

# MR Bruff's Guide To

Arthur Conan Doyle's  
**'THE SIGN OF FOUR'**

Mr Bruff  
ONLINE REVISION



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SAMPLE

## **Part 1: Introduction**

It seems that Sherlock Holmes has never been more famous than he is today. Over a century since he first appeared, there are a multitude of television shows, films and books inspired by his adventures as well as the life of his creator, Arthur Conan Doyle. Many words uttered by this consummate detective have become sayings in their own right - "elementary my dear Watson" - and the name Sherlock has almost become a byword for someone who has a keen eye for details and observation.

In this guide, I'm going to be looking at the background to *The Sign of Four* as well as aspects of language, structure, character and genre. In addition to this, I'm going to look at a few sample exam questions and provide answers to them. I hope you find it useful!

Peter Tobin

**Mr Bruff would like to thank:**

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## Part 8: Character Analysis - Sherlock Holmes

Sherlock Holmes is a man of extremes. When we meet him at the beginning of *The Sign of Four* he is off-duty, that is, not actively on a case. This Holmes is very different to the one we see when he is in 'investigation mode'. As stated earlier, Sherlock Holmes was a drug user. Sometimes it was cocaine and sometimes morphine (a derivative of heroin). This drug use is really quite a telling insight into Holmes' character because, as Watson makes it clear he disapproves of this habit, Holmes admits that he cannot do without these drugs when he is not working.

*"My mind,' he said, 'rebels at stagnation. Give me problems, give me work, give me the most abstruse cryptogram or the most intricate analysis, and I am in my own proper atmosphere. I can dispense then with the artificial stimulants. But I abhor the dull routine of existence. I crave for mental exaltation."*

The modern conception of a workaholic - one who focuses to the detriment of all other things on work and work-related activities - would appear to fit Holmes well. He is not a balanced person. When he does not have something to occupy his mind, he turns to drugs. It would appear also that Holmes, when not working, suffers from a type of mania or depression. When Watson asks Holmes if he has any "professional inquiry on foot at present", the answer is telling as to Holmes' mental state:

*"None. Hence the cocaine. I cannot live without brain-work. What else is there to live for? Stand at the window here. Was ever such a dreary, dismal, unprofitable world? See how the yellow fog swirls down the street and drifts across the dun-coloured houses. What could be more hopelessly prosaic and material?"*

Holmes on the case and with his faculties stimulated, however, is a different person altogether. When Miss Morstan arrives to ask Holmes for help, he "rubbed his hands, and his eyes glistened." Holmes' interest in the case is further emphasised when he leans "forward in his chair with an expression of extraordinary concentration". As we can see, Holmes off-duty is a tortured soul who faces addiction and, according to Watson, has "fits of the blackest depression". This contrasts with Holmes on-duty who is attentive, engaged and able to exercise his astonishing powers of the mind.

The case or problem is the sole focus for Holmes. After Mary visits, it's clear that Watson is quite taken by her, describing her as "a very attractive woman". Holmes' response to this is very telling in that he didn't notice anything about the woman whatsoever save for the details of her case. This leads Watson to describe his friend as an "automaton - a calculating machine". This, for us, is a very helpful description. Holmes has no interest in anything outside of the case. As we learn from Watson and the pair's housekeeper - Holmes doesn't often leave their home at Baker Street unless on a case. He doesn't recognise the beauty of a young woman, only seeing her as "a mere unit - a factor in the problem".

Similarly, when engaging with members of the public, regardless of class, his manner is the same. Whatever he can do to further his investigation he does, without consideration of social norms. He works with the Baker Street Irregulars, referred to in a derogatory way as "street Arabs". He engages in deception by wearing disguises. He doesn't pay any attention whatsoever to the police or their wishes and even Watson, sometimes, falls foul of this singular mind.

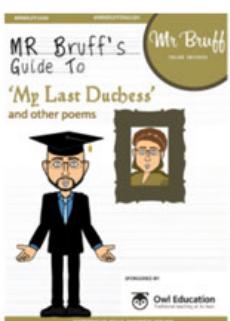
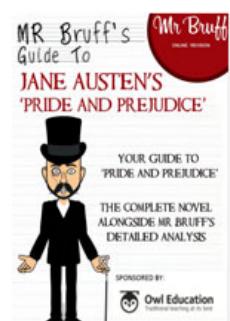
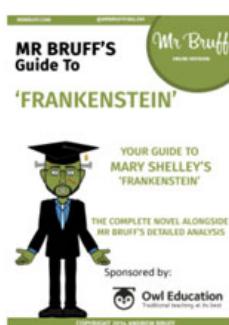
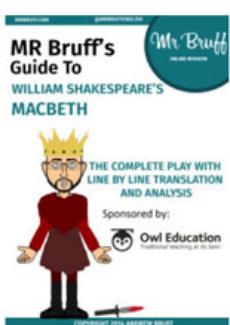
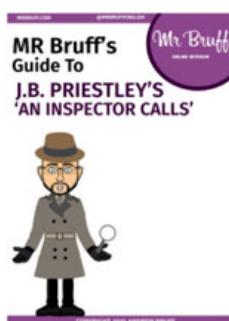
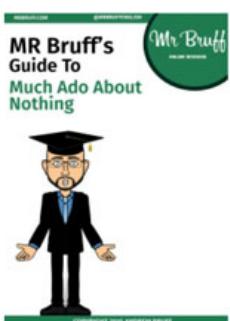
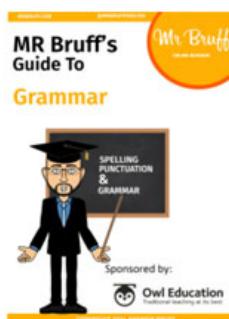
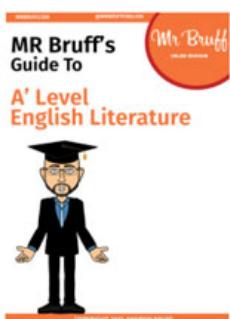
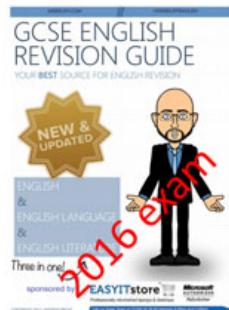
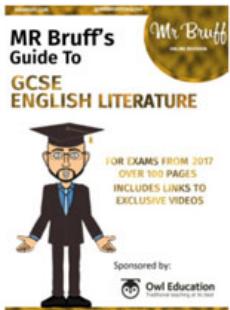
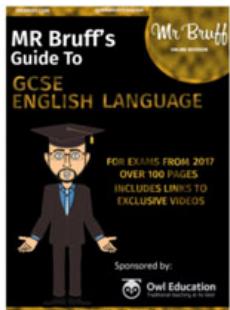
When Watson asks if Holmes has read a write-up of a previous case, Holmes says "I glanced over it ... Honestly, I cannot congratulate you upon it. Detection is, or ought to be, an exact science, and should be treated in the same cold and unemotional manner." This sort of rebuke is commonplace throughout the Sherlock Holmes stories and furthers the impression we get of a character almost devoid of human emotion and social considerations but who redeems himself and our impression of him through his astonishing feats of deduction and detection.

There is also an interesting conflict or contrast between two particular sides of Holmes. Conan Doyle presents Holmes as a character who craves the thrill of the investigation - testing himself against the seemingly impossible - but has no interest or time for the fame and publicity which go with displaying these astonishing skills. Holmes himself says that it is the "data" and pronouncing a "specialist's opinion" on a case and not the "credit" which motivates him. "My name figures in no newspaper," he says. He does it simply for "the work itself" which is his "highest reward". This is very noble but Conan Doyle may well be hinting at a mischievous side to his hero. Watson notes that "a small vanity underlay my companion's quiet and didactic manner".

Holmes often takes pains to downplay his achievements, telling Miss Morstan that his service to Mrs Forrester - the woman who recommended him to Mary - was "slight" and the case was "a very simple one". He often tells Watson that, what at first appears to be an incredible feat of deduction, is actually very simple. He is being playful here. By suggesting that he sees his talents and methods as simple, he's reinforcing his position as someone of supreme intelligence and ability - a vanity in itself.

It is clear that Holmes is a conflicted character who comes alive when there is an investigation to be carried out. He does whatever is required to further the investigation: going without sleep and food; donning disguises; engaging with people of a variety of classes and visiting a variety of places. His goal is the solution to the problem. As he admits openly, the people involved are mere units or factors and their suffering or happiness is immaterial to him. While he insists he cares not about recognition or rewards, there is a vanity to Holmes in that being defeated by a problem or a crime would be disastrous for him.

At the end of the case, when all is solved, we see Holmes come full circle and return to his initial state. "The reaction is already upon me. I shall be as limp as a rag for a week," he says to Watson at the completion of the investigation. Holmes doesn't exist in any real sense outside of these investigations. It is all he lives for.



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