2.24 Literature: The Sign of Four (Arthur Conan Doyle): 30-minute Pack

Total Marks

AQA / EDEXCEL / EDUQAS GCSE Literature 19th-century novel · about 30 minutes

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Answer ALL questions.

1 Explain how the novel's setting and events reflect Victorian Britain's relationship with its empire, particularly in India and the Andaman Islands.

(Total for Question 1 is 8 marks)

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2 Write about how Conan Doyle presents Sherlock Holmes as an unconventional hero across the novel.

(Total for Question 2 is 30 marks)

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Mark scheme · 2.24 Literature: The Sign of Four (Arthur Conan Doyle): 30-minute Pack

Question 1

Level 4 Detailed, well-informed explanation connecting specific plot elements to real historical and imperial context, showing clear awareness of how the novel reflects Victorian attitudes. **7-8**

Level 3 Clear explanation of at least one relevant connection between the novel and its imperial context, with reference. **5-6**

Level 2 Some explanation, with reference. **3-4**

Level 1 Simple, general comment on empire or India in the novel, with little development. **1-2**

Indicative content:

- the backstory of the original theft is set during the violent uprising of 1857 against British rule in India, a real historical event that Conan Doyle's original Victorian readers would have known and had strong feelings about
- Small's transportation to the Andaman Islands reflects the real historical use of the islands as a British penal colony for convicts from India, showing empire as a system of both wealth extraction and imprisonment
- the treasure itself originates in India and is carried back to England, physically representing the flow of wealth from colonised territory to the imperial centre, a pattern common in real Victorian trade and administration
- Tonga, the Andaman Islander who assists Small, is described in ways that reflect common, now widely criticised, Victorian stereotypes about non-European peoples as exotic or dangerous, revealing period attitudes to colonised peoples rather than an accurate portrait
- the idea of a violent, foreign threat travelling from the empire to disturb Britain itself reflects a wider Victorian anxiety, found in other fiction of the period, about the empire's dangers returning home

Question 2

Level 4 Compelling, critical response: sustained, sophisticated exploration of how Conan Doyle presents Holmes as an unconventional hero across the whole novel; judicious, precisely selected references; perceptive analysis of Conan Doyle's methods with consistently precise subject terminology; contextual understanding of Victorian science, detection and social attitudes woven fully into the argument. **26-30**

Level 3 Critical, exploratory response: clear line of argument sustained across the novel; well-chosen range of references; analyses the effects of Conan Doyle's methods with accurate subject terminology; relevant context integrated where appropriate. **16-25**

Level 2 Detailed, well-structured response: consistently clear response to the question; well-chosen range of references from across the novel; explains the effects of some of Conan Doyle's methods with some subject terminology; some awareness of context. **6-15**

Level 1 Simple response: simple response with some relevant reference to the novel; simple or limited comment on Conan Doyle's methods; little or no awareness of context. **1-5**

Indicative content:

- Holmes is introduced through his precise, almost theatrical deduction of details about Watson's absent brother from a single pocket watch, immediately establishing him as unconventional through the sheer, confident specificity of his method rather than through any traditional heroic action
- unlike a conventional Victorian hero, Holmes is shown using cocaine between cases out of boredom, a habit Conan Doyle presents without moral judgement from Watson, making Holmes an unusually flawed and modern figure for the period
- Holmes's use of disguise, appearing convincingly as an old sailor to gather information about the boat used in Small's escape, presents his heroism as intellectual and performative rather than physically dominant
- his reliance on forensic, physical evidence, such as footprints, a wooden leg's print and the trained dog Toby's tracking of a distinctive scent, presents detection as a scientific method rather than intuition or luck, distinguishing him from earlier fictional detectives
- during the Thames boat chase, Holmes is shown as capable of decisive, controlled action when required, but this physical courage is consistently framed as secondary to, and directed by, his intellectual planning
- Holmes's emotional detachment, particularly his muted reaction to Watson's engagement to Mary Morstan at the novel's close, and his return to the cocaine bottle once the case is solved, presents an unconventional, unromantic ending that resists a fully warm, sentimental heroism
- Conan Doyle wrote at a time of growing Victorian interest in forensic science and criminology, and Holmes's confident, replicable method of reasoning reflects contemporary faith in scientific progress as a way of restoring order to an increasingly complex, urban society
- by contrast with the official police detective who reaches a mistaken conclusion and arrests the wrong man, Conan Doyle uses Holmes's success to suggest that an unconventional, independent method of thought can succeed where established, official authority fails

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