AQA English Literature GCSE

The Sign of Four: Themes

Crime and Justice

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Crime and Justice

Overview

Holmes - Rational Justice



Doyle constructs Holmes as **emblematic** of logical, evidence-based justice, whilst Watson functions as a **moral lens** through which readers assess the emotional consequences of crime. Holmes' focus on collecting evidence, solving the case and identifying the criminal reaffirms **Victorian society's** confidence in **scientific reasoning** and logical investigation.

Watson and Mary - Moral Justice and Emotions

By contrast, Watson is more attentive to the **emotional impact** of crime, particularly in relation to Mary Morstan. Watson observes that Mary displays ***"every sign of intense inward agitation"***, highlighting her anxiety throughout the investigation, and reminding readers that crime has a **psychological** impact. As both a qualified doctor and a **narrator**, Watson balances Holmes' detached logic with compassion. Ultimately, Doyle argues that justice requires both empathy and reason.

Small and Mary - Victims of Crime

Similarly, Doyle constructs Jonathan Small to complicate **conventional** ideas of criminality. Doyle illuminates how those who commit crimes are not **inherently malevolent**, but are often shaped by circumstances such as poverty and **imperialism**. At the same time, Doyle highlights how innocent people like Mary can become **victims of injustice**. She loses her father and her inheritance as a consequence of the crimes surrounding the Agra treasure.

Thaddeus - Moral Ambiguity

Arguably, Thaddeus' decision to send Mary pearls is an attempt to **rectify this injustice**. Although Thaddeus benefits from the theft of the Agra treasure, Doyle portrays him as **morally conscious**. Doyle suggests that justice is not just obeying the law, but also acknowledging wrongdoing and making amends. Through contrasting Holmes, Watson, Mary, Thaddeus and Small, Doyle encourages readers to recognise that legal justice does not always **equate** to moral fairness: the line between criminal and victim is often **nebulous**.

Context Overview

Crime in Victorian London

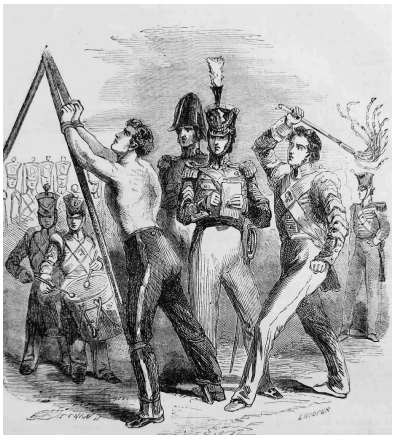


The **Victorian era** was a time of **rapid scientific progress,** however, it also consisted of an immense **rich-poor divide** between the **upper-class West End** and the **squalor** of the East End. As a consequence of extreme poverty in East London, many crimes were the product of **economic hardship.** Most crimes were petty crimes such as pickpocketing seen in *Oliver Twist*.

However, the public focused on violent crimes such as the **"Jack the Ripper"** murders of 1888, at the time Doyle was writing. The Metropolitan Police Force was established in 1829 in London, just 61 years before *The Sign of Four* was published. Unsolved crimes **elicited** widespread fear and dissatisfaction with the police.

Justice in Victorian London

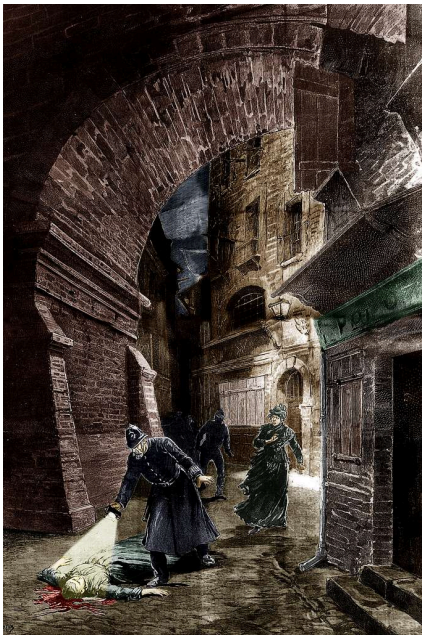
Today, justice refers to fairness, treating people equally and ensuring criminals receive the appropriate sentence in **proportion** to the crime committed. In criminal law, sentences are punishments intended to **deter** people from committing crimes in future.



However, Victorian punishments were far more severe than today's punishments. More serious crimes could result in hanging, which was a major public event and form of entertainment.

Presentation of Crime and Justice in *The Sign of Four*

Holmes - Rational Crime-Solving



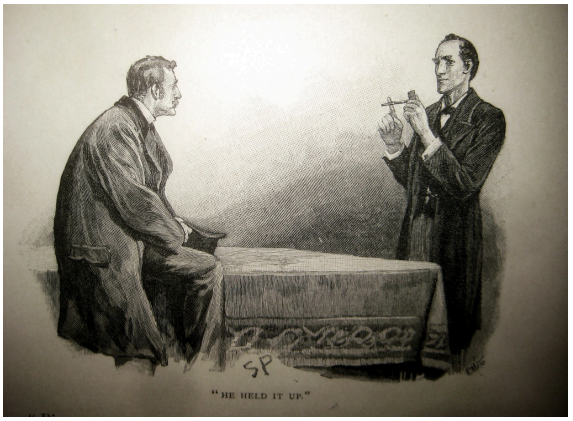
Doyle positions Holmes as restoring justice through logical reasoning, reflecting Victorian confidence in objective legal systems. The novella's narrative structure consists of short chapter titles such as ***"The Science of Deduction",*** reinforcing Holmes' belief that crime should be approached methodically and objectively.

In the 1890s, there was widespread anxiety regarding the ineffectiveness of the Metropolitan Police, particularly following unsolved cases such as Jack the Ripper murders. For contemporary readers, Holmes likely offered reassurance that crime could be solved logically. However, it could be argued that Holmes overlooks the emotional ramifications of crime.

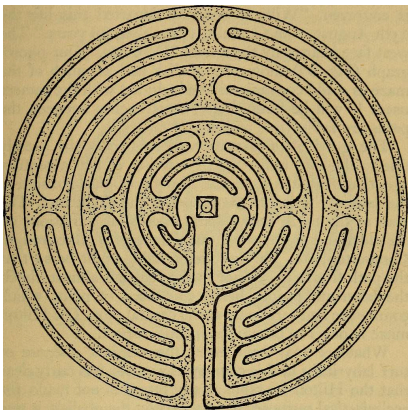
Watson's Moral Approach to Justice

Doyle constructs Watson as Holmes' foil, who holds Holmes to account: ***"You really are an automaton - a calculating machine!"*** Doyle's use of the metaphors ***"automaton"*** and ***"calculating machine"*** reinforces the notion that Holmes embodies rational justice. Equally "machine" highlights Holmes' efficiency in solving crimes, contrasting Victorian society's dissatisfaction with the Metropolitan Police.

Nevertheless, a ***"machine"*** carries negative connotations, and suggests that Holmes is devoid of all emotion. Whilst Victorian readers may value Holmes' efficiency in a time of rapid scientific progress, justice also requires a balance of reason and feeling. Doyle's employment of the exclamation mark conveys Watson's frustration with Holmes, unveiling the limitations of a justice system which only values logic. Doyle portrays the tension to emphasise how justice requires a balance of logic and emotion.



The Complexity of Crime



Doyle includes the **motif** of a "labyrinth", repeating it throughout the **novella** to represent the complexity of crime. A labyrinth is an intentionally confusing network of paths, **symbolising** the intricacy of crime-solving. In the **climax** of the novella, Watson is no longer critical of Holmes' reliance on logic, rather he praises Holmes for being ***"singularly endowed".*** Labyrinths are also **symbolic** of London streets and the social divisions which ensure lots of crimes are hidden in dark alleyways.

Alternatively, labyrinths may **allude** to the psychology of crime. In order to solve crime, it is important to consider the **motivations** of criminals, as well as implementing logical problem-solving. Doyle presents crime-solving as a process of interpreting different perspectives and lies, not just the simple discovery of facts, reinforcing the notion that justice is elusive.

Small - Alternative Views of Criminality

Doyle challenges **traditional representations** of criminals in literature by constructing Small as a **morally ambiguous** character. Initially, Watson assigns the label of ***"the ex-convict"*** to Small, reducing Small to his past and highlighting how Victorian society defines individuals' identities solely through the crimes they commit. However, Doyle's **structural shift** to Small's narrative voice in the **resolution** is significant because it is the first time the reader hears from Small's perspective. Instead of depicting Small as wholly **villainous**, Doyle encourages the reader to consider his motives.

Whilst Victorian readers are likely to condemn Small as **morally reprehensible**, it could be argued that he is the **product of injustice** and unfortunate circumstances. Doyle's use of the verb ***"snarled"*** carries **animalistic connotations**, reflecting how criminals were **dehumanised** in Victorian society to justify maltreatment. Doyle suggests that criminal acts arise from circumstance, rather than solely from inherent **moral depravity.**

Small - Guilt and Responsibility

Doyle further complicates the theme of justice through exploring Small's attempts to deny **responsibility** for Bartholomew's murder, tapping into changing attitudes towards the importance of intent in relation to crime. Small insists ***"I never raised a hand...I had no part in it, sir".*** Through the use of the **adverb** ***"never",*** Small attempts to distance himself from **culpability**.

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Nevertheless, Doyle elucidates how criminality operates on a **continuum**: Small was **implicated** in crime. Equally, Doyle employs the **semantic field** of hell when Small calls Tonga a ***"hell-hound"*** and a ***"devil",*** **dehumanising** Tonga and shifting the blame away from Small. Whilst Victorian readers may argue that Small is incapable of accepting responsibility, modern legal systems value both the intention of crime and the criminal act. Doyle illustrates how justice exists on a **spectrum**, reinforcing the **inherent moral ambiguity** of justice.

The Agra Treasure as a Curse

Doyle's description of the Agra treasure as a ***"curse"*** and ***"evil"*** **elucidates** the harsh **ramifications** of crime. Instead of accepting blame,***"curse"*** implies that Small has succumbed to forces beyond his control. The reference to ***"curse"*** and ***"evil"*** create a **semantic field** of the **supernatural**, drawing a **parallel** with Holmes' otherworldly mind. In the **battle of good and evil**, justice **prevails**. The **recurring imagery** of a ***"curse"*** suggests that crime has long-term impacts which extend beyond criminal sentencing, affecting every character who encounters the treasure.



Equally, the **metaphor** ***"slavery for life"*** further emphasises how Small is powerless and **shackled** by crime. Victorian readers may have delighted in Small's suffering and punishment, but today's readers are more likely to view him as a **victim** of unfortunate circumstances. Doyle constructs Small as self-pitying, limiting the reader's sympathy despite his difficult life experiences.

Imperialism and Unequal Punishment

Doyle depicts crime as inseparable from **imperial exploitation**, positioning crime as a **systemic issue**, not an individual failing. The **repetition** of the **first-person plural pronoun** ***"we"*** in relation to the treasure emphasises how crimes often have **collective** involvement.

The treasure becomes **symbolic** of the **British Empire's** exploitation, representing wealth obtained through injustice. Doyle encourages readers to consider how punishment is often applied **unequally** in the novella. Whilst Small is imprisoned for his crimes, some individuals face far fewer consequences. For example, Major Sholto enjoys years of wealth after stealing the Agra treasure.

Criminal Social Structures

Whilst Victorian readers may have believed in British **moral superiority**, other readers may criticise the **injustice** of applying different standards of criminality to different classes of people. By linking crime to empire, Doyle shifts criminal responsibility away from individuals alone to focus on the systems which enable criminality and **imperial exploitation**. Doyle suggests that injustice is **embedded within imperialist social structures**. Doyle argues that justice requires not only punishment, but also scrutiny of the imperialist systems which enable injustice.

Types of Justice



Doyle presents multiple types of justice in the novella: **legal, personal and moral**. Holmes pursues legal justice through deduction, Small seeks personal justice through revenge, and Thaddeus desires moral justice in the form of making amends to Mary.

Through depicting varied forms of justice, Doyle indicates the **complexity of justice** and how it cannot simply be reduced to punishing criminals.

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