Task 1

1. Read the character profiles below and then make a map grouping the characters.

2. Decide how you might group the characters - for example, you could group together people by relationship, or you could group them by place e.g. India, Baker Street, Pondicherry Lodge.

3. You could use Venn diagrams to show how some characters belong to more than one group.

4. You could illustrate your character maps with pictures of the characters or you could colour-code them, with different groups in different colours.

5. Compare your character map with that of another pair in your class and discuss the decisions you have made.

Sherlock Holmes

Sherlock Holmes is the only ‘unofficial consulting detective’ in the world.

- He uses deduction and observation of small details to solve crimes.
- He can be quite arrogant, boasting about his skills and knowledge and has a low opinion of most police detectives.
- He takes drugs to escape boredom when he doesn’t have a case.
- He says he will never marry because emotions interfere with the reason he uses to solve cases.

Dr John Watson

Watson is the narrator of the story.

- He lives at Baker Street with Sherlock Holmes and helps him with his cases.
- He was a surgeon in the army where he suffered a bullet wound in his leg.
- Watson is more emotionally intelligent than Holmes and is more sensitive to the feelings of other people.
- He falls in love with Mary Morstan but is worried that if she receives the treasure, she will be too rich to marry an ordinary man like him.
- When the treasure is lost, he becomes engaged to her.
Mary Morstan
- Mary comes to Holmes to solve two mysteries. Firstly, her father has been missing for 10 years; secondly, since her father disappeared she has received a pearl each year in the post and she doesn’t know who has sent them or why.
- She receives a letter asking her to a meeting outside the Lyceum Theatre and takes Holmes and Watson with her.
- She is represented as strong and intelligent but in need of male protection.
- She is not interested in the fortune that might come her way.

Captain Arthur Morstan
- He is Mary Morstan’s father.
- He was a captain in the army and disappeared on December 3, 1878 in London when he was on a 12-month leave to visit his daughter.
- He was an officer overseeing convicts on Blair Island where Jonathan Small was sent for the murder of Achmet.
- He is told of the treasure by Jonathan Small but, along with ‘The Four’ he is cheated of a share of it when Major Sholto steals it back to England.
- When he comes to England on leave he demands Sholto gives him his share of the treasure, but has a heart attack, hits his head and dies.

Major John Sholto
- He is an officer on Blair Island along with Captain Morstan.
- He has lost a lot of money due to gambling.
- Jonathan Small tells him where the treasure is hidden so Major Sholto can get a share of it to repay gambling debts in exchange for Small’s freedom.
- Sholto takes the treasure but goes to England, cheating Major Morstan and ‘The Four’ out of their share.
- When Morstan later confronts him at his home in London and has a heart attack, Sholto is afraid the police will think it is murder so he hides the body.
- He dies of fear and shock after seeing Jonathan Small’s face at the window of his house just as he is about to tell his twin sons where he has hidden the treasure.
**Thaddeus Sholto**

- Major Sholto’s son.
- He feels guilty that his father kept all the treasure so he anonymously sends her a pearl every year.
- He is a hypochondriac and a nervous man.
- He is arrested as a suspect when his twin brother Bartholomew is murdered but the police later release him.

**Bartholomew Sholto**

- Thaddeus Sholto’s twin brother.
- Unlike his brother, he doesn’t want to share the treasure with anyone, including Mary Morstan.
- He is killed by a poison dart shot by Tonga, Jonathan Small’s accomplice.

**Jonathan Small**

- He is one of the ‘Sign of Four’ group of men.
- He joined the army at the age of 18 to escape the country after he got a girl pregnant.
- He has a wooden leg because a crocodile bit off the bottom half of his right leg when he was with the army in India.
- During the Indian Mutiny, he is put in charge of two guards at the Agra Fort: Mahomet Singh and Abdullah Khan.
- Singh and Khan threaten to kill him if he does not join in the murder of Achmet, who is carrying the treasure of a rajah.
- When he escapes from Blair Island with Tonga he comes to England to get the treasure from Major Sholto.
- Just before he is caught by Holmes, he throws all the treasure into the Thames so that no one can have it.
**Mahomet Singh and Abdullah Khan**
- The men are Sikhs and on guard-duty with Small at the Agra Fort.
- Together with Dost Akbar, they come up with the plan to murder Achmet and steal the treasure he carries.
- They are sentenced to life imprisonment after the murder.

**Dost Akbar**
- He is also a Sikh and related to Abdullah Khan.
- He is described as an incredibly tall, large man.
- He travels to the Agra Fort with Achmet and, with Singh and Khan, plans to murder him to get the treasure he carries.

**Achmet**
- He is a servant of the rajah who is trusted to take the treasure and keep it safe during the Indian Mutiny.
- He is murdered by ‘The Four’ who steal the treasure and hide it in the Agra Fort.

**Tonga**
- Tonga comes from the Andaman Islands and helps Jonathan Small escape after Small finds him ill and nurses him back to health.
- He is loyal to Jonathan Small.
- He is less than four feet tall.
- In England, Small uses Tonga to earn a living by showing him at fairgrounds as a cannibal.
- Tonga kills Bartholomew Sholto with a poisoned dart, much to Jonathan Small’s anger.

**Detective Athelney Jones**
- He is the detective in charge of Bartholomew Sholto’s murder.
- He works with Holmes to solve the case but doesn’t always agree with his methods.
**Key features of detective fiction**

As you read *The Sign of the Four*, consider to what extent it follows the narrative conventions of the detective genre and jot down any supporting evidence you find. Remember to write down page numbers next to your evidence.

1. The detective must be memorable.

2. The crime must be significant e.g. a murder or major theft.

3. The criminal must be a worthy adversary e.g. of similar intelligence to the detective.

4. Suspects must be introduced.

5. Clues must be shared with the reader but may include some ‘red herrings’ (false clues).

6. The detective needs to work out who the criminal is by interpreting the clues using logical deduction.

7. The detective solves the crime and explains it at the end.
### True/False

After reading chapters 1-3 decide whether the following statements are true or false.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>True</th>
<th>False</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Holmes is taking morphine at the beginning of the novel.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Watson does not want Holmes to take drugs because he thinks it will weaken his health and it puts him in a black mood.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Holmes takes drugs to relax.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Holmes thinks detection is an emotional profession.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Watson’s leg has a bullet wound from his army service in Afghanistan.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Holmes deduces that Watson’s pocket watch belonged to his uncle, who took good care of it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Mary Morstan’s mother died and she was sent to a boarding establishment as her father was an officer in an Indian Regiment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Mary’s father disappeared on 12(^{th}) December, eight years ago.</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>She has received a letter telling her to meet a stranger at the third pillar from the left outside the Lyceum Theatre.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Watson thinks Mary Morstan might be attracted to him because he is a doctor and has been in the army.</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>Holmes believes one of Major Sholto’s heirs has sent Mary a pearl each year because they begin to be sent one week after Major Sholto’s death and he was the only person Major Morstan knew in London.</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Mary Morstan found the paper containing the Sign of the Four in her father’s diary.</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>At the house to which Holmes, Watson and Mary are taken, the door is opened by a Sikh in a white turban.</td>
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</table>
Answers to true/false

1. False. He is taking a seven percent solution of cocaine.

2. True.

3. False. He takes drugs to stimulate his mind and to avoid boredom when he doesn’t have a case.

4. False. Holmes says that detection is a ‘cold and unemotional’ science.

5. True.

6. False. It belonged to his brother. Holmes deduces that it had been pawned from the pawnbroker’s marks and the scratches by the keyhole suggest his brother was often drunk when he tried to wind it up.

7. True.

8. False. He disappeared on 3rd December, ten years ago.


10. False. He thinks she will not be attracted to him because of his ‘weak leg and weaker bank account’.

11. True.

12. False. She found it in a pocket-book (wallet) in his desk.

13. False. He is a Hindoo in a yellow turban.
Themes

As you read the novel make notes on the following themes, adding page references where you can.

The Rational versus The Emotional

Holmes and Watson are presented by Conan Doyle as antithetical characters. Holmes represents the rational and logical, whilst Watson represents the emotional (as represented by his romance with Mary Morstan). As you read through the story, note down quotations that illustrate the development of this theme.

Fear of the foreign

One of the goals of the British Empire was to spread English culture throughout the world. *The Sign of the Four* reflects both a fascination with the foreign and exotic and the English fear that foreign culture was eroding traditional English culture, including its moral values. It is significant that English men such as Jonathan Small are represented as having been corrupted by their time in the colonies - consumed with greed for treasure, which perhaps represents the English greed for the resources of India.

The representation of women

In many ways, Mary Morstan epitomises the Victorian woman: refined, controlled and virtuous. However, she is also represented as a woman in need of male protection and guidance, which appeals to Watson.

Drug use

Holmes’ drug use begins and ends in *The Sign of the Four*. The plant used for cocaine originated in South America, and arrived in Europe in the middle of the 1800s, soon becoming popular all over the Empire. Cocaine was widely used for medicinal purposes and Arthur Conan Doyle, as a doctor himself, would have been familiar with it. However, cocaine came to be viewed negatively because of its side effects, which the Victorians believed were due to its foreign origin. In the story, Holmes uses cocaine to stimulate his mind and nervous system. Conan Doyle seems to examine both sides of the cocaine debate at the beginning of the story.

Class

Conan Doyle was himself, as a doctor, a respected member of the middle classes. However, although he had wealthy uncles who ensured that he had a good education, Conan Doyle’s father was an alcoholic and, as a result, as a child Conan Doyle experienced living in squalid tenement flats in Edinburgh where each family would often live and sleep in just one room. In *The Sign of the Four* Sherlock Holmes can often be quite superior and snobbish about the working classes, but he also needs them - like the Baker Street Irregulars - to help him solve his cases because they blend in and don’t draw suspicion. Holmes also has pastimes or interests that are not always intellectual - for example, we find out that he is a good boxer who has fought the prize-fighter McMurdo, and due to this shared experience, he is accepted and respected by McMurdo.
Task 2

Read the following extract which explores the representation of drugs and the relationship between Watson and Holmes, then answer the questions that follow.

Sherlock Holmes took his bottle from the corner of the mantel-piece and his hypodermic syringe from its neat morocco case. With his long, white, nervous fingers he adjusted the delicate needle, and rolled back his left shirt-cuff. For some little time his eyes rested thoughtfully upon the sinewy forearm and wrist all dotted and scarred with innumerable puncture-marks. Finally he thrust the sharp point home, pressed down the tiny piston, and sank back into the velvet-lined arm-chair with a long sigh of satisfaction.

Three times a day for many months I had witnessed this performance, but custom had not reconciled my mind to it. On the contrary, from day to day I had become more irritable at the sight, and my conscience swelled nightly within me at the thought that I had lacked the courage to protest. Again and again I had registered a vow that I should deliver my soul upon the subject, but there was that in the cool, nonchalant air of my companion which made him the last man with whom one would care to take anything approaching to a liberty. His great powers, his masterly manner, and the experience which I had had of his many extraordinary qualities, all made me diffident and backward in crossing him.

Yet upon that afternoon, whether it was the Beaune which I had taken with my lunch, or the additional exasperation produced by the extreme deliberation of his manner, I suddenly felt that I could hold out no longer.

‘Which is it to-day?’ I asked,—‘morphine or cocaine?’

He raised his eyes languidly from the old black-letter volume which he had opened. ‘It is cocaine,’ he said,—‘a seven-per-cent solution. Would you care to try it?’

‘No, indeed,’ I answered, brusquely. ‘My constitution has not got over the Afghan campaign yet. I cannot afford to throw any extra strain upon it.’

He smiled at my vehemence. ‘Perhaps you are right, Watson,’ he said. ‘I suppose that its influence is physically a bad one. I find it, however, so transcendentally stimulating and clarifying to the mind that its secondary action is a matter of small moment.’

‘But consider!’ I said, earnestly. ‘Count the cost! Your brain may, as you say, be roused and excited, but it is a pathological and morbid process, which involves increased tissue-change and may at last leave a permanent weakness. You know, too, what a black reaction comes upon you. Surely the game is hardly worth the candle. Why should you, for a mere passing pleasure, risk the loss of those great powers with which you have been endowed? Remember that I speak not only as one comrade to another, but as a medical man to one for whose constitution he is to some extent answerable.’
He did not seem offended. On the contrary, he put his finger-tips together and leaned his elbows on the arms of his chair, like one who has a relish for conversation.

‘My mind,’ he said, ‘rebels at stagnation. Give me problems, give me work, give me the most abstruse cryptogram or the most intricate analysis, and I am in my own proper atmosphere. I can dispense then with artificial stimulants. But I abhor the dull routine of existence. I crave for mental exaltation. That is why I have chosen my own particular profession,—or rather created it, for I am the only one in the world.’

1. Why is it significant that Sherlock keeps his syringe in a ‘neat morocco’ case?
2. What impression of Sherlock Holmes is given in the adjectives describing his ‘white, nervous’ fingers?
3. Why do his eyes need to rest ‘for some little time’ on his arms?
4. What do the words ‘scarred’ and ‘innumerable’ to describe the puncture marks tell us about his addiction?
5. Pick out words or short phrases that show Sherlock’s response to taking the cocaine, and explain their effects.
6. Why is Watson reluctant to protest to Sherlock about using drugs?
7. Pick out words that show Watson’s anger at Sherlock’s use of the drug.
8. What reasons does Sherlock give for taking drugs?
9. What reasons does Watson give that he should not take drugs?
10. What impression of the relationship between Holmes and Watson is given in this opening paragraph?
11. Do you find Sherlock Holmes a sympathetic character? Give reasons for your answer.
Miss Morstan entered the room with a firm step and an outward composure of manner. She was a blonde young lady, small, dainty, well gloved, and dressed in the most perfect taste. There was, however, a plainness and simplicity about her costume which bore with it a suggestion of limited means. The dress was a sombre greyish beige, untrimmed and unbraided, and she wore a small turban of the same dull hue, relieved only by a suspicion of white feather in the side. Her face had neither regularity of feature nor beauty of complexion, but her expression was sweet and amiable, and her large blue eyes were singularly spiritual and sympathetic. In an experience of women which extends over many nations and three separate continents, I have never looked upon a face which gave a clearer promise of a refined and sensitive nature. I could not but observe that as she took the seat which Sherlock Holmes placed for her, her lip trembled, her hand quivered, and she showed every sign of intense inward agitation.

‘Au revoir,’ said our visitor, and, with a bright, kindly glance from one to the other of us, she replaced her pearl-box in her bosom and hurried away. Standing at the window, I watched her walking briskly down the street, until the grey turban and white feather were but a speck in the sombre crowd.

‘What a very attractive woman!’ I exclaimed, turning to my companion. He had lit his pipe again, and was leaning back with drooping eyelids. ‘Is she?’ he said, languidly. ‘I did not observe.’ ‘You really are an automaton,—a calculating-machine!’ I cried. ‘There is something positively inhuman in you at times’...

I sat in the window with the volume in my hand, but my thoughts were far from the daring speculations of the writer. My mind ran upon our late visitor,—her smiles, the deep rich tones of her voice, the strange mystery which overhung her life. If she were seventeen at the time of her father’s disappearance she must be seven-and-twenty now,—a sweet age, when youth has lost its self-consciousness and become a little sobered by experience. So I sat and mused, until such dangerous thoughts came into my head that I hurried away to my desk and plunged furiously into the latest treatise upon pathology. What was I, an army surgeon with a weak leg and a weaker banking-account that I should dare to think of such things? She was a unit, a factor,—nothing more. If my future were black, it was better surely to face it like a man than to attempt to brighten it by mere will-o’-the-wisps of the imagination.
1. Pick out some of the adjectives used to describe Miss Morstan. What do they suggest about the qualities that Victorians valued in women?

2. What impression of Watson is given in lines 8 and 9? How does Conan Doyle suggest the difference in freedom between men and woman?

3. Explain how and why Watson and Holmes react differently to Miss Morstan.

4. What are the ‘dangerous thoughts’ that Watson is thinking?

5. Why does he feel he cannot ‘dare to think’ of such things?

6. What does this tell you about what was expected of men of marriageable age in Victorian society?
Task 4

Read the following extract which explores setting and atmosphere, then answer the questions that follow.

*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-coloured 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. I could see from Miss Morstan's manner that she was suffering from the same feeling. Holmes alone could rise superior to petty influences. He held his open note-book upon his knee, and from time to time he jotted down figures and memoranda in the light of his pocket-lantern. We had, indeed, reached a questionable and forbidding neighbourhood. Long lines of dull brick houses were only relieved by the coarse glare and tawdry (flashy, cheap) 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 (seemingly endless) lines of new staring brick buildings, -- the monster tentacles which the giant city was throwing out into the country.*

1. What atmosphere is created by the fog? Link to particular words.
2. Find an example of *pathetic fallacy* and explain what mood it creates.
3. Why might Conan Doyle want to create this type of atmosphere?
4. Pick out some adjectives and nouns that describe the light and explain their effects on the reader.
5. What simile is used to describe the people and what atmosphere does it create?
6. What effect does the weather have on Watson and Miss Morstan?
7. How does Holmes’ reaction to the weather contrast to the others, and why?
8. What adjectives are used to describe the neighbourhood in the second paragraph and what are their effects?
9. Many Victorians were anxious about industrialised cities destroying the old, rural lifestyles of the countryside. Identify the imagery used to represent this anxiety in the second paragraph and explain its effect.
Task 5

Read the following extracts which explore the representation of the foreign, then answer the questions that follow.

Extract 1 (taken from Chapter 8)

He stretched his hand up, and took down a bulky volume from the shelf.

‘This is the first volume of a gazetteer which is now being published. It may be looked upon as the very latest authority. What have we here? ‘Andaman Islands, situated 340 miles to the north of Sumatra, in the Bay of Bengal.’ Hum! hum! What's all this? Moist climate, coral reefs, sharks, Port Blair, convict-barracks, Rutland Island, cottonwoods--Ah, here we are. ‘The aborigines of the Andaman Islands may perhaps claim the distinction of being the smallest race upon this earth, though some anthropologists prefer the Bushmen of Africa, the Digger Indians of America, and the Terra del Fuegians. The average height is rather below four feet, although many full-grown adults may be found who are very much smaller than this. They are a fierce, morose (sulky), and intractable (stubborn) people, though capable of forming most devoted friendships when their confidence has once been gained.’ Mark that, Watson. Now, then, listen to this. ‘They are naturally hideous, having large, misshapen heads, small, fierce eyes, and distorted features. Their feet and hands, however, are remarkably small. So intractable and fierce are they that all the efforts of the British official have failed to win them over in any degree. They have always been a terror to shipwrecked crews, braining the survivors with their stone-headed clubs, or shooting them with their poisoned arrows. These massacres are invariably concluded by a cannibal feast.’

Nice, amiable people, Watson! If this fellow had been left to his own unaided devices this affair might have taken an even more ghastly turn. I fancy that, even as it is, Jonathan Small would give a good deal not to have employed him.’

1. The description of the Andaman Islanders is taken from a text that Holmes describes as ‘the very latest authority.’ What does this tell us about prevailing views of natives who live in the colonies and what shapes the public’s view of them?

2. Identify adjectives used by Conan Doyle to describe the Andaman islanders. Explain how these adjectives negatively affect the reader’s view of the natives.

3. Phrenology was very popular ‘science’ in Victorian England. Phrenology involved the study of the skull in the belief that the shape of a person’s head could provide information about a person’s level of intelligence and their character traits. Criminals and the insane were popular subjects for phrenologists to study. In this context, what might the adjectives used to describe the Andaman Islanders heads as ‘misshapen’ with ‘distorted features’ suggest about them?
4. Why might the detail that ‘all the efforts of the British officials have failed to win them over’ be disturbing to a Victorian reader in Britain?

5. Find quotations that describe the Andaman Islanders’ behaviour towards ‘shipwrecked crews’ (which were likely to be the crews of trade ships and thus European). Why might this behaviour be alarming? (Focus closely on verbs and nouns.)

Extract 2 (taken from Chapter 10)

At the sound of his strident (loud, forceful), angry cries there was movement in the huddled bundle upon the deck. It straightened itself into a little black man -- the smallest I have ever seen -- with a great, misshapen head and a shock of tangled, dishevelled (untidy, disordered) hair. Holmes had already drawn his revolver, and I whipped out mine at the sight of this savage, distorted creature. He was wrapped in some sort of dark ulster (overcoat) or blanket, which left only his face exposed; but that face was enough to give a man a sleepless night. Never have I seen features so deeply marked with all bestiality and cruelty. His small eyes glowed and burned with a sombre (dark, serious) light, and his thick lips were writhed (twisted) back from his teeth, which grinned and chattered at us with a half animal fury.

‘Fire if he raises his hand,’ said Holmes, quietly. We were within a boat’s-length by this time, and almost within touch of our quarry (prey). I can see the two of them now as they stood, the white man with his legs far apart, shrieking out curses, and the unhallowed (unholy) dwarf with his hideous face, and his strong yellow teeth gnashing at us in the light of our lantern.

1. What is the effect of using the impersonal pronoun ‘it’ to describe Tonga?
2. What nouns are used to describe his facial features and what are their effects on the reader?
3. What verbs are used to describe his mouth and teeth in this extract? What impression do they make on the reader?
4. What is the effect of describing the two men as ‘quarry’? How does it relate to the description of Tonga as being possessed by a ‘half animal fury’?
5. What adjective is used to describe Tonga the dwarf, and how might it relate to the perception of foreign natives by Christian colonisers?
Task 6

Read the following extract which explores mood and atmosphere, then answer the questions that follow.

‘We MUST catch her!’ cried Holmes, between his teeth. ‘Heap it on, stokers! Make her do all she can! If we burn the boat we must have them!’

We were fairly after her now. The furnaces roared, and the powerful engines whizzed and clanked, like a great metallic heart. Her sharp, steep prow (front of the boat) cut through the river-water and sent two rolling waves to right and to left of us. With every throb of the engines we sprang and quivered like a living thing. One great yellow lantern in our bows threw a long, flickering funnel of light in front of us. Right ahead a dark blur upon the water showed where the Aurora lay, and the swirl of white foam behind her spoke of the pace at which she was going. We flashed past barges, steamers, merchant-vessels, in and out, behind this one and round the other. Voices hailed (called) us out of the darkness, but still the Aurora thundered on, and still we followed close upon her track.

‘Pile it on, men, pile it on!’ cried Holmes, looking down into the engine-room, while the fierce glow from below beat upon his eager, aquiline face (face with a hooked nose like an eagle’s beak). ‘Get every pound of steam you can.’

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1. Look carefully at the opening sentences in this extract. Identify the modal verb in the opening sentence and the types of verb used at the beginning of two of the sentences. What punctuation is used? Now consider: what atmosphere do these devices create?

2. Identify three verbs describing the steam engines at the beginning of the second paragraph. Which poetic device is used here and why?

3. Find references to light and darkness in the passage. What kind of atmosphere do they create?

4. Identify the similes used to describe the engine. Why do you think Conan Doyle might have described it in this way?

5. How does Conan Doyle use language devices to suggest the speed at which the Aurora is moving? Pick out devices and explain their effects.

6. What verb is used to suggest the speed at which Holmes’ boat is travelling in pursuit?

7. What is the overall effect of this passage on the reader?