2.24 Literature: The Sign of Four (Arthur Conan Doyle): Test Pack

Total Marks

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

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Answer ALL questions.

1 Answer the following short questions about the context of the novel.

(a) In which year was The Sign of Four first published? **(1)**

(b) In which magazine did The Sign of Four first appear? **(1)**

(c) The Sign of Four was Arthur Conan Doyle's second full-length novel to feature which detective? **(1)**

(d) Much of Jonathan Small's backstory takes place in India during a violent uprising against British rule in 1857. By what name is this uprising commonly known? **(1)**

(Total for Question 1 is 4 marks)

2 Explain how Conan Doyle uses Watson as the novel's narrator to shape the reader's experience of the mystery.

(Total for Question 2 is 6 marks)

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3 Explain the role that the Agra treasure plays in driving the events of the novel, from Major Sholto's actions to the novel's ending.

(Total for Question 3 is 6 marks)

4 Explore how Conan Doyle presents Jonathan Small as a criminal the reader can, to some extent, understand or sympathise with.

(Total for Question 4 is 8 marks)

5 Analyse how Conan Doyle structures the novel's narrative, including its use of an embedded first-person account, to build and then resolve suspense.

(Total for Question 5 is 8 marks)

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

Question 1

(a) 1890 **B1**

(a) Answer: 1890.

(b) Lippincott's Monthly Magazine **B1**

(b) Answer: Lippincott's Monthly Magazine.

(c) Sherlock Holmes **B1**

(c) Answer: Sherlock Holmes.

(d) the Indian Rebellion of 1857 (accept: the Indian Mutiny; the Sepoy Mutiny) **B1**

(d) Answer: The Indian Rebellion of 1857 (also known as the Indian Mutiny or Sepoy Mutiny).

Question 2

Level 3 Detailed explanation of how Watson's limited, first-person perspective withholds information and controls suspense, and of how his admiring but ordinary viewpoint makes Holmes appear more extraordinary by contrast. **5-6**

Level 2 Clear explanation of one relevant point about Watson's narrative role, e.g. that his ordinary understanding lets the reader follow the mystery at a relatable pace. **3-4**

Level 1 Simple, general comment about Watson telling the story, with little development. **1-2**

Indicative content:

- Watson narrates in the first person as an active participant, so the reader learns clues at the same time he does, creating suspense rather than being told the solution in advance
- Watson openly admires Holmes's intellect but does not fully understand his methods, so the reader experiences the same puzzlement and admiration Watson feels
- because Watson is not a professional detective, his more ordinary, sympathetic perspective, including his growing feelings for Mary Morstan, gives the novel an emotional dimension that Holmes's own detached narration would not provide
- Watson's occasional confusion or wrong assumptions about the case make Holmes's eventual, confident explanation feel more impressive by contrast

Question 3

identifies that Major Sholto's decision to keep the treasure entirely for himself, rather than sharing it as originally agreed, is the root cause of the conflict that follows (oe) **B1**

identifies that fear of Jonathan Small returning for the treasure is presented as contributing to Major Sholto's death (oe) **B1**

identifies that the search for the treasure, and Bartholomew Sholto's murder, is what brings Holmes, Watson and Mary Morstan together and starts the main detective plot (oe) **B1**

identifies that the treasure is what Thaddeus Sholto intends to divide fairly between Mary Morstan and his own family, in contrast to his father's earlier greed (oe) **B1**

identifies that Small's decision to throw the treasure into the River Thames rather than let it be recovered is presented as a final act of spite (oe) **B1**

identifies that the loss of the treasure at the end means the mystery is solved but the wealth itself is never actually gained by anyone, undercutting the idea that the pursuit was worthwhile (oe) **B1**

Answer: The treasure drives the plot from Major Sholto's original betrayal, through the murder and investigation it causes, to its final loss in the Thames, meaning nobody ultimately benefits from it.

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Question 4

Level 4 Detailed exploration balancing his violent actions with the injustices that shaped his choices, referencing his own extended first-person account near the end of the novel and considering how this narrative structure affects reader sympathy. **7-8**

Level 3 Clear explanation of specific reasons Small might attract some sympathy, with relevant reference. **5-6**

Level 2 Some explanation of one relevant point, with reference. **3-4**

Level 1 Simple, general comment on Small, with little development. **1-2**

Indicative content:

- Small is given an extended opportunity to tell his own story in his own words near the end of the novel, a narrative structure that lets the reader hear his justification directly rather than only through others' accounts
- his account presents him as a man shaped by hardship, including losing a leg early in his time in India and the harsh, punitive conditions of the penal colony where he was later transported
- he frames his pursuit of the treasure as reclaiming what he sees as rightfully his share, betrayed by Major Sholto, rather than simple theft, giving his motive a grievance the reader can follow even while disapproving of his actions
- however, Conan Doyle balances this sympathy against Small's willingness to use violence, including his role, through his companion Tonga, in the killing of Bartholomew Sholto, which prevents the reader from fully excusing him
- his final act, destroying the treasure rather than allowing anyone else to benefit from it, suggests a bitterness and vindictiveness that complicates any straightforward sympathy for his situation

Question 5

Level 4 Detailed analysis of how the novel's main frame narrative contains a second, embedded first-person narrative, and how this structural choice controls the release of information and shifts sympathy near the novel's end. **7-8**

Level 3 Clear analysis of the two-part structure, investigation followed by confession, and its effect on the reader. **5-6**

Level 2 Some explanation of one structural feature, with reference. **3-4**

Level 1 Simple, general comment on structure, with little development. **1-2**

Indicative content:

- the novel's main narrative is told throughout by Watson in the first person, meaning most of the story is structured as an unfolding investigation in which information is revealed gradually alongside Holmes's deductions
- near the novel's end, Conan Doyle inserts a lengthy, separate first-person narrative told directly by Jonathan Small, shifting the narrative voice and giving the reader the criminal's own account of events in his own words
- this embedded narrative structurally answers the questions the investigation has raised, functioning as a delayed explanation that only becomes available once Small is captured
- the shift from investigation, following Holmes and Watson, to confession, following Small, mirrors a common structure in detective fiction, where the puzzle of who and how is followed by a fuller explanation of why
- by placing Small's more sympathetic backstory after his capture rather than before, the structure ensures the reader's sympathy for him develops only once he can no longer pose a danger, allowing the novel to combine moral resolution with some sympathy for the criminal

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