

The Hound of Baskervilles
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Lecture 49
Gothic Tropes, Landscape and Cultural Anxieties

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Week 10: The Hound of Baskervilles

Lecture 10 D: Gothic tropes, landscape and cultural anxieties

Image source: 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's *The Hound of Baskervilles*. In today's lecture session, I will be discussing the Gothic tropes, the Gothic landscape as well as the anxieties of the past, present and future.

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Primitive past and progressive present



- “Sir Henry plans to follow in his uncle's progressive footsteps and continue modernizing Baskerville Hall by installing one of the recent benefits of modern science, electric lighting: "I'll have a row of electric lamps up here inside of six months," he enthusiastically tells Watson, "and you won't know it again with a thousand-candle-power Swan and Edison right here in front of the hall door" (57). The light of science will, he believes, dispel the "long shadows [that] trailed down the walls and hung like a black canopy above him."(p.66)
- Source: Degeneration, "Fin-de-Siècle" Gothic, and the Science of Detection: Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Hound of the Baskervilles" and the Emergence of the Modern Detective Story Author(s): Nils Claussøn

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In the previous lecture, I discussed how Baskerville Hall is being modernized by Sir Charles Baskerville. Now Henry, the heir of Sir Charles is continuing with the modernizing project. He is attempting to renovate Baskerville Hall by bringing in the fruits of modern science, one of the fruits of modern science which is this fantastic concept of electric lighting.

And he tells Watson with a lot of pride that he will get the lamps installed within six months and the effect would be wonderful because it will eliminate the gloomy shadows, the long shadows, the darkness that envelopes the walls of Baskerville Hall, it will eliminate, it will get rid of the black canopy, the suffocating atmosphere of darkness and gloom, which suppresses the spirit of the hall. So science is used to dispel the Gothic ambiance, the Gothic atmosphere of darkness and bleakness and gloominess.

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Progressive present



- “Like Sir Henry bringing electricity to Baskerville Hall, Holmes is also associated with light, and so with enlightenment, science and progress, as he seeks to shine the rational light of science on crime and criminals. “It may be that you are not yourself luminous,” he condescendingly tells Watson, “but you are a conductor of light” (8), implying that Holmes is the source of that luminosity. (One of his favourite words is elucidate, from the Latin ex = completely + lucidus = bright, clear.)” (p.66)
- Source: Degeneration, "Fin-de-Siècle" Gothic, and the Science of Detection: Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Hound of the Baskervilles" and the Emergence of the Modern Detective Story Author(s): Nils Clausson

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In this significant idea, Clausson draws a comparison between Holmes and science and light and enlightenment and progress. Holmes represents rationality, the rational light of science as Clausson puts it. And this light of science is used to dispel crime. It is used to dispel the darkness that suppresses Baskerville Hall. And Holmes becomes the embodiment of that kind of weapon, the weapon of science.

And Clausson points out that Holmes is associated with luminosity, light itself, the modern invention of light and Holmes very sarcastically points out that Watson is not bright himself, but he is useful in creating an opportunity for light to fall in. So he is the conductor of light and look at the language, the metaphor of science being used to describe the position and function of Watson in this domain, which is dominated by Holmes.

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Science and Supernatural



- "As a scientist, Holmes contemptuously rejects the supernatural explanation of Sir Charles's death- "I have hitherto confined my investigations to this world" (23)- and he dismisses the legend of the hound as of interest only to "a collector of fairy tales" (14). He scorns Mortimer's willingness to entertain a supernatural explanation for Sir Charles's death": (p.66)
- Source: Degeneration, "Fin-de-Siècle" Gothic, and the Science of Detection: Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Hound of the Baskervilles" and the Emergence of the Modern Detective Story Author(s): Nils Clausson

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Holmes is very, very clear when he rejects the possibility of the role of the supernatural in the death of Sir Charles Baskerville. He asserts that he is someone who confines his investigations to this world, to this material, temporal world and he rejects the theory of the hound, which is considered to have played a role in the death of Sir Charles Baskerville. And he says that such legends belong only to the narrative collection of fairy tales and he also dismisses Sir Mortimer's theory that perhaps there is a supernatural hand at the death of Sir Charles Baskerville. So Holmes, the scientific man, the luminous Holmes is dismissing the supernatural theory, the Gothic theory.

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Science and Supernatural



- "And you, a trained man of science, believe it to be supernatural?" (23), adding, "I see that you have quite gone over to the supernaturalists" (23). When Mortimer mentions the footprints left by Sir Charles on the gravel path where he stood smoking, Holmes exclaims: "If I had only been there! ... It is evidently a case of extraordinary interest, and one which presented immense opportunities to the scientific expert." (p.66)
- Source: Degeneration, "Fin-de-Siècle" Gothic, and the Science of Detection: Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Hound of the Baskervilles" and the Emergence of the Modern Detective Story Author(s): Nils Clausson

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"And you, a trained man of science, believe it to be supernatural?" adding, "I see that you have quite gone over to the supernaturalists." When Mortimer mentions the footprints left by Sir Charles on the gravel path where he stood smoking Holmes exclaims, "if I had only been there, it is evidently a case of extraordinary interest and one which presented immense opportunities to the scientific expert."

Once again, we see Holmes accusing Mortimer, who is a trained man of science to point out that how could a trained man of science be, someone who believes in the supernatural and he says, it is amazing to see that you have joined the group of supernaturalists. So Holmes is accusing a man of science here for paying attention to such stuff which belongs with the legends. And Mortimer points out the scene of crime and the evidence of the footprints and Homes exclaims that, if only he had been there, because this scene, this plot is something which offers extraordinary opportunities for the scientific expert and not for the supernaturalists. So once again, Holmes claims this domain for the scientific expert and rejects the role of the person who believes in the supernatural.

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Scientific use of the imagination



- “That gravel page upon which I might have read so much has been long ere this smudged by the rain and defaced by clogs of curious peasants.” (22) Holmes’s most passionate appeal to science occurs when, in response to Mortimer’s criticism that he is entering “into the region of guesswork,” Holmes replies, “Say, rather, into the region where we balance probabilities and choose the most likely. It is the scientific use of the imagination, but we have always some material basis on which to start our speculations” (33). The phrase “the scientific use of the imagination,” as Lawrence Frank has shown (338), is the title of an essay by the Victorian physicist and geologist John Tyndal (1820-93). By alluding to Tyndal’s essay, Holmes implies that he is doing in the science of detection what Tyndal did in physics and geology.” (67)
- Source: Degeneration, “Fin-de-Siècle” Gothic, and the Science of Detection: Arthur Conan Doyle’s “The Hound of the Baskervilles” and the Emergence of the Modern Detective Story Author(s): Nils Clausson

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“That gravel page upon which I might have read so much had been long ere this smudged by the rain and defaced by the clogs of curious peasants.” Holmes’s most passionate appeal to science occurs when in response to Mortimer’s criticism that he is entering into the region of guesswork Holmes replies, “say, rather, into the region where we balance probabilities and choose the most likely. It is the scientific use of the imagination, but we have always some material basis on which to start our speculations.” The phrase, the scientific use of the imagination, as Lawrence Frank has shown, is the title of the essay by the Victorian physicist and geologist, John Tyndal. By alluding to Tyndal’s essay, Holmes implies that he is doing in the science of detection, what Tyndal did in physics and geology.

Let us look at the first point here raised by Clausson. The first one is that Holmes is saddened to know that he cannot possibly go over the, that site, where the footprint had been originally there, because it had been removed by rain and the footsteps of curious peasants. Now that scene had been contaminated. And therefore, Holmes builds on his theory and it is very interesting to see that that theory is being attacked by Mortimer, who thinks that Holmes is entering the realm of guesswork because that scene is being contaminated.

And therefore, Holmes’s response by saying that, yes, I may be speculating, but there is always some kind of material basis on which to start his speculations. In fact, the idea that there is a kind

of a scientific use of the imagination is brought in, so there is the implication that science also relies on imagination at times to come in with better theories and far more plausible theories and Holmes's information about developments in science and technology and physics and geology informs the readers and those around him that his deduction is also a science which belongs with the different kinds of sciences that are being put together, categorized and that is very interesting the way in which Holmes sees his work as a scientific work. Of course, sometimes science relies on imagination, but it is science nevertheless.

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Scientific Use of the Imagination



- “But despite his claims to exemplify what he calls “the scientific use of the imagination,” Holmes's solution to the mystery of Sir Charles's death in fact shows little evidence of the use of science. Echoing a famous remark by Poe's Dupin, Holmes tells Watson, “The more outre” 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 [italics added] handled, the one which is most likely to elucidate it” (163). But Holmes has not scientifically examined and handled the mystery at all. His explanation gives only the illusion of a strictly scientific method.” (67-68)
- Source: Degeneration, "Fin-de-Siècle" Gothic, and the Science of Detection: Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Hound of the Baskervilles" and the Emergence of the Modern Detective Story Author(s): Nils Clausson

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Nils Clausson's point is here fantastic because he argues that the scientific basis of Holmes's theory and resolution is a bit shaky in terms of this particular novel *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. In fact, he points out that there is hardly any serious scientific examination of the

evidence and the clues left behind on the crime scene. And the point is that Holmes seems to depend more on the imagination part of this phrase, the scientific use of the imagination, in order to arrive at his solution to the death of Sir Charles's Baskerville.

So this point, the more I am extraordinary and out of the ordinary and grotesque and incident is the more it deserves to be studied. The point by Dickens is something that we have considered before. But it is interesting to revisit that idea to understand that even though Holmes emphasizes thorough examination of the scientific kind it is inevitable that in this particular instance, Holmes is relying more on the imagination to arrive at his solution.

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Scientific Use of the Imagination



- "Holmes's solution to the murder is almost as effortless-and as unscientific. As he boasts to Watson, "I had guessed at the criminal before ever we went to the West Country" (165)-the very thing that Mortimer had accused him of doing, but which Holmes had inflated into "the scientific use of the imagination." (67-68)
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So Clausson very pointedly illustrates here that Holmes had in fact arrived at the criminal even before he went down to Dartmoor, there had been a lot of guesswork and in, on Holmes's part. And he had been doing what Dr. Mortimer had been accusing him of doing. Therefore, the argument here is that the imagination comes way before the scientific examination. So

imagination is something which paves the way for scientific process to come in later. Therefore, Clausson argues that it is an effortless, an unscientific way of arriving at the solution to the problem on the part of Holmes in The Hound of Baskervilles.

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Gothic Landscape



- “Landscape plays an important role in Gothic fiction. Although the exotic late-medieval and Renaissance settings so beloved by authors such as [Ann Radcliffe](#) had given way to contemporary urban locations during the Victorian era, there was often still a place to be found for the lurking, eerie and sinister house in the middle of a desolate tract of countryside. As a means of evoking a sense of dread and unease, an isolated mansion in the midst of fog-shrouded moorland is difficult to beat.”
- Greg Buzwell, 2014
- <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/an-introduction-to-the-hound-of-the-baskervilles>

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Greg Buzwell points out that even though as the centuries progressed, the locations used by writers such as Ann Radcliffe have given way to more urban locations instead of medieval castles, we had a town houses as the locale in which the Gothic narratives were woven despite this kind of tendency to update the nature of the architecture and the domestic structure there was still a harking after, a demand for, a preference for a sinister house, a dangerous looking house, or run down house in a desolate landscape in the countryside.

The fog particularly is an added element that really intensifies the threat encoded in terms of that particular house in a desolate setting. So the moors, as we have also seen in the case of *Wuthering Heights* is particularly useful to communicate the desolateness of the mind of the society that can be found in that region. Therefore, a similar setup is exploited by Doyle in *The Hound of Baskervilles*.

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Gothic Landscape



- “During *The Hound of the Baskervilles* the move from sophisticated modern London to an elemental landscape of remote moorland is carefully described. Dr Watson and Sir Henry Baskerville travel down to Devon by train and, gazing through the window, Dr Watson observes how the landscape becomes richer and more luxuriant. On arrival at their station Dr Watson notes: ‘Rolling pasture lands curved upwards on either side of us, and old gabled houses peeped out from amid the thick green foliage, but behind the peaceful and sunlit countryside there rose ever, dark against the evening sky, the long gloomy curve of the moor, broken by the jagged and sinister hills’ (Chapter 6)”
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So, fantastic contrast that we get in this passage. If you look at this passage closely, we have several settings in place. One is the sophisticated urban world of London and the train seems to be the invention of science that seems to connect the various settings. We have London, the urban London, and then as they travel out of London and towards the countryside, they meet with rich pastures, green pastures, it symbolizes luxuriance, fertility and richness.

And when they arrive, they are struck by the peaceful and verde countryside. The houses seem very peaceful, there are rich lands, fertile lands on either side and yet there is one other setting that is further removed from the view which is that of the moors. And you can see the word gloomy appearing at the end of that statement, the gloomy curve. Earlier it had been pasture

lands, luxuriant, richer, spaces and now it is gloomy curve of the moor. And look at the word jagged and sinister, these are key words which at one suggests a gloominess of the mind, of the psyche, of the people inhabiting those regions. So we have the Gothic being gradually introduced into the setting, the gothic moors and the gloomy curves entering this space which is broken up by different kinds of ideas and entities.

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Gothic Hall



- “Baskerville Hall itself lurks ‘like a ghost’ at the far end of a ‘sombre tunnel’ of overarching branches (Chapter 6). The appearance of the house is unsettling, being an edifice that presents in its architecture an uneasy amalgamation between the ancient and the modern. This jarring sense of the old and new being placed side by side is another typical characteristic of Gothic fiction.”

- Greg Buzwell, 2014

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“Baskerville Hall itself looks like a ghost at the far end of a sombre tunnel of overarching branches. The appearance of the house is unsettling, being an edifice that presents in its architecture an uneasy amalgamation between the ancient and the modern. This jarring sense of the old and new being placed side by side is another typical characteristic of Gothic fiction.”

The very word ghost is used to describe Baskerville Hall. And sombre is another word, melancholic, something that is not very dark, but gloomy melancholic, the idea of grays, the color tone of gray comes into the picture. And even the overarching branches are gloomy in appearance. And the house that we have been discussing all along is as we know a combination, a hybrid of the ancient and the modern. One can see the connections between the past and the present in terms of the way in which the house is being modernized or updated.

This edifice from the past is being updated with the help of modernity, with the help of science. And the overall sense, the jarring sense as Buzwell points out, there is a sense of disjunction, there is a sense of rupture. There is friction in the combination that we find in terms of the edifice of Baskerville Hall and the coexistence, the cheek by jowl coexistence of Baskerville Hall's attributes and characteristics is symbolic as well because that ties in neatly with the ideology of the Gothic narrative, the Gothic mood, which brings together in a conflicting manner, the ideas of the past and the present.

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Gothic Hall



- “The whole front was draped in ivy, with a patch clipped bare here and there where a window or a coat-of-arms broke through the dark veil. From this central block rose the twin towers, ancient, crenelated and pierced with many loopholes. To right and left of the turrets were more modern wings of black granite. A dull light shone through heavy mullioned windows, and from the high chimneys which rose from the steep, high-angled roof there sprang a single black column of smoke’ (Chapter 6)”
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Now let us look at the description of the hall. “The whole front was draped in ivy, with a patch of clipped bare here and there, where a window or a coat of arms broke through the dark veil. From the central block rose the twin towers, ancient, crenelated pierced with many loopholes. To right and left of the turrets were more modern wings of blank granite. A dull light shone through heavy mullioned windows, and from the high chimneys which rose from the steep, high angled roof there sprang a single black column of smoke.”

The hall is covered in ivy, particularly the front part of the hall. And it is an interesting setting for the hall. If something is covered, especially in the front, there is a sense that it is being smothered or suffocated and especially the entrance is fully covered in ivy, except for patches here and there where the ivy is removed.

And even in the description, we get the sense that the hall is being veiled. Look at the use of the word dark veil. And the word dark veil, the phrase dark veil is used time and again in Gothic narratives in different contexts to suggest mystery, to suggest a kind of incarceration, to suggest the limits to one's personal freedom. Therefore, one gets a sense that all is not well with this hall too. And we have the towers it is, in the hall and it immediately takes us back to the traditional gothic halls which are castles in fact.

And look at the word towers crenelated, crenelated means battlements. So there is a sense of a fortress like impression for the readers when they read this description. And yet there are modern elements there in the structure. There are wings of black granite. So in addition to the towers, the ancient towers and battlements, we have the modern wings made up of constructed with black granite.

And there is a partition, heavily mullioned windows. And then, there is a single column of smoke. So there is an element of desolation. When you see the single column of smoke, gray smoke coming out of the house and it is set in a very isolated landscape as well. So this hall is primarily giving off a sense of bleakness.

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Gloomy Mansions



- “The gloomy mansion has an illustrious history in Gothic Fiction with Thornfield Hall from [Jane Eyre](#) (1847), Wuthering Heights from [Emily Bronte's novel of the same name](#) and Bartram-Haugh from Sheridan Le Fanu's novel *Uncle Silas* (1864) being among the most remarkable of the many examples.”
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So we have seen how the gloomy mansions are put to great use in Gothic fiction. In fact, the hall becomes a narrative element in the plot trajectory as we have seen in the case of Jane Eyre, even in the case of Wuthering Heights.

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The Gothic Curse

- “During the novel the past weighs heavily upon many of the characters. The curse of the Baskervilles which haunts the family line is first presented in a manuscript dating from 1742, and relates how the depraved activities of Sir Hugo Baskerville, and his drunken attempts to rape a young woman, result in his having his throat torn out by a gigantic hound. This sense of past family guilt being played out through subsequent generations is a common theme in Gothic fiction. A key way in which this is often represented is via the gloomy family portrait that, although showing the features of a distant ancestor, bears an uncanny resemblance to a present-day descendant.”
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The Gothic curse is also an important trope of Gothic narratives. In other words, the curse appears as an element of the past which continues to haunt the present characters and inhabitant of that society. In the context of the haunt of Baskervilles there is also a curse and it dates back to 1742 to the 18th century and there is an ancestor of the Baskerville family called Sir Hugo, who had attempted to assault a young woman. And for this crime, he was brutally murdered by a gigantic hound. And this guilty past is turned into a curse which seems to haunt all the generations of this family.

So you can see how the past is continuing to haunt the present by its presence in a narrative, in the narrative of the curse which is handed down across generation, but seems to kind of follow

the footsteps of all the heirs to this family. So this is important in the Gothic narratives. We have seen Gothic curses previously, too, especially in relation to *The Moonstone* where we have seen how the diamond brings a curse with it to the family of Rachel Verinder, how the possessor is supposed to be cursed. So that Gothic trope is present in a different form here in *The Hound of Baskervilles* too. So this is a common theme in Gothic fiction. And the point is that the curse is a figment of the past, which is haunting on the present and the future generations.

Now, how is this materialized. It is materialized shown in narratives through the gloomy family portrait. The picture of the ancestor is usually present in the hall, house, castle. And one can see the past being literalized through this kind of structure such as the portrait. And there is a resemblance between this past ancestor and the present descendant. So thus we see a strong bond being connected between the people of the past and the present.

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