

'The Sign of Four': Setting

To be completed whilst watching Mr Bruff's YouTube analysis video:

<https://youtu.be/idMzlhha3pA>

Alternatively, on YouTube, search for '*The Sign of Four*': Setting



'THE SIGN OF FOUR' ANALYSIS

- 1) Which city is the main setting for 'The Sign of Four'?
- 2) How did this city change between 1800 and 1900?
- 3) How was this city a city of contrast?
- 4) What is suggested by Holmes' knowledge of all areas of the city.
- 5) How are the police force presented in 'The Sign of Four'?
- 6) What is suggested by the fact that Watson is uncomfortable in some areas of the city?

EXTENSION QUESTION:

- a) How does Watson's description create a sense of uncertainty?

'It was a September evening, and no yet seven o' clock, but the day had been dreary one, and a dense, drizzly fog lay low upon the great city... Down the Strand the lamps were but misty splotches of diffused light which threw a feeble circular glimmer upon the slimy pavement.'

- b) 'London was a dangerous city to live in during this period.' Explain how far you agree with this statement. Refer to the text throughout your answer.

EXAM QUESTION (based on the extract on the next page):

Read the following extract from Chapter 4 of 'The Sign of Four'.

In this extract, Holmes, Watson and Mary Morston enter the home of Thaddeus Sholto.

How does Conan Doyle use the novella's settings to explore ideas about people and society?

Write about:

- how Conan Doyle presents the setting in this extract
- how Conan Doyle presents the setting in the novel as a whole. [30 marks]

We followed the Indian down a sordid and common passage, ill-lit and worse furnished, until he came to a door upon the right, which he threw open. A blaze of yellow light streamed out upon us, and in the centre of the glare there stood a small man with a very high head, a bristle of red hair all round the fringe of it, and a bald, shining scalp which shot out from among it like a mountain-peak from fir-trees. He writhed his hands together as he stood, and his features were in a perpetual jerk, now smiling, now scowling, but never for an instant in repose. Nature had given him a pendulous lip, and a too visible line of yellow and irregular teeth, which he strove feebly to conceal by constantly passing his hand over the lower part of his face. In spite of his obtrusive baldness, he gave the impression of youth. In point of fact he had just turned his thirtieth year.

“Your servant, Miss Morstan,” he kept repeating, in a thin, high voice. “Your servant, gentlemen. Pray step into my little sanctum. A small place, miss, but furnished to my own liking. An oasis of art in the howling desert of South London.”

We were all astonished by the appearance of the apartment into which he invited us. In that sorry house it looked as out of place as a diamond of the first water in a setting of brass. The richest and glossiest of curtains and tapestries draped the walls, looped back here and there to expose some richly-mounted painting or Oriental vase. The carpet was of amber-and-black, so soft and so thick that the foot sank pleasantly into it, as into a bed of moss. Two great tiger-skins thrown athwart it increased the suggestion of Eastern luxury, as did a huge hookah which stood upon a mat in the corner. A lamp in the fashion of a silver dove was hung from an almost invisible golden wire in the centre of the room. As it burned it filled the air with a subtle and aromatic odour.

“Mr. Thaddeus Sholto,” said the little man, still jerking and smiling. “That is my name. You are Miss Morstan, of course. And these gentlemen—”

“This is Mr. Sherlock Holmes, and this is Dr. Watson.”

'The Sign of Four': Context

To be completed whilst watching Mr Bruff's YouTube analysis video:

<https://youtu.be/VhO58isrAqo>

Alternatively, on YouTube, search for '*The Sign of Four*': Context



'THE SIGN OF FOUR'

A N A L Y S I S

1. What did Queen Victoria say about the police force?
2. What did Sir Robert Peel set up in 1829.
3. Why did the police force recruit from the lower classes?
4. How did the police have a fixed mindset towards criminals?
5. Which new detective technique was invented in the 1800s and also features in 'The Sign of Four'?
6. Why was 'the fear of the other' so prevalent in Victorian London?
7. What happened in 1857 in India? How does this link to events in 'The Sign of Four'?
8. How does a modern reader react to Holmes' drug use? How would a Victorian reader react?

EXTENSION QUESTIONS:

- a) How does Conan Doyle tap into the fears of Victorian England to create tension in 'The Sign of Four'?
- b) How important is it that 'The Sign of Four' is set in London? Would another city have worked just as well?

EXAM QUESTION (based on the extract on the next page):

Read the following extract from Chapter 6 of 'The Sign of Four'.

In this extract the police detective, Mr. Athelney Jones, arrives at the scene of Bartholomew Sholto's death.

Starting with this extract, explore how Conan Doyle presents the police in 'The Sign of Four'.

Write about:

- how Conan Doyle presents the police in this extract
- how Conan Doyle presents the police in the novel as a whole. **[30 marks]**

As he spoke, the steps which had been coming nearer sounded loudly on the passage, and a very stout, portly man in a grey suit strode heavily into the room. He was red-faced, burly and plethoric, with a pair of very small twinkling eyes which looked keenly out from between swollen and puffy pouches. He was closely followed by an inspector in uniform, and by the still palpitating Thaddeus Sholto.

"Here's a business!" he cried, in a muffled, husky voice. "Here's a pretty business! But who are all these? Why, the house seems to be as full as a rabbit-warren!"

"I think you must recollect me, Mr. Athelney Jones," said Holmes, quietly.

"Why, of course I do!" he wheezed. "It's Mr. Sherlock Holmes, the theorist. Remember you! I'll never forget how you lectured us all on causes and inferences and effects in the Bishopgate jewel case. It's true you set us on the right track; but you'll own now that it was more by good luck than good guidance."

"It was a piece of very simple reasoning."

"Oh, come, now, come! Never be ashamed to own up. But what is all this? Bad business! Bad business! Stern facts here,—no room for theories. How lucky that I happened to be out at Norwood over another case! I was at the station when the message arrived. What d'you think the man died of?"

"Oh, this is hardly a case for me to theorise over," said Holmes, dryly.

"No, no. Still, we can't deny that you hit the nail on the head sometimes. Dear me! Door locked, I understand. Jewels worth half a million missing. How was the window?"

"Fastened; but there are steps on the sill."

"Well, well, if it was fastened the steps could have nothing to do with the matter. That's common sense. Man might have died in a fit; but then the jewels are missing. Ha! I have a theory. These flashes come upon me at times.—Just step outside, sergeant, and you, Mr. Sholto. Your friend can remain.—What do you think of this, Holmes? Sholto was, on his own confession, with his brother last night. The brother died in a fit, on which Sholto walked off with the treasure. How's that?"

"On which the dead man very considerably got up and locked the door on the inside."

"Hum! There's a flaw there. Let us apply common sense to the matter. This Thaddeus Sholto *was* with his brother; there *was* a quarrel; so much we know. The brother is dead and the jewels are gone. So much also we know. No one saw the brother from the time Thaddeus left him. His bed had not been slept in. Thaddeus is evidently in a most disturbed state of mind. His appearance is—well, not attractive. You see that I am weaving my web round Thaddeus. The net begins to close upon him."

"You are not quite in possession of the facts yet," said Holmes. "This splinter of wood, which I have every reason to believe to be poisoned, was in the man's scalp where you still see the mark; this card, inscribed as you see it, was on the table; and beside it lay this rather curious stone-headed instrument. How does all that fit into your theory?"

"Confirms it in every respect," said the fat detective, pompously. "House is full of Indian curiosities. Thaddeus brought this up, and if this splinter be poisonous Thaddeus may as well have made murderous use of it as any other man. The card is some hocus-pocus,—a blind, as like as not. The only question is, how did he depart? Ah, of course, here is a hole in the roof." With great activity, considering his bulk, he sprang up the steps and squeezed through into the garret, and immediately afterwards we heard his exulting voice proclaiming that he had found the trap-door.

'The Sign of Four': Structure

To be completed whilst watching Mr Bruff's YouTube analysis video:

<https://youtu.be/MlhN87iNwPg>

Alternatively, on YouTube, search for 'Structure Analysis: 'The Sign of Four' (plus my dog barking)'



'THE SIGN OF FOUR' ANALYSIS

- 1) What is meant by the term 'structure'?
- 2) Copy out Freytag's pyramid, adding both the key definitions and examples from 'The Sign of Four' (presented at 2:10 and 2:25 in the video).
- 3) How does Conan Doyle use structure to create suspense and tension when Holmes, Watson and their entourage arrive at Bartholomew Sholto's estate?

EXTENSION QUESTIONS:

- a) How does an understanding of Freytag's pyramid increase the reader's enjoyment of 'The Sign of Four'?
- b) Apart from the example in question 3, where does Conan Doyle use structure to create suspense and tension? Refer to the text in your answer.

EXAM QUESTION (based on the extract on the next page):

Read the following extract from Chapter 2 of 'The Sign of Four'.

In this extract, Holmes and Watson meet Mary Morston.

Starting with this extract, explore how Conan Doyle presents the ways male characters treat Mary Morston.

Write about:

- How Mary Morston is treated in this extract
- How Mary Morston is treated in the novel as a whole. **[30 marks]**

Miss Morstan entered the room with a firm step and an outward composure of manner. She was a blonde young lady, small, dainty, well gloved, and dressed in the most perfect taste. There was, however, a plainness and simplicity about her costume which bore with it a suggestion of limited means. The dress was a sombre greyish beige, untrimmed and unbraided, and she wore a small turban of the same dull hue, relieved only by a suspicion of white feather in the side. Her face had neither regularity of feature nor beauty of complexion, but her expression was sweet and amiable, and her large blue eyes were singularly spiritual and sympathetic. In an experience of women which extends over many nations and three separate continents, I have never looked upon a face which gave a clearer promise of a refined and sensitive nature. I could not but observe that as she took the seat which Sherlock Holmes placed for her, her lip trembled, her hand quivered, and she showed every sign of intense inward agitation.

"I have come to you, Mr. Holmes," she said, "because you once enabled my employer, Mrs. Cecil Forrester, to unravel a little domestic complication. She was much impressed by your kindness and skill."

"Mrs. Cecil Forrester," he repeated thoughtfully. "I believe that I was of some slight service to her. The case, however, as I remember it, was a very simple one."

"She did not think so. But at least you cannot say the same of mine. I can hardly imagine anything more strange, more utterly inexplicable, than the situation in which I find myself."

Holmes rubbed his hands, and his eyes glistened. He leaned forward in his chair with an expression of extraordinary concentration upon his clear-cut, hawklike features. "State your case," said he, in brisk, business tones.

I felt that my position was an embarrassing one. "You will, I am sure, excuse me," I said, rising from my chair.

To my surprise, the young lady held up her gloved hand to detain me. "If your friend," she said, "would be good enough to stop, he might be of inestimable service to me."

I relapsed into my chair.

"Briefly," she continued, "the facts are these. My father was an officer in an Indian regiment who sent me home when I was quite a child. My mother was dead, and I had no relative in England. I was placed, however, in a comfortable boarding establishment at Edinburgh, and there I remained until I was seventeen years of age. In the year 1878 my father, who was senior captain of his regiment, obtained twelve months' leave and came home. He telegraphed to me from London that he had arrived all safe, and directed me to come down at once, giving the Langham Hotel as his address. His message, as I remember, was full of kindness and love. On reaching London I drove to the Langham, and was informed that Captain Morstan was staying there, but that he had gone out the night before and had not yet returned. I waited all day without news of him. That night, on the advice of the manager of the hotel, I communicated with the police, and next morning we advertised in all the papers. Our inquiries led to no result; and from that day to this no word has ever been heard of my unfortunate father. He came home with his heart full of hope, to find some peace, some comfort, and instead—" She put her hand to her throat, and a choking sob cut short the sentence.

"The date?" asked Holmes, opening his note-book.

"He disappeared upon the 3rd of December, 1878,—nearly ten years ago."

"His luggage?"

"Remained at the hotel. There was nothing in it to suggest a clue,—some clothes, some books, and a considerable number of curiosities from the Andaman Islands. He had been one of the officers in charge of the convict-guard there."

'The Sign of Four': Sherlock Holmes Character Analysis

To be completed whilst watching Mr Bruff's YouTube analysis video:

https://youtu.be/41mXYO_U9ZM

Alternatively, on YouTube, search for 'Sherlock Holmes Character Analysis: 'The Sign of Four''



'THE SIGN OF FOUR' ANALYSIS

- 1) How is Holmes a workaholic?
- 2) What do we learn about Holmes when Miss Morstan arrives?
- 3) How do Holmes and Watson react differently to Miss Morstan? What does this reveal about each character?
- 4) How is Holmes presented as being devoid of human emotion?
- 5) Holmes often takes pains to downplay his achievements. What does this suggest about his character?

EXTENSION QUESTIONS:

- a) 'Holmes is not a balanced person'. How far do you agree with this statement? Refer to the text in your answer.
- b) How do Holmes and Watson differ? Refer to the text in your answer.

EXAM QUESTION (based on the extract on the next page):

Read the following extract from Chapter 1 of 'The Sign of Four'.

In this extract, Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson are introduced.

Starting with this extract, explore how Conan Doyle presents Holmes as a complex character in 'The Sign of Four'.

Write about:

- How Sherlock Holmes is presented in this extract
- How Sherlock Holmes is presented in the novel as a whole. [30 marks]

Sherlock Holmes took his bottle from the corner of the mantel-piece and his hypodermic syringe from its neat morocco case. With his long, white, nervous fingers he adjusted the delicate needle, and rolled back his left shirt-cuff. For some little time his eyes rested thoughtfully upon the sinewy forearm and wrist all dotted and scarred with innumerable puncture-marks. Finally he thrust the sharp point home, pressed down the tiny piston, and sank back into the velvet-lined arm-chair with a long sigh of satisfaction.

Three times a day for many months I had witnessed this performance, but custom had not reconciled my mind to it. On the contrary, from day to day I had become more irritable at the sight, and my conscience swelled nightly within me at the thought that I had lacked the courage to protest. Again and again I had registered a vow that I should deliver my soul upon the subject, but there was that in the cool, nonchalant air of my companion which made him the last man with whom one would care to take anything approaching to a liberty. His great powers, his masterly manner, and the experience which I had had of his many extraordinary qualities, all made me diffident and backward in crossing him.

Yet upon that afternoon, whether it was the Beaune which I had taken with my lunch, or the additional exasperation produced by the extreme deliberation of his manner, I suddenly felt that I could hold out no longer.

“Which is it to-day?” I asked,—“morphine or cocaine?”

He raised his eyes languidly from the old black-letter volume which he had opened. “It is cocaine,” he said,—“a seven-per-cent. solution. Would you care to try it?”

“No, indeed,” I answered, brusquely. “My constitution has not got over the Afghan campaign yet. I cannot afford to throw any extra strain upon it.”

He smiled at my vehemence. “Perhaps you are right, Watson,” he said. “I suppose that its influence is physically a bad one. I find it, however, so transcendently stimulating and clarifying to the mind that its secondary action is a matter of small moment.”

“But consider!” I said, earnestly. “Count the cost! Your brain may, as you say, be roused and excited, but it is a pathological and morbid process, which involves increased tissue-change and may at last leave a permanent weakness. You know, too, what a black reaction comes upon you. Surely the game is hardly worth the candle. Why should you, for a mere passing pleasure, risk the loss of those great powers with which you have been endowed? Remember that I speak not only as one comrade to another, but as a medical man to one for whose constitution he is to some extent answerable.”

He did not seem offended. On the contrary, he put his finger-tips together and leaned his elbows on the arms of his chair, like one who has a relish for conversation.

“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 artificial stimulants. But I abhor the dull routine of existence. I crave for mental exaltation. That is why I have chosen my own particular profession,—or rather created it, for I am the only one in the world.”

'The Sign of Four': Genre

To be completed whilst watching Mr Bruff's YouTube analysis video:

<https://youtu.be/xIAm0kJuISw>

Alternatively, on YouTube, search for '*The Sign of Four*': Genre Analysis



'THE SIGN OF FOUR' ANALYSIS

- 1) Who is widely credited as being the creator of detective fiction in the West?
- 2) Complete the sentence: In the Sherlock Holmes story there is the constant tension between Holmes and _____.
- 3) How is Holmes presented in 'The Sign of Four'?
- 4) List the three basic generic conventions of detective fiction.
- 5) List the three generic conventions of detective fiction specific to Victorian literature.

EXTENSION QUESTIONS:

- a) How is Holmes presented as being intriguing to the reader?
- b) How does 'The Sign of Four' focus on the exotic?

EXAM QUESTION (based on the extract on the next page):

Read the following extract from Chapter 10 of 'The Sign of Four'.

In this extract, Holmes, Watson and Jones chase Jonathan Small and the islander by boat.

What ideas about society is Conan Doyle suggesting in this extract?

Write about:

- Ideas about society Conan Doyle presents in this extract
- Ideas about society Conan Doyle presents in the novel as a whole. **[30 marks]**

At that moment, however, as our evil fate would have it, a tug with three barges in tow blundered in between us. It was only by putting our helm hard down that we avoided a collision, and before we could round them and recover our way the *Aurora* had gained a good two hundred yards. She was still, however, well in view, and the murky uncertain twilight was setting into a clear starlit night. Our boilers were strained to their utmost, and the frail shell vibrated and creaked with the fierce energy which was driving us along. We had shot through the Pool, past the West India Docks, down the long Deptford Reach, and up again after rounding the Isle of Dogs. The dull blur in front of us resolved itself now clearly enough into the dainty *Aurora*. Jones turned our search-light upon her, so that we could plainly see the figures upon her deck. One man sat by the stern, with something black between his knees over which he stooped. Beside him lay a dark mass which looked like a Newfoundland dog. The boy held the tiller, while against the red glare of the furnace I could see old Smith, stripped to the waist, and shovelling coals for dear life. They may have had some doubt at first as to whether we were really pursuing them, but now as we followed every winding and turning which they took there could no longer be any question about it. At Greenwich we were about three hundred paces behind them. At Blackwall we could not have been more than two hundred and fifty. I have coursed many creatures in many countries during my checkered career, but never did sport give me such a wild thrill as this mad, flying man-hunt down the Thames. Steadily we drew in upon them, yard by yard. In the silence of the night we could hear the panting and clanking of their machinery. The man in the stern still crouched upon the deck, and his arms were moving as though he were busy, while every now and then he would look up and measure with a glance the distance which still separated us. Nearer we came and nearer. Jones yelled to them to stop. We were not more than four boat's lengths behind them, both boats flying at a tremendous pace. It was a clear reach of the river, with Barking Level upon one side and the melancholy Plumstead Marshes upon the other. At our hail the man in the stern sprang up from the deck and shook his two clinched fists at us, cursing the while in a high, cracked voice. He was a good-sized, powerful man, and as he stood poising himself with legs astride I could see that from the thigh downwards there was but a wooden stump upon the right side. At the sound of his strident, angry cries there was movement in the huddled bundle upon the deck. It straightened itself into a little black man—the smallest I have ever seen—with a great, misshapen head and a shock of tangled, dishevelled hair. Holmes had already drawn his revolver, and I whipped out mine at the sight of this savage, distorted creature. He was wrapped in some sort of dark ulster or blanket, which left only his face exposed; but that face was enough to give a man a sleepless night. Never have I seen features so deeply marked with all bestiality and cruelty. His small eyes glowed and burned with a sombre light, and his thick lips were writhed back from his teeth, which grinned and chattered at us with a half animal fury.

“Fire if he raises his hand,” said Holmes, quietly. We were within a boat's-length by this time, and almost within touch of our quarry. I can see the two of them now as they stood, the white man with his legs far apart, shrieking out curses, and the unhallowed dwarf with his hideous face, and his strong yellow teeth gnashing at us in the light of our lantern.