AQA English Literature GCSE

The Sign of Four: Themes

Social Class and Society

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

Social Class and Society

Theme Summary

In *The Sign of Four*, Doyle depicts social class as a rigidly defined, **hierarchical** structure which dictates characters' value, relationships and self-respect. Although Victorian society associated higher social classes with **respectability**, Doyle suggests that wealth is a **corruptive** force which can be obtained through **exploitation** such as through the Agra treasure.

Presentation of the Theme

Facades of Respectability – Mary

Doyle first introduces the reader to Mary through references to her social class, writing from Watson's romanticised **first-person narrative perspective**. Doyle's description of her as ***"well gloved"*** **alludes** to a higher social class as bare hands were associated with the working-class.

Class and Morality



Doyle **juxtaposes** Mary's purity with the **motifs** of ***"mud"*** and ***"fog"*** in the **novella**. Whilst the **recurring imagery** of dirt is **emblematic** of the **corruptive** nature of wealth, Mary remains detached from the exploitation.

Doyle constructs Mary to **mirror** Watson's moral constancy. Her gloves protect her from the London smog, reflecting how she is **uncorrupted** by the colonial wealth of the Agra treasure. Through Mary, Doyle challenges Victorian assumptions that a **higher social class equates to respectability**. Rather, Doyle suggests true value is rooted in integrity.

Class and Civilisation

In contrast to the ***"savage"*** Tonga, Mary's gloves are **symbolic** of English civilisation and restraint. Nevertheless, Doyle also describes Mary's dress as a ***"costume"*** suggesting that she is **performing the role of an upper-class woman**, despite ***"limited means".***



Although Mary was born **middle-class**, she worked as a governess because of her father's disappearance, therefore, her ***"costume"*** reflects her changing social class. The **superlative** ***"most"*** before ***"perfect"*** demonstrates how Watson is enchanted by Mary's performance. Doyle illuminates the **artificial nature of class** and how individuals are esteemed for their refinement, not their character.

Decadence and Class – Thaddeus

In chapter four, Thaddeus describes his house to Mary as ***" sanctum",*** suggesting his home is a private, sacred place where he retreats to be alone. Doyle warns of how the wealth which comes with a higher social class leads to isolation and removal from society. Equally, Doyle's use of the **metaphor** ***"an oasis of art in the howling desert of London"*** **alludes** to the Victorian **aestheticism** movement which valued 'art for art's sake'. Doyle **juxtaposes** ***"oasis"***, which is an area of vegetation, with the arid "***desert"***, reflecting the **stark inequality** of London.

Similarly, ***"sanctum"*** reinforces Thaddeus' desire to be separate from the urban poor. Describing London as ***"howling"*** creates an image of disorder, reflecting **upper-class anxieties about poverty and social unrest**. Thaddeus retreats into his private world of luxury, highlighting how wealth can encourage isolation from wider society.

Although Thaddeus **inherited** his wealth, his overt display of wealth imitates the **nouveau riche** (the self-made). Whilst Mary is dressed ***"in perfect taste",*** Victorian readers would likely have been critical of Thaddeus' vulgar exhibition of wealth. For modern readers, Thaddeus represents the upper-classes' refusal to **integrate** with members of different classes.

The Relativity of Social Class – Thaddeus

In spite of Thaddeus' ostentatious display of wealth, he introduces himself to Watson and Holmes as a ***"servant"***, suggesting a **lower-class status**. Doyle reinforces the notion that class is a performance determined by behaviour. Doyle **undermines** assumptions that wealth brings confidence, rather, Thaddeus' overly decorated home appears a desperate attempt to impress and conceal insecurity. Doyle depicts wealth as something which breeds insecurity and inferiority.



CC BY NC ND

Intelligence, Class and Justice – Holmes

Through Watson's **first-person narrative**, Doyle describes Holmes as having ***"great powers"***, **elevating his status**. Doyle indicates how Victorian society associated education and intellectual achievement with a higher social class. Despite Watson's status as a medical doctor, he is rendered ***"diffident"*** when witnessing Holmes' genius.

Further, ***"powers"*** connotes a **superhuman** quality to Holmes, thus Doyle delineates how intelligence functions as **social capital**, placing Watson amongst the intellectual **elite**. Doyle suggests that class is not only determined through wealth, but through knowledge. Equally, Holmes's ***"great powers"*** enable him to restore justice through solving crimes. Nevertheless, Doyle's choice to present events from Watson's **first-person perspective** means that Watson's description is likely **biased** and **idealised**, tinged by his intense admiration for Holmes.

Links to Crime and Colonialism



The theme of social class **intersects** with themes of crime and justice, as Doyle reveals that criminals come from all classes of society. Whilst Victorian literature **stereotyped** the urban poor as criminals, such as the Artful Dodger in *Oliver Twist*, Doyle exposes the **corruption** of the **ostensibly respectable** characters such as Major Sholto. Equally, wealth originates from the Agra treasure which came from India. Doyle emphasises how the British ruling classes were dependent on **imperial exploitation** and wealth is often built on injustice.

Doyle's Purpose



Doyle challenges Victorian readers' beliefs that wealth **equates to morality** and value. Doyle's description of Mary Morstan highlights how class is largely a **performative social construct.** Mary's "costume" emphasises how social class is manufactured through dress.

Equally, Thaddeus' **inherited wealth** exposes how **social hierarchies** are built on injustice and maintained through uneven distributions of wealth. Doyle illuminates how wealth can be acquired through criminal acts and is not necessarily an indication of a **virtuous nature**. On the contrary, Doyle highlights how wealth **corrupts** and leads to regret.

CC BY NC ND