AQA English Literature GCSE

The Sign of Four: Character Profile

Mary Morstan

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Mary Morstan

Character Summary



Mary Morstan forms the **cornerstone** of the **romantic subplot** of the **novella** and serves as a **moral contrast** to the greed and criminality surrounding the Agra treasure. She acts as the **catalyst** for the investigation when she informs Holmes that she has been receiving pearls from an anonymous sender. In contrast to the criminal acts of some of the male characters, Mary **symbolises** purity as reflected by the **Christian connotations** of the Virgin Mary.

Despite occasionally conforming to the **Victorian stereotype** of the emotional or hysterical woman, Mary demonstrates resilience after suffering shocking revelations. Doyle constructs Mary as a **beacon of hope** amidst the crime and suffering in the novella. It could be argued that Mary and Watson are the happiest at the end of the novella because they retain their **integrity** and do not **succumb** to greed.

Key Themes

Emotions and Women

Doyle first introduces Mary as entering ***"with a firm step and an outward composure of manner".*** The **adjective** ***"firm"*** may convey Mary's confidence, suggesting that Mary approaches unfamiliar situations with purpose. However, the **adjective** ***"outward"*** could indicate that Mary's ***"composure"*** is an act to conceal her diffidence or anxiety, highlighting the pressure on Victorian women to suppress their emotions in order to be respected.

Doyle elucidates how Mary is **tenacious** but not **emotionally detached**: she is capable of feeling, but knows she has to **repress** her emotions to be respected as a woman in a **patriarchal society.**

Victorian readers may have valued Mary's ability to remain composed, especially noting that women who did not regulate their emotions were often labelled **hysterical**. Mary **embodies** both emotional sensitivity and outward "***composure"***, demonstrating her adaptability, and challenging the **stereotype** that women were entirely governed by their emotions

Intellect and Intuition

Mary is introduced in the **exposition of the novella**, under the chapter title ***"The Statement of the Case"***. The **noun** ***"statement"*** carries legal **connotations**, reflecting Holmes' methodical approach to solving crime. Doyle immediately establishes Mary as credible in her logical presentation of the facts.



Holmes praises Mary by declaring her to be a ***"model client",*** demonstrating Mary's intellect. Rather than conforming to the **stereotype of the damsel in distress**, Mary delivers a coherent ***"statement of the case",*** providing valuable information which advances the case. Instead of depicting Mary as a **passive heroine**, Doyle presents Mary as a perceptive and active participant.

However, the **noun** ***"intuition"*** also implies **emotional insight**, outlining how Mary is capable of both rationality and emotion. Since Holmes acknowledges the value of Mary's intuition, Doyle elucidates how emotions should **complement rationality**.

Social Class and Femininity

Doyle's use of the **adjective** ***"beige"*** to describe Mary's dress may convey her modest nature in contrast to Bartholomew's ostentatious display of wealth. The neutral colour suggests simplicity, reflecting Mary's lack of interest in material wealth.



Similarly, Doyle's description of Mary's dress as ***"untrimmed and unbraided"*** further emphasises Mary's humility. The absence of decorative embellishments could be an attempt to be taken seriously in a **male-dominated environment**.

The fact that Doyle primarily describes Mary through her dress highlights how deliberate Mary's outfit choices are. Furthermore, it highlights how Victorian society formed judgements about women based on how they dressed.

Mary's rejection of extravagance could be interpreted as a subtle critique of **contemporary attitudes towards femininity**, elucidating how a woman's value should not lie in her outward appearance.

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Context

The Angel in the House



The concept of the 'Angel in the House' was popularised by Coventry Patmore's 1854 poem, which affirmed traditional attitudes to women as having a purely domestic role. The female protagonist is **submissive**, reflecting the female ideal. Likewise, Mary's ***"composure"*** conforms to **Victorian attitudes** that women should demonstrate self-restraint in order to be respected.

Nevertheless, Mary does not entirely **conform to the ideal**. Whilst Mary does not actively rebel, she also displays intelligence and initiative as Holmes' ***"model client".***

Women's Clothing and Class



Victorian society was highly **class-conscious**, and clothing was a **key indicator of class** depending on the colour and quality of the fabric.

As women started to gain avenues to employment and university, women's sleeves grew narrower. Wealthy women were more likely to have **adornments** such as lace and bows to reflect how they did not need to work, thus did not require clothes to be practical.

Whilst Doyle gives little attention to the male characters' clothing, Mary is almost always described in terms of what she is wearing, emphasising how Victorian women were greatly **defined by their appearance**, as opposed to intellect. Although Doyle depicts Mary as intelligent, her intellect is often presented as secondary to her physical appearance.



Key Quotations

"I seemed to be floated peacefully away upon a soft sea of sound"

- Doyle's use of the **metaphor and sibilant soundscape** ***"soft sea of sound"*** creates a calming **tone**, possibly reflecting how Watson's admiration of Mary places him in a trance-like state.

- Watson's **first-person narration idealises** Mary, helping to establish the **romantic subplot** of the **novella**. Whilst Holmes seeks escapism through intellectual stimulation and drug use, Doyle presents romantic love as a more fulfilling alternative to Holmes' drug taking.

"muffled in a dark cloak"

- In the **rising action**, Mary's ***"dark cloak"*** **contrasts** her innocence in the **exposition**. Arguably the ***"cloak"*** acts as a shield to protect Mary from the criminality and corruption surrounding the **mystery**.

- The **verb** ***"muffled"*** indicates layers of protection, almost as if Mary is insulated from the greed and violence that consume other characters, reinforcing how Mary is a figure of **virtue** amongst **moral corruption**.

"dressed in some sort of white diaphanous material, with a little touch of scarlet at the neck and waist"

- In contrast to Mary's plain beige dress in the **exposition**, in the **resolution**, Mary is dressed in ***"white"***, a colour associated with purity and innocence, reinforcing Mary's status as the moral centre.

- The adjective ***"diaphanous"*** refers to something very delicate and almost ethereal, elevating Mary to the **Victorian ideal** of the 'Angel in the House'.

- However, Doyle **juxtaposes** Mary's innocence with ***"scarlet"***, a colour which often **symbolises** passion, sin or boldness. The contrast reflects Mary's **duality**: she is a combination of traditional femininity and independence.

