

## The Sign of Four: Revision Spring 2017

Read the extracts and answer the questions.

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.

(Chapter 1, paragraph 2)

Who is narrating the passage? \_\_\_\_\_

Who is he describing? \_\_\_\_\_

What is the 'performance' the narrator has witnessed? \_\_\_\_\_

Is the narrator comfortable with what is happening? Yes / No

Evidence: \_\_\_\_\_

Does the narrator find the other person emotional or anxious? Yes / No

Evidence: \_\_\_\_\_

Is the narrator able to act freely or interfere? Yes / No

Evidence: \_\_\_\_\_

Does the narrator admire the other person? Yes / No

Evidence: \_\_\_\_\_

Is the narrator confident in challenging the other person? Yes / No

Evidence: \_\_\_\_\_

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*The narrative continues:*

"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."

- What **3** things does this exchange tell the reader about the narrator?

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2

3

"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."

(Chapter 1, p. 2)

Summarise the presentation of Sherlock Holmes in this extract in 3 bullet points – each with a quotation

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*"You have an extraordinary genius for minutiae," I remarked. (Watson to Holmes)*

Write 60 words exploring this quotation, and Watsons' opinion of Holmes

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*"For example, observation shows me that you have been to the Wigmore Street Post-Office this morning, but deduction lets me know that when there you dispatched a telegram." (Holmes to Watson)*

Explain how context (AO3) can be deduced from this comment:

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*"Viewing the matter as an abstract problem, I had forgotten how personal and painful a thing it might be to you." (Holmes to Watson)*

How does this quotation present Holmes to a reader?

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*"I cannot live without brainwork. What else is there to live for?" (Holmes to Watson)*

How does this quotation present Holmes to the reader?

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 grayish 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.

(Chapter 2, p. 10)

- Why is Watson's description of Mary Morstan so detailed?
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- How does this show a contrast between Holmes and Watson?
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- What is implied by the phrase 'limited means'?
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Choose 4 words or brief phrases that show the gentility of Mary Morstan:

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- Which verbs in the description indicate to the reader that Mary Morstan is nervous?
- Mary Morstan is employed as a governess and companion. How is this relevant to the context of the book?

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*"What a very attractive woman!" I exclaimed, turning to my companion.*

*He had lit his pipe again and was leaning back with drooping eyelids. "Is she?" he said languidly; "I did not observe."*

*"You really are an automaton -- a calculating machine," I cried. "There is something positively inhuman in you at times."*

What does this exchange reveal about the differing natures of Holmes and Watson?

This passage is from the beginning of Chapter 3, page 16.

It was half-past five before Holmes returned. He was bright, eager, and in excellent spirits, a mood which in his case alternated with fits of the blackest depression.

"There is no great mystery in this matter," he said, taking the cup of tea which I had poured out for him; "the facts appear to admit of only one explanation."

"What! you have solved it already?"

"Well, that would be too much to say. I have discovered a suggestive fact, that is all. It is, however, very suggestive. The details are still to be added. I have just found, on consulting the back files of the Times, that Major Sholto, of Upper Norwood, late of the Thirty-fourth Bombay Infantry, died upon the twenty-eighth of April, 1882."

- Explain how Watson's description of Holmes when he returns is comparable with the quotation "my mind rebels at stagnation."
- What 2 examples of the Victorian context of the story can be gained from this extract?

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2.

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"It is paper of native Indian manufacture," he remarked. "It has at some time been pinned to a board. The diagram upon it appears to be a plan of part of a large building with numerous halls, corridors, and passages. At one point is a small cross done in red ink, and above it is '3.37 from left,' in faded pencil-writing. In the left-hand corner is a curious hieroglyphic like four crosses in a line with their arms touching. Beside it is written, in very rough and coarse characters, 'The sign of the four -- Jonathan Small, Mahomet Singh, Abdullah Khan, Dost Akbar.' No, I confess that I do not see how this bears upon the matter. Yet it is evidently a document of importance. It has been kept carefully in a pocketbook, for the one side is as clean as the other."

(Chapter 3, p. 17)

How is this passage a good illustration of the **detective genre** of the book?

Chapter 4, paragraph 3, page 22:

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.

*'In that sorry house it looked as out of place as a diamond of the first water in a setting of brass.'*

How does this simile emphasise the contrast between the room and the description of the street at the end of the previous chapter?

- Which adjectives are used to indicate the luxury of the furnishing? Highlight at least 5.

*'Two great tiger-skins'*

How does this add to the context of the story?

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- Explain how the extract below from chapter 4, page 28 foreshadows later events in the book. Major Sholto is talking to his sons.....

At this instant a horrible change came over his expression; his eyes stared wildly, his jaw dropped, and he yelled in a voice which I can never forget, 'Keep him out! For Christ's sake keep him out!' We both stared round at the window behind us upon which his gaze was fixed. A face was looking in at us out of the darkness. We could see the whitening of the nose where it was pressed against the glass. It was a bearded, hairy face, with wild cruel eyes and an expression of concentrated malevolence. My brother and I rushed towards the window, but the man was gone. When we returned to my father his head had dropped and his pulse had ceased to beat.

- What is implied about Sherlock Holmes in chapter 5 by the following extracts:

"Oh, yes you do, McMurdo," cried Sherlock Holmes genially. "I don't think you can have forgotten me. Don't you remember that amateur who fought three rounds with you at Alison's rooms on the night of your benefit four years back?"

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Twice as we ascended, Holmes whipped his lens out of his pocket and carefully examined marks which appeared to me to be mere shapeless smudges of dust upon the cocoanut-matting which served as a stair-carpet. He walked slowly from step to step, holding the lamp low, and shooting keen glances to right and left.

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There is something devilish in this, Watson," said he, more moved than I had ever before seen him. "What do you make of it?"

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It means murder," said he, stooping over the dead man. "Ah! I expected it. Look here!" He pointed to what looked like a long dark thorn stuck in the skin just above the ear.

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"On the contrary," he answered, "it clears every instant. I only require a few missing links to have an entirely connected case."

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This is taken from chapter 5, page 34. Holmes, Watson and Morstan are walking through the grounds to Pondicherry Lodge.

*Inside, a gravel path wound through desolate grounds to a huge clump of a house, square and prosaic, all plunged in shadow save where a moonbeam struck one corner and glimmered in a garret window. The vast size of the building, with its gloom and its deathly silence, struck a chill to the heart. Even Thaddeus Sholto seemed ill at ease, and the lantern quivered and rattled in his hand.*

- How is a sense of isolation and mystery developed in this extract?