AQA English Literature GCSE

The Sign of Four: Character Profile

Dr John Watson

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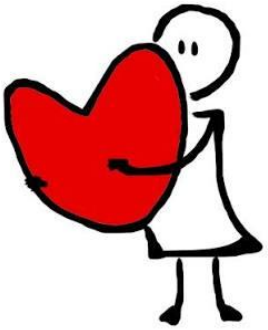
Dr John Watson

Character Summary

Watson is the **narrator** of the **novella**, meaning readers experience events through his **first-person perspective**. Doyle constructs him as a **proxy** for the reader, helping to simplify Holmes' complex deductions. The forename "John" was very common in **Victorian England,** reinforcing Watson's role as the 'everyman' who contemporary readers can identify with.

Doyle constructs Watson as a **foil** for Holmes. Watson is **emblematic** of the heart, whilst Holmes **symbolises** the rational head. Through contrasting Holmes and Watson, Doyle highlights Holmes' extraordinary intellect, whilst demonstrating the value of Watson's more compassionate nature.

However, Watson's **dialogue** often contradicts his first-person narration. It could be argued that Doyle constructs Watson to criticise the **performative nature** of **Victorian morality**.



Key Themes

Masculinity and Romantic Love

In the **rising action**, Doyle's **romantic subplot** challenges Victorian society's **restrictive attitudes** to masculinity. Watson confesses he loves Mary ***"as truly as a man has ever loved a woman"***. Doyle's use of the **intensifier** ***"truly"*** emphasises the sincerity and depth of Watson's feelings. Watson is both a **respectable** Victorian gentleman, and a man capable of feeling, elucidating how emotional openness can be a masculine trait. Doyle challenges Victorian attitudes that masculinity must be limited to **stoicism**.



Nevertheless, in **Victorian England**, it was more common to indirectly allude to affection through gifts of flowers, as opposed to overt expressions of love. Watson refers to Mary as a ***"treasure"***. The **metaphor** draws a **parallel** with the Agra treasure, reflecting how Watson values **romantic love** over material possessions. Through Watson's relationship with Mary, Doyle presents masculinity as **multifaceted**, highlighting how romantic relationships are equally as valuable as intellect.

Truth and Mystery

Doyle's use of Watson's **first-person narration** illuminates the **subjective** nature of truth. Doyle **juxtaposes** Watson's insistence he ***"could not tamper with the facts"*** with Holmes' belief that ***"some facts should be repressed".*** Whilst Watson's **dialogue** indicates a preference for **transparency**, readers question the extent to which Watson's narrative is **biased** by his personal feelings. As a result, the **mystery** extends beyond the investigation, as readers interrogate the **narrative** itself.



Performative Morality

In the **exposition**, Watson confesses he was ***"irritated"*** but ***"made no remark"***, revealing a **conflict** between Watson's private thoughts and public behaviour. Whilst Watson tells Holmes that he ***"marvel[s]"*** at Holmes' genius, Watson's earlier admission suggests that his **outward** politeness does not reflect his true feelings.

Equally, the **alliteration** in ***"marvel at the means"*** suggests that Watson's praise is carefully constructed, not spontaneous and natural. Doyle criticises the **performativity** of Victorian manners where politeness is an act, not an indication of good nature.

Context

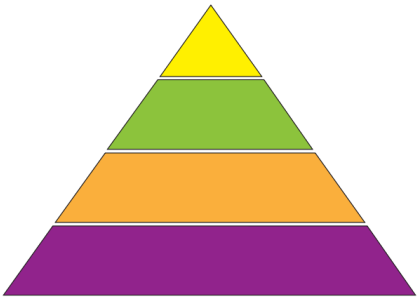


Urbanisation and Expansion

Doyle was writing in 1879, after many people had **migrated** from the countryside into towns and cities. London's **rapid expansion** in the **late Victorian period** created both opportunities and anxieties. As the narrator, Doyle constructs Watson as the reader's navigator, explaining the **complex urban environment**. Watson is the ***"medical man"***, who acts as a **reassuring** **voice of rationality** amongst the chaos.

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Class



Victorian society adhered to a stratified class hierarchy of upper, middle and working class, where wealth dictated status. Despite Watson being a middle-class gentleman, he is insecure about his ***"weaker banking account"***. Doyle's use of the comparative ***"weaker"***, reflects Victorian attitudes that financial limitations diminish social value. Doyle criticises the culture where personal worth is determined by wealth, and encourages readers to value moral integrity over class.

Key Quotations

"My conscience swelled nightly"

- In the exposition, the verb ***"swelled"*** illustrates how Watson initially represses his emotions. Equally, ***"swelled"*** reflects the tension between Watson's public face as a Victorian gentleman and his private frustrations.
- **"Swelled"** implies discomfort, indicating the emotional burden of remaining silent. Doyle critiques Victorian society for valuing restraint and respectability over honesty.
- Whilst Victorian readers may have respected Watson's ability to repress his emotions, today's readers may be critical of Watson's reluctance to verbalise his emotions.

"A black reaction[...]hardly worth the candle[...] for a mere passing pleasure"

- Arguably, Doyle employs the contrasting light and dark imagery to reflect Watson's internal moral conflict. The adjective ***"black"*** alludes to debauchery and moral decline. By contrast, ***"the candle"*** may symbolise Holmes' intellect.
- The alliterative plosive ***"p"*** sounds in ***"passing pleasure"*** create a harsh tone, possibly outlining how Watson disapproves of Holmes' drug use.
- Ultimately, Doyle constructs Watson as the moral compass of the novella to challenge Holmes' hedonism and emphasise the value of relationships and emotions.

"The Strange Story of Jonathan Small"

- In the **resolution**, Doyle's concise chapter title **"The Strange Story of Jonathan Small"** signals a shift in the **narrative perspective** from Watson's **first-person narration** to Small's confession.

- Whilst Holmes solves the case through deduction, Watson shapes the investigation into a **coherent narrative** for the reader to follow.

- The chapter functions as the solution to the mystery, **mirroring** the structure of a scientific investigation in which evidence is presented before an explanation is provided.

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