



English

Key Stage 4 (GCSE English literature)

The Sign of Four: Place and Communication



The text is set on the **AQA 8702** syllabus.

The following activities can form a unit on Sherlock Holmes and Place or be used separately. They address National Curriculum statutory requirements:

read and appreciate the depth and power of the English literary heritage through:

- reading a wide range of high-quality, challenging, classic literature and extended literary non-fiction, such as essays, reviews and journalism including works from the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries

understand and critically evaluate texts through:

- seeking evidence in the text to support a point of view, including justifying inferences with evidence
- analysing a writer's choice of vocabulary, form, grammatical and structural features, and evaluating their effectiveness and impact



They address GCSE English Literature assessment objectives:

- A01 Read, understand and respond to texts
- A02 Analyse the language, form and structure used by a writer to create meanings and effects, using relevant subject terminology where appropriate.
- A03 Show understanding of the relationships between texts and the contexts in which they were written.
- A04 Use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation.



Suggested activities:

The materials provided here allow students to develop analytical skills and explore the importance of place and Arthur Conan Doyle's presentation of it in *The Sign of Four*. They encourage students to compare Sherlock Holmes's late nineteenth-century London with modern London, and to think about Conan Doyle's presentation of other places in the book, including the wider British Empire. They also ask students to think about the development of modern communications in Britain in the nineteenth century and to trace the importance of communications within the text.

The **first activity** encourages students to consider contemporary experiences of navigating the city and the ways in which communications technologies affect that experience. This could take the form of a class debate. Students first read the extract from Will Self and in groups or pairs note his description of moving around cities today. Students either agree or disagree with Self's presentation of this experience, providing evidence from their own experiences. This then feeds into a debate, the form of which can be adapted to suit the class. The motion is 'Will Self does not understand our experience of getting around our cities and towns'. To finish, students label the extract from *The Sign of Four* with the differences and similarities with Self's text.

The **second activity** is a group activity intended to familiarise students with the historical and social context, using images to imagine the changing urban environment of London in the late nineteenth century. This could be a speaking and listening activity, and students could be divided into groups and each group could be given some images to look at closely before reporting back to the class. Using the images provided, students explore new forms of transport such as the horse-drawn omnibuses, the underground railway, overground railways, steam boats on the



Thames and communications networks such as the postal system and the telegraph. They can discuss the ways transport systems interact with text and the written word in the city: for example, newspapers being read, advertising on the outside of the omnibuses and so on. Their reports can be used to compile a class guide to late nineteenth-century London. They could also create a display of the images and texts which they label and annotate to be referred to during their study of *The Sign of Four*.

Suggested research task to **extend** for this activity:

They could find out about the way London is growing at this time, as more and more houses are built and the idea of the 'suburb' begins to emerge. They could also research how the communications systems they have been discussing link not just to London but to the wider world, and find out a little about the global reach of the international telegraph system, the boat-trains to the coast, and so on.

The **third activity** asks students to think about how the world was connected at this time. They can discuss what they think the red lines on the telegraph map represent. (A potential homework activity could be to research the telegraph, finding out how messages were sent and received). They then map the places that appear or are referred to in *The Sign of Four* onto a world map and can discuss the way that Conan Doyle makes connections between remote places in the story. There are a blank and a key provided.

The **fourth activity** encourages students to analyse and write about longer passages from the *Sign of Four*. As preparation for the questions they are getting in the exam, these passages ask students to think about how Conan Doyle presents place in the story.



Activity One **Navigating London Now**

Go to <http://www.iconeye.com/design/features/item/9724-mobile-phones-will-self>

Read the first part of the article up to 'slickety-clack of suburban train'.



Navigating London in the 1890s

"Surely I can come with you, then?" said I [Watson].

"No; you can be much more useful if you will remain here as my representative. I am loath to go, for it is quite on the cards that some message may come during the day, though Wiggins was despondent about it last night. I want you to open all notes and telegrams, and to act on your own judgment if any news should come. Can I rely upon you?"

"Most certainly."

"I am afraid that you will not be able to wire to me, for I can hardly tell yet where I may find myself. If I am in luck, however, I may not be gone so very long. I shall have news of some sort or other before I get back."

I had heard nothing of him by breakfast-time. On opening the Standard, however, I found that there was a fresh allusion to the business.'



Activity Two **London in the 1890s**



Arthur E. Grimshaw, The Strand, London, (1899)

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Arthur_E_Grimshaw_The_Strand_1899.jpg

Funded by:  Arts & Humanities
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[This is the magazine that published Conan Doyle's later Sherlock Holmes stories. The cover shows the Strand]

Special Collections Toronto Public Library [cc licence](#)

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/43021516@N06/8346258029/>



Oxford Street, London, in the 1890s

<http://londonist.com/2012/12/in-pictures-londons-lost-department-stores#gallery=640421,640422>



Atlantic Avenue, Brixton, South London, c.1895

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Electric Avenue by Baron Corvo, The Sketch, 1895.jpg?uselang=en-gb](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Electric_Avenue_by_Baron_Corvo,_The_Sketch,_1895.jpg?uselang=en-gb)



Terraced Houses in Coldharbour Lane - Suburban London at the turn of the century

http://www.landmark.lambeth.gov.uk/display_page.asp?section=landmark&id=8805



Transport to the Suburbs: The Omnibus



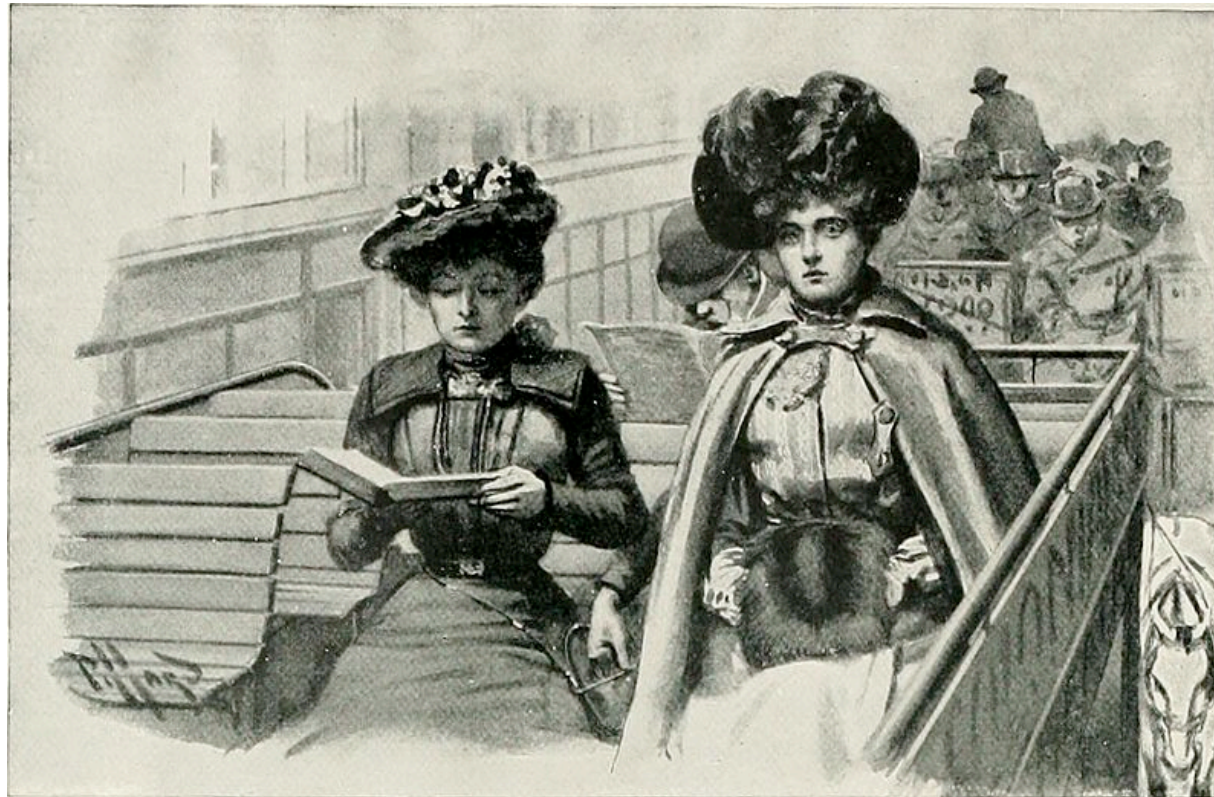
George William Joy, The Bayswater Omnibus (1895)

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:George_William_Joy_-_The_Bayswater_Omnibus.jpg?uselang=en-gb



Red Favourite Omnibus, 1901

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Red 'Favourite', 1901.png?uselang=en-gb](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Red_'Favourite',_1901.png?uselang=en-gb)



Living in London - 1902

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Living_London;_its_work_and_its_play,_its_humour_and_and_its_pathos,_its_sights_and_its_scenes;_%281902%29_%2814596820758%29.jpg?uselang=en-gb



The London Docks



Steam Tug on the Thames, c.1905

http://www.the-riverman.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/JPK_Album/jpg_Kieve_I.htm



This image, of the South West India Dock, is a little earlier than 'The Sign of Four' as it's from 1877. However it does give a sense of what docks were like.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:SOUTH_WEST_INDIA_DOCK_-_WESTERN_ENTRANCE.jpg?uselang=en-gb



'West India Dock' from Rivers of Great Britain (London: Cassell & Company, 1901)



London by Rail



Paddington Station, London 1887 (just three years before The Sign of Four)

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Scribner's_magazine_%281887%29_%2814595194958%29.jpg?uselang=en-gb

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Example of an 1890 London underground coach from the London Transport Museum

By sv1ambo: <https://www.flickr.com/people/50415738@N04>

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1890 Underground coach %285980249363%29.jpg?uselang=en-gb](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1890_Underground_coach_%285980249363%29.jpg?uselang=en-gb)



For more information and images on London Transport in the Victorian Period, see The London Transport Museum's website:

<http://www.ltmcollection.org/resources/index.html?IXglossary=Public%20transport%20in%20Victorian%20London%3a%20Part%20One%3a%20Overground>

<http://www.ltmcollection.org/resources/index.html?IXglossary=Public%20transport%20in%20Victorian%20London%3a%20Part%20Two%3a%20Underground>

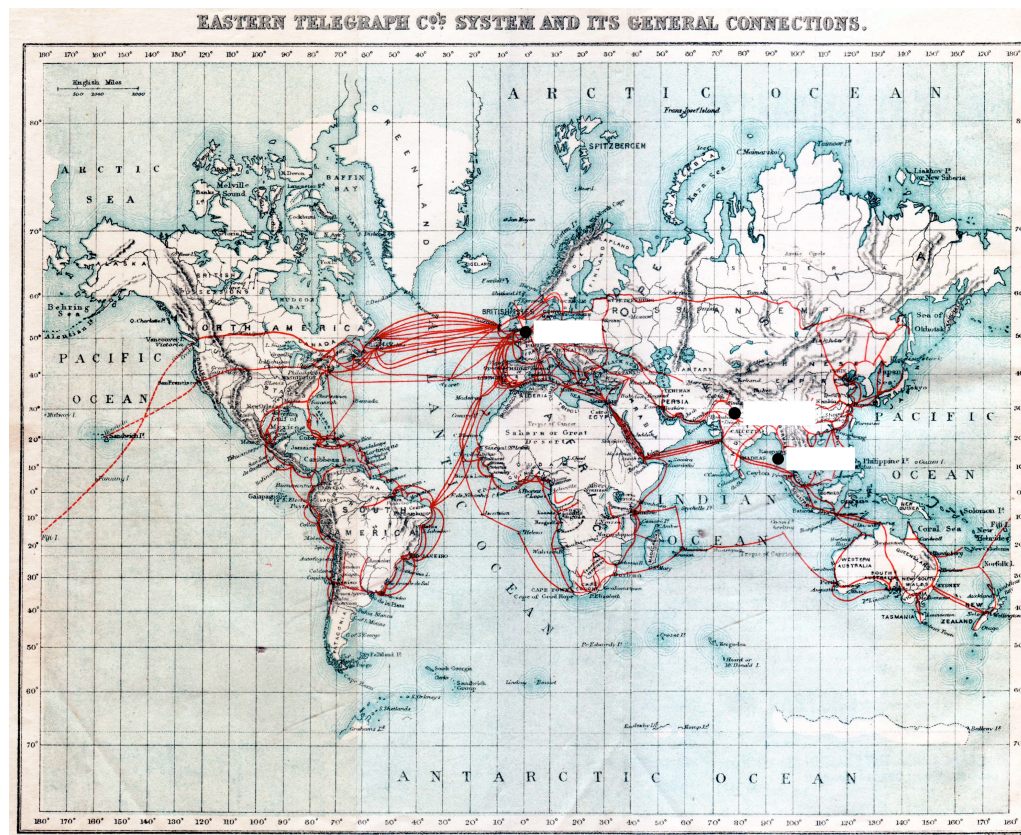


Activity Three

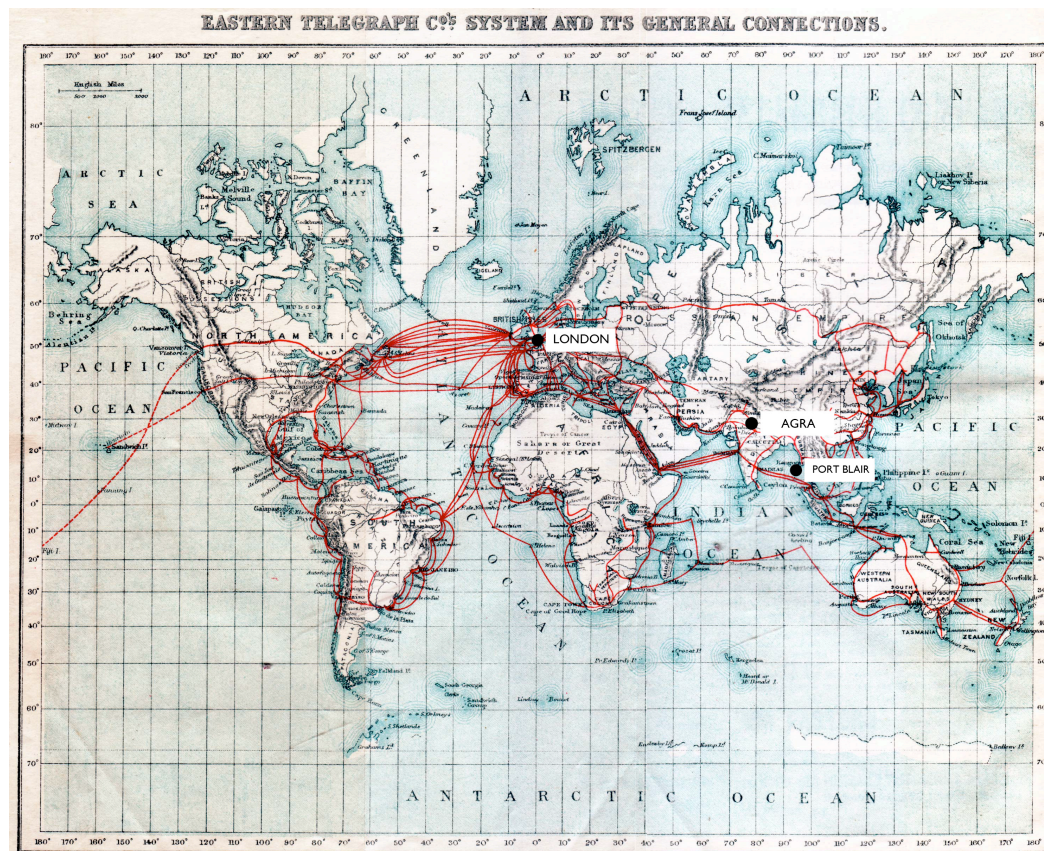


What do you think the red lines represent on this map?

Map: <http://atlantic-cable.com/Maps/> with thanks to Bill Burns



Can you work out which places from the story are marked on the map? Fill in the blanks



Answer key



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)



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)

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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."

Arthtur Conan Doyle, The Sign of Four (1890)