AQA English Literature GCSE

The Sign of Four: Character Profile

The Sholtos

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The Sholtos

Character Summary

The Sholto family consists of Major John Sholto and his twin sons Bartholomew and Thaddeus. Major Sholto's theft of the Agra treasure acts as a **catalyst** for the central **conflict** in the **novella**.

Thaddeus and Bartholomew



Thaddeus and Bartholomew not only inherit their father's wealth, but also the **ramifications** of his actions. Thaddeus benefits from fortune, but is less consumed by greed than the rest of his family. The **Victorian middle-class** were associated with refinement, however, Thaddeus' ostentatious display of wealth is more indicative of the **nouveau riche**.

Major Sholto

Major Sholto passes away before the **novella** begins, and Bartholomew is murdered before readers meet him. Consequently, readers' perceptions of the Sholto family are largely described through Thaddeus' **perspective**, raising questions about the **reliability** of Thaddeus' description.



The Sholtos' prosperity is the consequence of **imperial exploitation** and criminal activity. Through the Sholtos, Doyle challenges **Victorian attitudes** that **social class** and wealth were reliable indicators of morality.

Key Themes

Wealth, Class and Morality

Through Thaddeus, Doyle challenges the notion that wealth equates to morality. Doyle introduces readers to Thaddeus by **juxtaposing** the ***"dark passage"*** with ***"a blaze of yellow light".*** The use of **light imagery** in relation to Thaddeus may initially indicate that he is a force of good.

However, Doyle uses the same verb ***"blaze"*** to describe Jonathan Small's eyes, drawing a parallel between Thaddeus and Small. Both characters are affected by the corruptive influence of the Agra treasure. Similarly, the colour ***"yellow"*** can symbolise either hope and optimism, or danger and warning, reflecting Thaddeus' morally grey nature.
Whilst Doyle's use of light imagery may appear to elevate Thaddeus' status, Doyle quickly shifts his tone to comically mocking Thaddeus' ***"shining scalp"***. The simile "***like a mountain peak"*** further emphasises Thaddeus' ridiculous appearance, creating a comical image which undermines his authority.

Despite coming from wealth and having ***"just turned his thirtieth year"***, Doyle's criticism of Thaddeus' appearance undermines Victorian expectations that an affluent gentleman should have a refined appearance. Doyle subverts this expectation and exposes the instability of Victorian social hierarchies.

Crime and Illicit Wealth

Doyle constructs Major Sholto as a character whose wealth is built on crime, to illustrate the long-term consequences of illicit acts. Doyle's description of Major Sholto's ***"unnatural terror"*** may suggest that the Major was haunted by his past life of crime. Equally, the verb ***"possessed"*** reinforces this idea, underscoring how the Agra treasure continues to have a lasting negative impact on those coming into contact with it.

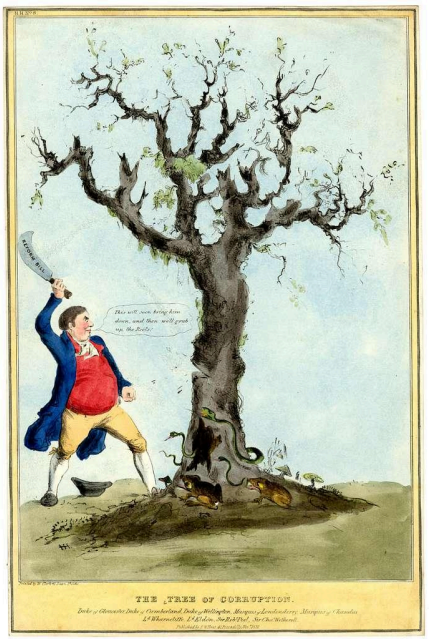


Whilst wealth is often associated with comfort and security, Doyle highlights how illicit wealth can generate anxiety. The phrase ***"upon his track"*** belongs to the semantic field of hunting, suggesting that Major Sholto has become prey to the consequences of his actions. Doyle employs irony: the same man who profited from exploitation becomes consumed with fear, subverting the power dynamic between Small and Major Sholto.

Although Small is labelled a ***"convict"***, Major Sholto is likewise implicated in criminal activity through his theft of the Agra treasure. Through Small's pursuit of Major Sholto, Doyle complicates ideas of justice and challenges the binary of victim and villain, encouraging readers to question whether social class should influence who deserves to be punished.

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Greed, Responsibility and Corruption



In the **rising action**, Doyle introduces the reader to Thaddeus. In Thaddeus' **dialogue**, Doyle repeats the **pronoun *"we"*** to emphasise shared responsibility, suggesting that Thaddeus considers himself and his family **collectively accountable** for Major Sholto's theft. Similarly, Thaddeus labels himself a ***"trustee"***, implying honesty and responsibility.

However, Doyle's shift to the **first person *"I"*** in relation to the **simple sentence *"I desired no more"*** **delineates** how Thaddeus considers himself distinct from his father and brother's greed. Doyle arguably depicts Thaddeus as a **moral contrast** to his family. It could be said that Thaddeus survives because he avoids the **obsessive pursuit** of the Agra treasure that ultimately corrupts characters such as his brother.

Context

Religion and Materialism



Victorian society was predominantly a **Christian society**, however, the growth of **capitalism, industrialisation, scientific developments** and **imperial expansion** threatened traditional Christian beliefs regarding morality. More wealth was associated with a higher **social status** and respectability.

Arguably, maintaining integrity became less important than **acquiring wealth**. This notion is particularly reflected in Major Sholto and Bartholomew Sholto's intense obsession with the Agra treasure.

However, Doyle's repeated references to the treasure as a ***"curse"*** highlights how wealth is unlikely to provide **spiritual fulfilment** like religion. Rather, the treasure elicits anxiety, corruption and suffering, elucidating how material possessions are not a substitute for spiritual fulfilment.

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Late Victorian Gothic

The Sholto family conforms to several **Victorian Gothic tropes** such as: twins, family secrets, crime and a haunting past. Major Sholto's theft of the Agra treasure continues to **elicit anxiety** in Thaddeus and Bartholomew, even after their father's passing, demonstrating how the past is never truly buried.



The Victorian Gothic focused on **psychological terror** as opposed to physical horror. Major Sholto's ***"terror"*** arguably reflects the long-term effects of guilt, conforming to the **Gothic trope** of the sins of one generation haunting the next.

Late Victorian Gothic texts often **critiqued social structures** to expose the **corruption** lying beneath **respectable appearances**. For example, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde was published in the same year as *The Sign of Four*. In his novel, Wilde challenges the notion that **aristocracy equates to morality**.

Similarly, the Sholto family's privilege initially conceals their criminal acts. As with Dorian Gray, wealth can function as a mask that hides **moral decay**, suggesting **respectability and virtue** are not synonymous.

Key Quotations

"The highest room"

- Doyle's use of the **superlative** **"highest"** when describing the location of the treasure in ***"the highest room"*** demonstrates the Sholtos' view of the treasure as having an elevated status.

- Likewise, the superlative ***"highest"*** may reflect the Sholtos' pride and how **material wealth** is of utmost importance to them. As the reader is only informed of the location of the treasure from Thaddeus' perspective, he could be exaggerating its significance due to his obsession with material possessions.

- Equally, a physically elevated location is associated with **spirituality** and heaven, outlining how the treasure becomes an object of worship. Doyle subtly critiques Victorian society's **shift to valuing wealth over religion**, where the treasure becomes a false idol, which brings suffering rather than spiritual fulfilment.

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"In the centre stood the treasure-chest, resting upon two rafters"

- Doyle places the treasure in the ***"centre"*** to **elevate its status** and to reflect how the entire **novella** revolves around it.



- Likewise, the **personification** ***"stood"*** indicates how the Agra treasure is almost a character itself, exerting influence over the Sholtos. Instead of being a passive object, Doyle depicts the treasure as a **catalyst** which elicits greed, crime and murder.

- The central position of the treasure may **symbolise** how it is at the centre of the Sholtos' minds, substituting a **moral compass**. Doyle underscores how the treasure has an everlasting **corruptive influence** even when it is no longer physically present.

"'Mr. Thaddeus Sholto,' said the little man, still jerking and smiling"

- The use of the **adjective** ***"little"*** diminishes Thaddeus' status despite introducing himself by the formal title of ***"Mr"***. Doyle undermines **Victorian readers' expectations** that a **Victorian gentleman** should appear confident and authoritative.

- Furthermore, the verb **"jerking"** may imply social awkwardness. Although Thaddeus is affluent, he lacks the composure associated with **upper-class respectability**.

- Doyle elucidates how wealth and **refined manners** are not always interlinked. Structurally, Thaddeus' discomfort when meeting Watson and Holmes may **foreshadow** the Sholto family's guilt, as well as illustrating the long-term effects of his family's greed. Doyle challenges **Victorian attitudes** that wealth was an accurate indicator of morality and respectability.

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