AQA English Literature GCSE

The Sign of Four: Character Profile

Jonathan Small

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Jonathan Small

Character Summary



Small is a key **antagonist** in the **novella**. He dominates the **frame narrative** in the **resolution**, where his confession offers an **alternative perspective** to Watson's **first-person narration**. Doyle constructs Small as a **morally ambiguous** character who erodes the **binary** of victim and villain.

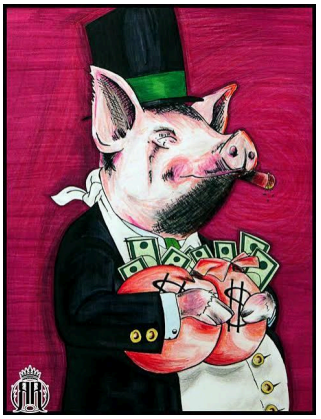
Although Small's disability, imprisonment and poverty may **elicit** sympathy from readers, he is **avaricious** and **revengeful**. Through Small's character, Doyle unveils the complexity of justice, and encourages readers to consider whether any punishment is truly fair. Doyle also invites readers to consider whether crime is a matter of individual choice, or the consequence of personal circumstances.

Key Themes

Victim or Villain?

In the **resolution of the novella**, Small describes himself as ***"a useless cripple"***. Doyle's use of **emotive language** may encourage readers to sympathise with Small, viewing him as a **victim** of circumstance as opposed to a villain. The **adjective *"useless"*** conveys Small's feelings of worthlessness and **ostracisation** from society, illustrating how his disability has impacted his **identity** and self-respect.

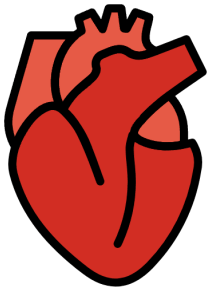
Victorian society often viewed the disabled unfavourably because their ability to work was reduced, rendering many vulnerable to poverty. Doyle blurs the lines between victim and villain, suggesting that criminality can stem from social disadvantages, not purely **inherent immorality**.



Greed and Duality

In Small's **dialogue**, Doyle positions Small as a victim of circumstance. The **alliterative** "t" sounds regarding the ***"talk about the treasure"*** create a **percussive beat,** conveying a sense of urgency and **tension**.

Equally, the deliberate choice of "t" sounds could suggest that Small's confession is carefully crafted to persuade his audience of his innocence. Despite Small's **working-class background**, the eloquence of his speech imitates the education and manners of the upper classes, highlighting Small's intelligence.



Alternatively, the rhythm **mimics** a heartbeat, reflecting Small's urgency to tell his story after years of being silenced and reduced to the label of ***"ex-convict"***.

Arguably, Small is not only a **victim of unfortunate circumstances**, but is also a character who succumbs to greed. He confesses that ***"my heart turned".*** The reference to Small's ***"heart"*** suggests that Small's desire for the treasure is driven by emotions rather than financial necessity alone.

Context

Colonialism and Empire



Doyle published the **novella** in 1890, at the height of the **British Empire**. Many Victorians were proud of the Empire as it symbolised economic prosperity. Nevertheless, Doyle illuminates how the Empire also involved **exploitation** of the colonised and **moral corruption**.

Since the Agra treasure originates from India, one of Britain's **colonies**, it could be argued that Small's obsession with the Agra treasure **symbolises** Britain's pursuit of **colonial wealth**. Arguably, Doyle constructs Small as a warning against the **ethical implications of Empire**, suggesting that colonialism can breed **exploitation** and criminality.

Victorian Disability and Social Class

In the **Victorian era**, disability was often closely tied to **social status**, as employment largely consisted of **manual labour**. Similarly, physical strength was associated with masculinity and productivity in a **capitalist** society. As physical disabilities could restrict people's ability to work, disabled individuals were often of a **lower social class**.

Victorian literature frequently portrayed disabled bodies as monstrous, silent and morally corrupt. Through giving Small a voice at the end of the novella, Doyle challenges this stereotype. Instead, Doyle portrays Small as persuasive, intelligent and articulate, encouraging readers to look beyond his disability.

Key Quotations

"a network of lines and wrinkles all over his mahogany features"

- Instead of describing Small as merely aged, Doyle emphasises how Small bears the marks of a difficult life.
- Doyle's use of the noun ***"network"*** may allude to Small's travels to India and the Andaman Islands. A network is a connected group of things, possibly reflecting how Small's identity has been permanently altered by his experiences and hardships.



- ***"Mahogany"*** is a wood associated with opulence, thus is in direct contrast with Small's working-class background. Equally, in Victorian society, darker ***"mahogany"*** skin was often associated with outdoor work and a lower social class.
- The presence of mahogany may illustrate how, despite Small's ardent pursuit of wealth, he cannot escape his lower-class background, reflecting the limitations of social mobility in Victorian society.
- Mahogany was also a valuable material in imperial trade, therefore, Doyle reinforces the connection between Small and the Agra treasure, suggesting that the corruptive nature of the treasure has continued to shape Small's identity even after the treasure was lost.



"I was grieved as if it had been my blood-relation"

- Doyle's use of the **simile** may reflect Small's capacity for empathy. Despite Doyle referring to Small in **animalistic** terms later in the novella as ***"snarl[ing]"***, here Doyle **humanises** Small as having a **visceral response** to Sholto's death.

- Doyle elucidates the **complexity** of criminals, and how criminals are not entirely malevolent. The noun ***"blood"*** also **connotes** violence and murder, possibly displaying the **hypocrisy** of Small: he grieves Sholto, but is also involved in criminal acts. Doyle deconstructs the **binary of victim and villain**, depicting Small as **morally ambiguous**.

"Small had dropped his mask of stoicism, and all this came out in a wild whirl of words, while his eyes blazed"

- Doyle's use of the **metaphor** of a ***"mask of stoicism"*** taps into the theme of **duality**. Masks are associated with **performance and concealment**, suggesting that Small's outward ***"stoicism"*** hides his true feelings.

- Doyle encourages readers to question the **reliability of Small's confession** and whether he is genuinely remorseful or merely attempting to gain sympathy from his audience.

- The verb ***"blazed"*** **alludes** to fire, possibly reflecting Small's passionate desire for revenge. The **connotations** of fire **juxtapose** the restraint associated with Small's ***"stoicism"***, indicating Small's inner emotions piercing through his composed **facade**.



- However, the ***"mask"*** could also **symbolise** years of **emotional suppression**. Small's speech comes out in a ***"whirl of words"*** because it is an overwhelming release of past emotions and thoughts he was not able to express.

- Doyle reinforces the notion that criminal acts often stem from **inner turmoil** and a difficult past. The **moral ambiguity** of Small encourages readers to question if justice is truly possible.