

The Hound of Baskervilles
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Lecture 48
Anxieties of the Past and the Future

(Refer Slide Time: 00:11)



Week 10: The Hound of Baskervilles

Lecture 10C: Anxieties of the Past and the Future



Hello, and welcome to Week 10's lectures on The Hound of Baskervilles. In today's session I will be discussing further about the Anxieties of the Past and the Future.

(Refer Slide Time: 00:24)

The Hound of Baskervilles



- "Early in the book Dr Watson accompanies Sir Henry Baskerville on his journey from London to Dartmoor while Holmes declines to travel on the grounds that other cases require his attention in the city. During this portion of the novel the events taking place on Dartmoor are narrated entirely by Dr Watson; and with Holmes apparently removed from the action the Gothic elements take over."
- Source: [Greg Buzwell 2014](#)
- <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/an-introduction-to-the-hound-of-the-baskervilles>



“Early in the book Dr. Watson accompanies Sir Henry Baskerville on his journey from London to Dartmoor, while Holmes declines to travel on the grounds that other cases require his attention in the city. During this portion of the novel the events taking place on Dartmoor are narrated entirely by Dr. Watson; and with Holmes apparently removed from the action the gothic elements take over.”

So this is a crucial point that is implied in the narrative of *The Hound of Baskervilles* in the absence of Sherlock Holmes, who embodies the element of ratiocination or the idea of science itself, the gothic elements take over. So when Holmes is not present, it is the domain of the gothic. When Watson is apparently doing some kind of investigation, what he comes up with are elements of the dark, of the gloomy, the legendary stuff, which is eventually cleared up by the scientific Holmes. And we also realized that with Dr. Watson present in the narrative, it gives scope for Watson's firsthand account of things to be narrativized in the story.

(Refer Slide Time: 02:04)

The Hound of Baskervilles



- “Watson’s imaginative narrative teems with sinister touches and a cloying sense of fear and unease: Baskerville Hall itself is brooding, isolated and in a state of disrepair – a building that in many respects mirrors that most remarkable of all sinister Gothic piles, Edgar Allan Poe’s melancholy House of Usher; meanwhile a dangerous convict is at large on the moors and the nights are haunted by strange sounds and flickering lights. Landscape, atmosphere and legend combine for purely Gothic effect.”
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nights are haunted by strange sounds and flickering lights. Landscape, atmosphere and legend combine for purely gothic effect.”

Greg Buzwell very significantly points to a set of elements, which contributes to the construction of the Gothic atmosphere, in this novel. The previous point was that Watson gives space for the Gothic elements to occupy the center stage of the narrative. Further, he is also given the chance to narrate things from his own point of view. Adding onto that set of ideas we realize that Watson's imagination itself is a fertile domain for gothic elements to be noticed and magnified or illustrated for the benefit of the readers.

If you look at Watson's narrative, Buzwell argues that it kind of teems, it is full of, it is thriving with elements of the sinister and Watson captures and accentuates the fear, the horror, an element of the disturbing sense one can get from that setting is very effectively communicated by Watson's narrative. Baskerville Hall is also a classic Gothic stereotype in terms of its appearance and structure. It is gloomy, it is bleak. It reminds us of other gothic castles that we have read in the novels for this course. It reminds us of dangerous disturbing households, Wuthering Heights, Thornfield Hall.

So it is participating, Baskerville Hall is participating in that tradition of the Gothic home. And it is also isolated, it is run down, it is not well kept up and Buzwell points out that it resembles the most sinister of all gothic structures, which is Edgar Allan Poe's the House of Usher.

On top of that, we have strange visitations as well. There is this rumor that convict is wandering on the moors and the nights are particularly eerie and strange. There is a sense of haunting by strange and very, very eerie set of sounds and lights and you can see how the landscape contributes, the place, the locale, the setting contributes to the construction of the gothic atmosphere. And finally, we have all these legends about a hell hound running about on the moors. So it is a perfect classic Gothic package that we get in The Hound of Baskervilles. And it is this package that gets displayed spectacularly in the narrative of Watson's highly imaginative narrative.

(Refer Slide Time: 06:14)

The Hound of Baskervilles



- “One strand of the story, namely the plot to murder first Sir Charles Baskerville and then Sir Henry in order to obtain the Baskerville inheritance, belongs to the detective novel but the means by which the murders are to be carried out, involving folklore, a phantom hell-hound and a family curse, is pure Gothic.”
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So, Buzwell neatly differentiates between the strands of the Gothic and the detective. He points out that the way, he points out that the plot to eliminate Sir Charles Baskervilles and then Sir Henry in order for somebody to get at the property is a very crucial Gothic, sorry, very crucial detective trope. And the way in which this crime is carried out belongs to the trope of the Gothic.

So you can see how neatly one can make a difference between these two strands, one being the detective and the other being the Gothic. And in terms of the Gothic, the attributes are the presence of the hell hound, there is this family curse, which is also doing the rounds in the narrative and of course, element of the folklore combined to add the horror effect to the Gothic strand of *The Hound of Baskervilles*.

(Refer Slide Time: 07:58)

The Hound of the Baskervilles



- In bringing together the scientific detective and the supernatural beast of ancient legend, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* occupies a liminal position, poised between the rational positivism of detective fiction and the uncanny ambiguity of the Gothic. While these two genres appear, on the face of things, to be antithetical in method and intent, it is now widely recognised that they share a common ancestry, albeit one that was denied by early critics of detective fiction.
- <http://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/44312/>
- Allan, JM 2017, 'Gothic returns : the Hound of the Baskervilles' , in: **The Cambridge Companion to Sherlock Holmes** , Cambridge Companions to Literature , Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.



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He is very clear that this novel by Conan Doyle brings together very, very effectively the narrative of deduction and the narrative of the supernatural. There is a fantastic blending of the two sub-genres. And in terms of the scientific detection, we have the experimental, the highly knowledgeable Holmes representing that domain. And in terms of the supernatural, the beast, the hell hound, the hound is representing or embodying the ancient legend that is haunting the minds of the people.

So on the one hand, we have the world of experiments, the world of science, chemistry, rational positivism, the belief that everything can be rationally found out, explained away, deducted is put on one side, on the other we have this unexplainable mysterious uncanniness, which is what Gothic means to the minds of the people. So these apparently contradictory, apparently appositional, apparently distinct moods are brought together. And Allan here argues that though

they appeared to be antithetical and appositional in method and effect, it is arguable that these two sub-genres share a common ancestry, which was not much noticed by the earlier critics.

(Refer Slide Time: 10:21)

Science and Supernatural



- “It is important to note, however, that Doyle's novel establishes, and indeed relies upon, a binary between science and superstition – the rational and the irrational – if only to reveal the boundary between them to be as slippery and permeable as the mire itself.”
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Though these two sub-genres apparently share a common ancestry, Allan argues or points out that the novel rests on this faith in the distinction between science and superstition. The one being opposed to the other, it is dependent on the distinction between the rational and the irrational side of life in society. However, while the distinction is important for the narrative crux of *The Hound of Baskervilles*, the novel also ultimately points out that there is a traffic between the two domains that the boundaries are permeable, that it is a slippery distinction that one makes between the rational and the irrational. In fact, the analogy that he points out here is the mire, Grimpen Mire itself, the slushy, the flexible the malleable mire is used as an analogy to point out how porous the boundaries are between science and superstition.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:53)

Gothic trope of regression



- “Like the characters in contemporary Gothic tales, Watson and Holmes journey from 'civilized' London to 'primitive' Dartmoor, and the criminal, in keeping with the Gothic trope of regression, turns out to be "an interesting instance of a throw-back, which appears to be both physical and spiritual""(139). (p.65)
- 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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Watson and Holmes leave London to go to Dartmoor and the idea is that London represents everything that is civilized, urban, progressive, and the interior parts, the rural parts are represented by Dartmoor, which is considered to be primitive. So the movement from one to the other is going back in time, is a regression of sorts. It is a movement from civilization to “barbaric time.” So very powerfully through spatial shifts Doyle is able to point out that there is a psychological regression taking place in the narrative.

So space is exploited for this purpose. The special metaphor, the special shifts, the special change is exploited to highlight this trope of regression. And in addition, the criminal ease representing a throwback, a reversion, a regression to an earlier time where there is both physical and spiritual degeneration primitivism.

(Refer Slide Time: 13:46)

Gothic binary



- “And finally, like other Gothic tales, The Hound of the Baskervilles is constructed around a series of binary oppositions—science vs. the imagination, reason vs. superstition, the progressive present vs. the primitive past, evolution vs. degeneration or regression—and the novel undertakes a similar Gothic interrogation of the privileged term in each pair. Ultimately, it questions the (assumed) stable generic opposition between Gothic tale and detective story by showing itself to be simultaneously both Gothic tale and detective story.” (65)
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Clausson very importantly list outs the various binary that is holding up this narrative structure of The Hound of the Baskervilles. You can see that science is associated with the art of deduction and imagination being allied to the Gothic. Reason is put in the box of deduction and superstition being allied with gothic. So whatever is progressive is science and deduction and Holmes. And whatever is primitive is associated with the Gothic with the rural Dartmoor and with the criminal.

It is a very interesting distinction that the novel puts forth, evolution towards a better progressive self is embodied by science and deduction and Holmes, and degeneration are going backwards in time is associated with the non-urban, with the rural criminal.

One can see the argument of the novel very clearly through this kind of analysis about the binary. And what the novel does is that it uses the Gothic modes to interrogate the distinctions between these apparently different domains. And ultimately, what we understand is that, while there is science and the domain of the supernatural, apparently distinguishable in the narrative, there is also the implication that this tale is not arguing for a complete distinction between the two, the tale, *The Hound of Baskervilles* is both Gothic and detective. And in fact, one can go further and argue that Holmes, while representing science and detection is not completely away or removed from that domain of the spiritual or the supernatural or the world of imagination.

(Refer Slide Time: 16:59)

A Gothic Tale



- “Most of the conventions of the classic ratiocinative detective story appear in the opening chapters, dominated by Holmes, and in the final chapter, which is principally narrated by Holmes. But the long middle section of the novel, in which Holmes goes into hiding and thus remains off stage, is a Gothic tale that, in the form of a “counter-attack,” questions the very assumptions and values that the detective story plot takes for granted and tries to affirm”. (65)
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Clausson, in terms of structure points out the areas where the ratiocinative, the art of science and reason and deduction is dominant in *The Hound of Baskervilles*. For instance, he points out that the first few chapters in which Holmes is present is a sign that science is dominating the

narrative, everything rational, everything that is methodical is what takes the center stage in those chapters.

And finally, in the last section Holmes is back on in full power, because he is explaining away the apparently supernatural phenomena in *The Hound of Baskervilles*. But the middle chunk he points out, the long chunk he argues is dominated by the Gothic when Holmes is apparently off stage, he is not very visibly present in his own identity and that is the domain in which the Gothic tale is at its height. So once again, this point is repeatedly mentioned that Holmes represents science and enlightenment and progression and urbanity. And in his absence, the reverse, the oppositional qualities come to dominate the scene.

(Refer Slide Time: 19:05)

Gothic plot



- “The Gothic plot undermines not only the detective story's (and Holmes's) confident endorsement of science and reason, but also the late-Victorian confidence that biological evolution necessarily entails social and moral progress, that modern, progressive English civilization, with Holmes as its defender, is self-evident proof that evolution inevitably leads upward” (65)
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Clausson’s argument is that the Gothic plot powerful enough, the long middle chunk is powerful enough to undermine some of the narrative of ratiocination or the narrative of logic and reason and science and experiment. And when the Gothic is doing such an activity, what is implied is

that on a larger plane, on a broader sense, the Gothic is attacking the Victorian society's faith in the idea of evolution, which implies, which argues, which suggests that evolution inevitably means progression and progression means social and moral progression that everything better and good and moral are the things that are going to ensue with every evolutionary stage.

Now that idea apparently is being attacked by the gothic, the faith that the English civilization will progress and Holmes is a defender and an embodiment of that kind of progression. When the Gothic is taking the upper hand that kind of symbolic notions are implied in the theory of Clausson here. And what the people, what the individuals and the society at the turn of the century began to fear is that there is no absolute certainty that progression means a progression for the better. It does not necessarily implied that the movement is going to be upward, there is a fear or anxiety about the future and their anxiety was that there is going to be a regression in terms of moral values.

(Refer Slide Time: 21:40)

Progress and Degeneration



- "The two primary oppositions in the novel, those between the civilized present and the primitive past, and between progress (or evolution) and degeneration (or reversion), are established in the first chapter. Dr. James Mortimer, the client who engages Holmes's services as a consulting detective, has won a prize for an essay entitled "Is Disease a Reversion?" and he has also published two articles in The Lancet entitled "Some Freaks of Atavism" and "Do We Progress?" (66)
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"The two primary oppositions in the novel, those between the civilized present and the primitive past, between progress or evolution and degeneration or reversion are established in the first chapter. Dr. James Mortimer, the client who engages Holmes's services as a consulting detective has won a prize for an essay entitled "Is Disease a Reversion?" And he has also published two articles in The Lancet entitled "Some Freaks of Atavism" and "Do We Progress?"

Dr. James Mortimer is the one who comes to hire Holmes to solve the mystery in the Baskerville Hall and Dartmoor. And it is significant that Dr. James Mortimer wrote an essay titled *Is Disease a Reversion*, the word reversion is very, very important for us, because we are talking about the anxieties at the turn of the century when the society is fearful of what is going to be the future for its citizens. And his choice of word reversion is telling in this context because of that anxiety about a reversion to an earlier time, a primitive time.

And further the other two articles that Mortimer had written are participating in this kind of discourse of anxiety and the titles are “Some Freaks of Atavism” and “Do We Progress?”. And that question is a question is a larger question that is asked by the entire society in the face of rapid industrial progress. And the question is, is this a progression or is it really a regression? And these ideas are present in the initial chapters of *The Hound of Baskervilles* and you can see how the novel participates in this dialog, this national dialogue about progression and degeneration about the promise of the future and as well as its fears.

(Refer Slide Time: 23:58)

Progress and Degeneration



- “But it is not just Mortimer’s paper that asks this disturbing question. The novel also poses it, and the answer, as in many fin-de-siecle Gothic tales, is not one that most middle-class readers of *The Strand Magazine* would have found comforting. The conventional late-Victorian view of civilization as progressive is represented by Sir Charles and Sir Henry Baskerville.” (66)
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Now, Clausson points out that it is not just those articles of Mortimer that post this problematic question about regression and atavism, the novel, *The Hound of Baskervilles* also brings up this question time and again and the answer apparently is not one that the readers of *The Strand* would find comforting or pleasing or instilling a sense of faith in the future. Sir Charles, who is killed off or who is shocked into dying is representative of this idea that civilization is all about progression, evolution is all about progression.

So the two characters, Sir Charles and Sir Henry who are threatened and one dies and the other is, the other's life is under threat, are the figures who represent this view of civilization and that is what is being captured in *The Hound of Baskervilles*. Those values are being threatened and that threat is from a past, is from a legend, it is from folklore, it is from the world of supernatural, it is from the world of the spirit.

And one can see a battle between these two ideals being illustrated spectacularly by Arthur Conan Doyle. The threat is real for the readers of this novel. It will really, it would have really made the readers of *The Strand* very, very uncomfortable to see all these faith inducing ideals being under serious threat, under threat by all these elements from the past.

(Refer Slide Time: 26:16)

Primitive past and progressive present



- "Sir Henry's uncle Charles was using the "large sums of money [he made] from South African [gold] speculation" (15) to finance "schemes of reconstruction and improvement" (15) at Baskerville Hall, whose architecture mirrors the novel's opposition between a primitive past and a progressive present: "The lodge was a ruin of black granite and bared ribs of rafters, but facing it was a new building, half constructed, the first fruit of Sir Charles's South African gold" (57). (p.66)
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“Sir Henry's uncle Charles was using the large sums of money he made from South African gold speculation to finance schemes of reconstruction and improvement at Baskerville Hall, whose architecture mirrors the novel's opposition between a primitive past and a progressive present. “The lodge was a ruin of black granite and bared ribs of rafters, but facing it was a new building, half constructed, the first fruit of Sir Charles’s South African gold.””

This particular point fantastically represents the confluence of the past and the present. The past is financed by the colonial spaces of Great Britain. Charles gets that gold from South Africa and he is using that money to rebuild, improve, make the hall, Baskerville Hall into something that is better and more modern. And again the lodge represents a run down past and there is a new building that is being half constructed and that is again being financed by Sir Charles’s South African gold.

So what is interesting to us here is that, even the present ultimately depends on the money that comes from elsewhere and that elsewhere is that problematic spatial entity that is connected to Great Britain's political narrative. And this edifice that is being threatened is an edifice that sustains itself or attempts to sustain itself through money that is made in problematic ways. And that is what the novel also points out in this fashion. So the hybrid nature is very, very interesting and it is something that needs to be dwelled upon to untangle the various ways in which structures come up and are threatened.

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