AQA English Literature GCSE

The Sign of Four

Glossary of Definitions

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Glossary of Key Terms

Techniques – Language

Allegory – A story, character, setting or object which alludes to wider moral, social or political messages.
[Arguably, Doyle constructs the Agra treasure to warn of the corruptive nature of imperial wealth.]

Alliteration – The repetition of the same consonant sounds at the start of words, often creating a staccato rhythm.

Allusion – An indirect reference to a concept or theme without explicit mention.

Anaphora – Repeating a word or phrase at the start of successive clauses.
*[**"Give me problems, give me work, give me the most abstruse cryptogram"**]*

Antithesis – A rhetorical device where contrasting concepts are placed together in a text, typically a sentence, to highlight how different they are.
[Watson and Holmes are the antithesis of each other: reason versus emotion.]

Archetype – The perfect example of something with universally recognisable traits.
[Holmes is the archetypal detective.]

Assonance – The repetition of vowel sounds (a, e, i, o, u) within words close to each other, often creating emphasis or musicality.

Auditory imagery – Language which appeals to the reader's hearing.
*[**"dull thud"**]*

Colloquialism – An informal expression.
[Small's language is often more colloquial to indicate his lower–class status.]

Connotation – Implied meanings of words beyond their literal definitions.
[*Doyle's description of Pondicherry Lodge has sinister connotations.]*

Consonance – The repetition of consonant sounds anywhere within words close to each other in a sentence, often creating a harsh sound.

Detective genre – A subgenre of crime fiction. It centres around a detective who solves crime.
[Holmes is the archetypal figure in the detective genre.]

Dynamic character – A character who undergoes a significant transformation through the course of the novella or book.
[Watson is a dynamic character. At the start of the novella, he is reserved and on the periphery, but by the end, he confidently pursues Mary and confesses his feelings for her.]

Epitome – The perfect or ultimate embodiment of a quality.

Foreshadow – To subtly allude to an event which happens later in the novella.

Gallicism – The use of a French phrase, often to indicate education and sophistication.
*[**"à propos of this Norwood business"** – Doyle's gallicism suggests that Holmes is highly educated and culturally sophisticated.]*

Hyperbole – The use of exaggerated statements.
[Doyle constructs Watson's dialogue to include hyperbolic language when he discusses Mary, reflecting his ardent love for her.]

Interjection – A sudden remark, used often as an interruption or aside in the text.

Irony – Using language typically implying the opposite of what the writer is intending to express, often for a humorous effect.
[It is ironic that the treasure everyone covets ultimately ends up in the Thames!]

Juxtaposition – Comparing two concepts, characters, or clauses, in close proximity in a passage for the effect of contrast.

Motif – A recurring image, idea or symbol throughout the novella.
[The Agra treasure is a motif in the novella.]

Olfactory imagery – Appeals to the reader's sense of smell.
*[**"the air was heavy with a peculiarly pungent, tar–like odour"**]*

Oxymoron – Two opposing terms are placed next to each other.

Pathetic Fallacy – Weather or nature reflecting characters' feelings or the mood of the scene.
*[**"What else is there to live for? Stand at the window here. Was ever such a dreary, dismal, unprofitable world? See how the yellow fog swirls down the street and drifts across the dun–coloured houses. What could be more hopelessly prosaic and material?"**]*

Personification – Attributing human qualities to non–human things.

Protagonist – The central character of a literary text.
[Sherlock is the protagonist of the novella. The action centres around him.]

Round Character – A complex character.

Semantic Field – Words which are linked by a theme or topic throughout a text or passage. *[Doyle employs the semantic field of science when describing **"observation", "analysis"** and **"deduction".]*

Sibilance – Repetition of 's' sounds.
*[**"soft sea of sound"**]*

Staccato – Describes a rhythm which is stop–start and abrupt.

Symbolism – Using one object or character to represent a wider concept running throughout the novel.
[For example, the Agra treasure could symbolise greed and colonialism.]

Syntactic – Relating to the arrangement of words within a sentence within a text.

Temporal deixis – Language which references time.
*[**"last night"**]*

Techniques – Structure

Climax – The height of the tension in the novella.

Detective Fiction – A subgenre of mystery and crime fiction, typically featuring a hero who is the investigator of the case and who eventually uncovers the truth.

Dichotomy – A contrast of two beings or things that are opposed or distinctly different.
[Victorian London was dichotomous. It consisted of a division between the rich and the poor.]

Exposition – The beginning of a text. It provides all the background information required to understand the forthcoming plot and the characters involved.

Falling action – After the climax, comes the falling action. This is where the tension is diffused, preparing the reader for the **resolution**.

Fin de siècle – The end of the century. Often a time of new beginnings.
[There were many fin de siècle fears at the time Doyle was writing The Sign of Four in 1890.]

First–person narrative – Uses the "I" pronoun.
[Watson is the first–person narrator. We hear events from his perspective.]

Flashback – When authors shift from the present to the past.
[Jonathan Small's backstory at the end of the novella acts as a flashback.]

Flat character – A simple, two–dimensional character that lacks depth.
[Some critics argue that Holmes is a flat character because he is the stereotypical detective.]

Foil – A character which serves to contrast another, to emphasise certain characteristics of the other character.
[Watson is Holmes' literary foil. His emotional intelligence contrasts Holmes' rationality.]

Foreboding – An indication that something bad is about to happen.
[***"something eerie and ghost–like"*** *]*

Frame narrator – A narrator within a narrative, meaning there is an outer and an inner narrator.
[In the final chapter, Small acts as a frame narrator.]

Novella – A short novel, roughly 20,000 – 40,000 words.
[The Sign of Four is roughly 35,500 words so fits into this length bracket.]

Parallelism – The use of grammatically identical or similar components repeated in a sentence or multiple sentences.

Rising action – Follows the **exposition** and builds the tension before the **climax**.

Key Vocabulary

Atavism – Reverting to something primitive.
[Tonga displays atavistic traits. Doyle describes him as a ***"hell–hound",*** *highlighting his animalistic qualities.]*

Binary – Refers to something which consists of two parts.
[The novella centres around the binary of East and West.]

Catharsis – Relief derived from releasing repressed emotion.
[Small's backstory is his catharsis. He is finally able to tell his tale.]

Colonialism – The act of one country controlling another country or territory politically and economically.

Contemporary reader – A reader of the book at the time it was published.

Darwinism – The theory that species evolve through natural selection, developing characteristics which better help them to survive.

Debased – Reduced in value or status, especially morally.
[The Sign of Four members become increasingly debased when pursuing wealth.]

Debauchery – Excessive indulgence.

Degeneration – The fear that people could regress to a more primitive state.

Duality – Simultaneously displaying two halves, with the two halves often having opposite meanings.
[Doyle engages with the duality of good and evil.]

Empire – The group of territories controlled by another country.

Facade – An exterior pretense.
[Many Victorians had the facade of respectability, despite committing debaucherous acts.]

Hedonistic – The self–indulgent life, which is dedicated to seeking pleasure.
[Holmes' cocaine use could be seen as hedonistic.]

Idiosyncrasies – Behaviour of an individual which is peculiar.
[Holmes' indifference to women and occasional drug use can be seen as idiosyncrasies, as they are departures from what is typical.]

Imperialism – The act of extending a nation's power, often through acquiring territories (colonialism).

Moral – Awareness of the principles of right and wrong conduct.
[Morality is a key theme which Doyle explores in relation to criminality.]

Multifaceted – Having many different aspects.

Nouveau Riche – A French term meaning "new rich". It refers to people who have acquired wealth in their lifetime as opposed to being born into it.
[The Sholtos are seen as nouveau riche. They acquired wealth through the Agra treasure.]

Orientalism – The portrayal of Eastern cultures as exotic and mysterious and the West as superior.
[Doyle's depiction of Tonga taps into Orientalist attitudes.]

"Other" – A term used to refer to someone outside the dominant ethnic or social group.
[Doyle presents Tonga as "other" due to his animalistic nature.]

Physiognomy – The theory that a person's character can be garnered through interpreting their facial features.

Rationality – The philosophical attitude that privileges logical thinking over emotions.
[Holmes embodies rationality. He focuses on deductive thinking.]

Social Mobility – The movement between different social classes.
[The Agra treasure offers the possibility of social mobility for Jonathan Small.]

Victorian Gentleman – A man in Victorian society who was expected to have immaculate manners. Gentlemen often had respectable occupations such as a lawyer.
[Although Holmes' education is indicative of a Victorian gentleman, his drug use would likely challenge the stereotype.]