



The SIGN of FOUR KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER

Context – *The Sign of Four* was written by Arthur Conan Doyle and was published in 1890.

Arthur Conan Doyle – Sir Arthur Ignatius Conan Doyle (1859–1930) was British writer, who is best known for his Sherlock Holmes detective fiction texts. He was originally a physician, before he published *A Study in Scarlet* in 1887, the first of four novels (and also over 50 short stories) about Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson. *The Sign of Four* was first published in *Lippincott's Magazine* in February 1890.



The Victorian Era – The Victorian era describes the period in which Queen Victoria sat on the English throne – between 1837 and 1901. Whilst this was a time of industrial revolution, it was also an extremely harsh time to live, and the differences between the lives of the richest and the poorest were exacerbated. The Victorian era was a period of great change. In this time, the population of England doubled – from 16.8 million 1851 to over 30 million in 1901. Conan Doyle lived throughout most of Victoria's reign, and *The Sign of Four* is also set in the Victorian era.



Colonialism – From the 16th to 20th centuries, many European countries sought to colonise other nations. The British Empire, at its height, it was the largest empire in history and, for over a century, was the foremost global power. By 1913, the British Empire held sway over 412 million people, 23% of the world population at the time, and by 1920, it covered 35,500,000 km² (13,700,000 sq. mi), 24% of the Earth's total land area. Many Britons lived, worked, or served prison time in the British colonies.



The Jack the Ripper Murders – Jack the Ripper was the best-known name for a serial killer that remained unidentified and uncaptured in the impoverished areas around Whitechapel in London in 1888. At least 5 murders took place on women, who all had their throats cut and were mutilated. The sensationalised nature of reporting on the murders created a huge wave of public interest in the case.



Attitudes towards the Police – In Victorian London, areas of deprivation were directly next to neighbourhoods of the gentry, where there was a great deal of wealth. In an attempt to tackle any issues that this may have created and maintain the peace, the police force were employed. Policing was seen to be 'an attack on liberty', and also many were perceived to be corrupt and power-hungry. Their bumbling of famous cases (e.g. Jack the Ripper) only added to the mistrust. For these reasons, the representations of police at the time are often derogatory.



Racism – Rapid improvements in travel times (and also the effects of colonialism) meant that different cultures and races were being introduced to one another more than ever before. The prevalent viewpoint of those from the imposing European countries was that other races were in some way subhuman and should be treated as inferior to themselves. Racism extended to declaring that those from the colonies were inherently savage, and that they were less intelligent than Caucasian races.



Main Characters – Consider what Doyle intended through his characterisation of each of the below...

Sherlock Holmes – Sherlock Holmes is an incredibly sharp-minded, methodical, and perceptive private detective, who functions as the lead protagonist in the novel. He seems to be able to deduce things that others don't even notice, and has an incredible range of knowledge. This being said, he is socially and emotionally cold, and in the opening chapter is revealed to be a recreational drug user.

Quote: "My mind," he said, "rebels at stagnation. Give me problems"

Mary Morstan – Mary Morstan brings the case to Holmes and Watson's attention. She is described as being blonde, with pale skin, and Watson notes that she has 'perfect taste.' Watson also infers that she is 27 years old. Before visiting Holmes and Watson, she had spent many years searching for her father, who is revealed by Sholto to be dead. At the end of the text, she is engaged to Watson.

Quote: "...entered the room with a firm step and an outward composure."

Athelney Jones – A lead detective with the local police, Jones is described as being a 'stout man', 'red faced' and 'burly.' Despite his own appearance he is highly judgmental of the appearance of others – blaming Thaddeus for the murders on partially on account of the fact that he is 'not attractive.' Although well-meaning, Jones is portrayed as bumbling and slow, a widely held view of the police at the time. In the end, Jones takes Holmes' credit for solving the case.

Quote: 'Oh come now, come...Bad business! Bad business!'

Dr Watson – John Watson is Holmes' partner and his roommate. He is also the narrator of the adventure. Watson was once a doctor in the army, where he got a bullet in the leg, which now impedes his movement. Watson himself is an extremely clever man, however Holmes' superb observation skills can make him look relatively slow. Watson, however, is a more social and empathetic character.

Quote: "I should have had more faith in your marvellous faculty."

Jonathan Small/ Tonga – Jonathan Small and Tonga are the lead antagonists in the text, who steal the treasure. Small has a wooden leg, which he attained in an accident involving a crocodile. He was one of the 'four' who obtained the treasure, but was betrayed by Major Sholto. Tonga is a small, violent man native to the Andaman Islands who is devoted to Small. He murders Bartholomew Sholto.

Quote: "I am a Worcestershire man myself,—born near Pershore."

Thaddeus Sholto – Thaddeus Sholto is the son of Major Sholto and the brother of Major Sholto. He is described as being a 'small man' with a bristle of red hair' around a 'bald, shining scalp.' He also has a 'perpetual jerk' and a 'pendulous lip', with 'a too visible line of yellow and irregular teeth.' Despite this he is not an old man, only just past his 'thirtieth year.' One of the benefactors of the treasure, he contacts Mary as he feels that she has been 'done a great wrong.'

Quote: "We can settle everything satisfactorily among ourselves."

Chapter-by-Chapter Summary – Alongside key quotations from each scene.

I. The Science of Deduction

Sherlock Holmes and Watson are at Holmes' Baker Street dwelling, and Holmes is injecting himself with cocaine. Watson laments him for this, however, Holmes explains that he uses because he hates having an idle mind. He then takes joy in deducing what Watson has been doing that morning from minute details, astonishing Watson. Mary Morstan is then shown into the room, bringing a new case: Ten years previously, her father, an officer in the Indian Regiment, was given 12 months leave. She was told that arrived safe in London, but went out that evening and did not return. Four years later, a note in the newspaper appeared for her to give her address. Each year since, she has received in the post a 'lustrous pearl' of some value. That morning she received a letter to say that she has 'been done a great wrong' and suggests a meeting that evening. Holmes takes the case.

"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."



II. The Statement of the Case

III. In Quest of a Solution

IV. The Story of a Bald-Headed Man

Holmes, Watson, and Mary are taken in a dark carriage to a strange house, where they meet an eccentric man named Thaddeus Sholto. He reveals that Mary's father has died, and that she is a partial heir to a vast hidden treasure. Thaddeus goes on to explain that his father lived in fear of men with wooden legs. On his deathbed, he had revealed to his two sons about the existence of a great treasure, but before he could say where it was, the face of a man appeared at the window and he died of a heart attack. The next day he had a note on him, stating 'The Sign of Four.' Thaddeus' brother Bartholomew found the treasure in an attic. Their father had made them swear they would share it with Mary.

"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."



V. The Tragedy of Pondicherry Lodge

VI. Sherlock Holmes Gives a Demonstration

Holmes, Watson, Sholto, and Mary go to Pondicherry Lodge (Bartholomew's estate) to divide up the treasure three ways. However, when they get there, the housekeeper expresses her worry about Bartholomew, who has not emerged from his room all day. Holmes and Watson peer through the door and see Bartholomew (dead) with an unnatural grin on his face. Upon entering, they find a poisoned thorn in his neck. Holmes concludes that two people, one of whom had a wooden leg, committed the crime. The other was a particularly small man, who Holmes finds fascinating. Athelney Jones, the police detective, shows up, and makes some false assumptions about the case, believing Thaddeus to be guilty. Holmes assures him that he will clear his name.

"Oh, indeed! You did notice it, then?" He seemed a little crestfallen at the discovery. "Well, whoever noticed it, it shows how our gentleman got away. Inspector!"



VII. The Episode of the Barrel

VIII. The Baker Street Irregulars

One of Holmes' deductions had revealed that the wooden-legged man had stepped in creosote during his escape. Holmes and Watson choose to follow up on this lead, borrowing a dog to follow the scent. After a wrong turn and some back-tracking, the scent leads them to the edge of the River Thames, where Holmes deduces that they must have hired a boat. Over the next few days, Holmes employs the 'Baker Street Irregulars' (a gang of street urchins) to search every avenue of the river for the boat. These efforts fail, which at first leaves Holmes in something of a quandary, until he has an idea.

"As he spoke, there came a swift pattering of naked feet upon the stairs, a clatter of high voices, and in rushed a dozen dirty and ragged little street-Arabs"



IX. A Break in the Chain

X. The End of the Islander

Holmes, in disguise, makes a search for the boat himself, and manages to find out that the boat they have been looking for (the Aurora – an exceptionally speedy boat) has been craftily camouflaged to avoid detection. Holmes hatches a plan to capture the Aurora and hence the men suspected of the murder. That night, Holmes, Watson and several officers pursue the Aurora in a police barge. The boat is extremely quick. However, after some time, they overtake the boat, which has a wooden-legged captain and a tiny pygmy native from the Andaman Islands (his name is Tonga). As they pursue the boat, Holmes and Watson are nearly struck by one of Tonga's poison darts, before they open fire on the islander themselves, who is shot dead into the Thames. The Aurora runs aground and the wooden-legged man becomes trapped in the mud. He is then captured. Watson, examining the poison dart with Holmes, feels sick at how close they came to death.

"He whirled round, threw up his arms, and with a kind of choking cough fell sideways into the stream. I caught one glimpse of his venomous, menacing eyes amid the white swirl of the waters."



XI. The Great Agra Treasure

XII. The Story of Jonathan Small

The wooden-legged man, whose name is Jonathan Small, is brought back to Baker Street, along with an iron box, which was found on the Aurora with him. Captain Small then tells the story of the Agra treasure, which he became involved in when he was a gatekeeper on a fortress in India. He was approached by his fellow guards (Sikh men) who offered him a share in a great fortune should he help them murder the man who held it. This they did. They then hid the treasure, but were arrested for the murder of the man. Small was sent to a penal colony on the Andaman Islands, where he befriended Tonga. Small bribed two of the guards (Mary's father and Sholto's father) to help him escape, in exchange for a share of the treasure. After some time, it emerged that Sholto had betrayed Small, and so Small escaped with Tonga. After many years, he tracked Sholto down (just before he died) and affixed the note. When he returned to the Sholto estate, Tonga killed Bartholomew (to Small's dismay) and the two stole the treasure. In the chase, he threw it in river, and thus the chest is empty. This ends the case. Watson, who has come to love Mary, proposes to her.

"Twenty long years in that fever-ridden swamp, all day at work under the mangrove-tree, all night chained up in the filthy convict-huts, bitten by mosquitoes, racked with ague, bullied by every cursed black-faced policeman who loved to take it out of a white man."



Themes – A theme is an idea or message that runs throughout a text.

Appearances – In *The Sign of Four*, appearances are shown to be deceiving. Thaddeus Sholto, as a man that is 'not attractive' becomes Athelney Jones' prime suspect, however he is proven to be entirely innocent. Likewise, Holmes pounces upon details that are appear seemingly innocuous, yet are of huge importance, such as the 'Sign of Four' letter.



Racism – The character of Tonga reflects prevailing attitudes of the time. As a native of the Andaman Islands (where there were penal colonies back in Doyle's time) Tonga is described as 'animalistic' and a 'savage.' He is the one character in the whole text who does not seem to possess a shred of human morals. This is in keeping with how cultural 'others' were depicted by Europeans in Doyle's era.

Wealth – The text highlights how destructive the pursuit of wealth can be –the Agra treasure negatively impacts on just about all of the characters who desire it. It ends the lives of Small and Tonga, for example. Furthermore, the treasure creates a 'romantic conflict' for Watson, as he feels that he cannot ask for Mary's hand in marriage in case it is assumed that he is after her money.



Modesty – Modesty and Humbleness are presented as extremely positive traits throughout the novel. Those who do not seek material or societal gain are portrayed in a positive light by Doyle. For example, Watson and Morstan emerge from the text as happy and content fiancées, a reward for having little interest in the treasure, whilst Holmes maintains respect by allowing Jones the credit for the capture.

Doyle's Language Devices

Pathetic Fallacy

'Mud-coloured clouds drooped sadly over the muddy streets'

Metaphors

'Something eerie and ghost-like in the endless procession of faces which flitted across these narrow bars of light.'

Alliteration

'day had been a dreary one, and a dense drizzly fog lay low'

Varied Verbs

'they flitted from the gloom into the light, and so back into the gloom once more'

Features of the Detective Novel

A rational and intelligent detective
Sherlock Holmes has wide knowledge and a talent for deduction, e.g. in the opening chapter when he makes deductions about Watson.

A companion for the detective
Watson, whilst a very clever man himself (he is a doctor) looks astonished at Holmes' work, thus adding to the aura surrounding Holmes.

Clues to the Solution
The readers enjoy these as a puzzle and so maintain their engagement – examples are the poison dart, the pearls in the post, and the footprints.