

Nature and Spirit in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*

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The Hound of the Baskervilles is one of the most famous Sherlock Holmes mysteries. A dark and gripping tale of a spectral hound that plagues the Baskerville family, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is alive with drama, tension and surprises. Uncertainty abounds as we witness Holmes undertake his greatest challenge yet: his fight against the irrational and the unknown. Nature and spirit are two of the key themes in this novel as they enable Conan Doyle to address important issues including the place of science, nature, and the evolution, influences and rationality of the human mind. Nature and spirit take many guises in the book but ultimately focus on the rational and irrational: the scientific and the supernatural. The main themes are shown to be transient, influential and ultimately, inseparable.

The Hound of the Baskervilles has mystery at its heart. This is encapsulated by its very inception, being written eight years after the great sleuth had seemingly plunged to his 'death' in *The Final Problem* (1893). Conan Doyle had wanted to kill off his most famous creation. However, he was forced to revive Holmes in the wake of public and agent outcries, and does so in 1901 with this book. It could be argued that the fact that *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is set in 1889 – twelve years earlier than it was written and preceding both Holmes's death in *The Final Problem* and his coming 'back to life' in *The Adventure of the Empty House* (1903) – enhances the air of suspense and uncertainty which are trademarks of this great novel.

Even the document at the novel's centre, which details the terrible family legend, dated 1742 and written by a descendant of Sir Hugo Baskerville, is shrouded in obscurity. Although we know it heralds from the mid-seventeenth century because we are told it is from 'the time of the Great Rebellion', there is no preciseness to its origin. The only certainty is that the Baskerville family has been cursed because Sir Hugo Baskerville's wicked deed unleashed the 'hell-hound' of legend.

This constant battle between what is and what is not certain or rational, plays particularly in the ultimate fight between the power of nature and the power of spirit. This is demonstrated early on in the book, when Sir Henry Baskerville arrives in London soon after his uncle, Sir Charles's death. He has been living in Canada, away from the family legend and its melancholy setting. Upon hearing the dark legend, as read by Dr Mortimer, Sir Henry jokingly refers to the curse as 'the pet story of the family' and one that he'd never taken seriously before.

This jovial take on his dark family history emphasises that the spirit, the supernatural, only really penetrates when the setting, nature, is right. As the tale unfolds, it becomes clear that the moor has a great effect on people's perceptions and Sir Henry is soon saying to Watson one night in Devon, '... it was one thing to laugh about it in London, and it is another to stand out here in the darkness of the moor and to hear such a cry as that ...' (Chapter 9). He talks about his uncle, Sir Charles's death and that it all begins to 'fit together'. The bleak and haunting nature of the moors penetrates his character and changes his opinion of what happened to his uncle from one of 'natural causes' to thinking the 'hell-hound' may be real after all. Watson also feels the force of nature. Although he would not be drawn to believe in any supernatural elements in London, he describes Baskerville Hall as glimmering 'like a ghost' when he first arrives there with Sir Henry. Perched on the edge of the treacherous moorland, the Hall takes on a ghostly appearance. Later on in his stay, Watson mentions the influence of bleak countryside more directly: 'The longer one stays here, the more does the spirit of the moor sink into one's soul, its vastness, and also its grim charm.' (Chapter 8).

The stark contrast between the sophistication of London and the wilderness of the Devon moors is emphasised even before Sir Henry and Watson travel to Baskerville Hall. For example, the warning letter Sir Henry receives upon first arriving in London contains words cut from a recent article in *The Times* – with the exception of the word 'moor'. This had been added by hand because it is so infrequently used in *The Times*, creating the impression that the worlds of London and Dartmoor very rarely collide and have little in common.

The moor is portrayed as having a character of its own. It is alive and dangerous; unlike anywhere else. Even nature is very specific to the moor. There are moor ponies which, despite their lengthy history in this environment, are still adapting to the harshness and are shown to 'wander' into the Grimpen Mire. The moor seems to pulse with danger, claiming victims both present and past. The Grimpen Mire 'means death to man or beast' if a false

step is taken. There are 'great circular rings of stone' where prehistoric man used to live and it is this vast expanse which adds to the moor's intimidating presence. The naturalist, Stapleton describes the moor as having a frightening beauty: 'It is so vast, and so barren, and so mysterious.' (Chapter 7). Watson, however, is clearly overawed by the moor's 'undulating downs, long green rollers, with crests of jagged granite foaming up into fantastic surges'. The guttural 'uh', 'oh', 'eh' and 'ah' sounds extenuate the severity of the landscape and echo its terrible influence.

Natural elements on the moor appear to be alive too. This is dramatically conveyed by Watson in the moments before he, Holmes and Lestrade face the hell-hound in the book's climax: 'There was a thin, crisp, continuous patter from somewhere in the heart of that crawling bank. The cloud was within fifty yards of where we lay, and we glared at it, all three, uncertain what horror was about to break from the heart of it.' (Chapter 14). The word 'heart' is used twice in quick succession, emphasising both the pulsating nature of the moors and the undoubtedly quickened pace of Watson's own vital organ, pumping furiously in anticipation of the hound.

Against this backdrop of the natural world influencing and altering previously rational perceptions, the more scientific side of the hound legend plays against, with and for this concept. The early twentieth century, when this book was penned, was a time of radical change. Science was advancing quickly and the previously condemned works by Charles Darwin and his contemporaries were beginning to conquer the backlash from the Church and gain widely acclaimed respect. As a trained doctor of sharp intellect, it was only natural Conan Doyle would keenly follow scientific developments. As James Kissane and John M. Kissane wrote in their 1963 essay entitled *Sherlock Holmes and the Ritual of Reason*, '... what *The Hound of the Baskervilles* almost uniquely presents is the hero-detective acting specifically as the champion of empirical science, facing its crucial challenge, the challenge of the seemingly supernatural ...'

From the opening scene, we are presented with the theme of supernatural behaviour which turns out to have a perfectly rational explanation. As Dr Watson studies the stick the previous night's visitor had left behind, he is startled when Holmes asks him what he makes of it: 'How did you know what I was doing? I believe you have eyes in the back of your head.' Holmes's reply swiftly solves the mystery: 'I have, at least, a well-polished, silver-plated coffee-pot in front of me.' In this minor example, Holmes's ability to elucidate the situation is emphasised from the outset.

When Sir Henry receives the letter warning him to keep away from the moor, both he and Dr Mortimer are puzzled how it could be addressed

to the Northumberland Hotel, London, as he only arrived in the city that morning. Holmes likens his ability to get to the root of the mystery so quickly, by drawing a parallel with Dr Mortimer's work, asking him: 'I presume, doctor, that you could tell the skull of a Negro from that of an Esquimaux?' (Chapter 4). He describes the art of spotting the different newspapers' leaders in a scientific manner, emphasising the practical benefits of logic. Before too long, Holmes has ascertained that Sir Henry and Dr Mortimer had been followed since their arrival in London, hence the hotel was known, and quickly establishes the words in the letter, bar 'moor', were cut from the previous day's copy of *The Times*.

Sir Henry's missing boots are further examples of when Holmes utilises his 'scientific imagination' to shed light on the matter. The new tan boot, which was taken after being placed outside the hotel door, is soon returned. As Holmes comments prior to its return, 'It seems a singularly useless thing to steal', and he is shown to be right. We soon realise the reason this new and never-worn boot is returned, and the old black boot is taken instead, is because Stapleton is using them to train the hound to track Sir Henry's scent. A brand new boot which Sir Henry has never worn is 'useless'.

Similarly, the mystery of how the escaped convict Selden is able to survive on the bleak and cruel moors for so long is cleared up by the rational explanation that he was receiving human help from his sister, Mrs Barrymore and her husband Mr Barrymore. They had been smuggling food out to him nightly, along with castoffs from Sir Henry – which also explains why the hound went after Selden on that fateful night, thinking it was the baronet, and frightened him into falling to his death. A recurring theme throughout *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, the hand of man is often shown to be behind the cause of a seemingly supernatural occurrence. It is also man – in the case of Selden's helpers being discovered, Watson and Sir Henry; and with Selden's fall to his death due to the castoffs he is wearing, Holmes and Watson – who uses the power of deduction to ascertain the human culprit.

This enlightenment of dark and uncertain events through the use of logic occurs time and again as the story unravels, and none more so than with the hound of the legend himself. Portrayed as a 'hell-hound', 'luminous', 'ghostly', 'dreadful' – and yet nothing prepares Dr Watson for what he eventually sees: 'Fire burst from its open mouth, its eyes glowed with a smouldering glare, its muzzle and hackles and dewlap were outlined in flickering flame. Never in the delirious dream of a disordered brain could anything more savage, more appalling, more hellish, be conceived ...'

(Chapter 14). Holmes and Watson have soon wielded science against the supernatural being and proven man is at the helm. The abomination of the creature is explained by Watson's announcement upon closer inspection of the 'glowing muzzle', of its being caused by 'phosphorous'. It is this substance which Stapleton added to the simple hound to give him his supernatural nature.

There are reminders throughout the book that this is one of the hardest cases Holmes has been presented with. For example, in Chapter 7, Watson comments: 'Holmes himself has said that no more complex case had come to him in all the long series of his sensational investigations.' The fact it is so baffling only serves to heighten the impressiveness of the swift solution Holmes is able to deliver and, in turn, the importance of science. Furthermore, Watson describes Holmes's actions in medical terms, always shown to be using scientific measures and procedures despite not being a scientist himself: '... he weighed every particle of evidence, constructed alternative theories, balanced one against the other and made up his mind as to which points were essential and which immaterial.' (Chapter 3).

On the surface, science undoubtedly triumphs in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. The 'hell-hound', the 'dreadful apparition', is revealed as being just a hound which has been abominated by man. There are definite nods that science cannot provide the answers to everything, however. James Kissane and John M. Kissane discuss Holmes's statement '... to take on the Father of Evil himself would, perhaps, be too ambitious a task' (Chapter 3), in their 1963 essay entitled *Sherlock Holmes and the Ritual of Reason*. While they acknowledge Holmes is speaking facetiously, the remark and whole exchange with Dr Mortimer presents us with the possibility that 'there may be limits to the ways of reason.'

One of these 'limits' is human nature. Sherlock Holmes ponders issues beyond science and the supernatural in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. In Lawrence Frank's 1999 essay entitled *The Hound of the Baskervilles, the Man on the Tor, and a Metaphor for the Mind*, he highlights that Holmes considers the implications of human origins. As the 'man upon the tor', Holmes is portrayed as being above the moors: 'He stood with his legs a little separated, his arms folded, his head bowed, as if he were brooding over that enormous wilderness of peat and granite which lay behind him. He might have been the very spirit of that place.' (Chapter 9). Holmes is master of all he surveys, working behind the scenes to solve the mysterious crime. As the 'spirit' of the moor, he is at once linked to the place and surveyor of it, overseeing its vast expanse of physicality

and longevity. Frank (1999) calls this image the 'figurative rendering of a generalized evolutionary perspective'. The scene alludes to Darwin's *The Descent of Man* (1871): man is on top 'the very summit of the organic scale' but ultimately linked and with the 'indelible stamp of his lowly origin'.

We see the theme of evolution and the nature of human beings in particular in the two characters that are most at-one with the moor: Stapleton, the naturalist and mastermind criminal, and Selden, the escaped convict. As Holmes closes in on Stapleton, the language used is reminiscent of that used to describe Sir Hugo's crime. Animalistic imagery for Sir Hugo includes 'cage empty' and 'bird escaped', highlighting what a beast he was. Stapleton, as a naturalist, is akin with nature in a cruel way, catching butterflies and moths in a way that 'made him not unlike some huge moth himself'. (Chapter 7). Just as Stapleton views beings as his prey – the creatures of the natural world, his wife Beryl whom he bullies and torments to achieve his end goal, and of course Sir Henry himself – the hunter soon becomes the hunted. The natural world is cruel and it is not long before Holmes is talking about the 'nets' closing in on him, having used his cunning logic. The scene is then set for nature to reclaim him, and he is taken by the Grimpen Mire of 'his' moorland.

When Watson and Sir Henry go after Selden, after hearing that the escaped convict is actually Mrs Barrymore's brother, Watson paints him as having 'an evil yellow face, a terrible animal face, all seamed and scored with vile passions'. (Chapter 9). It is little wonder he can adapt so well to the brutal Devon moorland, which is also the death of him. These two characters are portrayed as the lowest forms of man, with undeveloped emotional capacity. It is fitting on both occasions that they meet a natural grave.

The inherent wickedness of Stapleton is implied by Holmes's observation of the Baskerville family portraits. Holmes deduces that the motive behind Stapleton's crime is natural – he is in fact Roger Baskerville's son and a claimant to the estate. Roger was the 'black sheep of the family' who 'came of the old masterful Baskerville strain, and was the very image ... of the family picture of old Hugo ...' Roger inherited Hugo's wickedness, his bad genes, and so did his son Stapleton. That he inherited his nature and spirit are stated by Holmes's comment on the likeness of Sir Hugo's portrait to Stapleton: 'Yes, it is an interesting instance of a throwback, which appears to be both physical and spiritual.' (Chapter 13).

Through the link with evolution, we are shown it is not possible to escape human nature, which retains certain mysteries. Given the complexity of humans, it is little wonder that the characters are complex

and inconsistent at times. Even Holmes, notorious for scientific precision and calculated reasoning, is shown to have foibles. He has a quasi-respect for Stapleton's 'profession'. Stapleton understands his victims perfectly. For example, he knew that nothing would draw Sir Charles out to the moors at night, except for Mrs Laura Lyons in distress, due to his belief in the family legend. This, combined with the knowledge gained from Dr Mortimer that he had a weak heart, resulted in a fatally effective plan. Similarly with Sir Henry, he uses his 'sister' Beryl to gain his trust and set the trap. Sir Henry was of a different nature to Sir Charles, and Stapleton knew he would not easily scare. Hence he had to be cunning in how he approached him. As Holmes says, '... he foresaw that she [Beryl] would be very much more useful to him in the character of a free woman.' (Chapter 12). Post the crime, Holmes says Stapleton carried it out with 'considerable finesse', adding: 'The use of artificial means to make the creature diabolical was a flash of genius upon his part.' When Holmes states: 'A pin, a cork, and a card, and we add him to the Baker Street collection!' (Chapter 13), he actively links himself with Stapleton, 'the naturalist and entomologist who collects rare moths and butterflies' (Frank, 1999). As Frank explains, this is linked to the Darwinian overtones of the novel and the fact the two characters are connected through human nature, with no rational explanation as to why.

An even more intriguing statement from the sleuth is when he announces 'We've laid the family ghost once and for ever.' (Chapter 14). It seems not even he can fail to be drawn into the 'spirit' of the criminal investigation. Furthermore, the logical detective also experiences out-of-body moments in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, when his 'spirit' hovers over the Ordnance map of Devonshire. This is possibly the first hint of drugs use, emphasised by statements such as 'Sherlock Holmes had, in a very remarkable degree, the power of detaching his mind at will' (Chapter 5). The book does not elaborate, although Conan Doyle's second Holmes novel, *The Sign of the Four*, opens with 'Sherlock Holmes took his bottle from the corner of the mantelpiece and his hypodermic syringe ... he thrust the sharp point home ... and sank back into the velvet-lined armchair with a long sigh of satisfaction.'

Throughout the book it is 'the peasants' who are said to believe in the supernatural hound. Deemed to be closer to nature and less evolved, the implications are that the peasants are unable to utilise science to triumph over the seemingly supernatural elements of nature. It soon transpires, however, that more of the characters believed in the terrible hound than initially thought. Having originally dismissed the legendary Hound of

the Baskervilles family legend as of interest 'to a collector of fairy tales', Holmes finds himself 'pale and exultant ... and lips parted in amazement' when faced by the hound. Watson describes the vision: 'A hound it was, an enormous coal-black hound, but not such a hound as mortal eyes have ever seen.' (Chapter 14). Despite one being a doctor and the other an adopter of scientific methods, neither was prepared for the vision that befell them.

As a doctor, Conan Doyle empathised with the pressures that come with such a high profile and key social role. Dr Mortimer in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* explains his reasons for withholding that he'd seen the footprint 'of a gigantic hound' the night of Sir Charles's death: '... a man of science shrinks from placing himself in the public position of seeming to endorse a popular superstition.' (Chapter 2). Keenly aware that Holmes is amazed that he, 'a trained man of science, believe[s] it to be supernatural', in his defence, Dr Mortimer states 'that there is some evidence that this may be so'. Proven to be right, this serves to emphasise the complexity of human nature and that science cannot conquer explanations for all happenings.

The characters are complex and, at times, inconsistent in their nature in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. When you consider the writer, Conan Doyle, there is no wonder at the depths of each creation. So precise and accurate in all he did and thought – much like his most famous creation, Sherlock Holmes – Conan Doyle sought reasons for everything. Having shunned religion early on, Conan Doyle then spent his life feverishly searching for something else and was unwilling to accept that life and death are all there are. He wanted to believe in something beyond this.

With his ever-questioning mind, his conversion to Spiritualism was 'the inescapable outcome of his nature', as one of his earliest biographers Hesketh Pearson wrote in 1930. Conan Doyle was true to himself to the end: Spiritualism was not a whim. Pearson (1930) reports he owned one of the largest libraries of Spiritualist literature in the world and that his conversion to the faith was based on facts alone. It was only after seeing photographs of the Cottingley Fairies that Conan Doyle actually believed in the existence of fairies.

It is fitting that one of the most famous hoaxes that fooled the scientific world, the Piltdown Man of 1912, has a link with Conan Doyle. When scientists discovered fossilised remains in the village of Piltdown near Uckfield in East Sussex, they thought it heralded the link between us and earliest man. It took more than forty years for the scientists to discover the bones were a forgery. Conan Doyle is among the hoaxter suspects and

if it was him, he certainly would have demonstrated fallacies in science. Even in 1889, when *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is set, Conan Doyle is beginning to outwardly have doubts in science. In *The Mystery of the Cloomber*, the book ends in Chapter 16 with: 'For what is science? Science is the consensus of opinion of scientific men, and history has shown that it is slow to accept a truth. Science sneered at Newton for twenty years. Science proved mathematically that an iron ship could not swim, and science declared that a steamship could not cross the Atlantic.'

The nature of humans dictates that we follow our beliefs. Conan Doyle believed in evidence first, and commitment to a concept second. He needed evidence for fairies. Likewise, the Piltdown Man scientists needed evidence for the evolution link. It is irrelevant that both sets of evidence proved to be fakes.

Conan Doyle showed throughout his extensive writing career a thorough understanding of science, the supernatural and the flawed nature of man. Much as Holmes sought refuge from his mind through drugs, Conan Doyle found refuge from the torture of science's lack of answers in Spiritualism. This enabled him to rationalise his life, hardships and losses, and die a happy man. Hesketh Pearson (1930) writes that Conan Doyle said on his deathbed: 'I am quite serene and happy. Quite prepared to go or stay, for I know that life and love go on forever.'

Although his conversion to Spiritualism seemed irrational to many of his contemporaries, despite its popularity in the early twentieth century, it was, however, in keeping with his character. All his life he applied logic, summed up neatly by Holmes in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*: 'It is the scientific use of the imagination, but we have always some material basis on which to start our speculations.' Nature and spirit are inseparable; our actions and motives are complex. Influenced by each other, nature and spirit herald an evolutionary history that can only be partially explained by reason. After reading *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, perhaps Conan Doyle and Spiritualism do not seem such an unnatural pairing, after all.