

**The Popular Gothic Novel**  
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**Lecture 50**  
**Gothic Crime and Mythical Subtexts**

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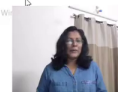


## Week 10: The Hound of Baskervilles

Lecture 10E: Gothic Crime and Mythical Subtexts



Image source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Hound\\_of\\_the\\_Baskervilles#/media/File:Houn-54-The\\_Hound\\_killed\\_by\\_Holmes.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Hound_of_the_Baskervilles#/media/File:Houn-54-The_Hound_killed_by_Holmes.jpg)



Hello and welcome to Week 10's lectures on *The Hound of Baskervilles*. In today's session, I am going to continue the discussion on the nature of Gothic crime and the mythical subtexts of this novel.

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### The Gothic Curse

- “This idea of hereditary traits being passed from generation to generation plays a crucial role in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* – it is the similarity between a portrait of Sir Hugo Baskerville, the villainous ancestor with whom the curse originates, and one of the present-day characters in the novel that enables Holmes to solve the mystery.”
- Greg Buzwell, 2014
- <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/an-introduction-to-the-hound-of-the-baskervilles>



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Let us talk about the Gothic Curse. “The idea of hereditary traits being passed from generation to generation plays a crucial role in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. It is the similarity between a portrait of Sir Hugo Baskerville, the villainous ancestor with whom the curse originates and one of the present-day characters in the novel that enables Holmes to solve the mystery.”

We saw in the previous session, how the curse, the family curse is an important element of the Gothic mode. This curse connects the past with the present. One of the ancestors of the present-day character or characters passes on the problematic heritage from the previous years to the present. And something similar happens in *The Hound of Baskervilles* too. The curse originates with Sir Hugo Baskerville. It originates in the 18th century. Sir Hugo becomes the villainous ancestor who was passing on the hereditary problem onto his descendant.

And in this novel, Holmes arrives at the resolution, at the solution to the Gothic crime by figuring out the resemblance between Sir Hugo and one of the present-day descendants of this ancestor. So Holmes is sharp enough to work out the similarity between the past and the present.

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## Inevitability of the past

- “The novel also highlights our inability to escape the past in other ways. The fugitive murderer Selden, for example, hides out on the moors in one of the many prehistoric stone dwellings that litter the landscape. This pairing of the criminal and the primitive early settlers in the area emphasises how our frequently violent and ancestry occasionally reemerges in the present. The broken remains of the stone dwellings also act as a reminder of how previous attempts to tame the landscape have often ended in failure.”
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emphasizes how our frequently violent and ancestry occasionally reemergence, reemerges in the present. The broken remains of the stone dwellings also act as a reminder of how previous attempts to tame the landscape have often ended in failure.”

There are plenty of significant points in this passage, in this critical passage by Greg Buzwell. Buzwell is trying to establish the connection between the setting, in which the murderer who is wandering in the moors is hiding and the idea of the past.

Now, the point being drawn here is that the criminal is associated with primitivism. The criminal is found in primitive or prehistoric domains or settings. And it is also very interesting to see how Dartmoor itself becomes somehow primitive, somehow removed from the present in some sense, removed from the urbane sophisticated landscape of London.

And further, Buzwell points out that the broken remains of the early settlers is an indication that it had been difficult for humans to tame the landscape. And the larger significance one can draw is that people like Holmes attempt to tame mythical subtext legends, but ultimately there is an element of failure associated with such attempts.

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## Gothic Trope and Modernity



- “The landscape even becomes a metaphor for the inexplicable in the modern world. As Dr Watson observes: ‘Life has become like that great Grimpen Mire, with little green patches everywhere into which one may sink and with no guide to point the track’ (Chapter 7). Holmes’s ability to solve the case may be regarded as a triumph for the modern world over the realms of mystery and superstition, but in a sense the larger mystery into the nature of criminality and evil remains, disturbingly, just beyond the limits of our knowledge and understanding.”
- Greg Buzwell, 2014
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Buzwell here points out how the landscape, space itself, this primitive space, this isolated space, this bleak space becomes a symbol of the problematic modernity itself and very usefully Watson compares life to this great Grimpen Mire. And it is very difficult to find once way in this Mire, if one sings, because there is no lodestone drop, there is no direction, there is no guide, there is no help to the right track.

Now the initial attempts at solving the mystery and Holmes's inability to solve the case initially, maybe regarded as the triumph of mystery, as the triumph of the gothic world over the modern world, the triumph of the past over the present.

And further, we understand that our inability to make sense of criminal minds, the criminal psyche, the nature of evil itself is a massive challenge to knowledge and modernity after all despite all one's expertise in the worlds of scientific knowledge, it is not easy to find out one, one's proclivity towards evil.

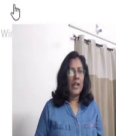
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## Gothic Elements



- "Doyle's moor mirrors an additional element that adds to the fantasy atmosphere - the gothicness of the story. Kathleen Spencer contends that gothic tales are "the first fantastic fictions" (200), for they provide "a textual confrontation of two models of reality" (199). Todorov would argue that the gothic elements in *The Hound* place the work in the "fantastic uncanny" since the "events that seem supernatural throughout a story receive a rational explanation at its end" " P.140
- Source: "Eliminate All Other Factors": Fantastic Hesitation in Arthur Conan "Doyle's Hound of the Baskervilles" Author(s): John Pennington Source: *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, Spring 2005, Vol. 15, No. 2 (58) (Spring 2005), pp. 132-143

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We have been discussing how the landscape is contributing to the Gothic atmosphere of this novel. So the gothicness is constructed by the moors, the Dartmoor itself. Kathleen Spencer a critic, argues that the Gothic narratives are in the first place, are fantastic fictions. Firstly, because they bring an element of fantasy, an unreal perspective to the narrative. In fact, there is this real world and there is this fantastic world and when they clash, things become complex.

Todorov argues that *The Hound* could be placed in the context of the fantastic uncanny. Uncanny is a useful word to analyze the Gothic mode, because in the Gothic narrative, the real world takes on a suddenly a strange perspective and Gothic fiction suggest the hound the apparently strange things become rationally explicable at the end. So the real becomes unreal, the unreal becomes real. And this kind of treatment is interesting to look at, to study the nature of the Gothic.

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## Gothic Elements



“And, indeed, Doyle's novel does do this, but only if we believe wholeheartedly in the logical reasoning of Holmes. When we combine the gothic and fantastic elements, we are left with a much more ambiguous text, one that embraces explanation and mystery. Spencer defines the "urban gothic" as "that modern version of the fantastic marked by its dependence on empiricism and the discourse of science" (219). "To be modern," continues Spencer, "also means that science is the metaphor that rules human interactions with the universe, so the new fantastic adopts the discourse of empiricism even to describe and manipulate supernatural phenomena”

- P.140
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The argument here is that there is the world of reason, and there is the world of mystery and both are conflicted in *The Hound of Baskervilles*. Kathleen Spencer's analysis is used to throw a light on the way the Gothic functions in Doyle's *The Hound of Baskervilles*.

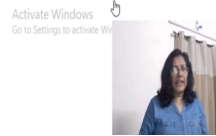
According to Spencer, the urban Gothic is a Gothic where the fantastic, the other worldly, the uncanny, the strange domain depends for its functioning on the world of empiricism or the world of science. So science is absolutely important to structure the fantastic. In fact, even to describe and manipulate the supernatural phenomenon. So there is a very, very close association between the discourse of empiricism, the language of empiricism, the subject of empiricism and the world of the Gothic, the darker, the gloomier, the bleak world.

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## The family ghost

- "The Hound appropriates the urban gothic to add further texture to the fantastic elements that resonate throughout the narrative. The climactic scene in the novel revolves around Holmes's killing of the real hound that Stapleton has unleashed on Henry Baskerville. Real bullets kill a real dog, and Holmes is able to conclude that "we've laid the family ghost once and for ever"".
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The novel by Doyle exploits the urban Gothic to intensify the world of the fantasy in this particular novel. The fantastic elements that resonates in this novel on the basis of this discourse of empiricism. The climax to this novel happens when Stapleton uses a real dark, a real hound to attack Henry Baskerville. And the dog is killed by a real bullet and the world of empiricism, real tangible concrete scientific knowledge and equipment are used to lay the family ghost down for ever. So you can see how empiricism apparently dominates this world of mystery.

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## The Gothic Hound

- "Watson describes the flesh-and-blood hound as "a terrible creature. ... It was not a pure bloodhound and it was not a pure mastiff; but it appeared to be a combination of the two - gaunt, savage, and as large as a small lioness. Even now, in the stillness of death, the huge jaws seemed to be dripping with a bluish flame, and the small deep-set, cruel eyes were ringed with fire" .
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“Watson describes the flesh and blood hound as a terrible creature. It was not a pure bloodhound, it was not a pure mastiff, but it appeared to be a combination of the two gaunt savage and as large as a small lioness. Even now in the stillness of death, the huge jaws seemed to be dripping with the bluish flame and small, deep-set, cruel eyes were ringed with fire.”

This is a fantastic description of this hound. The monstrous creature in this novel and Watson's since language is very useful for us to get a visceral picture of this creature. And Watson points out that it is not a pure bloodhound or a pure mastiff. It is not one thing, it is not from one single breed, you can see this hybrid context for the origin of this hound and that in itself is telling. It does not seem like a hound, it in fact seems like a small lioness.

So you can see once again a conflation of attributes of two different creatures. And even when it is dead, it seems to be alive with a blood thirstiness. And that thirstiness is not from a biological domain. In fact, one can see a bluish flame dripping from its mouth and its eyes seem to be full of fire, ringed with fire. So you can see a variety of forces scientific, the natural, the biological being used to orchestrate a very, very frightening creature that has associations with the hell.

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## Mythic Hound

- "The glow is merely phosphorous, nothing more, so Holmes seems right - the ghost of the legend is put to rest, explained away. That Inspector Lestrade is on the scene is further proof of the rational explanation. But Watson's description of the dead dog as a "terrible creature" that is neither bloodhound or mastiff makes the real creature somewhat otherworldly, further reminding the reader of Hugo Baskerville's death by the supposed mythic hound.
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We understand that the bluish flame dripping from the mouth of the hound is just phosphorous and it is nothing more than that. And this apparently hellish creature seems to be explained away in a rational manner for the presence of the inspector on the crime scene is also an indication that this entire plot, the crime plot is being neatly tied-up and explained away with the help of structures of power. But despite all these elements of science and power represented by Holmes and inspector Lestrade whose job is to kind of participate in this discourse of crime in such a way to neatly explain all the cues and the details.

Despite all these kinds of structures we understand from Watson's description that this dead dog is or was a horrible, frightening creature. And further, the fact that it belongs to neither one particular entity, neither mastiff or bloodhound, it does not seem to be just a mere dog. It is fierce like a lioness, and it has all these apparently inexplicable flames and brings a fire associated with its appearance.

With all these kinds of suggestive, descriptive epithets, there is a sense that this creature does belong to the other world. And there is a suggestion that perhaps Hugo Baskerville was really killed off this ancestral figure from whom the curse originated did perhaps die at the jaws of this myth hound.

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## Grimpen Mire



- "As Holmes and Watson pursue Stapleton into the mire, Watson again personifies the bog as a place that with "its tenacious grip plucked at our heels as we walked, and when we sank into it it was as if some malignant hand was tugging us down into those obscure depths, so grim and purposeful was the clutch in which it held us"
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Again, a very, very suggestive passage in the novel, the Baskervilles. We see how Holmes and Watson chase the criminals Stapleton who runs into the mire and Watson and Holmes follow him. And Watson’s description is fantastic because he communicates to the readers the sense of being sucked into Grimpen Mire.

And he says how we sank into it and it was not just an element of nature. The bog was not just an element of nature, it is as if some really evil, vicious hand was plunking tugging us down, bringing us further into the depths of that grim and purposeful place and his language seems to tell us that there is a mind. There is a functioning brain behind that organic space.

And Watson further points out that the space seemed to kind of hold the prisoner. So again, this kind of description strengthens or intensifies the gothic mode and antenna of this narrative.

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## Mythic Subtext



- "They never capture Stapleton, losing sight of his footsteps: "But no slightest sign of them [foot- steps] ever met our eyes. If the earth told a true story, then Stapleton never reached that island of refuge towards which he struggled through the fog upon that last night. Somewhere in the heart of the great Grimpen Mire, down in the foul slime of the huge morass which had sucked him in, this cold and cruel-hearted man is for ever buried" (156). Stapleton vanishes at the end, we are assume to his death, but there is no real material proof that he is dead, further reinforcing the mythic subtext that begins the novel."
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Again, this is a very interesting argument made by John Pennington whose ideas I have been discussing for the past half hour. In this set of ideas, Pennington argues an interesting theory in the absence of the footsteps of Stapleton. We have seen how Holmes and Watson chase Stapleton, and he enters the bog Grimpen Mire to escape them. And he hopes to reach a particular island of refuge. And Watson seems to be convinced that he never survived, he never escaped.

In fact, Watson's argument is that he was buried in that foul slime, in that great Grimpen Mire. And this seems to be a perfect end, a fitting end for this cold and really cruel-hearted man. And yet, and yet, since there are no footprints, since there are no evidence to argue that this man really died. There is no body, there is no concrete proof to point out that he is, in fact, buried in this Grimpen Mire. There is also a further sense that perhaps he had escaped, perhaps he is alive, perhaps he had survived. And this survival possibly reinforces the mythic subtext, the possibility of the legends arriving.

So it is a fantastic argument. It is an interesting argument made by John Pennington that seems to strengthen the world of the supernatural, the world of the spirit.

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## Baskerville Curse



- "Now Stapleton is part of the Baskerville curse, haunting the moor with the demonic hound. In the final chapter, "A Retrospection," Holmes fully controls the narrative, explaining the details of Stapleton's plan: Stapleton used a trained dog to scare Sir Charles to death and to do away with Sir Henry. Holmes' solution, from a detective narrative standpoint makes sense, but it seems somewhat anti-climatic, seems too probable, too mundane and commonplace - downright inadequate - for the story that the reader has witnessed. Holmes's solution is just too tidy."
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It is to be remembered that Stapleton is a key part of that Baskerville curse. And in the certainty that Stapleton is dead or in the absence of that certainty, that Stapleton is dead. Then, there is a possibility that the haunting seems to continue, that the haunting could possibly continue, that the demonic hound could be visiting the moors again. In the final chapter, we see that Holmes is trying to explain away everything with utter logic.

He tells the readers who are following the narrative as well as his audience that Stapleton used a trained dog to scare Sir Charles to death who had a weak heart, and therefore he collapsed at the site of this really frightening demonic hound. And according to Pennington here the narrative makes too much of a sense. It is in fact, anti-climactic in his point of view, and he says that the explanations are too mundane, too ordinary and too inadequate. There is a lack of sufficiency in establishing certainty.

And he finally says that everything seems to be too neat and orderly in the explanation, in the logical explaining away of things by Holmes.

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## Baskerville Curse



- Holmes's solution is just too tidy. The reader may feel cheated by having the fantastic made commonplace. Yet questions still remain: What do we make of the cursed hound of the Baskerville legend? What killed Hugo, if not this hound? What of the Grimpen mire and the bog and fog that permeates it?"
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In fact, he says that the reader may feel cheated by having the fantastic made commonplace. Yet questions still remain, what do we make of the cursed hound of the Baskerville legend? What killed Hugo, if not this hound? What of the Grimpen Mire and the bog and fog that permeates it?

After this long narrative, this central chunk of the story, which is dominated by supernatural stuff, the legend of the bloodhound, this kind of explanation seems to be a bit of a letdown, according to the perspective of John Pennington. In fact, the reader might be slightly disappointed by the way things have been explained away, despite there is on the other hand, we have questions which seem to proliferate.

If this dog did not kill Hugo, then, which hound did, in fact, do away with him, why did we have the legend in the first place? What if we make of the Grimpen Mire? What does it represent? Is it literal? Is it a manifestation of the evil, what about the fog that kind of permeates and cloaks it?

So these are some other questions that seem to be unanswered at the end of the narrative of the Hound of Baskervilles.

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## Crime and Myth



- "Holmes's pedestrian story - the what of the crime, the solution - is at odds with Watson's fantastic narrative - the plot, the how of the narrative. The reader tends to hesitate over accepting Holmes's solution about the immediate crime that also projects a solution to the overall Baskerville curse that has mysteriously haunted the area since 1742. The reader intuitively believes that Holmes's solution is the right one for these particular recent crimes, but the reader hesitates over extending that solution as a way to debunk the ancient myth."
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Pennington makes a distinction between the narrative of Holmes and that of Watson and calls Holmes's narrative pedestrian, commonplace, ordinary, mundane. And he describes Watson as the fantastic one, the exciting one as well.

The reader is hesitant according to Pennington to accept the explanation of Holmes because the Baskerville curse seems to have haunted, seems to have been around since 1742, since the 18th century. The reader could buy Holmes's theory intuitively for the present crimes for the recent crimes. But Pennington argues that it becomes difficult for the reader to extend this solution to as far back as 1742.

So it becomes difficult for the readers to reject the ancient myth, to reject the legend of this hound. And that by implication means that the world of mystery cannot be brushed aside.

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## Materialist and Spiritualist



- "on the one hand, Doyle, as the creator of Holmes, is a scientific materialist, bent on the logical art of deduction. On the other hand, Doyle, as a spiritualist, believes in otherworldly phenomena. This tension in Doyle's world view becomes artistically realized in his greatest Holmes full-length detective novel The Hound of the Baskervilles (1902)."
- P.133
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From reading of Doyle's biography, we understand that Doyle was both a man of science as well as a man who believed in the world of the spirits. He had one foot in science, the other foot in the

domain of the supernatural. So that kind of tension that co-existed in Doyle's personality is reflected in *The Hound of Baskervilles* too.

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