AQA English Literature GCSE

The Sign of Four: Themes

Colonialism and Empire

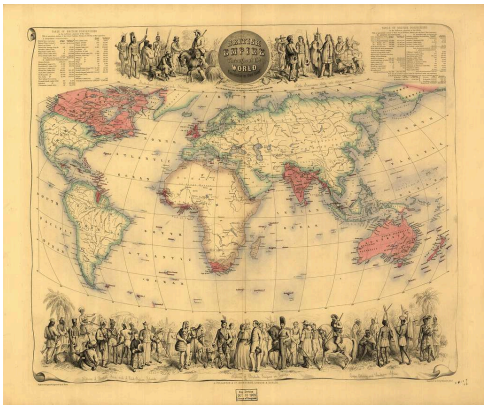
This work by PMT Education is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

Colonialism and Empire

Summary

In *The Sign of Four*, Doyle employs the theme of colonialism to expose the immorality of British **imperial expansion**. The theme of colonialism is significant because Doyle both reinforces and challenges Victorian society's view that Britain was **morally superior** to the East. Doyle conforms to **stereotypical portrayals** of colonised characters in Victorian literature, but also unveils the **exploitation** and **avarice** of the British Empire. The theme of empire closely relates to the theme of morality, as Doyle illustrates how colonialism complicates the **binary** concept of right and wrong.

Context



The British Empire

The **British Empire** was a global collection of countries controlled by Britain called **colonies**. The **imperialists** were those who supported or benefited from the expansion of the British Empire, whilst the **colonised** were those under British rule. The Victorian era was the height of the British Empire, which many Victorians considered as evidence of Britain's economic superiority. However, colonialism **precipitated ethical issues** which Doyle explores in the **novella**.

The Indian Rebellion

Doyle was writing shortly after the 1857 Indian Rebellion, a rebellion against British rule. Although unsuccessful, it elicited anxieties in Victorian society about colonial subjects challenging British authority, termed **reverse colonisation**.

Presentation of the Colonialism and Empire



Imperial Wealth and Corruption

Doyle constructs the **motif** of the Agra treasure to **symbolise subverted** morality. In the **resolution** of the **novella**, Mahomet Singh describes the Agra treasure to Jonathan Small as a ***"fair share of the loot...we can say no fairer".***

Doyle's use of the noun ***"loot"*** connotes ideas of theft and illegality, elucidating how colonial wealth is often obtained through exploitation. However, the repetition of ***"fair"*** contradicts the notion of criminality. Doyle reveals how Singh is self-justifying: despite committing criminal acts, Singh convinces himself and others of his ethical fairness.

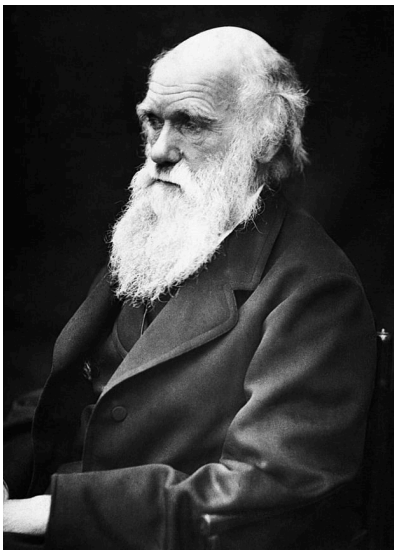
For Victorian readers, the Empire likely symbolised pride, whereas modern readers are more likely to view the British Empire as a destructive force which corrupts both the imperialists and the colonised. Arguably, the Agra treasure functions as a microcosm of the British Empire. It promises wealth, but results in moral decline. Doyle exposes how beneath the prosperity of imperial expansion lies exploitation.

Tonga and Colonial Stereotypes

Doyle's use of the adjective ***"savage"*** when describing Tonga taps into Victorian society's view of the colonised as primitive and uncivilised. Equally, the reference to ***"instincts"*** implies that Tonga is driven by animalistic impulses, not rational thought. Noting that Tonga is an islander from the Andaman Islands, a British colony, Doyle arguably conforms to Victorian literature's tradition of dehumanising Eastern characters, reducing them to a stereotype as a means of justifying imperial rule.

Through describing Tonga's instincts as having ***"broken out",*** Doyle implies that Tonga has suppressed his ***"savage"*** qualities. From a Victorian perspective, Doyle's animalistic description of the colonised justifies imperial control, whereas modern readers are more likely to be critical of Doyle's prejudicial stereotypes. Animalistic representations of the East were influenced by Victorian interpretations of evolutionary theories such as Darwinism. Victorians often used these evolutionary theories to justify beliefs in Western superiority.

The Allure of Empire



Doyle delineates how imperialism is not only immoral, but alluring. In the falling action of the novella, Mrs Forrester exclaims ***"a romance!...a black cannibal".*** The exclamation mark after "romance" reflects Victorian society's fascination with the colonial other as well as the excitement associated with new discoveries in the East. Contemporary adventure fiction depicted the colonies as exciting, but Doyle also indicates how colonial spaces can be dangerous. Doyle juxtaposes romance with the racialised language of a ***"black cannibal",*** indicating how Victorian society sensationalised the suffering of the colonised as entertainment.

Alternatively, the **juxtaposition** of romance and racialised language could tap into Victorian fears of **reverse-colonisation**: the notion that **colonised** territories may seek revenge on the **imperialists.** Equally, ***"cannibal"*** connotes the **semantic field** of animalism and violence, reflecting Victorian fears about the perceived threat of the colonised.

Doyle's Purpose

Doyle employs the theme of colonialism to expose the **hypocrisy** of Victorian London. Whilst Victorians associated empire with Western superiority, Doyle considers how colonial wealth is a **corruptive** force linked to greed and betrayal. Equally, the Agra treasure coming over to Britain **symbolises** how this corruption is not only found in the colonies, but is also present in Britain.



Consequently, Doyle blurs the distinctions between East and West, delineating how the West is not purely "civilised", nor is the East entirely "savage". Rather, **moral corruption** is present in both the East and West.

CC BY NC ND