AQA English Literature GCSE

The Sign of Four: Character Profile

Sherlock Holmes

This work by PMT Education is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

Sherlock Holmes

Character Summary



Doyle constructs Holmes as the **archetypal** detective who relies on **rational thinking** and often dismisses emotions as a weakness. As readers mostly perceive Holmes through Watson's **first-person narrative** perspective, they gain an insight into both Holmes' extraordinary genius and his vulnerability to addiction.

Arguably, Holmes is a force of justice in the **novella**, and Doyle portrays him as a more effective alternative to the police force. Although critics mostly view Holmes as a rational figure, Doyle also **alludes** to Holmes' loneliness. Holmes struggles to find a purpose when he is not solving crime and **succumbs to addiction**, revealing the limitations of his rational **persona**.

Key Themes

Isolation and Loneliness



Throughout the novella, Doyle presents Holmes as an **isolated figure** whose exceptional intellect **ostracises** him from wider society, leaving him dependent on crime-solving for fulfillment.

In the **exposition**, Doyle's use of the **triplet** ***"dreary, dismal, unprofitable"*** creates a **pessimistic tone**, reflecting how Holmes' dependency on mental stimulation prevents him from enjoying ordinary life.

Doyle's use of **pathetic fallacy** in relation to the ***"yellow fog"*** further reflects Holmes'melancholy. The colour yellow can **connote** sickness, whilst fog **symbolises** confusion and obscurity, suggesting that Holmes feels both bored and unwell without the intellectual stimulation of detection.

Although esteemed for his ***"mental faculties"***, Doyle illuminates how Holmes has depressive qualities. Alternatively, the fog **alludes** to the effect of **urbanisation** and London smog, which would likely have been familiar to **contemporary** readers. Doyle may be criticising urbanisation for creating social **disconnection**.

Rationality, Emotion and Women

Doyle presents the limitations of Holmes' rational worldview through his attitudes to women. In the **rising action** of the novella, Holmes declares that ***"women are never to be entirely trusted".*** Doyle's use of the **adverb** ***"never"*** reflects how Holmes **stereotypes** women as a whole, as opposed to viewing them as individuals. Doyle may be **reinforcing contemporary attitudes** to women, regarding their emotional volatility and **hysteria**, explaining why Holmes believes women cannot be ***"trusted"***.

Alternatively, it could be argued that Holmes' distrust is not directed at women. Rather, as a detective, he approaches all people with suspicion. Ultimately, Holmes' caution reinforces his reliance on logic, and reinforces the **notion** that emotions are a threat to reason.

Crime and Detection

Through Holmes, Doyle explores the theme of crime and justice to challenge **contemporary** policing methods. Jones describes Holmes as ***"a man who is not to be beat".*** Doyle's use of the **hyperbolic** phrase ***"not to be beat"*** emphasises Holmes' exceptional intelligence and reinforces his role as the **archetypal detective**.



Doyle underlines how important Holmes' observation-focused detection is in ensuring justice. Whilst **Victorian** police often refused to believe that criminals could be **upper-class**, Holmes is indiscriminate in his methods, relying on evidence over social status.

Justice and Narrative Perspective

Equally, Doyle's use of the **metaphor** ***"threw light upon"*** depicts Holmes as a force of justice who illuminates the truth and exposes criminality. Since Watson is the **first-person narrator**, much of the reader's perception of Holmes is shaped by Watson's potentially **idealised perspective**.

However, Jones' view of Holmes provides **unbiased** validation of Watson's **narrative**. By presenting readers with Jones' perspective, Doyle underscores that Holmes' genius is not merely the product of Watson's admiration. The **Victorian criminal justice system** relied heavily on multiple **witness testimonies**, thus Doyle's employment of multiple perspectives arguably mirrors **contemporary** investigations.

CC BY NC ND

Context

Medicine, Detection and Class



Doyle was writing during the **fin de siecle**, a period of rapid **scientific advancements** and an increasing emphasis on **rational observation**. Doyle studied medicine under Dr Joseph Bell's training. Bell was renowned for drawing accurate conclusions by analysing minute details. It is argued that Bell formed the **prototype** for Holmes' style of **detection**.

Victorian society was highly **stratified** with limited **social mobility**. As class could be gleaned from dress and manners, detection became closely intertwined with social status. Holmes' ability to deduce precise details from people's appearances reflects Victorian society's growing interest in observation. Whilst Victorians frequently associated **criminality** with the **lower classes**, Doyle elucidates how people from all walks of life commit crimes.

Urbanisation and Crime

The late Victorian period was a time of **urbanisation,** with increasing numbers of people moving out of the countryside into cities. As a consequence of the **rising population**, Victorians grew increasingly concerned about **crime and social disorder**.

Doyle presents Holmes as the solution to **contemporary anxieties** surrounding crime, using his deduction to restore order. The **novella** was published shortly after the unsolved Jack the Ripper murders, meaning **Victorian readers** were likely dissatisfied with the efficiency of the police. Holmes, therefore, represents an alternative form of law enforcement to reassure Victorian readers that crimes could be solved using observation and logic.



Key Quotations

"Give me problems, give me work, give me the most abstruse cryptogram"

- In the **exposition of the novella**, Doyle's **repetition** of the **imperative** ***"give me"*** creates a demanding **tone**, highlighting how Holmes views intellectual stimulation as a necessity. In contrast to Bartholomew's **hedonistic** tendencies, Holmes **embodies the Victorian ideal of rationality**.

- Equally, the **repetition** of the **imperative** ***"give"*** creates an assertive **tone**, depicting Holmes as an authority figure. Given the widespread concerns about policing, Holmes' decisiveness would have likely soothed **contemporary anxieties.**

"His face was dark and troubled"

- In the **rising action of the novella**, Watson observes that Holmes's ***"face was dark and troubled",*** contrasting readers' first impression of Holmes as an **emotionally detached** detective.

- Doyle's use of the **adjective** ***"dark"*** links to the **novella's recurring light and dark imagery** where darkness **symbolises** crime and moral corruption. Doyle illustrates how Holmes is not entirely devoid of emotion, and is emotionally affected by crime.

- Although **some critics may argue** that Holmes is a **flat character**, Doyle depicts him as emotionally complex. Structurally, this moment is significant in the **novella** because unveiling Holmes' concern **builds the tension**. Readers recognise that if even the ostensibly unemotional Holmes is anxious, this case must be unusually complex.

"With his long, white, nervous fingers he adjusted the delicate needle"

- Doyle constructs a **cyclical structure**, drawing a **parallel** between the **exposition** where Holmes' ***"long, white, nervous fingers adjusted the delicate needle"*** and the **resolution** where Holmes ***"stretched his long white hand"***.



- The **cyclical structure** may demonstrate how Holmes does not fundamentally evolve throughout the **novella**. Doyle creates a sense of **tragedy and irony** where Holmes can solve others' problems, but not his own personal struggles of addiction and loneliness.

CC BY NC ND

- Equally, Doyle chooses to end the **novella** with Holmes' voice: ***"for me[...] there still remains the cocaine bottle"***. The **adjectives** ***"thin"*** and ***"white"*** may indicate poor health, **alluding** to the consequences of Holmes' drug use and how Holmes is trapped in the cycle of drug use.

- During **fin de siècle**, concerns about addiction were growing increasingly prominent. Arguably, Doyle portrays Holmes as isolated and dependent on substances, causing readers to question how rational he truly is.

CC BY NC ND