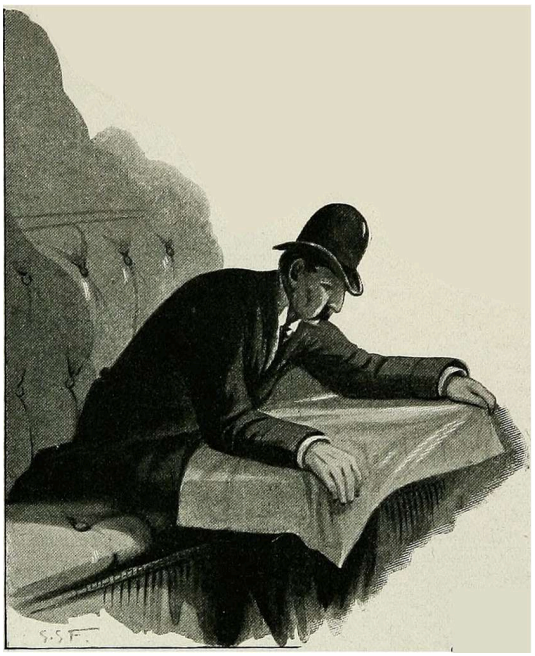
AQA English Literature GCSE

The Sign of Four: Overview and Key Scenes

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Overview and Key Scenes



Key Characters

Detectives

- **Sherlock Holmes** – The **principal protagonist** and detective. He **symbolises** rationality, but also demonstrates the **limits of pure reason** through his **loneliness** and addictive tendencies.

- **Inspector Athelney Jones** – A police inspector who highlights the inefficiency of the police in contrast to Holmes.

Romantic Subplot

- **Dr John Watson** – Holmes' closest friend, a former army doctor and the **narrator**. He is arguably Holmes' **foil**, **symbolising emotions** and acting as the **moral compass**.

- **Mary Morstan** – Holmes' client who **is emblematic** of purity. Whilst her gentle nature conforms to **Victorian ideals of femininity**, her tenacity in pursuing the truth demonstrates her courage and challenges **contemporary views** that women were intellectually inferior to men.

Major Characters Connected to the Mystery

- **Captain Arthur Morstan** – Mary's father and a senior captain of the Indian regiment. His disappearance is the **catalyst** for the action.

- **Jonathan Small** – The main **antagonist and antihero** whose confession forms the **frame narrative** in the **resolution.** He is **morally ambiguous**, eliciting both sympathy and disdain from readers.

- **Tonga** – Jonathan Small's companion from the Andaman Islands. He represents the colonial **"other"** and reflects **contemporary** attitudes towards non–European people.

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The Sholtos

- **Major Sholto** – A former army officer under Captain Morstan in India. He stole the Agra treasure and represents the **corruptive nature of imperial wealth**.
- **Thaddeus Sholto** – Major Sholto's twin son. Arguably, he tries to make amends for his father's criminal act of theft.
- **Bartholomew Sholto** – Thaddeus' twin brother whose greed **mirrors** his father's, and ultimately results in his demise.

Chapter Overview

Chapter	Summary	Freytag's Pyramid Structure
1	• Doyle introduces us to Holmes and Watson. • We learn of Holmes' cocaine use and exceptional talent for detection.	**Exposition**
2	• We meet Mary when she consults Holmes regarding her receipt of a letter and pearls from an anonymous sender and her father's disappearance, forming the **inciting incident**. • Watson starts to feel affection towards Mary, introducing the **romantic subplot**.	**Exposition**
3	• Holmes, Mary and Watson investigate the **mystery** regarding Mary's father, Captain Morstan.	**Rising Action**
4	• We are introduced to Thaddeus, who explains Captain Morstan's connection to Major Sholto and the Agra treasure.	**Rising Action**
5	• Holmes, Watson and Mary travel to Pondicherry Lodge and find Bartholomew dead.	**Rising Action**
6	• Holmes investigates the crime scene to determine who is responsible for Bartholomew's death.	**Rising Action**
7	• Holmes follows the clues and identifies Small as a prime suspect.	**Rising Action**
8	• Holmes directs the Baker Street Irregulars to gather information about *The Aurora.*	**Rising Action**
9	• Holmes temporarily loses the trail of Small, but the Baker Street Irregulars continue the search.	**Rising Action**

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10	• Holmes and Watson chase Small and Tonga along the River Thames. Tonga tries to shoot at Holmes and Watson, but is shot and killed.	**Climax**
11	• Small is in custody and informs Holmes and Watson that the Agra treasure was thrown into the Thames.	**Falling Action**
12	• Small recounts the history of the Agra treasure, the formation of The Sign of Four, and Major Sholto's greed. • The **novella** ends with Watson proposing to Mary.	**Denouement/ Resolution**

Key Scenes



Scene 1 – Mary Morstan Presents the Details of the Case (Chapter 2)

This scene is significant because it establishes the **central mystery** regarding Captain Morstan's disappearance and Mary's receipt of anonymous pearls. Doyle sows the seeds for the **romantic subplot** between Mary and Watson, and **contrasts** Holmes' rationality with Watson's ability to feel.

- ***"Outward composure"*** – The use of the **adjective *"outward"*** may emphasise how Mary's composure is performative and superficial. Doyle introduces the theme of **appearance versus reality**, which is a **motif** in the **novella**, **foreshadowing** how the reader's first impressions of characters are not always accurate.

- ***"Her lip trembled, her hand quivered, and she showed every sign of intense inward agitation"*** – Doyle **juxtaposes** Mary's ***"outward composure"*** with ***"inward agitation",*** reinforcing the theme of **duality**. The **verbs *"trembled"*** and ***"quivered"*** demonstrate Mary's vulnerability, evoking **sympathy**. Nevertheless, her ***"outward composure"*** reflects how Mary adheres to the **stereotype of the ideal Victorian** woman.

- Mary's letter includes the message: ***"you are a wronged woman and shall have justice".*** Doyle's use of the **noun *"justice"*** **alludes** to one of the key themes in the **novella, foreshadowing** Major Sholto's betrayal and the **moral corruption** regarding the Agra treasure. The letter is arguably a **catalyst** for the events to follow.

Scene 2 – Meeting Thaddeus (Chapter 4)

Doyle introduces the reader to the Sholtos and alludes to the **moral corruption** surrounding the Agra treasure.

- ***"Now smiling, now scowling"*** – Doyle's **repetition** of the **adverb** ***"now"*** emphasises Thaddeus' unpredictable nature, and how his facial expressions are rapidly changing. The **contrast** of ***"smiling"*** and ***"scowling"*** again taps into the theme of **duality**, depicting Thaddeus as possibly untrustworthy. Doyle unveils how appearances can be deceiving: despite Thaddeus' unconventional appearance, he is one of the more virtuous characters in the **novella**.

- ***"As out of place as a diamond of the first water in a setting of brass"*** – Doyle employs the **simile** to reflect Thaddeus' **nouveau riche** status where he is ***"out of place"***. Although Thaddeus inherited his father's wealth, this wealth was built on **corruption**. Doyle underscores how those who acquire wealth respect the manners and respectability of those with **generational wealth**.

Scene 3 – Discovering Bartholomew's Body (Chapter 5)

This scene introduces the **central murder mystery,** develops Watson's relationship with Mary and draws on **Gothic tropes**.

- ***"Pondicherry Lodge stood in its own grounds"*** – Doyle's use of the **verb** ***"stood"*** **personifies** Pondicherry Lodge, tapping into the **Gothic sublime** where vastness elicits awe or terror. Doyle presents Pondicherry Lodge as a character itself, and arguably **symbolises** the Sholto family's dark secrets and how **moral corruption** is embedded in the house itself

- ***"The shrill, broken whimpering of a frightened woman"*** – The image of a woman screaming conforms to **Gothic tropes of a damsel in distress**. Doyle's use of the **auditory imagery**, implies that something ominous has occurred before the details are revealed, heightening the **tension**.

- ***"Our hands instinctively sought for each other"*** – Doyle develops the **romantic subplot** between Watson and Mary. The use of the **adverb** ***"instinctively"*** suggests that Watson and Mary's relationship is natural, reinforcing the strength of their relationship. In contrast to the background of crime, Watson and Mary's relationship provides comfort and stability, illustrating how relationships are more fulfilling than material wealth.



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Scene 4 – Holmes' Investigation (Chapter 6)

Doyle highlights Holmes' superior detective skills in contrast to the police, extending the theme of rationality.



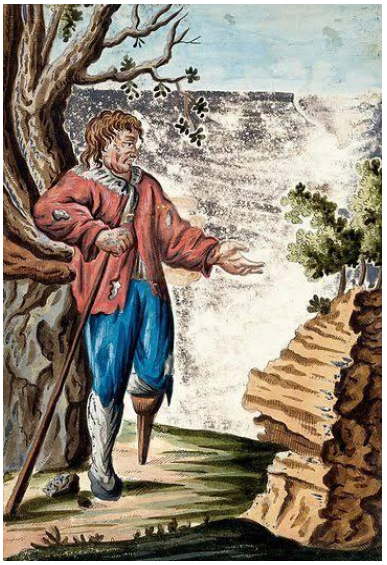
- ***"Like those of a trained blood–hound"*** – Doyle employs **animalistic imagery** when outlining Holmes' detective skills. The **simile** comparing Holmes to a ***"blood–hound"*** further reinforces Holmes' lack of emotion when pursuing criminals. The **adjective** ***"trained"*** implies Holmes' expertise is the consequence of study, as well as natural intelligence. Like a hunting dog, Holmes is not motivated by feelings.

- ***"I am weaving my web around Thaddeus"*** – Athelney Jones' self–congratulatory praise **mirrors** Watson's **animalistic imagery** used to describe Holmes. The **metaphor** of a spider's web trapping its prey indicates how Jones views himself as adept at catching criminals.

- However, Doyle mocks Jones through describing him as ***"the fat detective"***. Doyle employs **dramatic irony**, where the reader knows that Jones is pursuing the wrong suspect. Likewise, Jones' praise only highlights the incompetence of the police.

Scene 5 – Meeting the Baker Street Irregulars (Chapter 8)

Doyle introduces the **theme of class** in relation to the Baker Street Irregulars.



- ***"Go everywhere, see everything, overhear every one"*** – Doyle's **repetition** of ***"every"*** demonstrates the efficiency of the irregulars in helping Holmes**.** Whilst the police dismiss the Baker Street Irregulars due to their **lower–class status** and age, Doyle recognises their intelligence. Doyle underscores how titles do not equate to competence, challenging **Victorian society's** disrespect towards the lower classes.

- ***"I don't like that wooden–legged man, wi' his ugly face and outlandish talk"*** – Mrs Smith emphasises the connection between ***"ugliness"*** and goodness. Doyle taps into **Victorian attitudes regarding physiognomy**, elucidating how Small is disliked due to his disability and unattractive appearance. Doyle **alludes** to Small's misfortune where he is perceived as a criminal before any information is revealed about him.

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Scene 6 – The Thames Chase (Chapter 10)

This is the **climax**, the moment of heightened tension where Small is captured and the investigation is brought to its resolution.

- ***"Our meal was a merry one"*** – At the start of the chapter, Doyle provides a very mundane detail in Watson's **first–person narration**. The adjective ***"merry"*** implies peace and comfort, and is in **stark contrast** to the boat chase which occurs later in the chapter. Doyle temporarily disarms the reader, only to introduce the **climax**, rendering the chase scene even more dramatic.

- ***"Half animal fury"*** – Doyle **dehumanises** Tonga and conforms to the **Victorian stereotype** of the "other". The noun ***"animal"*** likely refers to Tonga's lack of rationality, whilst the adjective ***"fury"*** refers to Tonga's dangerous nature. Doyle emphasises Tonga's animalistic and threatening nature to heighten the tension during the chase.

Scene 7 – The Loss of the Treasure (Chapter 11)

This is a key moment in the **novella** because Doyle reveals that the Agra treasure is lost forever. Small ensures that no one can benefit from the wealth of the Agra treasure. Water often **symbolises** purity, as if the haunting, **corruptive** influence of the treasure has been erased. The treasure brought suffering for everyone who encountered it. Small's gesture highlights how wealth is not always desirable.

- ***"A great shadow seemed to pass from my soul. I did not know how this Agra treasure had weighed me down"*** – Doyle continues the **motif of light and dark imagery** to delineate the corruptive nature of the treasure, highlighting how wealth can be more restrictive than liberating.



- ***"Whoever had lost a treasure, I knew that night I had gained one"*** – Doyle employs the **metaphor** of Mary being a ***"treasure"*** to emphasise how **romantic love** is ultimately more fulfilling than material wealth.

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Scene 8 – Small's Account (Chapter 12)

Doyle ends the **novella** with Small's account to provide an alternative perspective, recognising how he is partly a **victim** of his circumstances.

- ***"I lived only for vengeance"*** – Doyle warns of **the destructive nature of obsession.** The adverb ***"only"*** emphasises how Small's life revolved around revenge. Doyle underscores how obsession can strip individual **identity and purpose**, only bringing more misery. Whilst Small's poverty brought hardship, his involvement in crime to pursue wealth only precipitated more suffering, emphasising how obsession only breeds resentment.

- ***"Twenty long years in that fever–ridden swamp"*** – Doyle's use of the **adjective** ***"long"*** emphasises the duration of Small's suffering, likely eliciting sympathy from the reader. Equally, the **compound adjective** ***"fever–ridden"*** **alludes** to contagion and disease, reflecting the brutal conditions in the Andaman Islands. Doyle presents Small as both a **victim and villain**, and encourages the reader to recognise how Small's **desire for revenge** was shaped by his hardships.



Structure

Doyle's novella is **detective fiction**, and Watson and Holmes learn of the mystery at the same time as the reader.

The novella adheres to the conventions of **Freytag's pyramid**:

- **Exposition** – Doyle introduces the main characters and the central **mystery**. Mary Morstan visits Holmes to explain her father's disappearance and her receipt of anonymous pearls.

- **Rising action** – **Tension** starts to build. Thaddeus reveals Captain Morstan and Major Sholto's connection to the Agra treasure. The murder of Bartholomew also heightens the tension.



- **Climax** – The **conflict** reaches its peak during the chase along the River Thames, resulting in Tonga's death, and Small being captured.

- **Falling action** – The **mystery** begins to be resolved. After the Agra treasure is lost, the reader starts to understand the origin of The Sign of Four.

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- **Denouement/resolution** – The **conflict is entirely resolved**. Small's confession outlines the history of the Agra treasure. Watson proposes to Mary, and Holmes returns to his cocaine.

By placing Small's account at the end of the novella, does Doyle encourage readers to sympathise with him? Or is Small playing the role of a victim to justify his acts?

Form

Detective Fiction

The title refers to the group of people whose identities are gradually revealed as the mystery unfolds, making readers curious as to who The Sign of Four are. Through beginning the **novella** with Holmes taking cocaine, Doyle **subverts** the reader's expectations of what qualities are associated with detectives. Instead, Doyle depicts Holmes as flawed with addictive tendencies.

Doyle **builds suspense** by revealing clues slowly, and withholding the history of the Agra treasure until the final chapter. In the **denouement**, Doyle encourages the reader to question their previous attitudes towards Small. Doyle illuminates how Small is **morally ambiguous** and a **victim** of unfortunate circumstances.

The conventional **detective structure** consists of a crime being committed at the start, leaving a trail of clues for the detective to solve. Often detective novels contain a plot twist such as Small's confession, which fundamentally alters the reader's understanding of earlier events in the novella.



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Narration

The novella is narrated from Watson's **first–person perspective**, and the final chapter includes Small's **frame narrative** (a narrative embedded within a narrative). Doyle reveals clues gradually to build the suspense.

- Watson acts as a **surrogate** for the reader. He lacks Holmes' expertise, allowing the reader to understand his language. His educated status as a former doctor encourages the reader to view him as a **reliable narrator**.
- However, as Watson does not possess Holmes' superior intellect, Doyle **builds tension** through Watson's lack of knowledge.
- Watson is Holmes' **emotional counterpart**. His narrative is likely tinged by his affection for Mary, meaning his narration is **subjective**.

Frame Narrative

In the final chapter, Small's **perspective** dominates the narrative for the first time, unveiling an alternative perspective where Small is the **victim**. Whilst most of the narrative is **linear**, in the **denouement**, Doyle shifts to Small's account of past events.

Small's confession arguably functions as a legal testimony, increasing the **complexity of the narrative** and encouraging readers to form their own judgement of Small.

Evidence

- **Mary's anonymous letters** – Using a physical object as opposed to a mere rumour adds credence and **validity to the narrative**. The anonymity further adds to the mystery and encourages the reader to speculate who the writer is.
- **The map of the Agra treasure** – The map provides **tangible evidence** of the existence of the Agra treasure, as well as connecting Major Sholto and Captain Morstan to it. Its presence adds credibility to Thaddeus' narrative and acts as a plot driver.
- **Newspaper reports** – The article demonstrates how the media can distort the truth to shape public opinion, particularly when Jones receives the credit for solving the mystery.

Doyle employs documents to highlight how the novella is an investigation and to encourage the reader to analyse clues in a similar manner to Holmes. Physical documents add to the **realism**, **delineating** how reliant Holmes is on **evidence over speculation**.

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