

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle: *The Sign of Four*

Read the following extract from Chapter 6 of *The Sign of Four* and then answer the question that follows.

In this extract, Holmes is investigating the death of Bartholomew Sholto at Pondicherry Lodge.

5 "My dear Watson, try a little analysis yourself," said he with a touch of impatience. "You know my methods. Apply them, and it will be instructive to compare results."
"I cannot conceive anything which will cover the facts," I answered.
"It will be clear enough to you soon," he said, in an offhand way. "I think that there is nothing else of importance here, but I will look."
10 He whipped out his lens and a tape measure and hurried about the room on his knees, measuring, comparing, examining, with his long thin nose only a few inches from the planks and his beady eyes gleaming and deep-set like those of a bird. So swift, silent, and furtive were his movements, like those of a trained bloodhound picking out a scent, that I could not but think what a terrible criminal he would have made had he turned his energy and sagacity
15 against the law instead of exerting them in its defence. As he hunted about, he kept muttering to himself, and finally he broke out into a loud crow of delight.
"We are certainly in luck," said he. "We ought to have very little trouble now. Number One has had the misfortune to tread in the creosote. You can see the outline of the edge of his small foot here
20 at the side of this evil-smelling mess. The carboy has been cracked, you see, and the stuff has leaked out."

1 3

Starting with this extract, explore how Conan Doyle presents Holmes as an interesting and unusual investigator.

Write about:

- how Conan Doyle presents Holmes as an interesting and unusual investigator in this extract
- how Conan Doyle presents Holmes as an interesting and unusual investigator in the novel as a whole.

[30 marks]

Turn over for sample answers.

Sherlock Holmes – marked answer from last year’s GCSE – approx. Grade 5+

In this extract, Holmes is an interesting and unusual investigator. We can see this when Sherlock and Watson are having a conversation about how they are investigating the death of Bartholomew at Pondicherry Lodge and Sherlock asks Watson to see if he could “try a little analysis yourself” and “You know my methods. Apply them.” This shows that Holmes thinks that investigation is fun and he is trying to teach Watson to enjoy it and make his mind work in different ways, and if you look hard enough “it will be clear enough to you soon”.

You can also see that he is unusual when it says “hurried about the room on his knees”. This suggests that he is excited and wants to get down to the bottom and has something to exercise his mind. You can also see that he is excited and intrigued when Arthur Conan Doyle uses a simile “eyes gleamed and deep set like those of a bird.” This suggests that Holmes is looking for evidence like a bird would look for sticks for its nest. Holmes’ way of investigating is also seen as quite strange and when it says “so swift, silent and furtive were his movements, like those of a trained bloodhound”. The alliteration “so swift, silent” shows how Sherlock is moving around the room quietly so he can take every single factor in. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle uses another simile - “like those of a trained bloodhound” – to show how Holmes is investigating like a dog would find its prey.

Sherlock is also shown as an obsessive investigator when he “kept muttering to himself”. This shows that he was speaking his thoughts out loud and connecting all of the evidence. This may make the audience feel interested at how he is so different to other detectives and how he finds information out and is animal-like, and not normal.

Earlier in the book, we can also see that Holmes is very different to other people when Watson describes him as an “automaton”, “calculating machine”. This suggests that he is not normal and he is machine-like as everything he figures out no normal person could do that. We can also see that Sherlock is very confident in his methods and it is simple to him when he says “It all comes down to the power of deduction”. We can also see that Sherlock is bored when he has nothing to investigate when he says “I crave for mental exaltation”. This suggests that he wants to investigate otherwise he is bored and has nothing to do. We can also see that Sherlock wants a difficult case as when Watson gives him an old watch that he had just been given and told him to find out what kind of man the original owner was, Holmes finds it too easy and knows straight away that the owner was Watson’s brother and a clumsy drunken man. This may make the audience feel impressed at how smart he is to find a difficult task so easy, but we can see in the extract that when Sherlock comes to some evidence in a hard case he gets very excited – “we are certainly in luck”. This suggests that he is happier when he finds evidence and he gets very excited, unlike other detectives that take it seriously.

Sherlock Holmes – marked answer from last year's GCSE – approx. Grade 8+/9

Sherlock Holmes is a well-known, intelligent detective in 'The Sign of Four'. His presence and capability of solving crimes and mystery allow the readers of the Victorian era to relax and enjoy the endeavour of the books. Cases such as Jack the Ripper were present at the time – he was never caught. Sherlock Holmes' character provided relief and interest for Victorian readers.

In the extract, Holmes is presented as an interesting and unusual investigator when he offers for Watson to "try a little analysis" himself, but with a "touch of impatience". Holmes' actions are contradictory, as he allows Watson, who has a much lower intelligence, and lack of detection methods, to investigate the murder of Bartholomew. However, this could purely be based on the fact that Watson was a military doctor, and his knowledge of wounds could have been of great service to Holmes. On the other hand, Watson could potentially find or pick out an aspect that Holmes could have missed when analysing the crime scene. The personified phrase "a touch of impatience" shows how Holmes is a fast worker, but is slowing down due to the help of Watson. To a reader this could come across as strange – he is more capable of doing it himself. This links to the theme of friendship and the bond between Holmes and Watson.

Also in the extract, Watson uses the simile "like those of a trained bloodhound" to describe Holmes' actions, movements and instincts. The noun "bloodhound" implies to the reader that Holmes is inhumane and has the capabilities of a specialised creature. His movements could come across as comical, as the image is drawn that he "hurried about the room on his knees". Watson uses animalistic language throughout the novella to clearly emphasise that Holmes is "positively inhuman" with his methods of deduction. He is also described to have "clear-cut hawk-like features" and "beady eyes gleaming and deep set like those of a bird". The use of similes throughout the text clearly portrays the difference in Holmes compared to people such as Athelney Jones. To both Victorian and modern day readers, Holmes is extraordinary. But to a Victorian reader, he is seen as unusual due to the contrast of his methods and himself with their current police force – one that you only needed a clean criminal record to get into, and one that didn't do a good job of keeping people safe. Furthermore, historically police men and women were "never to be entirely trusted" according to Holmes, showing the prejudice of the time that would often assess lower class men as criminals. This could relate to why Jack the Ripper was never caught. The reader, even though baffled by his unusual descriptions and methods, is interested in Holmes as his methods work, unlike Athelney Jones.

In the novella as a whole, Holmes' interesting and unusual methods cause Watson to "marvel" at them. The verb shows his admiration for Holmes, and expresses that many others felt like this too. However, at the beginning of the novella, Holmes is described to be reaching for and taking cocaine. This is also shown at the end of the novella, when Watson describes that "his long white fingers reached up for it". The verb "reached" shows that Holmes is desperate for "mental exaltation" and finds investigating a hobby as opposed to work and labour. The novella is structured in a circular way, suggesting that Holmes only changes when completing a case and working. In addition, the twelve chapters in the novella could symbolise the numbers of the clock face – at the start of the hand rotation and at the end. Holmes is seen as desperately needing cocaine, as he pleads to Watson "give me problems, give me work". This further presents Holmes as unusual to the reader, since as such a highly intelligent man, he is taking drugs that could potentially cause his mood and health to worsen. The clock could link to the fact that Holmes is very fast at solving cases, and there

is only a limited amount of time before Holmes is in need of “mental exaltation” again. This interests the reader as his work is seen to be a continuous cycle.

Further in the novella, Holmes contradicts his actions in the extract by exclaiming to Watson “sit in the corner there”. Holmes is patronising and could potentially be seen as rude towards Watson. The common switches of mood show the duality of Holmes’ character and the unusual behaviour undertaken by him. Also, Holmes shows his interesting and unusual methods of investigation when Watson explains that “Holmes’ voice broke in upon us”. Holmes shows his split character and duality by dressing up in disguise, which no other detective would do in the Victorian era. His actions show that he is obsessive and very much interested in the art of investigation. The reader, both Victorian and modern day, can deduce that Holmes’ actions are unusual and different to others.

Finally, Holmes is described by Watson as a “calculating machine”, suggesting his robotic thinking. This also links to the animalistic language, as Holmes is commonly describes using nouns that are “inhuman” rather than anything human. In addition, Holmes purely focuses his attention on certain details when looking for clues and examining information. For example, when Watson says “what a very attractive woman”, Holmes reminds Watson that he “didn’t notice”. His ability to choose and filter through certain pieces of information shows that Holmes is uninterested by anything else – the reader could think that he is unusual due to his lack of emotion and feelings.

To conclude, Holmes is portrayed as inhuman when investigating a case. His methods contrast with those of normal inspectors and policemen, making him come across as unusual and interesting, as he is out of the ordinary, especially for those in the Victorian era.