THE SIGN
OF THE FOUR
EMC RESOURCE PACK
Acknowledgements

Written and edited by Kate Oliver

Editorial assistance: Emma Marron

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Introduction

The resources in this pack have been put together for you to use when teaching *The Sign of the Four* to Key Stage 4 classes, or equivalent (though many of the activities are adaptable for anyone teaching the book to younger students). They are not specific to any particular examination specification and, while their rigorous approach will be invaluable in helping your students to prepare for their final exams, they also aim to provide a rich and broad approach to literary study as a whole.

Before reading activities are designed to put the text in context and to whet students’ appetite for reading. Chapter by chapter activities build personal and critical response and exam skills. After reading activities help students to engage with key ideas and provide ideas for revision and exam practice. This is a particularly challenging text in terms of the racist portrayal of certain characters and events. Support for looking at the text in context, including challenging such attitudes, is provided throughout the resource.

As with all resources produced by the English and Media Centre, we would encourage you to use the resources in a way that best suits your classes. So while they have been designed with sections to use before, during and after reading, it is unlikely that any particular class will need to draw on every single activity, or work their way through the pack sequentially and without additional teacher input.

The resources reflect the belief of the English and Media Centre that literary study is best approached in the classroom as an exploratory, collaborative activity, with a strong focus on close language analysis and critical discussion. Drawing on the combined ideas and knowledge of their fellow students as a starting point for much of the work included establishes a solid foundation from which students can explore and practise their own individual responses to the text.

A pack like this is an aid to the study of the actual text, but never a substitute for strong textual knowledge itself. So however you decide to use it, we recommend that students always have a well-thumbed copy of the novel by their side!

Page references are to the Collins Classics edition of *The Sign of the Four* (2015; 978-0-00-811046-8).
BEFORE READING

Making Predictions

- Share out the tasks, below and on page 7, between small groups.
- Share your predictions as a class.
- Discuss any similarities and differences you notice in your predictions. Record some of your ideas so that you can refer to them as you read the novel.

Task 1: The Title and Book Covers

- Brainstorm some ideas about the title: *The Sign of the Four*.
- Discuss what you notice in the six book covers, below and on page 6.
- Make three predictions about the novel, drawing on your discussion.
Task 2: Chapter Headings

- Read the list of 12 chapter headings from the novel, below, and discuss anything you notice or find interesting about them

- Make three predictions about the novel, drawing on your discussion.

| 1. The Science of Deduction | 7. The Episode of the Barrel |
| 2. The Statement of the Case | 8. The Baker Street Irregulars |
| 3. In Quest of a Solution | 9. A Break in the Chain |
| 4. The Story of the Bald Headed Man | 10. The End of the Islander |
| 5. The Tragedy of Pondicherry Lodge | 11. The Great Agra Treasure |

Task 3: Common Words

Some key words have been picked out of the novel. The list, below, shows how often they appear.

- Discuss what you notice about the words on the list, for example, how often they appear, or words that you might group together.

- Make three predictions, drawing on what you noticed in the word list.

- Treasure x 75
- Case x 47
- Strange x 23
- Police x 19
- London x 15
- Detective x 13
- India x 12
- Mystery x 11
- Murder x 10
- Blood x 9
- Clue x 9
- Deduction x 6
- Horror x 5
- Terror x 4
- Evidence x 4
- Unofficial x 4
- Gold x 4
- Witness x 1
Warning! This book contains racism. And sexism. And class prejudice. And drug use.

It’s almost impossible to read a Victorian novel without encountering attitudes that are no longer acceptable and *The Sign of the Four* is no exception. The activities in this resource will help you to discuss some of the attitudes in the novel, both in the context of the time in which Doyle lived, and in a modern context. Once you have read the novel, you will also have a chance to consider your own views about whether books like this are suitable for a modern classroom.

- Share out the statements below to small groups around the class. Each one describes an attitudes which was a mainstream idea at the time the novel was published.

- In your group, discuss what you think about your statement, for example do you find it funny, shocking, strange, unacceptable, or just plain offensive?

- As a class, feed back one or two points from each discussion and talk about which attitudes seem furthest away from modern attitudes. Do any of the attitudes persist today in anyway?

| A. | White upper- and middle-class British men were considered to be the peak of civilisation. It was therefore assumed to be their duty to lead, look after and educate everyone else. The right attitude towards women, poor people and those from other races was that they were a bit like children. |
| B. | Careful measurements of the size and shape of your skull were thought by some respected scientists to show all sorts of things such as personality, intelligence or a tendency towards criminality or violence. As these scientists were almost entirely white upper and middle-class men, funnily enough their measurements tended to show that women, poor people and those from other races were inferior. |
| C. | Cocaine was an ingredient in various medicines. Until 1868 anyone could buy it at the pharmacy. However, doctors were starting to realise the problems there were with the drug and the 1868 Pharmacy Act restricted its sale to registered chemists and pharmacists. Public opinion hadn’t quite caught up with medical opinion and regular use of the drug was considered to be a bad habit, or a personal weakness, but not a big problem. |
| D. | The new science of evolution suggested a completely new idea: that humans were descended from apes. However, some humans were considered to be less evolved than others. As the scientists developing these theories were almost entirely white upper- and middle-class men, funnily enough those they considered to be less evolved were women and people of other races. |
| E. | If a poor child was orphaned and had no family or friends who could look after them, they generally had two options. They could go into an orphanage or workhouse where they would often be poorly fed, harshly treated and worked hard for little or no pay, or they could live on the streets, begging and doing odd jobs. Their hard lives were not considered to be any excuse for being ‘wild’ or turning to crime. |
DURING READING

Building Your Case

One of the pleasures of detective fiction is for the reader to work alongside the detective, trying to solve the case.

Detectives usually keep case notes, and Sherlock Holmes is no different – he is also well known for having all sorts of useful information in his card index. This was a collection of cards with information written on them, a necessity in the days before Google! Meanwhile, Dr Watson is busy making his own notes, which he then writes up as the story you are reading.

You are going to keep your own case file to help you keep track of what is going on in the novel. You can use these to help you to solve the case, but also as revision notes!

How you put your case file together is up to you and your teacher. You could use index cards, as Holmes does, a ring binder, a folder on the computer or a notebook divided into sections. Whatever your case file looks like, it should include the following sections:

Notes on the Mystery

Here you can record (see page 23):

- your questions about the mystery
- answers to your questions
- theories and speculation about what happened
- clues and evidence, and what they suggest
- anything that strikes you as interesting or odd.

Locations

- Use the map on page 33 to record events that happen in different locations:
  - London
  - India
  - Thaddeus Sholto's apartment
  - Bartholomew Sholto's house – Pondicherry Lodge
  - The Andaman Islands
  - The River Thames
Character Profiles

In the story you will meet the following characters:

- Sherlock Holmes, private detective
- Dr John Watson, his friend and housemate
- Mary Morstan, a young lady
- Major Sholto, an officer who knew Mary Morstan's father
- Dr Thaddeus Sholto, one of Major Sholto's twin sons
- Bartholomew Sholto, Thaddeus's twin brother
- Jonathan Small, an escaped criminal
- Tonga, Andaman Islander and friend of Small
- Abdullah Khan (a Muslim name, but in the story he is a Sikh), acquaintance of Jonathan Small
- Mahomet Singh, an Indian Sikh, acquaintance of Jonathan Small
- Dost Akbar (a Muslim name, but in the story he is a Sikh) acquaintance of Jonathan Small.

As part of your case file, create a page for each character (see pages 24-32). Here you can record:

- their appearance and personality
- what they say and do
- the role they play in the plot
- important quotations

Crime Scene Investigation Board

As well as your individual case file, you might like to construct a class Crime Scene Investigation Board to share ideas about the case. This could include, questions, information, evidence and clues, links between characters, events and settings.
A Good Way to Start a Novel?

- On your own, either write a statement that sums up your response to the chapter, or choose one or more of the statements below.

- Share your statements as a class and discuss any similarities and differences in your responses.

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td>I was shocked by the first paragraph in which Holmes injects himself with cocaine. Not what I was expecting from a Victorian novel!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.</td>
<td>It seems like a bit of a slow start but the chapter ends on an interesting note and now I want to read on to find out who Mary Morstan is as she is clearly going to be part of the mystery.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C.</td>
<td>I was drawn in by the personality of Holmes – he is a very intriguing character.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D.</td>
<td>I liked the character of Dr Watson, the faithful friend – and the way he tells the story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.</td>
<td>Modern detective novels often start with the discovery of a dead body and I think that is a much better way to start than two friends talking about a watch!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F.</td>
<td>The amount of information Holmes got from the watch was amazing – it makes me look forward to reading on.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A Seven Percent Solution

At the time of *The Sign of the Four*, cocaine was a legal drug, although people were aware that it was addictive and harmful – Watson, a doctor, is constantly trying to get Holmes off the drug. These days cocaine is a Class A drug with possession carrying a penalty of up to seven years in prison.

- Re-read the beginning of the chapter, as far as ‘…for I am the only one in the world’

- With a partner, discuss what these paragraphs tell you about Holmes, about Watson and about the relationship between them.

- As a class, discuss why you think Doyle might have decided to make Holmes a drug addict.

Completing Your Case File: Character Profiles

- Start your character profile pages for Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson. Your notes could include:
  - factual information about each character
  - indications about their personalities
  - notes on the nature of the friendship between the two men.
Before Reading Chapter 5 – The Tragedy of Pondicherry Lodge

The Tragedy of Pondicherry Lodge

Pondicherry is another reference to India. At the time of the novel the seaside territory of Pondicherry (now known by its Tamil name, Puducherry) in the south east of India, was under French colonial control.

- With a partner, devise a short role play showing the ‘tragedy of Pondicherry Lodge’ based on your predictions about what might happen in this chapter.

Tension and Suspense

Reminder:
Tension provokes feelings such as anxiety, stress or worry in the reader or in a character.
Suspense makes the reader ask ‘What will happen next?’

- As you read this chapter, look out for ways in which Doyle builds tension and suspense.

After Reading Chapter 5

Tension and Suspense

Almost any aspect of a story can be used to create suspense and tension, for example:
- the plot
- the characters
- settings
- dialogue
- length of sentences
- choice of language
- using all the senses.

- With a partner, draw up a chart like the one on page 43, with three rows for notes.

- Choose two of the extracts, underneath the chart, and complete the second two columns for each one. The chart gives you an example of the kind of thing you might say.

- Find one more extract of your own and add it to the chart.

- Share some of your ideas as a class.