AQA English Literature GCSE

The Sign of Four

Context

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Context

Victorian London

The **novella** is set in London, the centre of the **British Empire**. London was the largest city in the world in the 1890s. It experienced **rapid urbanisation** and people **migrated** from rural areas in search of employment, resulting in a **pronounced rich– poor divide**. Despite being the place of opportunity, London was also growing increasingly **rife** with crime, overcrowding and **social inequality**.



Social Class

Victorian society was **stratified** into distinct classes:

1) **Upper class** – Aristocracy and landed gentry
2) **Middle class** – Businessmen, professionals and merchants
3) **Working class** – Labourers, servants and factory workers

Class in the Novella

- **Holmes and Watson** – Their education and professions render them middle–class. Watson's manners are indicative of the **respectable Victorian gentleman**.
- **Mary** – Her potential inheritance would have **elevated her status**, demonstrating the importance of wealth in Victorian society.
- **The Sholtos** – Represent acquired wealth (**nouveau riche**) through **imperialism**. Their ostentatious displays of affluence contrast the poorer parts of London. Doyle associates their wealth with **greed, secrecy and corruption**.
- **Jonathan Small** – A former soldier who symbolises the **working class**. Doyle depicts him as resentful of the treasure he was unable to obtain, reflecting the difficulty in **ascending the social hierarchy**.

Nouveau Riche



Nouveau Riche is a French term, which refers to people who have acquired wealth in their lifetime, as opposed to inheriting it. In Victorian society, **social class** was closely linked to education and upbringing. In contrast to modern society, Victorians were contemptuous towards the nouveau riche, believing they lacked the **manners and refinement** of those who **inherited wealth**

Masculinity



Victorian society expected men to be **financially independent, courageous, rational and self– controlled**, whilst emotional vulnerability was associated with weakness and femininity. In the novella, Holmes arguably represents **traditional masculinity** through his logical thinking whilst Watson is a combination of masculine rationality and feminine sensitivity. Equally, Doyle warns of the dangers of some forms of masculinity. Small is so motivated by wealth and status that he is willing to compromise his morals.

Watson's Physicality – The Fragility of Masculinity

Despite ostensibly being the **traditional Victorian man**, Watson carries both physical and psychological injuries from his military service in Afghanistan. Arguably, Watson's injured leg is something which takes away from his masculinity. Whilst he had the **respectable profession** of an army doctor, his physicality has been compromised. Since physical strength is a **cornerstone of masculinity**, Watson does not quite represent the **masculine ideal**. Doyle delineates how fragile the concept of masculinity is.

Watson's Financial Anxiety

Watson fears himself to be ***"a vulgar fortune– seeker"***, reflecting his insecurities surrounding his masculinity. Since women's **educational and career prospects** were very limited, **financial independence** was central to masculine identity. Mary's possible inheritance threatens the **traditional power balance** between men and women, emphasising how male authority is dependent on economic status.

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Male Friendship

Victorian male friendships were intense and critics refer to them as **homosocial** friendships. The only friendships in the novella are between the two men, Watson and Holmes. Male friendships were a **cornerstone of masculinity**, more so than romantic relationships, explaining why Watson's relationship with Holmes is given more space than his relationship with Mary.

Men spent much of their time in **male– dominated** universities, private schools, clubs, the military and professional occupations. It was common for men to write affectionate letters to each other, openly expressing their admiration for each other.

Holmes' Rejection of Women

Holmes **privileges masculine rationality** over femininity, arguing that ***"the emotional qualities are antagonistic to clear reasoning".*** Whilst male friendships are associated with constancy and stability, heterosexual relationships are considered distracting and unnecessary.

Women

The Angel in the House



Doyle was writing in a **patriarchal society** when women were expected to have a **submissive** nature and manage the home. In Coventry Patmore's poem, he referred to the **female ideal** as ***The Angel in the House***. Whilst men were expected to be career– focused, women were mostly limited to the **domestic sphere**. Mary Morstan is one of the few women in the novella. She **embodies stereotypical femininity**, as well as being a working woman. Her ***"turn[ing] so white [Watson] feared she was about to faint"*** reinforces Victorian stereotypes of female **hysteria**.

Female Hysteria

Hysteria was one of the most common diagnoses for Victorian women and doctors believed women were more susceptible to **nervous disorders** than men. Hysteria was associated with fainting, anxiety and convulsions. Since women were expected to be passive, any woman who **deviated from this ideal** was labelled hysterical. Modern critics often argue that the label was used to control women who failed to **conform to gender norms**.

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Marriage and Women's Legal Rights

The Victorian legal doctrine of **coverture** referred to the notion that husband and wife became one person under law. After marriage, women surrendered absolute control of their property to their husbands.

Despite women's lack of **autonomy**, new legislation was emerging to increase women's rights. For example, The Married Women's Property Act of 1870 allowed women to retain their property after marriage.

Mary Morstan's inheritance offers the possibility of **elevating her social status** and marriage prospects. Equally, Watson worries it creates a **social barrier** between them, reflecting how closely wealth is tied to relationships.

Changing Attitudes to Women

Despite the persistence of *The Angel in the House* ideal, attitudes to women were gradually changing. Campaigners sought improved access to education and property rights for women. By the 1840s, some universities offered education for women. Whilst Mary is largely passive, she also works as a governess, indicating her **financial independence**. Through Mary, Doyle demonstrates **transitional attitudes to women**: she is a balance of traditional femininity and independence.

Detection

Victorian Social Codes and Detection

Although Doyle presents Holmes as **emblematic** of **rationality**, he also relies on Victorian **social codes** regarding class, gender, race and manners. Holmes often infers a person's background based on their physical appearance, thus Doyle depicts class as something which can be "read" from people's bodies. Refinement, intelligence and self– control were visible indications of a higher **social status**. Arguably, Holmes defends social norms, and uses observation to identify those who threatened the **established social hierarchy**.



The Rise of Detection

Jack the Ripper was an **infamous** serial killer in London in 1888, two years before *The Sign of Four* was published. The murderer was never identified, resulting in **widespread dissatisfaction** with the police. Queen Victoria herself criticised the inefficiency of the detective system. The police had a very fixed idea of what constituted a criminal, and discounted members of **upper classes** as possible suspects. Doyle challenges this notion in the novella, demonstrating how members of all classes can be **morally corrupt**.

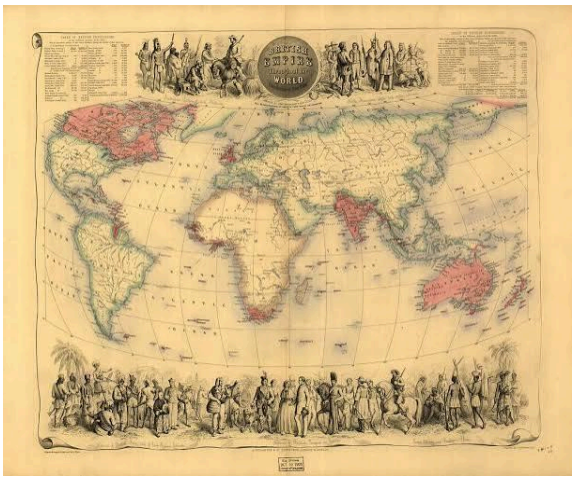
Visual Culture and Detection

The Sign of Four was first published in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* in February 1890 in the UK and the US before publication in novella form in October 1890. **Improvements in literacy** levels had expanded the market of readers enabling inexpensive, mass–produced periodicals. **Advancements in printing** made producing images cheaper and easier. **Crime fiction** was known for being more pictorialised. Since the 1890s **serialisation** of Doyle's fiction, his sales dramatically increased, demonstrating the emphasis on the visual.



Colonialism

The British Empire



Doyle was writing at the height of the **British Empire** when Britain had the largest empire in the world. For **Victorians**, the Empire was a source of pride and demonstrated Britain's **superiority** over other countries and territories. By contrast, **modern readers** may associate Empire with **exploitation of the colonised**, economic inequalities and loss of independence.

Importing and exporting goods led to increased wealth for Britain, **improving living standards** for the upper and middle classes. Equally, London's population increased due to the influx of people from the colonies seeking wealth. Consequently, London was becoming a multicultural city, eliciting fears of **the "other"**.

The 1857 Indian Rebellion/Mutiny

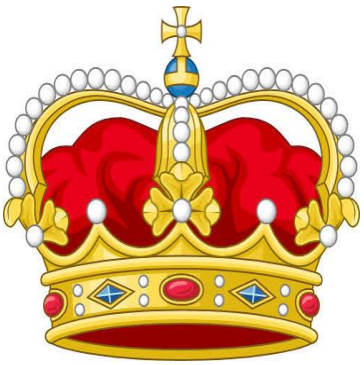
The **Indian Rebellion or Mutiny** was a major **uprising against British rule** in India, eliciting fears that India would rebel again. The Mutiny was important because it interfered with the **power dynamic** between India and Britain. Britain's fears of future uprisings are reflected in the Indian characters in *The Sign of Four*.

Racial Types – Tonga

Instead of portraying Indian characters as complex, Doyle constructs **flat characters** which lack depth. Doyle may construct **racial stereotypes** in support of **imperial ideology**. Alternatively, through depicting **animalistic** characters, readers observe the absurdity of such portrayals.

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The "Jewel in the Crown" – The Agra Treasure



India was described as the **"jewel in the crown"**. This term referred to India's economic and political importance to Britain. In 1877, Queen Victoria adopted the title **Empress of India**, emphasising the centrality of India within the British Empire. The name draws a parallel with the ***"jewels"*** or the Agra Treasure in *The Sign of Four*. Doyle employs the Agra treasure to **symbolise** the riches that Britain gained from India. Equally, the treasure illustrates how **imperial wealth can corrupt.** Doyle illuminates how colonial wealth is attractive, but **ultimately destructive.**

Drugs and Empire

Whilst **today's readers** may be surprised by Holmes' drug– taking, it is important to note that drugs such as cocaine and morphine were legal and widely available in **Victorian Britain**. Laudanum, cocaine and arsenic could be obtained through visiting a chemist, and opium was sold in markets. Drugs were imported from the **British Empire**, thus drug use became **rife during the Victorian era**.



Nevertheless, Watson's criticism that drug– taking is a ***"pathological and morbid process, which involves increased tissue– change and may at last leave a permanent weakness"*** illuminates some awareness of the negative effects.

Drug use was often viewed more leniently than it is today, and there was less awareness about the **dangers of addiction**. Many Victorians held the belief that addiction was only something that the **Eastern world could succumb to**. However, in the 1860s, people started to campaign for restrictions after opium dens became more prevalent in East London.

Why Cocaine?

Holmes takes cocaine to ***"escape the dull routine of existence".*** Cocaine became commercially available in the 1880s and doctors often viewed it as a miracle drug. It was believed to increase mental activity, reduce fatigue and ward off depression. An 1877 medical article described "moderate consumption of coca is not only wholesome, but frequently beneficial". Cocaine was viewed positively by leading doctors, therefore, Doyle depicts Holmes as holding the **mainstream Victorian view** of cocaine.

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The Gothic in *The Sign of Four*

Fin de Siècle

The term, **fin de siècle,** refers to the end of the century. *The Sign of Four* was published in 1890, during the **fin de siècle** period, a time of heightened anxiety due to **rapid scientific and technological changes**.

Detective Fiction



Doyle's use of the **detective fiction genre** reflects the mystery and uncertainty associated with a new century looming. Holmes' use of logic would have likely offered assurance for Victorian readers that crimes can be solved.

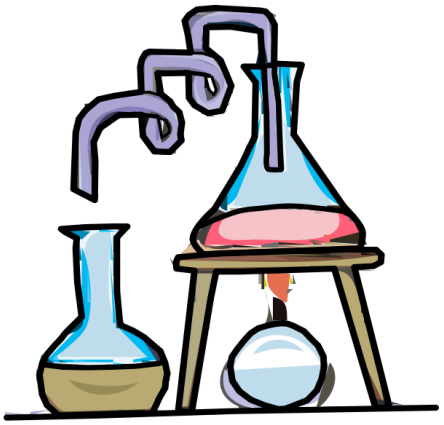
Literary Context

Scientific developments led to the questioning of traditional religious beliefs. **Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution** precipitated the questioning of Christian teachings. Consequently, **Gothic literature and detective fiction** are characterised by themes of mystery and uncertainty.

Gothic Tropes in *The Sign of Four*

- **The Unknown** – The hidden Agra treasure forms the centre of the **novella**, building **mystery and suspense**.
- **Gothic Architecture** – Pondicherry Lodge. Doyle describes ***"a very high stone wall"*** and ***"an iron– clamped door"***. The enormous architecture makes humans feel small, contributing to the Gothic **sublime**.
- **Moral corruption** – The Agra treasure breeds crime and greed.
- **"The Other"** – Arguably, Small and Tonga are **outsiders** from mainstream society. Tonga represents fears of the **colonised**.
- **Obscurity** – Doyle's use of the **motif** and **pathetic fallacy** of ***"fog"*** obscures reality, creating a sense of **mystery**. Hindered vision leads readers to imagine, building **suspense**

Science and Technology



Victorian Scientific Discoveries

The Victorian era was a time of **scientific advancements**, which sometimes challenged **religious beliefs**. Changing scientific attitudes are reflected in Doyle's depiction of Sherlock Holmes. Holmes insists that detection is an ***"exact science"***, contrasting previous reliance on religion and superstition.

Early 1800s – Romanticism

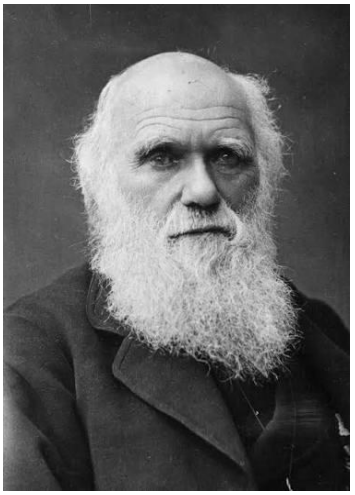
The shift towards **scientific thinking** was a direct contrast with the early 1800s **Romanticism** movement. Previously, Romantic writers valued emotions over reason. Nevertheless, Watson and Mary arguably represent previous Romantic attitudes.

Arthur Conan Doyle – Medicine

Before becoming an author, Doyle practised as a doctor. He worked with Dr Joseph Bell, who formed the inspiration for Holmes. Bell relied on **careful observations**, and had the same ***"extraordinary genius for minutiae"*** as Holmes. Improvements in medicine likely contributed to Britain's population skyrocketing by 19 million from the beginning to the end of the century.

Technological Advancements

The Industrial Revolution precipitated **prosperity**, mostly for the **upper and middle classes**. Expanding the railway network enabled people to travel faster, and **industrialisation** led to increasing **urbanisation**, with more people living in towns and cities than in the countryside.



Charles Darwin – Degeneration

Darwin developed the theory of **natural selection**: the idea that species naturally adapt over time. In 1871, two decades before *The Sign of Four* was published, Darwin published **The Descent of Man**, where he applied his theories to humans. Darwin's theories were highly controversial in **Victorian society** as they created a tension between science and religion. Some Victorians interpreted Darwin's theories, believing that humans could **degenerate** and revert to a more **primitive** state.

In *The Sign of Four*, Doyle's description of Tonga is **animalistic**. He is described as a ***"hell– hound"*** and ***"savage".*** Victorian readers may have connected this description to ideas of **degeneration**, believing that certain ethnicities are "primitive". However, present– day readers may view this as a reflection of **colonial attitudes**.

Lombroso – Atavism and Criminality

In 1876, Italian criminologist, Cesare Lombroso, published *The Criminal Man.* He theorised that some people were **born criminals**, and this was reflected through features such as a large jaw or unusual characteristics. Lombroso argued that these people were **primitive or atavistic**, belonging to an earlier stage of **evolution**.

Tonga and Atavism



In *The Sign of Four*, Doyle describes people from the Andaman Islands, such as Tonga, as ***"naturally hideous, having large, misshapen heads, small, fierce eyes, and distorted features."*** The description aligns with Lombroso's theory that **criminality** could be identified through physical appearance.

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