lime and vanilla' (p. 4) a description similarly used by Captain Cook <https://assignbuster.com/the-sign-of-four-and-stevensons-history-essay/>

regarding the Pacific a generation before. The American linguist and critic Mary Louise Pratt has used the term "contact zone" to refer to "social spaces where cultures meet" [ ] often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism (1991, p. 33). Stevenson's entire narrative is played out on the contact zone of a trading beach, thus increasing the sense of realism in the colony's influence. From the moment Wiltshire discovers that Uma has a taboo attached to her which causes all the other natives to refuse to do business with him (p. 44), the reader becomes acutely aware of a theme of superstition present in the text and is drawn into the culture behind the setting- the beliefs of the locals, and the way they are manipulated by the traders. The representation of the Colony in this setting is arguably one of forced companionship, Uma and Wiltshire's initially unstable marriage, although the English arguably still predominantly rule it. This is highlighted by the language- the natives are described as, similarly to Doyle's text, animalistic "like cowering poultry" and "pointer dogs" (p. 55)- and through narrative, when it becomes apparent Case turned most of the village men into his "disciples" by convincing them that he is related to a "big-chief devil" called "Tiapolo", and thus has power over the "aitu", the minor devils which inhabited the Samoan consciousness (p. 46). Further emphasizing the white intellect displayed by Case, it is Wiltshire's typical European attitude against mysticism and his scepticism towards the missionaries and religious symbols of the island that save the day- prominent scientific thinking apparent in Doyle's work. Nevertheless, England is placed in a less favourable light than in Doyle's Sign of Four. This is further emphasised by the reader's initial look for union amongst the Colony settling in Falesa. Wiltshire declares deprivation of

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contact with his countrymen: "I was sick for white neighbours" (p. 4)- but on closer inspection, he discovers Case difficult to place and no better than Falesa's natives. The initial excitement at meeting a fellow Briton on Falesa is replaced by a growing sense of uncertainty about Case's social, national, and moral standing. "No man knew his country, beyond he was of English speech" (p. 5), Through both texts, Doyle and Stevenson exhibit the commonly held notion in the Victorian era that the British Empire was superior, either culturally or intellectually. However, it was becoming more apparent that the lines between home and abroad were becoming increasingly blurred. Racial and national categories, as with the ideas of home and abroad, were increasingly destabilised by the realities of trade, imperial expansion, emigration and settlement. Both *The Beach of Falesa* and *The Sign of Four* remind us of the increasing interconnectedness brought by trade and empire. On the one hand, British traders and settlers were expected to be ambassadors of British virtues, and to remain faithful to those values however long they spent abroad. Captain Randall, however, has been in Falesa for such a long time that he now squats on the floor native fashion naked to the waist (p. 8), Case has a Samoan wife who dyed her hair red, Samoan style (p. 5) and Jonathon Small is lured into a pact for treasure with native Sikhs (p. 142). In conclusion, whilst both texts are founded in a common representation of England and its colonies, they differ in approach and are not equally complimentary. Doyle's *The Sign of Four*- whilst appreciating some aspects of Indian culture and intermixing *The Sign Of Four* with Hindu and Urdu words and humble Indian servants- unquestioningly upholds England's authority, thus reflected in Small's description of the Mutiny, where he clearly depicts a violent and corrupt

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India. Stevenson's attitude, on the other hand, towards the settlers is that although Samoans are described as variously infantile, the white English perpetrator signifies that white men are not regarded as morally superior. Case is evidently not what British Victorian readers would recognise as a gentleman, and Wiltshire's controversial marriage with Uma highlights one of the central problems that European imperial expansion in the nineteenth century presented for traditional ideas about race and nationality.

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