**Chapter 7, Arthur Canon Doyle, The sign of Four**

**Introduction**

This chapter will focus on the idea of home, the rise of the detective fiction, the publishing history of this novel, how abroad is represented, and the importance of reading for the Victorians.

**At home with the Victorians: London life**

As we've seen before, the idea of an ideal home is very important to the Victorians. Creating a safe and morally good home was the most important character of Victorian social values. The Sign of Four is a detective novel, but also a **domestic novel**. It took us on a tour on many London interiors like Sherlock Holmes's and Dr Watson's bachelor home at **221B Baker Street**, which is where the story starts and finishes. Part of the huge success of this novel and the other Holmes stories is the **familiar domesticity** of 221B Baker Street. The episodic structure of the novel keeps bringing us back to this address, and the narrative repeatedly introduces us to the rituals associated with **comfortable bourgeois** (or middle class) life (e.g. a pleasant dinner with fine wines, reading the newspaper over breakfast, practising the violin, taking afternoon tea).

Describing a domestic interior that is familiar to the original reader, the domestic details in the novel, and Holmes's features and most typical gestures and habits are all meant to make the character of Holmes a realistic and **believable personality**, to make him a real person in the imagination of the reader. The novel highlights the image of domesticity and having a safe home as a shelter from the horrors of the outside world (e.g. people go to Holmes to find answers to their problems and to find criminals who disturb their lives. He collects information and investigates until he solves the case and closes it inside his home).

**Doyle** was born to an Irish immigrant family that experienced some financial hardship during his childhood but later his uncle helped him to have an excellent education at a privet school and later at Edinburg University. Being a medical student, and later a practising doctor, he saw both sides of the social divide and understood that prosperity and respectability are not separated from poverty and crime. Doyle knew from an experience that what seems like happy homes may hide dark secrets. Doyle's father was alcoholic. The threat that the outside world presented to the home is a theme that is always present in The Sign of Four, in which domestic spaces are always a crime scene. Even the comforting world of 221B Baker Street is not what it seems. We are told that Holmes is a drug addict, he injects himself three times a day with cocaine. Doyle also was aware that high ideals of perfect home often clashed with violent realities of urban life.

**Detective fiction**

Detective fiction is a mainly **modern genre** that can be found in the form of a novel or a short story. It's a development of the Victorian age. From the beginning, there's a single criminal case (usually a murder or theft, or both) that is meant to be solved through the action of a detective. Detective fiction is based around a solution of a particular crime that is resolved throughout the narrative. From the start, detective fiction encouraged the reader to engage with the text and pay attention to the details.

**Reading detective fiction**

The first detective fiction in the English-speaking world was *"The Murders in the Rue Morgue"* by the American writer **Edgar Poe**. The earliest use of the term 'detective' referred to the work of the 'detective police'. Charles Dickens was the first to use the term in its current, professional sense by referring to the idea of a detective investigator as different from an ordinary policeman.

The ability of the detective to *collect* data from the case, *distinguish* between relevant and irrelevant information, *exclude* scenarios (plots) that are illogical or impossible, and *draw* the correct conclusion are all central to the plot development of detective fiction. In *The Sign of Four*, Sherlock Holmes tells us about the **scientific method** of investigation that he practises (the science of deduction) and why this is an effective and reliable method. He said that when you exclude the impossible, whatever remains, however doubtful, must be the truth. **Deduction** for Holmes is an accurate methodology, and as readers of detective fiction, we are encouraged to adopt this method ourselves as we work our way through the story. It's the responsibility of the detective to prove guilt or innocence with complete certainty, and that's why detective fiction is evidence-based, practical and factual. Detective fiction is full of significant and insignificant details. **Significant details** provide valuable information about a case, a sequence of events, or a person. **Insignificant details** flesh out the scene, place, person or event described, it doesn't have any value as evidence, but it can help to *shape* our opinions as readers. In order for detective fiction to work as a satisfying read, some of the significant details might appear as insignificant, and vice versa.

**Activity 2**

Mary **Morstan** offers us the bare outline of relevant information about the case. She confirms the dates of Captain Morstan's return, gives information about her own life and career, and her father's connection to Major Sholto. Holmes's three questions in this passage are completely practical and designed to work out the additional material evidence and the material witnesses that need to be followed up (significant and insignificant details). Through his three questions, Holms has established these facts. The information about the suitcase that is left behind is not important to the case, also that Major Sholto had returned to England before Morstan, and he was now avoiding him.

While readers of other types of literary fiction are encouraged by the author to be aware of characterisation, the reader of detective fiction is forced to pay attention to small details in the text. The reader must be careful not to let anything slip by their attention, while at the same time, they must try to distinguish between these two types of detail. Writers of detective fiction use significant and insignificant detail to develop and resolve the plot, but they also manipulate this device to maintain our interest until the end of the narrative. This tactic is closely associated with the ways in which detective fiction was published and read.

**Publishing detective fiction**

The Sing of Four was first published in **1890** in *'Lippincott's Monthly Magazine'*, a well-regarded literary magazine that sold in reasonable numbers. However, the turning point in Doyle's literary career was *'Scandal in Bohemia'* which was published in *'The Strand Magazine'*, a richly illustrated, standard size monthly magazine that had millions of readers and contained a combination of new fiction and journalism. Due to the success of the Holmes and Watson stories, The Sign of Four was offered at lower prices and reached a larger readership.

Unlike the realist novel, detective fiction is driven by the **resolution of the plot**, rather than the development of character. The structure is repetitive and predictable, with the narrative always offering a definitive resolution. Detective fiction was written for readers who lived in a newly industrialised urban world, destroyed by social inequality, and filled with anxiety about crime. Detective fiction offered the readers a comforting reassurance that all was well.

**Activity 3**

The novel was **serialized** in the local and popular press. It is divided into *12 parts* and each part is given a *summary title*, each part is around *3000 words*. The episodic style of the narrative indicates the type of readership and reading experience (a huge market and mobile readers who read chunks of fiction of 30 minutes at a time). This's a very different way of reading from novels like Wuthering Heights, for example. Different types of reading are mentioned in The Sign of Four, but **newspaper** reading is the most common. E.g. Mary and the police place an advertisement in the newspapers to try to gather information about Captain Morstan's disappearance because they know that this's the best way to reach more people. All of the action of the novel takes place over just *96 hours*, and all the major characters in the story read newspapers regularly, which strongly suggests that Victorian readers depended heavily on newspapers for up-to-date information.

Britain in the Victorian era was entering what we now call *'information economy*', one in which increasing numbers of people were literate, and had access to information, and where information itself had fundamental economic value. Information of all kinds, educational, professional, and entertainment-related, were available through cheap fiction, magazines and newspapers, etc. The majority of the characters in the novel are presented as *literate* and engaged in the world of print.

**The Victorians and abroad**

**India in London:**

India (the largest Victorian-Britain's imperial colony) appears large in the novel, as it did in the imagination of its Victorian readers. The Victorian age was Britain’s greatest period of *imperial expansion* abroad, and *economic and social development* at home. In the novel, there are many references to Indian places, events, objects and people (often in Hindi or Urdu) which suggests that the book's intended readers were familiar with these terms. Also, *Thaddeus Sholto's* local South London home is furnished with tiger-skins, hookahs (Shisha) and richly decorated Indian fabrics, gathered from his family's involvement with India. In addition, *Mary Morstan* was born in India, before being sent home to start her schooling. *Captain Morstan* spends many years serving as an officer in the British army in India before returning to England.

Although Holmes is **not an ex-colonial**, he's well aware of the importance of India to British life and its relationship to the crime committed in London. Holmes can *distinguish* between Hindu and Muslim footprints, and he can distinguish between the British and Indian cigarette ash, too. For Holmes, the ability to identify a potential criminal by whether he is smoking an Indian cigar or not is highly important because it *narrows* the field of search.

**Activity 5**

There are at least **3 Indian servants** in the employ of the Sholtos. **1-** Thaddeus Sholto's nameless butler (the chief manservant of a house) who greets Holmes and Watson on their arrival in Brixton. **2-** Major Sholto's late butler, *Lai Chowdar*, who helped dispose of Captain Morstan's body. **3-** Bartholomew Sholto's butler, *Lai Rao*, an assistant to his employer's murder at the hands of Jonathan Small. **4-** the blowpipe-using Tonga. All of them were brought back from India *by Major Sholto* upon his retirement soon after the disappearance of the Agra treasure. Working within the domestic sphere, the Indian butlers have information about the crimes committed inside Pondicherry Lodge (e.g. Lai Chowdar witnessed the death of Captain Morstan, and Lai Rao is an assistant in the murder of Bartholomew Sholto).

Holmes's knowledge of India is a largely intellectual and theoretical one, derived from his *reading*, while Watson's experience is more *practical*, he is an ex-colonial, a veteran of a war on British India's borders. If London in this novel represents the comfortable world of domestic interiors, sociability, emotional order, India is depicted as its polar opposite, a land of extremes of wealth and poverty, danger, lawlessness and financial opportunity. Both the *wealth and the danger* of India threaten to destabilise London life. While bringing home the wealth of India can make life in London extremely comfortable, the possibility of violence being brought home at the same time is an ever-present danger. However, the entire plot of this detective novel is dependent upon the individual greed, treachery and criminality of British colonists (Jonathan Small, Captain Morstan, Major Sholto, the prison guards on the Andaman Island and Bartholomew Sholto).

**The Mutiny**

One historical event that shapes the narrative of this novel is the **violent rebellion** of Indian soldiers and civilians against British East India Company rule in **1857**. Usually referred to as the **Indian Mutiny**, it lasted a year and was the first serious challenge to British control in India. The reason for this rebellion is the growing problems in India, the discrimination between Indians and the British, the fact that the British can escape justice while Indians can't, working and pay conditions, and most importantly is a problem that happened in the army, where British would give the Indian soldiers *paper cartridges* that were greased with animal fat (pork fat for Muslims and beef fat for Hindus). Rumours about the cartridge spread widely through the country and people were furious because they felt that this's a secret policy attempting to convert soldiers to Christianity. The Mutiny broke out in Meerut. Indian soldiers started *killing* their British commanders and their families. Then workers and landowners and others started joining.

**Agra** is the city that is described in the novel, it was the *refugee* for the British population from the Mutiny. In Kanpur, nearly 120 women and children were brutally killed. In **1858**, the Mutiny was crushed and Britain started a *mass execution* of rebels and ordinary civilians. **Looting** was widespread with many British and their Indian allies looting the wealth of the rebel cities that they recaptured. The political impact of the Indian Mutiny was to transform the British rule in India from the indirect authority of the East India Company to the direct rule of the crown as a colony, with an appointed Governor General representing the monarch.

**Literary responses to the Mutiny**

The **cultural impact** of the events of Mutiny on the British public was wide and long-lasting. Many novels were written and published on *this theme*, as well as accounts of histories, diaries, paintings, illustrations, poetry, magazines and newspapers and most of them called for revenge. The magazines and newspapers fed the British public appetite for *information* about events in India. These resources were totally *unreliable* because they were mythologized and far away from the reality and they weren't based on historical facts. They described Indians as heartless, animalistic, cruel and dark killers who raped women and killed children without any mercy. These resources gave these details to show English people how brutal and barbaric Indians were. Novelists like Dickens and other writers contributed to the shaping of the Mutiny in the British public consciousness. Even writers without family connections to India responded to these events. For example, articles like “The Mutiny at Jhansi” and “Events at Jhansi”, and the poem “In the Round Tower at Jhansi” are all talking about the death of **Captain Skene**, but each one of them has a *different story*.

**Activity 6**

*"The Mutiny at Jhansi"* exaggerates the characteristic of Mr and Mrs Skene and portrays them as *heroes* who were killed inside the fort while they were defending themselves. The second article *“Events at Jhansi”* says that one of the writers tried to escape in native clothes but they were caught and the rebels had promised the British soldiers and their families to keep on their lives if they opened the gate, but when they trusted on them, they betrayed the British and killed them all outside the fort. The poem *“In the Round Tower at Jhansi”* by **Rossetti** presented a tragically heroic sequence of events. Captain Skene shoots his wife to protect her from being raped by the rebels before committing suicide. The poem presents their suicide as an act of *patriotic love*. A few years later, Rossetti added a note to her poem telling the readers that her poem was *not historically accurate* and it has been written and published before she heard the supposed facts.

**Activity 7**

**Small's account** of the 'Mutiny' is aimed at *British readers* at home. Small's account describes the rebels in *demonic terms*. His portrayal of the crimes he sees is in graphic, illustrated terms. Small explicitly mentions that he expects the British listeners to his confession (Holmes and Watson) to know all about. Implicitly, Doyle is expecting the same from his British readers. This suggests that more than 30 years after the events of 1857, the British readers at home who had never witnessed the Mutiny could still be expected to know something about it. Rossetti and Doyle had one thing in common, none of them had been to India or witnessed the Indian Mutiny, and yet they wrote about it.

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