

**The Popular Gothic Novel**  
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**Lecture 47**  
**Gothic Plot**

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## Week 10: The Hound of Baskervilles

Lecture 10B: Gothic Plot

Image source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Hound\\_of\\_the\\_Baskervilles](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Hound_of_the_Baskervilles)

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Hello, and welcome to week 10's lectures on Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Hound of Baskervilles*. In today's session, I will be discussing the Gothic plot of the novel.

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### *The Hound of Baskervilles*



- "Further described as a "dreadful apparition" and a "hell hound" ([Baring-Gould, 1967](#): 16), the hound has a thirst for blood and a desire to kill. Using science, Doyle is able to explain the seemingly supernatural qualities of the beast; when Holmes and Watson encounter the creature, the bluish flame dripping from its mouth that provided the spectral glow is declared as being "a cunning preparation" of phosphorous" ([Baring-Gould, 1967](#): 101).

• Source: <https://www.nature.com/articles/palcomms201745>

• Reasoning through madness: the detective in Gothic crime fiction

• [Michelle Miranda](#) *Palgrave Communications* volume 3, Article number: 17045 (2017)

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If you remember the previous lecture session, I was discussing the key Gothic element of the novel, *The Hound*. We were talking about the ghastly, haunting quality of the Hound of

Baskervilles. “Further described, as a dreadful apparition and a hell hound the hound has a thirst for blood and a desire to kill. Using science, Doyle is able to explain the seemingly supernatural qualities of the beast, when Holmes and Watson encountered the creature, the bluish flame dripping from its mouth that provided the spectral glow is declared as being a cunning preparation of phosphorous.”

The hound is also perceived or seen as a frightful spirit. It is spectral it is ghostly, it is also called as the hell hound, the hound from hell. And this particular hound has a desire for blood. It is almost vampiric, in some sense, it thirsts for blood and it wants to kill. Interestingly, we see at the end of the novel, Holmes is able to explain away the spectral, the spiritual, the supernatural elements of the beast. He explains that this creature which has this bluish flame that seems to be coming from its mouth is nothing but a cunning, a crafty preparation of phosphorus. So there is a chemical explanation for this apparently supernatural quality of the hound.

You can see very clearly, how science is able to explain away the Gothic character of the hound and Holmes the detective is using his expertise to rationally explain the spiritual quality, the hellish nature of the hound.

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## Sherlock Holmes



- “Reflecting the sentiments of Poe’s Dupin, Holmes states, “The more outré and grotesque an incident is, the more carefully it deserves to be examined, and the very point which appears to complicate a case is, when duly considered and scientifically handled, the one which is most likely to elucidate it” ([Baring-Gould, 1967](#): 109).

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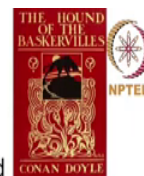
to complicate a case is when duly considered and scientifically handled the one which is most likely to elucidate it.” This is very significant in a larger sense, in relation to the Gothic character too.

Holmes argues that the more extraordinary and bizarre a particular event is, then one should more carefully examine all aspects of that incident. And Holmes suggest that a thorough examination, a scientific exploration of that particular case, the incident will shed clearer light on the matter. So one can see that the apparent mystery, the event which is shrouded in darkness and mystery can be explained away in a logical and rational and scientific manner.

Likewise for the Gothic, sometimes the narrator, the story, the event or the incident might be spectral and spiritual and supernatural but a thorough examination might explain the societal cause for this apparent supernatural phenomena.

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## Gothic Society



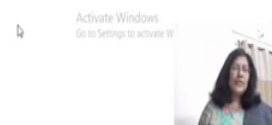
- “Gothic society was fearful of many intrusions, from disease and poverty to crime and degeneration. These fears, compounded by advances and enquiry in science, technology and epistemology, were exploited by many Gothic writers—from the walking dead and lab-created monsters to madness and evil specters.”

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Let me just pick up on the last mentioned elements which frequent Gothic fiction. Michele Miranda points out that these Gothic monsters, these monsters could be creatures from legends and myths, such as vampires, the walking dead, the gothic creatures could be created

from a laboratory. It could be a Hyde like creature, Hyde from R. L Stevenson's a Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, for example, or Frankenstein's monster, which is experimentally produced by Victor Frankenstein.

So the monsters could be taken from traditional narratives, or it could be the result of scientific experimentation. It could be evil specters or manmade, regardless of the way these creatures originated. What we understand is that the Gothic writers exploited these various monsters that come in many shapes and sciences in order to explore the fears in society. It is very interesting to see that Michel Miranda calls the society itself as Gothic society.

The society, which is so fearful, which is full of anxieties is a Gothic society and this society uses all these monsters to explore somehow kind of chase away these monsters exorcise these monsters by narratively experiment with them, so the fears of society are many. For instance crime, the fear of degeneration, going backwards in time, losing civilizational attributes, the fear of disease or fear of foreigners and so on, so Gothic is a useful medium to think through the fears that haunt society.

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## Gothic horrors



- “Successful authors found ways to make their fictional tales horrific by weaving in elements of moral panic and socio-cultural beliefs to give their macabre tales an air of reality. Degeneration, criminological theories of atavism and psychological theories of madness sparked fears that Poe and Doyle were able to capture in their stories.”

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Writer such as Doyle and Edgar Allan Poe were able to exploit the deepest anxieties and fears of the individuals in society. They harnessed the moral panic the fear about atavism that is primitivism that people feared were slowly making intrusions into the civilizational fabric of society. New theories, new bodies of knowledge about how a criminal mind works also caused panic among people in society because they were able to use these theories to analyze crimes and apply these theories and models onto different sections of the people in their society.

So science also caused a lot of fear among society. So one can see how, while advancement was happening in society the very same domains of advancement also cause people to be very, very apprehensive about the trajectory of the human race.

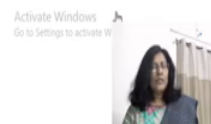
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### *The Hound of the Baskervilles*



- “**The Hound of the Baskervilles**, one of the best known of the [Sherlock Holmes novels](#), written by [Arthur Conan Doyle](#) in 1901. The [novel](#) was serialized in *The Strand Magazine* (1901–02) and was published in book form in 1902. It was the first Sherlock Holmes tale since the detective’s shocking “death” in the story “The Final Problem” (1893) but was set prior to his [demise](#). The popularity of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* helped pave the way for Holmes’s appearance in later works.”

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“The Hound of the Baskervilles, one of the best known of Sherlock Holmes novels, was written by Doyle in 1901. The novel was serialized in The Strand Magazine and was published in book form in 1902. It was the first Sherlock Holmes tale since the detective’s shocking “death” in the story The Final Problem 1893, but was set prior to his demise. The popularity of The Hound of Baskervilles helped pave the way for Holmes’s appearance in later works.”

You can see a very interesting position, interesting narrative’s life in relation to the character of Holmes. Holmes was apparently killed in the story The Final Problem, which was

published as I mentioned in 1893. But as I pointed out in my previous lecture there was an outcry for the revival of this character Holmes and Doyle had to satisfy his reading public and lo and behold we have *The Hound of Baskervilles*.

And interestingly in *The Hound of Baskervilles*, Holmes makes an appearance, but this novel is set prior to the "Death of Holmes" and once again this work becomes immensely popular and makes the way for the continuation of this character Holmes. It kind of helps Holmes revive combat to life on the pages of Doyle's writing.

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## The Plot



- “Based on a local [legend](#) of a spectral hound that haunted [Dartmoor](#) in [Devonshire](#), England, the story is set in the moors at Baskerville Hall and the nearby Grimpen Mire, and the action takes place mostly at night, when the terrifying hound howls for blood. After Sir Charles Baskerville is found dead with his face twisted in stark terror, Holmes is called upon to protect his heir, Sir Henry Baskerville. Narrating the story is Holmes’s assistant, [Dr. Watson](#), who is sent to Dartmoor while the busy Holmes remains in [London](#).”
- [Source: https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Hound-of-the-Baskervilles](https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Hound-of-the-Baskervilles)



Now let us take a look at the plot of this novel. “Based on a local legend of a spectral hound that haunted Dartmoor in Devonshire, England, the story is set in the moors at Baskerville Hall and the nearby Grimpen Mire, and the action takes place mostly at night, when the terrifying hound howls for blood. After Sir Charles Baskerville is found dead with his face twisted in stark terror, Holmes is called upon to protect his heir, Sir Henry Baskerville. Narrating the story is Holmes's assistant Dr. Watson who, was sent to Dartmoor while the busy Holmes remains in London.”

So we have a clear cut Gothic setting for this novel. The novel is set in the moors on those empty vistas of space where we have grasslands, that is the setting. And the story takes place mostly in the dark. The key house, the key mansion, edifice is Baskerville Hall. And of course, we have another Gothic setting in the Grimpen Mire. Even the names are symbolic and does not give a lot of cheer to the readers. There is this legend about this ghostly hound that is doing the rounds in the community. And at night one can hear the howls of the hound, which seems to be being for blood.

There is death at the beginning and it is the death of Sir Charles Baskerville and he seems to have died in great terror and Holmes is roped in to help save the life of his heir Sir Henry Baskerville, and the story is narrated by Holmes's friend and assistant Dr. Watson. In fact, Holmes sends Dr. Watson to check out the place and its environment, while he apparently stays in London.

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## The Plot



- Upon his arrival, Watson learns that an escaped convict is on the loose. More unsettling events occur, including the appearance of an unknown figure on the moor. Watson later discovers that the mysterious person is Holmes, who has been conducting his own investigation. Holmes deduces that the killer is Jack Stapleton, a neighbour who is actually Roger Baskerville. Hoping to inherit the family estate, he has plotted to kill his relatives using a vicious hound that he has painted with phosphorous to appear sinister. The superstitious Charles suffered a heart attack after being frightened by the animal. Stapleton also hopes to kill Henry Baskerville but is thwarted by Holmes. Afterward Stapleton flees and is believed to have died, swallowed by Grimpen Mire.
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You can see that this is a very dark narrative of crime and there is a fantastic combination of science and human evil. Watson is doing a bit of investigation on his own and he comes to know that there is an escaped convict on the loose in the surroundings. So escaped convict, moors, Grimpen Mire so all these are plastic Gothic attributes. And he also finds that as Watson also finds that there is somebody else on the moors as well and he finally realizes that it is none other than Holmes himself who is secretly conducting an investigation of his own.

So you can see how very eerily Holmes puts himself into the crime plot that Holmes finds out that it is the neighbor Jack Stapleton who is behind all these strange and eerie happenings and



he realized that Jack Stapleton is, in fact, related to the Baskervilles, and it is he, who had exploited the hound to scare Sir Charles Baskerville to his death.

Jack Stapleton knew that Sir Charles was very superstitious and the appearance of this hound in reality, the hound of the legends in reality would seriously affect him and he is proven right when Charles dies of heart attack, believing that he is seeing this ghostly spectral hell hound. And Stapleton had planned to kill Henry as well, the heir to the property, but he is eventually thwarted by Holmes.

And Stapleton while he is fleeing falls into Grimpen Mire and is killed in a really ghastly dreadful manner and we are reminded of *The Moonstone* as well, there we have similar settings too. At this point, I want you to think back to the shivering sand in *The Moonstone*. And it would be interesting to draw connections between Rosanna Spearman, who kills herself by drowning in the shivering sand. So there is a parallel in terms of the Gothic settings and we see how disturbing characters and problematic objects are disposed off with the help of Gothic locales.

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### *The Hound of the Baskervilles*



- “*The Hound of the Baskervilles*, the third novel by [Arthur Conan Doyle](#) to feature [Sherlock Holmes](#), is arguably the most famous detective story in fiction. The tale was a huge success upon its first appearance in *The Strand Magazine* where it ran from August 1901 to April 1902. Indeed the story’s popularity was such that for the first (and only) time in *The Strand*’s history a seventh printing of the magazine was required in order to keep up with demand”.
- Source: [Greg Buzwell](#) 2014
- <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/an-introduction-to-the-hound-of-the-baskervilles>

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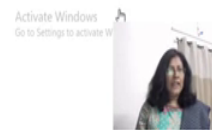
So you can see how very popular this tale was with the public. In fact, the seventh edition was something unheard of in the history of the magazine, The Strand.

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## The Hound of the Baskervilles



- “In *The Hound of the Baskervilles* Conan Doyle uncharacteristically emphasized the eerie setting and mysterious atmosphere rather than the hero’s deductive ingenuity. One of the all-time classic mysteries, the novel was hugely popular as readers rejoiced at the return of Sherlock Holmes. (His death in “The Final Problem” had enraged fans, causing thousands to cancel their subscriptions to *The Strand*.)”
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What is significant about the Hound of Baskervilles is the emphasis not primarily on the detective ability of Sherlock Holmes. In fact, what was more emphasized was the mysterious setting the atmospheric character of that play. So the Gothic tone was more important to the story than the fantastic character of the investigator of the detective Holmes.

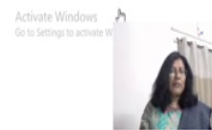
And of course, as I mentioned, Holmes makes a reappearance after his apparent death in the final problem. And it is very, very interesting to see that the reading public showed their protest by canceling their subscriptions to The Strand when their favorite character was killed off.

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## Doyle and Sherlock Holmes



- “Although Conan Doyle had previously claimed to have grown “weary” of Sherlock’s name, he subsequently revived the character after negotiating a large payment from publishers. A series of short stories were published in 1903–04 and later collected in *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* (1905). *The Hound of the Baskervilles* was adapted for film numerous times, beginning with a silent German production in 1914.”
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## *The Hound of the Baskervilles*



- “The story of a seemingly supernatural hound that haunts Dartmoor caught the public imagination, pitting as it did the supremely rational Sherlock Holmes against the unearthly family curse that terrorises the Baskervilles. The novel also merged two popular genres, the detective story and the Gothic tale, using an ingenious double-narrative to do so. In addition, along with its late-Victorian Gothic predecessors *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886); *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and *Dracula* (1897) the book addressed many of the fears that assailed the final years of the 19th century.”
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*The Hound of Baskervilles* is a novel which belongs to the turn of the century literary works. Such as *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Dracula* that addressed the fears and anxieties of the population because of all these new changes in the way they looked at the world. So the turn of the century produced these unique experimental works that really brought to the surface the worries and anxieties of the society.

Further, in terms of narrative, we have two moods in this novel, we have the detective mood, and we have the Gothic mood. And it is very interesting to see that for the first time, Doyle puts Holmes against this unearthly supernatural narrative. So we have the present and the past clash, come together. And the past is represented by the family curse, the past is represented by the specter of hound, the past is represented by all these legends about spirits and supernatural creatures.

And very interestingly Stapleton, the villain of the piece harnesses the power of both, the past and the present. He makes use of this legend about the hound and he also exploits the magic of science when he when he uses phosphorus to make this hound more frightening than it already is. So this merging of two very different traditions and two very different moods and two distinct ideologies is what makes this novel very, very powerful and appealing to the reading public.

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## Doyle



- "By the time the first Sherlock Holmes novel, *A Study in Scarlet*, appeared in 1887 detectives had already begun to appear as central characters in popular fiction. The investigations of Inspector Bucket, for example, had played a large part in the plot of [Charles Dickens'](#) novel *Bleak House* (1853), while Wilkie Collins' book *The Moonstone* (1868) featured not only the established policeman, in the form of Sergeant Cuff, but also introduced the gentleman amateur detective in the character of Franklin Blake."
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So we know that Holmes comes in the wake of a long line of fictional detectives. If you want to think back to the mid-Victorian period, we have Dickens’ own in Mr. Bucket, who makes an appearance in *Bleak House* and then of course, we have our Sergeant Cuff in *The Moonstone*, in addition to Franklin Blake, who also tries his hand at detective work.

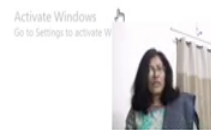
So Holmes has his predecessors. And we also realize that all these detectives walk through narratives, which are not just about harnessing clues and finding the solution to the problem, they also realized that the fabric of the narrative is Gothic in tone as well.

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## Doyle



- “A *Study in Scarlet*, however, took things to a new level, highlighting a modern, scientific approach to deduction. Holmes has an excellent knowledge of chemistry; he is able, for example, to distinguish between numerous different types of tobacco ash and he scientifically appraises crime scenes with a tape measure and a magnifying glass. Deduction from carefully collected clues and close observation was now a key part not only of the detective's work, but also of the way in which detective stories were told and presented to the reading public.”
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What is pointed out here is that deduction was a science. It was not just an art, but a science and we witness the extraordinary expertise, knowledge and acumen of Holmes who was able to distinguish between several different kinds of a particular entities, for example, tobacco ash, and he measures everything, he examines everything very closely using a magnifying glass. All the clues are neatly and very, very methodically explained to the reader.

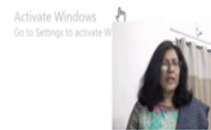
So the narration of deduction is also becoming very, very organized. And this is a spirit of the time. It reflects the scientific inquiry of the time, it reflects the desire to categorize and organize things and discuss everything in a rational, methodical way. And this detective narrative was part of that spirit of that age.

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## Doyle



- “One year prior to the appearance of *A Study in Scarlet*, [Robert Louis Stevenson](#) had published his [Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde](#) which began the fin de siècle renaissance of [Gothic literature](#), providing an imaginative means by which to explore contemporary fears including the unsettling implications of [Darwin's theory of evolution](#), and the growing fears that humankind was becoming both physically weaker and morally more degenerate in an increasingly decadent society.”
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Greg Buzwell points out that there was a revival of the Gothic at the turn of the century, there was a renaissance of Gothic literature, Gothic narratives at the turn of the century. And *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is a novel, a novella which is referred time and again to illustrate the immense fear about atavism about degeneration, about devolution if human beings can evolve into a better form, they can also kind of go back, regress in time into something less admirable. So that was a fear that haunted the mind of the public in those times. And one can say that *The Hound of Baskervilles* is also a work that participates that exploits the kind of fear of the public.



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## *The Hound of the Baskervilles*



- “*The Hound of the Baskervilles* combines both detective and Gothic genres, placing them side by side in an inventive fashion. The rational detective story takes centre stage whenever Holmes is present in the narrative. In these sections of the book a cool logic predominates and the bizarre events taking place on the moors surrounding Baskerville Hall are subjected to a cool, logical analysis. For much of the story, however, Holmes is absent, or so we are lead to believe”.
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So as we discussed that there, we realized that there are twin narratives, one is the detective the other is the Gothic. Whenever Holmes is present Buzwell suggests that there is the dominance of cool logic there is assassination, there was logical explanation of things. However, when he is not absent, when he is not present, the implication is that logic takes a backseat and the Gothic fears and the legends and spectral presences seem to crowd in on the center stage.

Yet we also know that Holmes is not far away. He is just not in the center, but he is in the margins conducting his own investigations. Ultimately, the point is that while there is this domain of spectrality, supernatural faith there is also this domain of science and logic and reason. And we see these two domains come to a head in the hound of Baskervilles. And we also see how one feeds off the other, as is the case with Stapleton who organizes this crime narrative by combining the forces of science and tradition and legends.

Thank you for watching, I will continue in the next session.