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Sherlock Holmes and The Ritual of Reason

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IT IS NO MYSTERY why Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* should be regarded as a classic of its genre. Most of its elements have since become virtual requirements for a satisfactory detective novel, and nowhere else do these characteristic features appear in such distinguished, one might say quintessential, form. The bizarre crime is not only conceived with ingenuity, it exudes the mystery and horror of the supernatural. The circumscribed society confines suspicion within strict limits; and Doyle not only keeps the list of suspects to a daring minimum but comprises it of such classic types as the Family Doctor (Mortimer), the eccentric (Frankland), the Naturalist (Stapleton), and of course the Butler (Barrymore). There are not one but three atmospheric settings: London, a gloomy ancestral hall, and a desolate moor. Doyle stages his climax, at which evil is at last confronted and exposed, with great showmanship. As Holmes, Watson, and Les-trade await the appearance of the murderous hound, the threat of a concealing fog adds a full measure of suspense to the unique uncertainty of the peril. Finally, there is the master detective—or rather detectives, for in addition to Holmes, whose supremacy among the breed finds no serious challenge, Watson also qualifies, since in this adventure he plays an unusually important role by doing much of the sleuthing himself.

Doyle's specific achievement, however, argues for more than mere representative status. *The Hound of the Baskervilles* stands above its author's other works at the same time that it stands for his predominance in the field of detective fiction. One obvious feature that sets this tale apart offers a clue to its particular excel-

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lence. Anyone familiar with the Holmes stories will recognize *The Hound of the Baskervilles* as the only one of the four novel-length works that includes no separate, retrospective narrative. In each of the others the events underlying the mystery and leading to the crime form a distinct tale—a tale that does not involve Holmes and Watson and has its setting far from Baker Street and even outside England. In *A Study in Scarlet* it is the account of Jefferson Hope and the Mormons; in *The Sign of Four* it is Jonathan Small's story of the Agra Treasure; and in *The Valley of Fear* there is the episode of labor union terrorism among the Allegheny coal miners. In each case the purpose of the "flashback" is to provide colorful incident and exotic atmosphere beyond that contained in the crime and its solution. In *The Hound of the Baskervilles* the Baskerville legend which Dr. Mortimer reads to Holmes and Watson may seem similar to the episodes mentioned, but in fact it performs a quite different function. The legend is a beginning to the action rather than a clarification at the end; it is essential to the actual crime, and its atmosphere permeates the enveloping mystery.

What this means, of course, is that by developing his tale out of the "west country legend" mentioned in the acknowledgment Doyle created a work of greater unity than he managed to do in his other longer efforts. The difference in effect is obvious. In *A Study in Scarlet*, for example, our interest in the solution of the crimes and the apprehension of the criminal has been satisfied before the account of Hope's adventures among the Mormons begins. In *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, on the other hand, the exposure and thwarting of Stapleton's scheme is also, in a sense, the last chapter to the Baskerville legend. The melodrama and the problem in detection are woven into a single narrative; in the other novel-length adventures they are separate.

The unified fable that results is a classic embodiment of the abstract form of the detective story as it has been entertainingly and instructively delineated by W. H. Auden ("The Guilty Vicarage," *Harper's*, May, 1948). In essence the fable concerns the freeing of an ancestral house from a contaminating curse. The crime, Sir Charles's death, is identified with the curse that has plagued the Baskerville family, and it jeopardizes the heir, Sir Henry, and casts suspicion upon the society gathered around Baskerville Hall. In solving the crime and exposing the criminal, Sherlock Holmes performs the traditional heroic function of purg-

ing the hall of its ancestral blight and the society of the presence of guilt. Conan Doyle brings out these elements of his fable with thoroughness and solidity and rises to heights of mastery in the way he uses this material to dramatize a struggle of scientific reason against superstition and irrationality. It is common to regard the detective story as having been born of nineteenth-century "scientism"; *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is the example of the genre in which the implications of that origin are given their most vivid and their richest artistic realization.

The murder of Sir Charles Baskerville confronts us with the family curse in two ways. Most immediately the death, because of its circumstances, raises the spectre of the legendary hound; but it raises also the question of the fate of the new heir. Doyle gives careful emphasis to Sir Henry's situation. A Canadian, he is really a newcomer as yet untouched by the sinister aspects of his inheritance. Still, he accepts his role as the "last of the old race" and Baskerville Hall as "the home of his fathers" (chapter iii). We are clearly made to feel that there is a family as well as a personal fate involved in the mysterious circumstances Sir Henry encounters. Indeed, Stapleton's scheme to gain the inheritance makes explicit the connection between the personal peril and the family one. Moreover, the effect of the Baskervilles' fortunes upon the more general welfare is also stressed. The revival of the Baskerville legend causes "a reign of terror in the district" (chap. iii), and were Sir Henry to avoid the curse by remaining away from the Hall the results would be still more serious: ". . . the prosperity of the whole poor, bleak countryside depends upon his presence" (chap. iii). Even Sherlock Holmes in all his rationalism cannot help seeing the successful completion of the case in the context of the Baskerville curse. Over the body of Stapleton's giant dog Holmes pronounces his version of the hero's vaunt: "We've laid the family ghost once and for ever" (chap. xiv).

Thus in this particular adventure Sherlock Holmes earns in a special sense the title "folk hero" that one recent writer has given him (Dwight Macdonald, "A Theory of Mass Culture," *Diogenes*, Summer, 1952, p. 11). One has in fact only to substitute Grendel, Hrothgar, and Heorot for the Hound, Sir Henry, and Baskerville Hall to see Holmes playing Beowulf's epic part. Naturally these heroes' methods are as vastly different as their personalities. Holmes, who concedes that "in a modest way I have combatted

evil" (chap. iii), does so mainly by his powers of observation and reason rather than by the strength of his hand, and he overcomes his inhuman adversary by showing that what appears to be supernatural is but the agent of a human master whose designs can be discovered and foiled by scientific deductions. The scientific character of Holmes's famous method is perfectly evident in any of his numerous adventures, but 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. Hence, in solving this case Holmes does more than expose crime and defeat a criminal, he expunges heroically a family curse and demonstrates reassuringly the sufficiency of reason.

Doyle takes pains to emphasize that the Baskerville crime is an especially severe test of Holmes's method. The detective himself repeatedly remarks upon the unmatched complexity of the case, but its formidableness is chiefly suggested through the agency of Dr. Mortimer, who brings the affair to Holmes's attention. Many times Holmes stresses the similarity between Mortimer and himself with respect to their devotion to science. "This is a colleague," he remarks to Watson, "after our own heart" (chap. iii), and he compares Mortimer's knowledge of human skulls to his own ability to identify newspaper type (chap. iv). Thus when Mortimer reflects that "There is a realm in which the most acute and most experienced of detectives is helpless" (meaning the supernatural), it carries considerable dramatic weight. Holmes's reaction adds to this effect. He is struck that "a trained man of science" should entertain a supernatural explanation of Sir Charles's death: "I have hitherto confined my investigations to this world. . . . to take on the Father of Evil himself would, perhaps, be too ambitious a task" (chap. iii). Holmes is speaking facetiously of course, but the scene does place squarely before us the possibility that there may be limits to the ways of reason.

Dr. Mortimer puts Sherlock Holmes on trial in yet another way. At the outset Mortimer does not seem quite ready to grant Holmes's scientific pretensions. In the delightfully comic conclusion to the opening chapter he offends Holmes by referring to him as "the second highest expert in Europe."

"Indeed, sir! May I inquire who has the honor to be the first?". . . .

"To the man of precisely scientific mind the work of Monsieur Bertillon must always appeal strongly."

"Then had you not better consult him?"

"I said, sir, to the precisely scientific mind. But as a practical man of affairs it is acknowledged that you stand alone. I trust, sir, that I have not inadvertently--"

"Just a little," said Holmes.

Throughout the novel Conan Doyle is careful to show that his detective is as "precisely scientific" as Dr. Mortimer and to free him from the stigma of being merely "a practical man of affairs." Watson's description of Holmes's procedure is unmistakably the traditional portrait of an experimental scientist in action:

. . . hours of intense mental concentration during which 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 (chap. iii).

Holmes himself defends one of his conclusions against Mortimer's charge of "guesswork" by labeling it "the scientific use of the imagination" (chap. iv). And when Inspector Lestrade arrives on the scene he is designated "the practical man" as contrasted to Sherlock Holmes, "the reasoner" (chap. xiii).

But if the case is a test of Holmes personally, it is even more a test of what his method ultimately represents: that is, the ability of reason to reduce even the most baffling mystery to a commonplace. This theme is presented in miniature in the very first page of the novel. Watson is scrutinizing Dr. Mortimer's stick. "Well, Watson," says Holmes, who has his back to him, "what do you make of it?" Watson is, of course, astonished and affirms that his companion must have eyes in the back of his head. But Holmes's explanation is, as usual, elementary: "I have, at least, a well polished silver-plated coffee-pot in front of me."

This little exchange may be seen as a kind of synecdoche for the Holmes-Watson relationship. The detective is perfectly in character here, but his friend is not less so. It is Watson's regular function to register bafflement in the face of mystery and to express wonder as Holmes solves it. Perhaps it should be emphasized, however, that though Watson is a foil he is not a burlesque character, as the radio and motion picture dramatizations have portrayed him. His bewilderment is intended not so much to reveal

him as the butt as to add luster to Holmes and his deductions. If Watson does play Sancho to Holmes's Quixote, the joke, when there is one, is as likely to be directed toward the eccentric knight of nineteenth-century rationalism as made at the expense of his faithful squire. It is probably most accurate to regard Watson as a kind of chorus. We may patronize him somewhat, but we also take our cue from him on how to react.

But, as has been mentioned, Watson's role in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* demands special notice. Throughout the middle section of the novel it is he, not Holmes, whom we observe conducting the investigation. This is in one sense an entertaining turnabout, similar in effect to those two adventures in which Holmes, acting as narrator, becomes his own Watson. More important, however, Watson's activities as investigator neatly solve a major technical problem faced by all detective-story writers who depend upon hero-detectives. How is one to preserve mystery through the length of a novel without casting doubt upon the superior intelligence of the master sleuth? The detective must remain in the dark nearly as long as the reader, for to have him reach a solution early and not disclose it is both irritating and implausible. Yet to fill a book with clues which the detective fails to penetrate until near the end implies a certain amount of ineffectual groping in the part of the hero. In *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, however, Holmes yields the stage to Watson and withdraws behind the scenes. Thus when the reader must experience uncertainty he shares it with Watson as he follows his diligent but rather unenlightened maneuvers; when the time comes for an *éclaircissement*, Holmes, his supreme intellect uncompromised, reappears to provide it.

The suddenness of Holmes's return to the action is the dramatic anticipation of the decisiveness with which reason triumphs over mystery. His virtuosity in unraveling the web in which Watson has been toiling dazzles us as it does the good Doctor, but there is no mistaking the source of Holmes's power. "The world is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance ever observes," he remarks to Watson on one occasion (chap. iii). This, then, is the explanation of all mystery and wonder; and it is through his refusal to acknowledge any other and by a steadfast pursuit of his rigorous empiricism, as the "scientific expert," that Holmes's particular heroism is defined.

This line—the heroic line in terms of this novel—is consistently taken by Holmes as other lines are presented in opposition to it. As Dr. Mortimer finishes reading the account of Hugo Baskerville and the infernal hound, Holmes merely yawns and pronounces it to be of interest only “to a collector of fairy tales” (chap. ii). Later, when Watson takes up a chance remark by Holmes and accuses him of “yourself inclining to the supernatural explanation,” the detective dismisses the idea and places his approach to the affair on the firmest rational grounds: “There are two questions waiting for us at the outset. The one is whether any crime has been committed at all; the second is, what is the crime and how was it committed?” (chap. iii). Pretending to Stapleton that he has abandoned the case, Holmes reminds the naturalist that “an investigator needs facts, and not legends or rumours” (chap. xii); but though this reveals Holmes’s attitude up to a point, he is in fact only more challenged and even encouraged by the unusual aspects of the problem. It is those things which seem most contrary to reason that are particularly instructive to it:

The more *outré* and grotesque an incident is the more carefully it deserves to be examined, and the very point which appears to complicate a case is, when duly considered and scientifically handled, the one which is most likely to elucidate it” (chap. xv).

To the scientist the system-shattering fact must become the basis for a new and sounder hypothesis.

Although this struggle of reason against mystery is presented as a serious one, we are never in real doubt concerning the outcome. The detective story characteristically achieves an ambivalent combination of certainty as to a successful solution and uncertainty as to its nature and the way in which it will be reached. The anxiety generated by the question “whodunit?” is checked by the assurance that “murder will out.” Edmund Wilson has called attention to the special air of coziness and regularity that dominates the fictional world of the Sherlock Holmes adventures, the feeling we are given that crime and violence are really the “sinister” but rare exception (*Classics and Commercials* [New York, 1950], p. 273). In one sense this context of normality puts more dramatic emphasis on the sensational mystery to be solved, and certainly in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* the Baskerville legend and the eerie circumstances of Sir Charles’s death are so emphasized. But it is

equally true that such normality leads to assurance. This is not to deny or minimize the excitement aroused by the narrative; but as for the possibility that the hound may actually be a demon, that—as Sir Henry puts it—the case may be one for a clergyman rather than a policeman, Conan Doyle heads off this conclusion as deliberately as he raises the issue in the first place.

This should not be considered timidity or ineptness on Doyle's part; it is essential to the novel's design that the supernatural alternative be presented yet never really become insistent. If it were to become so, the triumph of reason would be falsified simply by being made to seem extraordinary. But Doyle's readers did not need to be told that reason holds the key to truth. The solution of the mystery is not intended to teach anything new or strange, only to *demonstrate*, to re-enact in terms of a situation at once concrete and idealized, the comforting drama of reason asserting its power in a natural world to which it is perfectly attuned. The detective-hero has a genuine adversary, but it is another intellect as human, and almost as scientific, as his own. The effect which *The Hound of the Baskervilles* so solidly achieves—an effect perhaps fundamental to the detective story genre—is therefore a ritualistic one. It possesses the characteristic quality of the predictable result whose achieving brings a special satisfaction (as in a wedding or a bullfight). Towards that end we have, at the most critical phase of the action, Holmes's repeated assurances that the last uncertainties will be overcome: "We'll know before the day is out . . ." (chap. xiii). "But I shall be very much surprised if it is not clear enough before we go to bed this night" (chap. xiii). It is true that Watson waits some weeks for the complete fulfillment of this promise, but the setting for the conclusion of the affair justifies the delay. It brings the action back full circle to the sitting room in Baker Street, and the blazing fire on "a raw and foggy night" completes the impression of a snug security re-established.

But if the effect of ritual is reassuring, there must of course be some need for reassurance. Despite the cozy warmth of the Baker Street fire, the atmosphere of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* does give rise to such necessity. By the time Sherlock Holmes has identified the hell-fire issuing from the hound's mouth as phosphorous paint, the curse has lost its hold upon Baskerville Hall; but the legend of the hound is not the only source of uneasiness. Certain

details of the novel give a suggestion that civilization itself has at best a precarious hold upon its hard-won position. The old family hall is perched on the very edge of the desolate moor whose presence seems to threaten the settled neighborhood and touch it with gloom: ". . . behind the peaceful and sunlit countryside there rose ever, dark against the evening sky, the long, gloomy curve of the moor, broken by the jagged and sinister hills" (chap. vi). This sinister desolation has, we are carefully reminded, outlasted the human attempts to subdue it. A village of Neolithic huts is the memorial of one extinct society; the abandoned tin-mine in the middle of the Grimpen Mire is another such reminder. Among these signs of human extinction the mire itself serves as a compelling image of an impersonal and pervading hostility—whose force Doyle personifies as "some malignant hand" (chap. xiv). To Watson, the mire conveys his sense of the mystery as he confronts it independent of Holmes: "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" (chap. vii). This may, indeed, be the crucial metaphor: what sure guide is there through life's treacherous maze save the rationalism of a Sherlock Holmes? Thus the power to draw man toward oblivion, represented by moor and mire, is a threat that reason must meet. It is a threat analogous to that posed by the irrationality of the Baskerville curse: "Nothing will persuade me to believe in such a thing," Watson stoutly insists. "To do so would be to descend to the level of these poor peasants" (chap. x). It is suggestive, moreover, that Selden, the "fiendish man, hiding in a burrow like a wild beast, his heart full of malignancy against the whole race which had cast him out" (chap. vi), should seek refuge in the moor and that at the sight of Stapleton's hound he should abandon his reason and be dashed to his death.

The figure of Selden, a Cain-like outcast from society, adds an important note to the novel. It is significant that he is a brother of the harmless domestic, Mrs. Barrymore, to whom "he was always the little curly-headed boy that I nursed and played with" (chap. ix), for we are thus shown the unexpected emergence of malignant and retrogressive tendencies in the very midst of an innocence that cannot even recognize them. Selden exemplifies this dark side of human nature in a way that the actual villain Stapleton, as long as he must remain unidentified with the crime, cannot. But Staple-

ton, at the proper point, completes the picture of a vaguely yet fundamentally imperiled civilization. After all, he is not less a descendant of the Baskerville line than is Sir Henry; and although the brutishness of Hugo Baskerville may be refined in him, the marks of violence upon Mrs. Stapleton show it is still present. The scene in which Stapleton's Baskerville blood is revealed makes this clear. The portrait of Hugo is discovered by Holmes to bear a resemblance to the naturalist Stapleton, and the detective's comment on the similarity places the whole matter in a specifically biological context. "It is," he says, "an interesting instance of a throw-back, which appears to be both physical and spiritual" (chap. xiii). Legend, as Doyle's contemporary Henrik Ibsen also knew, is not the true source of the ghosts that haunt humanity: man's natural inheritance furnishes its share.

So two Baskervilles contend for the mastery of the hall: one a "throwback," and the other distinctly identified with the new. Sir Henry is not only "a true descendant . . . of that long line of high-blooded, fiery, and masterful men" (chap. vi), he also offers to that line something of a progressive spirit. He comes from the New World, and it is in that character that he determines to banish the ancestral gloom of his family dwelling with electric lamps, courtesy of "Swan and Edison" (chap. vi). We do not forget, however, that although Sir Henry invokes the spirit of Edison, it is the rationality of Sherlock Holmes that has banished a more essential darkness from the home of the Baskervilles. We also remember that whereas the half-animal Selden met his death on the moor and the Grimpen Mire draws the moral throwback Stapleton to its fatal bosom, Holmes endures—for the sake of his science—all the desolation and hardship that the moor can offer. He even manages it with clean linen.

In "Sherlock Holmes stories", the character "Sherlock Holmes" is based on the story of Joseph Bell who was a lecturer at the University of Medicine and Surgery Doctor in the late 19th century, Edinburgh, Scotland, whose legend brings Conan Doyle's inspiration. This paper analyzes the character of Sherlock Holmes, explain why so many people all over the world are fascinated by the story in four parts. Part three analyzes the manners, appearance and detective skills of Sherlock Holmes, in this way, Sherlock Holmes' character is shown. Through the above three parts, we can understand why the character of Sherlock Holmes lives in the hearts of people for so long. When we said something about detective, the first figure that prompt in our mind is Sherlock Holmes. Sherlock Holmes stories: details about each mystery, fascinating facts about each story, cool ratings, interesting pictures, discussions about magical moments in the story, and more! Menu. Home. The stories are almost as good as the ones in The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes. A tad bit less; but that "tad" is hardly noticeable. I'd love to tell you about my ratings for each story, the plot (without spoilers %) and some cool quotes on this page. If you haven't read it yet, you'll have a reason to read it. And if you have, I welcome you dear Sherlock Holmes fan to relive the book with me. There is the great standing perennial problem to which human reason is as far from an answer as ever. My Ratings. Average Rating: 9.25/10.