# AQA English Literature GCSE

## *The Sign of Four:* Themes

### Reason and Emotion

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# Reason and Emotion

## Theme Overview



Doyle contrasts Watson and Holmes as **foils** to explore the **tension** between reason and emotion. The **detective genre** lends itself to Holmes' deductive reasoning, and Holmes has become the **archetypal** detective figure today.

### Emotion and Morality

Watson is arguably the **moral lens**, symbolising human connection and forming the **romantic subplot** of the **novella**. Watson's medical background means he can think logically, and his relationship with Mary demonstrates his ability to express his emotions.

### The Limitations of Reason

Doyle **constructs** Holmes and Watson as **foils** to highlight the **limitations** of purely rational thinking. Writing at a time of rapid scientific progress, Doyle advocates for a balanced approach which combines reason and emotion. Whilst Holmes' desire for knowledge is insatiable, Watson finds contentment in emotional connection. Doyle suggests that emotions are **imperative** for enduring happiness.

## Presentation of the Theme



### Holmes and Reason

Doyle initially constructs Holmes as a **paradigm** of reason. In the **exposition of the novella**, Holmes asserts ***"detection is, or ought to be, an exact science"***, immediately establishing a **didactic tone**, illustrating the dominance of reason.

### Holmes' Capacity for Empathy

Nevertheless, Holmes confesses to Watson: ***"I had forgotten how personal and painful a thing it might be to you".*** Doyle's use of **alliterative plosive** "p" sounds creates a harsh **tone**, reflecting the emotional weight of Watson's pain. Whilst Doyle mostly presents Holmes as rational, he is not incapable of empathy. Holmes' ability to recognise Watson's suffering suggests Holmes is not an entirely **flat character**. Doyle suggests that reason and emotion exist on a spectrum.

### The Tension between Reason and Emotion



Alternatively, the **discordant** sounds emphasise the tension between Watson's emotional perspective and Holmes' **detached rationality**. Doyle's **employment** of the **scientific lexis** ***"science", "observation"*** and ***"deduction"***, almost **elevates** Holmes to the status of a scientist. For Victorian readers, Holmes' rationality reflects contemporary desires for order amidst London's rapid **industrialisation** and **urban expansion**.

### Watson as Holmes' Foil

In contrast to Holmes, Doyle **constructs** Watson as a **foil** for Holmes, highlighting the qualities Holmes lacks, such as emotional intelligence. Watson forms the **romantic subplot** through his relationship with Mary. Arguably, Watson's perspective is shaped by his feelings for Mary, making his narrative more subjective.

### Watson's View of Mary

Instead of describing Mary in a purely physical manner, Mary is ***"singularly spiritual and sympathetic".*** Doyle's **repetition** of the **sibilant** "s" sounds creates a calming **tone,** indicating how intensely Watson is affected by Mary's presence. Equally, the gentle **sibilant** sounds reflect Mary's gentle femininity.

### Mary's Composure



Doyle constructs Mary to both reinforce and challenge traditional **Victorian attitudes** towards femininity. Despite **"at first, turn[ing] faint"**, she had ***"borne trouble with a calm face".*** For example, Mary ***"calmly"*** states ***"the treasure is lost".*** Despite the Agra treasure offering a chance of **social mobility**, Doyle's use of the adverb ***"calmly"*** reflects Mary's resilience, and challenges **contemporary stereotypes** of women as **hysterical**. Mary functions as a **symbol** of emotional fulfilment and domestic stability.


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### Watson's Compassion

Whilst Holmes ***"crave[s] mental exultation"***, Watson finds contentment and meaning through love and companionship. Doyle suggests that emotional connection creates a more enduring form of happiness than intellectual stimulation. Watson's background as a military surgeon, however, means he has a balance of **rational scientific thinking**, as well as the ability to **empathise** and care for patients.

In the **exposition**, Watson exclaims, ***"Count the cost!"*** regarding Holmes' cocaine use. Doyle's use of the **imperative verb** ***"count"*** coupled with the exclamation mark creates a sense of urgency, delineating Watson's feelings for Holmes.

### Doyle's Ideal Balance

Arguably, Watson **embodies** Doyle's ideal balance of rational thought and human compassion, combining his medical training with emotional sensitivity. By contrast, Holmes' drug use does not appear rational. Doyle illuminates how reason without emotion can become **self-destructive**, undermining rationality.

## Links to Crime and Morality

### Setting



The **setting** develops the theme of reason and emotion in close relation to themes of crime and justice to highlight the tension between objective law and emotional moral ambiguity. Doyle's use of **pathetic fallacy**, particularly ***"dense, drizzly fog"*** and ***"mud-coloured clouds"*** mirrors the moral ambiguity of crime as both ***"fog"*** and ***"mud"*** obscure vision, elucidating how the truth is often unclear and cannot be solved through logical reasoning alone.

### Contemporary Fears

For Victorian readers, the ***"fog"*** may **symbolise** uncertainty regarding rising urban crime. Victorian London experienced rapid urban expansion, precipitating concerns about **social disorder**. Fog limits the ability to see ahead, reflecting **contemporary** worries about future change. Holmes' rational thinking offers reassurance that order can be restored.

Alternatively, as Doyle employs the motif of fog throughout the novella, it could also indicate Watson's inner turmoil when he attempts to suppress his emotions. Doyle emphasises how investigation is shaped by human feelings: reason and ***"emotional qualities"*** are not ***"antagonistic to clear reason"*** as Holmes states, but often work in tandem. Through Watson's narration, Doyle demonstrates how emotions can complement reason.



## Doyle's Purpose

### The Limitations of Reason

Doyle employs themes of reason and emotion to challenge Holmes' declaration that detection is ***"an exact science".*** Arguably, Holmes is the mouthpiece for Victorian readers' faith in science and rationality. Doyle constructs Holmes to warn of the consequences of reducing people to ***"labyrinths"*** or puzzles to solve, ignoring the emotional ramifications. Holmes embodies contemporary beliefs that logical reasoning alone could solve all of society's problems. However, Doyle outlines the limitations of Holmes' tendency to overlook individuals' suffering. In Watson's relationship with Mary, Doyle demonstrates that human empathy is invaluable.

### The Importance of Emotions

Equally, ***"labyrinths"*** could also reflect the complexity of human nature. Detectives can identify clues and facts, but emotions are more difficult to navigate. For Victorian readers, rationality was likely comforting in a period of social change and anxieties about crime, but Doyle portrays reason and emotion as interdependent and equally important. Holmes' deductive thinking is necessary to solve crime, but Watson's ability to empathise helps readers to understand the emotional consequences of crime.



### The Paradox of Logical Thinking

Ultimately, Doyle suggests that reason and emotion are complementary, not opposing forces. Doyle constructs Holmes as a character who prides himself on rationality. Notwithstanding this, Holmes' dependence on cocaine exposes the paradox of logical thinking: his pursuit of pure logic undermines his rational judgement.


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**The Ending**

Significantly, the novella ends with Watson being happily married to Mary. By contrast, Holmes reaches for ***"the cocaine-bottle"***, mirroring the start of the novella, and creating a **cyclical** structure. Through Watson, Doyle presents an alternative model where reason and emotion **coexist harmoniously**. Whilst Watson is emotionally fulfilled, Holmes is alone in the same place he started.


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