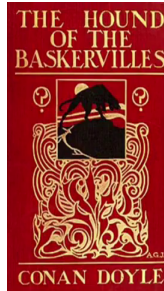


The Popular Gothic Novel
Professor Dr. Divya A
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras
Lecture 51
Gothic Evil

(Refer Slide Time: 00:11)



Week 10: The Hound of Baskervilles

Lecture 10F: Gothic Evil

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 The Hound of Baskervilles. In today's session, I am going to discuss the nature of Gothic Evil. And this lecture session on this novel will draw together in the manner of a summary, the key point of this particular analysis on The Hound of Baskervilles.

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Gothic and Evolutionary Biology



- "James Mortimer, Holmes's client in The Hound of the Baskervilles, is no ordinary general practitioner. Consulting the Medical Directory, Watson finds him to be the author of several learned essays: 'Is Disease a Reversion?', winner of the Jackson Prize for Comparative Pathology, and 'Some Freaks of Atavism' and 'Do We Progress?', published in The Lancet and Journal of Psychology respectively. It thus hardly seems fair for Holmes to characterise him as a mere 'country doctor'. Mortimer's publication history is highly revealing, both about his own scientific world view and that of the novel. Keywords in the essays' titles - 'reversion', 'atavism' and 'progress' - clearly indicate that these are investigations in evolutionary biology."
- P.169
- Chapter Title: Do We Progress? Book Title: The Case of Sherlock Holmes Book Subtitle: Secrets and Lies in Conan Doyle's Detective Fiction Book Author(s): Andrew Glazzard Published by: Edinburgh University Press Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/10.3366/j.ctv7h0vt4.22>

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In the previous lecture discussion as well, we saw how Dr. Mortimer, the doctor who hires Holmes to through light on the mystery at Baskervilles Hall is a man who is deeply interested in pathology and in evolutionary biology. It is important for us to reinforce the notion that Mortimer’s study is concerned with analysing the nature of evolutionary biology and the important words in his essays, such as reversion, atavism and progress are concepts, which are preoccupying the minds of not only the doctors, but also people in general.

And this preoccupation reveals the anxieties of the society about evolution and the question that keeps surfacing time and again is, is human species reverting, are its quality, some of its qualities atavistic in nature, is progression genuinely a progress towards better civilisational value? So these are some of the questions that haunt the psyche of the century when it is going to move into a different time period.

(Refer Slide Time: 03:24)

Gothic Crime



- “The convicted murderer Selden, being sheltered on Dartmoor after his escape from Princeton by his sister and brother-in-law, is glimpsed by Watson and Sir Henry Baskerville: ‘there was thrust out an evil yellow face, a terrible animal face, all seamed and scored with vile passions. Foul with mire, with a bristling beard, and hung with matted hair, it might well have belonged to one of those old savages who dwelt in the burrows on the hill-sides. The light beneath him was reflected in his small, cunning eyes, which peered fiercely to right and left through the darkness, like a crafty and savage animal who has heard the steps of the hunters’.”
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The light beneath him was reflected in his small cunning eyes, which peered fiercely to right and left through the darkness, like a crafty and savage animal who has heard the steps of the hunters.’”

This passage tells us a lot about the physical appearance of the murderer Selden who is a haunting the moors of Dartmoor. His physical description is very, very interesting, because the words that detail his appearance also imply the evil nature of this particular prisoner who had escaped from the clutches of the law.

Look at the choice of words he used to describe this murderer Selden. Yellow is interesting, yellow complexion, suggesting not white, not perhaps belonging genuinely to the race of Great Britain. You can also notice the choice of the word animal face. Selden does not seem to be human. He is more animal than human. So that seems to be the indication of the choice of words he used to sketch out this character. He is dirty and he is not cleaned up. He has a bristling beard and look at the hair, which is uncombed, it is matted.

And this figure, Selden could almost be one of the primitive race of human beings. He could be savage, not part of the current civilisational society. He could as well live in the warrens and burrows on the hillsides. He could live just like the animal, which hides in the hillsides. And his eyes are cunning.

Look at the choice of the word again here, cunning eyes and it is shifty as well. The eyes seemed to look here and there in the darkness. And there is villainy suggested, there is savagery suggested, and he looks like an animal, which is hunted by the hunters. So the important point here for us to notice is the connection between the savage nature of Selden.

And the point here discussed in relation to Mortimer's essays, the possibility that human beings are reverting to an earlier primitive stage. And Selden seems to be an embodiment of that kind of atavism, that kind of regression.

So this novel participates in this discussion between progression and regression and there is a Gothic subtext to the fear that human beings are going backward in time, in terms of civilisational characteristics.

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Gothic Strain



- “Here is living, biological proof that answers the question posed in the title of Mortimer’s essay, ‘Do We Progress?’ Selden is evidence of atavism, biological reversion to lower forms of life, signalled by the label of ‘animal’ being applied to him twice in three sentences. Importantly, Watson suggests he is a reversion in time as well as in development, to an age of ‘savages’ and humans as hunter-gatherers. But Selden is not the only instance of biological atavism in the novella. Collectively, the various Baskervilles we meet or hear about demonstrate that immorality is genetically inherited: the villainous Stapleton is, we discover, an alias used by the son of Rodger Baskerville, the ‘black sheep of the family’ and scion ‘of the old, masterful Baskerville strain’ (23)”.
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Andrew Glazzard points out that Selden is not just an indication. Selden is not just an indication of a reversion to the world of the savages. He is crucially a symbol of the time period in which humans lived as hunter gatherers. So it is both a quality, the reversion is both a quality, the nature of behaviour as well as to a previous historical time period.

Further, Andrew Glazzard points out that this kind of reversion is not just biological reversion, there is a moral atavism, an immorality also, which is an indication of this kind of

reversion to the primitive state. And he points to the character of the villainous Stapleton, who is in fact the son of Rodger Baskerville and Stapleton had been suppressing his connection to the family in order to get at the property by ulterior means.

And eventually it is revealed to us that he is the son of Rodger Baskerville who is the black sheep in the family, a bad character, a wastrel. And he continues that gothic curse that we discussed in the previous session. So this quality, this morally problematic character is being passed on to the heirs of the Baskerville family and Stapleton inherits that.

(Refer Slide Time: 10:12)

Baskerville Villany



- “This suggests that this Rodger was the heir of the ‘wild, profane, and godless’ (11) Hugo Baskerville’s villainy, an impression supported by the recurrence of the names Hugo and Rodger in the Baskerville family line. Stapleton’s true identity becomes clear to Holmes and Watson in one of the novella’s most brilliant coups de théâtre, when they contemplate a portrait of Hugo Baskerville: Holmes conceals Hugo’s hat with his arm and Watson records his amazement: ‘The face of Stapleton had sprung out of the canvas’ (139).”
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Rodger Baskerville is heir to Hugo Baskerville and we know that Hugo Baskerville is the figure who originated the Gothic curse, so that villainy is a family heirloom that is being passed on from one generation to the other. And that kind of passing on of certain characteristics is reflected in terms of the choice of names such as Hugo and Rodger. And this

kind of passing down of these qualities, problematic moral qualities also connects to the point about evolution in terms of civilisational characteristics.

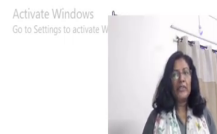
So there is a reversion, going back in time to the nature of the villainous ancestor Hugo Baskerville. So that connection is something we need to remember as well. A curse does not really come down, is not just hunted down. It is also a mirroring of a previous age and a mirroring of the previous ancestor.

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Gothic Fiction



- “This moment echoes the spectral portraits of Gothic fictions such as The Castle of Otranto (1764), but it also offers a vivid metaphor of the past intruding on the present. Holmes explains that Stapleton is ‘an interesting instance of a throw-back’ (139), a genetic reversion, but he also suggests the re-emergence of the ancient past in the modern present.”
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Now, how do we get at the connection between Hugo Baskerville and Charles Stapleton? So here, Holmes does something amazing, he performs a theatrical trick of sorts when he hides Hugo's hat with his arm. And in the absence of that particular part of the outfit, Watson immediately records his surprise because he could see the face of Stapleton springing, emerging from the canvas.

“This moment echoes the spectral portrait of Gothic fiction such as the Castle of Otranto published in 1764, but it also offers a vivid metaphor of the past intruding on the present. Holmes explains that Stapleton is an interesting instance of a throwback, a generic reversion, but he also suggests the re-emergence of the ancient past in the modern present.”

Now, the element of the portrait is an important Gothic trope. Spectral portraits are also found in novels such as the Castle of Otranto and the significations are the ones, which occupy us here at this moment.

Now, the portrait and the values of the figure which are present in the now, the portrait representing the past and the contemporary figure representing the moral values of the past are the qualities which baffles us and which also problematises the concept of evolutionary biology, because we understand that this kind of recurrence, the re-emergence of the values of the past is a genetic reversion as well so the past is continuing, but also the past is re-emerging, re-appearing.

So there are multiple ways in which you can approach the point about this re-emergence. So the past is in the present. The past is not completely eliminated in the present. So there are multiple trajectories that are complicating the progression of time and values.

(Refer Slide Time: 14:34)

Different Forces



- “The novella presents a stark and highly ideological distinction between the forces of progress and civilisation, and the forces of primeval disorder. The former comprise Holmes, Watson, Mortimer and the American Sir Henry Baskerville, whose first words on seeing the gloomy ancestral home is to promise illumination from ‘a thousand-candle-power Swan and Edison right here in front of the hall door’ (57).”
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Domains of progress



- "The domain of progress is London, with its modern hotels, art galleries, steam engines and hansom cabs, post and messenger offices, shops selling exotic tobacco and Ordnance Survey maps, and newspapers carrying articles on free trade".
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We understand from a discussion of this novel, that Holmes is associated with elimination, with light, with ratiocination, with enlightenment. And in addition to Holmes, we have Watson, Mortimer and the American figure Sir Henry Baskerville representing this domain of values and ideas. And Baskerville's words that he is going to light-up the front of the hall door is symbolic in that context, because he wants to bring light where there is a great gloom and doom.

And we know that the Dartmoor, the setting, the isolated setting, the bleak nature of that landscape are part and parcel of the Gothic paraphernalia, which has its own set of ideas and ideologies.

"The domain of progress is London, with its more than hotels, art galleries, steam engines and hansom cabs, post and messenger offices, shops selling exotic tobacco and Ordnance Survey maps and newspapers carrying articles on free trade." So what is the space of progress and modernity? Modernity is represented by hotels, all these museums, engine, steam engines, and train stations, cabs, and post offices. And all these aspects of trade, selling a range of items, including survey maps, maps that map out spaces and newspaper articles about trade, about free trades.

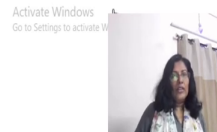
So these are some of the elements of progress, which are present in the world of London, but which are apparently absent in the dark and Gothic atmosphere of Dartmoor.

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Primal Terrors



- "On the side of primeval disorder are Stapleton, Selden and the hound itself. First presented to us from the pages of the eighteenth-century manuscript, the hound haunts the imagination of Sir Charles Baskerville and, according to Stapleton, the inhabitants of Grimpen and its environs. Although its spectral reappearance is the result of a very modern application of phosphorescent paint, that is not how it appears to Inspector Lestrade, who throws himself onto the ground in fright, or Watson, for whom the spectacle conjures up primal terrors".
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So we have seen the domain of urbanity, modernity, light and progress, which includes Holmes, Watson, Mortimer and Hugo Baskerville. On the other side, in the opposite side, in the world of primeval disorder and Gothic problematics are Stapleton, the villain, Selden, the murderer and the hound itself, the hell-hound, the hound, which is apparently after the heirs of Baskerville hall.

Where did we first meet the hound? We meet the hound first on the pages of that manuscript, that 18th century manuscript and the hound seem to inhabit and haunt that particular space of Grimpen Mire and its surrounding areas.

Now the hound reappears in a very modern version and how does it reappear through the application of phosphorus that chemical element, which makes that hound that creature more terrible to the combination of legend and chemistry makes this monstrous truly apparent and frightening. And that is what shocks Charles Baskerville into dying.

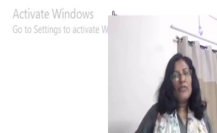
So when inspector Lestrade meets with this creature, he just cannot face that kind of appearance of that kind of creature and he falls to the ground in fright. And even for Watson, this image of the hound is full of primitive terrors.

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Savage Hound



- “Never in the delirious dream of a disordered brain could anything more sav-age, more appalling, more hellish, be conceived than that dark form and savage face which broke upon us out of the wall of fog’ (150-1). Again, Watson repeats a keyword: the hound is savage in more than one sense. It is a legacy – at least in the imagination of those who witness it – of an uncivilised age.”
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“Never in the delirious dream of a disordered brain could anything more savage, more appalling, more hellish, be conceived than that dark form and savage face, which broke upon us out of the wall of fog. Again, Watson repeats a keyword, the hound is savage in more than one sense. It is a legacy, at least in the imagination of those who witness it of an uncivilised age.”

The hound in the words of Watson is something that is unbearable to look at, it is terribly hellish. And it is something that comes from that darkness and his face is completely savage. And it emerges from that wall of mist and fog. And the key point here is that the repetition of the word savage is important, because the hound seems to belong to a primitive age to a prehistoric time.

And the word savage is used in the context of the murderer as well. Selden as we just saw, so this hound is something that is passed down just as the Gothic curse was passed down. And the reappearance is a kind of restoration of the past in the present or marking of the continuation of the past in the present, or the re-emergence of the past taking the present to the previous world, to a previous time period. So ultimately, what we understand is that how

it represents a lack of civilisation. It represents an uncivilised age, a primeval age, a prehistoric time.

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Powers of evil



- “The domain of these forces of disorder comprises both Baskerville Hall, an ‘ancient’ (56) ivy-covered Gothic pile with sombre yew-lined avenues, rafters of ‘age-blackened oak’ (58), unlit passageways and venerable and occasionally spectral portraits of Sir Henry’s ancestors – it is another of the many versions of the House of Usher that we can find in the Holmes saga – and the moor itself, a place where, the legend tells us, ‘the powers of evil are exalted’ during the hours of dark-ness (14).”
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What is the nature of the hall, the Baskerville Hall? It is ancient. We know that it is a traditional household. It is a structure from the past. It is covered by ivy. In fact, Andrew Glazzard calls it a Gothic pile, and it is lined with yew-trees, yew-trees again symbolising bleakness, the notion of mourning.

At the same time, the hall is vulnerable, but it also holds the portraits of the ancestors of Sir Henry Baskerville and the portraits are spectral, supernatural almost intone. And we have seen how this Gothic pile, this Gothic house is associated with other Gothic structures, such as the House of Usher.

Now, it is a place where we can imagine a lot of evil associated with it, just because this kind of structure is traditionally associated with the notions of darkness, bleakness, powers of evil. So this house is a classic Gothic trope.

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Ancient Baskerville Hall



- “Despite Holmes’s purchase of an Ordnance Survey map from Stanford’s in London, the great Grimpen Mire defies modern cartography and is perilous to any living being that tries to cross it, from a pit pony screaming as it is sucked under, to Stapleton whose confidence in knowing a safe path through the mire turns out to be misplaced when he disappears, presumably drowned, at the climax of the novella. But if Baskerville Hall seems ancient to Watson, then the remnants of habitations on the moor are from a different era altogether.”
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Holmes gets hold of a map, a government survey map from a place called Stanford’s, from a store called Stanford’s in London. But this map is unable to give any kind of guidance to Holmes on the great Grimpen Mire. In fact, this mire defies this notion of modernity, modern cartography is at a loss on how to chart the uncharted space of Grimpen Mire.

And there is a reference to a pony, which is sucked under by the mire. And in fact Stapleton who is also extremely confident that he can cross this mire that he knows a safe passage across it, a safe path across it, even his confidence is misplaced. He finds out to his great tragedy and he is presumed to be drowned at the climax of this novella, of this novel at The Hound of Baskervilles.

So if Baskerville Hall itself seems ancient to Watson, then, how can one characterise the habitations on the desolate moor. These settings seem to belong to a different time period altogether. So these are some of the aspects of the novel, which captures the undefinable

novel, the uncharted territory of the world of darkness, and perhaps even the powers of evil or the powers that kind of offer some kind of poetic justice at the end of the narrative.

(Refer Slide Time: 25:01)

Primeval and Prehistoric



- “The persistence of these ruins means that the contemporary moor remains unchanged from the place crossed by the evil Hugo and his entourage in the seventeenth century: ‘Now it opened into a broad space in which stood two of those great stones, still to be seen there, which were set by certain forgotten peoples in the days of old’ (13). After the deaths of the hound and its owner, Holmes and Watson approach Stapleton’s base of operations in the great Grimpen Mire, through a landscape more primeval than prehistoric” (p.173)
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“As Watson reports to Holmes on the moor, you have left all traces of modern England behind you, but on the other hand, you are conscious everywhere of the homes and the work of prehistoric people. On all sides of you, as you walk on the houses of these forgotten folk, with their graves and their huge monoliths, which are supposed to have marked their temples.

As you look at the grey stone huts against the scarred hillsides, you leave your own age behind you, and if you were to see a skin-clad hairy man, crawl out from a low door, fitting a flint-tipped arrow on to the string of his bow, you would feel that his presence there was more natural than your own.”

Now Watson is very conscious of the difference between the England, the London, in which Holmes inhabits. So that world is completely different to the world of the people one finds on the moor. Holmes and Watson have completely left behind the urban landscape, the modern world, and therefore they are very, very self-conscious about the kind of, about the landscape and its nature, and its tenor, which seem to be inhabited by people who belong to the prehistoric times.

Look at the choice of words that Holmes, that Watson adopts to describe these people on the moors. He calls them the forgotten folk, people who have been forgotten by the progressive modernity. In fact, their monolith seemed to be their temples and the stone huts are part of the

landscape itself. And when people look at these structures, they seem to, the people who are doing the viewing seem to be out of place just as Holmes and Watson are.

And Watson says that if you find a man, a hairy man crawl from somewhere in the landscape, from the landscape and use a bow and arrow that man would seem to belong to that setting and Holmes would be the one who is out of place. He seems to be the one who is, or who is an intruder in that region.

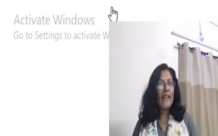
So the novel is at pains to establish the fact that these people are the leftovers, the prehistoric sort of people and there is a kind of a marked distinction between the people who belong with Holmes and these forgotten folk.

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Divided society



- The Great Boer War presents a contradictory picture of the Boers – both atavistic and purified by their healthy, outdoor environment – and The Hound of the Baskervilles provides something of a mirror image in which the British population is divided between the racially and culturally progressives, associated with urban society, colonialism and science, and regressive forces associated with superstition and savagery.
- P.177
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“The persistence of these ruins means that the contemporary moor remains unchanged from the place crossed by the evil Hugo and his entourage in the 17th century. Now it opened on to a broad space in which two of those great stones, still to be seen there, which were set by certain forgotten peoples in the days of old. After the deaths of the hound and its owner, Holmes and Watson approach Stapleton's base of operations in the great Grimpen Mire through a landscape, more primeval than prehistoric.”

The latter point that has been communicated by the ideas here on the slide is that this setting, this particular landscape, this moor does not seem to have changed from the time of the Evil Hugo Baskerville. It seems to be a constant that has completely not changed its ways.

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Prehistoric



- “the path zig-zagged from tuft to tuft of rushes among those green-scummed pits and foul quagmires . . . Rank reeds and lush, slimy water-plants sent an odour of decay and heavy miasmatic vapour into our faces, while a false step plunged us more than once thigh-deep into the dark, quivering mire, which shook for yards in soft undulations around our feet. (155)”
- P.173
- Chapter Title: Do We Progress?Book Title: The Case of Sherlock HolmesBook Subtitle: Secrets and Lies in Conan Doyle's Detective FictionBook Author(s): Andrew GlazzardPublished by: Edinburgh University PressStable URL:
<http://www.jstor.com/stable/10.3366/j.ctv7h0vt4.22>



“The path zig-zagged from tuft to tuft of rushes among those greens scummed pits and foul, quagmires... Rank reeds and lush, slimy water plants sent an odour of decay and heavy miasmatic vapour into our faces, while a false step plunged more than once thigh-deep into the dark quivering mire, which shook for yards in soft undulations around our feet. “

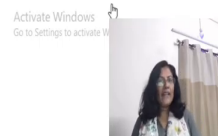
So this is a fantastic description of the mire and the mire itself seems to be an embodiment of all that is ranked and evil in the psyche of the human society. So there is a lot of decay and this decay and this quagmire is a constant. It has not completely gone away despite all the progression, despite all the evolution, despite all the advances in science and the technology.

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Divided society



- The Great Boer War presents a contradictory picture of the Boers – both atavistic and purified by their healthy, outdoor environment – and The Hound of the Baskervilles provides something of a mirror image in which the British population is divided between the racially and culturally progressives, associated with urban society, colonialism and science, and regressive forces associated with superstition and savagery.
- P.177
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Conan Doyle wrote a work on the Great Boer War. And in that work, he once again presents a distinction between the characteristics of the Boers. On the one hand, they are atavistic. They belong to a different time, a prehistoric time. On the other hand, they are pure, because of their healthy outdoor life.

And the same kind of idea seems to be repeated in Hound of Baskervilles. On the one hand, we have the urban society occupied by figures, such as Holmes and Watson. And in that society, there are forces of colonialism and science and they represent progression. And on the other hand, there is the presence of superstition and savagery, which are represented by the landscape of Dartmoor.

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Do we progress?



- “should move forwards, to greater and greater civilisation. We progress, but only by defeating in war the forces of darkness in and around us, and fighting for civilised values. Progress is not inevitable: it requires vigilance, discipline and military power, because on moors, on veldts and in deserts there are forces from the past waiting to pull us back from the twentieth century into an age of darkness.”
- P.177
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Now, the question is, is society progressing? The society “should move forwards to greater and greater civilisation. We progress, but only by defeating in war, the forces of darkness in and around us fighting for civilised values. Progress is not inevitable. It requires vigilance, discipline and military power because on moors, on veldts and in deserts, there are forces from the past waiting to pull us back from the 20th century into an age of darkness.”

So this seems to be the greater point of Conan Doyle. There is progression, there is a move towards greater and greater civilisation, but that is not, given that is not as certain, the forces of evil are constantly pulling the people backwards in time.

So unless the forces fight in a disciplined and in a military manner, everywhere, spaces such as the moors, then if the forces of progressiveness does not fight, if the forces do not fight, then, the past will pull the society, the individuals back into an age of darkness.

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