AQA English Literature GCSE

The Sign of Four: Themes

Greed and Obsession

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Greed and Obsession

Theme Summary

Doyle presents greed and obsession as destructive forces which inflict suffering on individuals. The Agra treasure **symbolises** how greed **corrupts** both the **colonisers and the colonised**, and obsession hinders characters from thinking rationally. Doyle underscores how the **pursuit of wealth** only results in further dissatisfaction as greed is ultimately **insatiable**.



Greed was particularly relevant for **Victorian readers** as Doyle was writing at the height of the British Empire where **imperial expansion** resulted in enormous wealth. Equally, Victorian society valued **moral responsibility**. Whilst excessive greed was viewed as immoral, colonial expansion was encouraged, highlighting the **hypocrisy** of Victorian society.

Presentation of the Theme



Corruptive Greed – The Agra Treasure

Doyle constructs the Agra treasure as a **motif** to **symbolise** the destructive consequences of greed and obsessing over wealth. Doyle emphasises the precise value of the treasure as ***"not less than half a million sterling".*** Equally, the treasure is described as ***"cursed"***, demonstrating how fortune ironically creates suffering and misfortune for those who pursue it.

Equally, in Small's **frame narrative** at the end of the novella, he reflects ***"so blind and foolish a thing is avarice".*** The **adjective** "blind" extends Doyle's **motif** of "fog", reflecting how greed robs people of the ability to think rationally. Whilst **Victorian readers** may have delighted in seeing the wealth generated by the **British Empire**, **modern readers** are more likely to recognise the **exploitation** which underpins the financial gain.

Jonathan Small – Irrational Obsession

Doyle elucidates the illogical nature of obsession when Small reflects ***"at the talk about the treasure my heart turned to it".*** Doyle's reference to ***"heart"*** suggests emotions overwhelm reason, highlighting how **obsession distorts judgement**. Arguably, Doyle warns of the consequences of the overreliance on emotions when making decisions. **Victorian readers** are likely to have interpreted Small as a warning against greed, but **modern readers** may sympathise with Small's experience of betrayal. Either way, Doyle suggests that obsession is **self-destructive** when it overrides **morality**.

Watson – Greed as a Barrier to Love

When Doyle writes from Watson's **first-person perspective**, Doyle employs the **simile** ***"like an impassable barrier"*** to describe the impact of the Agra treasure on his relationship with Mary. Doyle presents greed as something which hinders romantic love. The use of the **rhetorical question** ***"might she not look upon me as a mere vulgar fortune-seeker?"*** indicates how wealth can be an obstacle to human connection. Unlike other characters, Watson rejects greed and prioritises affection. Through Watson, Doyle suggests that **moral integrity** is more valuable than material wealth.

Links to Social Class, Colonialism



The theme of greed intersects with colonialism as the Agra treasure originated from India, linking **affluence** to **imperial exploitation**. Doyle demonstrates how the British Empire's prosperity was built on the **extraction of wealth from the colonised**.

For Victorian readers, colonial wealth was likely a source of national pride, but modern readers are more likely to interrogate the **ethics of colonial exploitation**. Since the members of the Sign of Four are corrupted by their obsession with wealth, Doyle portrays greed as a **universal human weakness**, not something confined to a particular class or culture.

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Doyle's Purpose



Doyle employs the theme of greed and obsession to warn readers of the dangers of valuing wealth over **morality**. Through the Agra treasure, Doyle suggests that unchecked greed frequently results in betrayal and suffering. By contrast, Watson and Mary represent human connection, and their happiness reflects how love is more valuable than material possessions. Ultimately, Doyle depicts greed as a **self-destructive** force.

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