Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

# The Sign of Four

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## Plot

- Mary Morstan asks Sherlock Holmes for help. Her father, Captain Morstan, vanished in 1878, and for six years she has been sent a pearl each year by an unknown person.
- She meets Thaddeus Sholto, whose father, Major Sholto, had hidden a treasure from Agra in India. Thaddeus's brother Bartholomew finds it, but is murdered with a poisoned dart and the treasure is stolen.
- Holmes and Watson track the thieves, with the dog Toby, to a steam launch, the Aurora, and chase it down the Thames. Tonga is shot and Jonathan Small, a one-legged man, is caught; but the treasure box is empty.
- Small tells how, during the **Indian Rebellion** of 1857, he and three Sikh men (the Four) took the treasure, and how Sholto and Morstan betrayed them. Watson and Mary become engaged.

## Themes and context

- Greed and treasure, justice, the British **Empire**, friendship, and reason and detection.
- Published in 1890. It reflects Victorian London and the **empire** in India; its descriptions of Tonga show the racist attitudes of the time.

## Form

- A detective novel narrated by Dr Watson, with Holmes's **deductions**, a chase and a confession that explains the past.

## How to get top marks

- Use Watson's narration: his admiration shapes how we see Holmes.
- Have an idea about **Empire**: the treasure comes from colonial India, and it corrupts everybody who touches it.
- Discuss how the novel shows Victorian attitudes to race and outsiders, with some critical distance.

## Key terms

| | |
|---|---|
| **Deduction** | Reasoning from clues to a conclusion, Holmes's method. |
| **Narrator** | Dr Watson, who tells the story. |
| **Indian Rebellion** | The 1857 uprising against British rule in India. |
| **Empire** | The lands ruled by Britain, including India. |

## Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. Who brings the case to Holmes?
2. What has Mary received each year?
3. How is Bartholomew Sholto killed?
4. Who narrates The Sign of Four?
5. What is the Aurora?
6. What happened to the treasure in the end?
7. When did the Four take the treasure?
8. Which theme is shown by Major Sholto's betrayal?

### Answers

1. Mary Morstan
2. A pearl
3. With a poisoned dart
4. Dr Watson
5. A steam launch the thieves use to escape
6. Small threw it into the Thames
7. During the Indian Rebellion of 1857
8. Greed

## What to do next

**Practise 10 questions on this topic**

**Try 3 exam questions, with mark schemes**

**Read the lesson, one step at a time**

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