The Sign of Four:

Place and Communication

Activity Four

Writing Exercise

Choose **one** of the following three extracts from The Sign of Four and answer the following question:

**How does Conan Doyle present place in the extract?**

When analysing the language Conan Doyle has used, aim to:

* Examine words and phrases
* Think about the sorts of words he chooses (positive, negative, descriptive)
* Explore layers of meaning (what else could a phrase refer to or suggest?)
* Notice any literary techniques (simile, metaphor, alliteration)
* Explain the effects of the language used – how does it make you feel?

The Strand, central London, in The Sign of Four

“It was a September evening, and not yet seven o'clock, but the day had been a dreary one, and a dense drizzly fog lay low upon the great city. Mud-colored clouds drooped sadly over the muddy streets. Down the Strand the lamps were but misty splotches of diffused light which threw a feeble circular glimmer upon the slimy pavement. The yellow glare from the shop-windows streamed out into the steamy, vaporous air, and threw a murky, shifting radiance across the crowded thoroughfare. There was, to my mind, something eerie and ghost-like in the endless procession of faces which flitted across these narrow bars of light,—sad faces and glad, haggard and merry. Like all human kind, they flitted from the gloom into the light, and so back into the gloom once more. I am not subject to impressions, but the dull, heavy evening, with the strange business upon which we were engaged, combined to make me nervous and depressed.”

**Arthur Conan Doyle, The Sign of Four (1890)**

**How does Conan Doyle present place in the extract?**

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London Suburbs: Brixton in The Sign of Four

“"Wordsworth Road," said my companion. "Priory Road. Lark Hall Lane. Stockwell Place. Robert Street. Cold Harbor Lane. Our quest does not appear to take us to very fashionable regions."

We had, indeed, reached a questionable and forbidding neighborhood. Long lines of dull brick houses were only relieved by the coarse glare and tawdry brilliancy of public houses at the corner. Then came rows of two-storied villas each with a fronting of miniature garden, and then again interminable lines of new staring brick buildings,--the monster tentacles which the giant city was throwing out into the country. At last the cab drew up at the third house in a new terrace. None of the other houses were inhabited, and that at which we stopped

was as dark as its neighbors, save for a single glimmer in the kitchen window. On our knocking, however, the door was instantly thrown open by a Hindoo servant clad in a yellow turban, white loose-fitting clothes, and a yellow sash. There was something strangely incongruous in this Oriental figure framed in the commonplace door-way of a third-rate suburban dwelling-house.”

Arthur Conan Doyle, The Sign of Four (1890)

**How does Conan Doyle present place in the extract?**

When analysing the language Conan Doyle has used, aim to:

* Examine words and phrases
* Think about the sorts of words he chooses (positive, negative, descriptive)
* Explore layers of meaning (what else could a phrase refer to or suggest?)
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* Explain the effects of the language used – how does it make you feel?

The London Docks in The Sign of Four

“At that moment, however, as our evil fate would have it, a tug with three barges in tow blundered in between us. It was only by putting our helm hard down that we avoided a collision, and before we could round them and recover our way the Aurora had gained a good two hundred yards. She was still, however, well in view, and the murky uncertain twilight was setting into a clear starlit night. Our boilers were strained to their utmost, and the frail shell vibrated and creaked with the fierce energy which was driving us along. We had shot through the Pool, past the West India Docks, down the long Deptford Reach, and up again after rounding the Isle of Dogs … never did sport give me such a wild thrill as this mad, flying man-hunt down the Thames.”

Arthur Conan Doyle, The Sign of Four (1890)