

The Hound of The Baskervilles

by Arthur Conan Doyle

"Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson confront a terrifying, supernatural beast and a sinister human plot amidst the desolate, mist-shrouded moors of Dartmoor, unravelling a centuries-old curse that threatens the last heir of the Baskerville family."

OVERVIEW

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's 'The Hound of the Baskervilles', first serialised in The Strand Magazine from 1901 to 1902, stands as a towering achievement in detective fiction and a quintessential entry in the Sherlock Holmes canon. This gripping novel masterfully blends elements of Gothic horror, folklore, and the meticulous deduction for which Holmes is renowned, creating a narrative that is both intellectually stimulating and viscerally thrilling. Set against the atmospheric backdrop of Dartmoor, with its ancient bogs, granite tors, and pervasive sense of isolation, the story plunges Holmes and Watson into a mystery steeped in a legendary family curse – a monstrous, spectral hound said to haunt the Baskerville line.

The narrative commences with the arrival of Dr. James Mortimer at 221B Baker Street, presenting Holmes and Watson with the perplexing death of Sir Charles Baskerville. Sir Charles, a philanthropic baronet, was found dead on the grounds of Baskerville Hall, seemingly from a heart attack, yet his face was

contorted in an expression of abject terror, and the footprints of a gigantic hound were discovered nearby. Mortimer recounts the chilling legend of the Baskervilles, a curse originating in the 17th century with the villainous Hugo Baskerville, who was supposedly torn apart by a demonic hound for his depravity. This ancient tale, coupled with the recent, inexplicable death, casts a pall of supernatural dread over the proceedings.

As the last surviving heir, Sir Henry Baskerville, arrives from Canada, he immediately becomes the target of sinister machinations, including a threatening anonymous note and a stolen boot. Holmes, recognising the grave danger, dispatches Dr. Watson to Baskerville Hall to protect Sir Henry and investigate the local inhabitants, whilst he himself remains in London, ostensibly to pursue other cases. Watson's detailed reports from the moor form a significant portion of the narrative, immersing the reader in the eerie landscape and introducing a colourful cast of suspicious characters, each with potential motives and secrets. The novel brilliantly juxtaposes the rational, scientific approach of Holmes with the primal fears evoked by the legend, ultimately revealing a meticulously planned human conspiracy cloaked in the guise of the supernatural.



Key Takeaways



The Triumph of Rationality Over Superstition

At its core, 'The Hound of the Baskervilles' is a profound exploration of the conflict between ancient superstition and modern scientific deduction. The pervasive legend of the spectral hound, deeply ingrained in the local psyche and amplified by the desolate Dartmoor landscape, creates an atmosphere of primal fear. However, Holmes, representing the pinnacle of rational thought, systematically dismantles the supernatural facade, revealing a meticulously planned human conspiracy. This theme underscores the power of observation, logic, and empirical evidence to demystify even the most terrifying and seemingly inexplicable phenomena, asserting that human malevolence is often more frightening than any mythical beast.



The Corrupting Influence of Greed and Ambition

The true villain, Jack Stapleton (revealed as Rodger Baskerville), is driven by an insatiable greed for the Baskerville inheritance. His elaborate and cruel plot, spanning years and involving the manipulation and murder of his own relatives, highlights the destructive power of unchecked ambition. Stapleton's willingness to exploit a local legend, terrorise an entire family, and even sacrifice his own wife to achieve his financial aims serves as a stark warning about the moral decay that can accompany the pursuit of wealth and status. His character embodies a cold, calculating evil that is far more chilling than any supernatural entity.



Key Takeaways



The Art of Deduction and Observation

The novel is a masterclass in Sherlock Holmes's deductive method. From the initial examination of Dr. Mortimer's walking stick to the subtle clues gathered by Watson on the moor, Holmes pieces together a complex puzzle with seemingly disparate fragments of information. His ability to see patterns, make connections, and anticipate the villain's actions, even from a distance, showcases his unparalleled intellectual prowess. The narrative also highlights the complementary roles of Holmes's brilliant deduction and Watson's diligent observation and reporting, demonstrating that even the most formidable intellect benefits from thorough, on-the-ground investigation and a reliable chronicler.



The Power of Setting and Atmosphere

Dartmoor itself is an integral character in the novel, its bleak, beautiful, and dangerous landscape profoundly influencing the story's mood and plot. The treacherous Grimpen Mire, the ancient tors, the pervasive fog, and the isolated Baskerville Hall all contribute to a Gothic atmosphere of dread and mystery. The environment not only provides a perfect hiding place for the villain and his monstrous hound but also amplifies the psychological impact of the curse, making the supernatural seem plausible. Conan Doyle masterfully uses the setting to heighten tension, create suspense, and immerse the reader in the chilling world of the Baskervilles, demonstrating how environment can shape both character and destiny.



Chapter Breakdown

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Part 1: The Shadow of the Hound



The narrative opens with Dr. James Mortimer's visit to Baker Street, presenting Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson with a perplexing case. Mortimer, a country doctor from Dartmoor, recounts the death of his friend and patient, Sir Charles Baskerville, a wealthy baronet. Sir Charles was found dead near the yew alley on his estate, Baskerville Hall, his face contorted in terror, with the footprints of a gigantic hound discovered some distance from his body. Mortimer also shares an ancient manuscript detailing the legend of the Baskerville curse: a monstrous, spectral hound that has plagued the family for centuries, a consequence of the wicked Hugo Baskerville's actions in the 17th century.

Holmes, initially sceptical of the supernatural, is intrigued by the details, particularly the footprints and Sir Charles's apparent terror. The arrival of Sir Henry Baskerville, the last heir, from Canada, immediately brings the threat to London. Sir Henry receives an anonymous, crudely cut-out letter warning him to 'keep away from the moor', and one of his new boots is stolen from his hotel. Holmes and Watson observe a bearded man following Sir Henry, but he eludes them. Holmes, sensing the immediate danger to Sir Henry, decides to send Dr. Watson to Baskerville Hall with the young baronet, ostensibly to protect him and gather intelligence, whilst Holmes remains in London, claiming other pressing engagements.

KEY POINTS

- Dr. Mortimer introduces the Baskerville curse and the mysterious death of Sir Charles Baskerville, found dead with a look of terror and giant hound footprints

nearby.

- Sir Henry Baskerville, the last heir, arrives in London and immediately faces threats, including an anonymous warning note and the theft of his boots, indicating a stalker.
- Holmes dispatches Dr. Watson to Dartmoor with Sir Henry to act as his protector and investigator, whilst Holmes maintains a deceptive presence in London.

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Part 2: Dartmoor's Desolation and Suspicion



Watson and Sir Henry arrive at Baskerville Hall, a grim, ancient edifice situated amidst the desolate, mist-shrouded landscape of Dartmoor. The atmosphere is immediately oppressive, filled with the mournful cries of the moor and the pervasive sense of isolation. They are introduced to the household staff: Mr. and Mrs. Barrymore, the butler and housekeeper, whose behaviour seems unusually secretive and evasive. Watson observes Mrs. Barrymore weeping at night and later discovers Mr. Barrymore signalling with a candle from a window, ostensibly to someone on the moor.

Their neighbours include the eccentric naturalist Mr. Stapleton and his beautiful sister Beryl, who warn Sir Henry about the dangers of the moor and the legend. Watson also encounters Mr. Frankland, an elderly, litigious neighbour with a passion for astronomy. The moor itself becomes a character, with its treacherous bogs and ancient stone formations, adding to the pervasive sense of dread. Watson's initial investigations reveal a complex web of relationships and potential motives, with the Barrymores' nocturnal activities being a primary source of suspicion, suggesting they are aiding someone on the moor.

KEY POINTS

- Watson and Sir Henry arrive at the foreboding Baskerville Hall, immediately immersed in the eerie and isolated atmosphere of Dartmoor.
- The Barrymores, the butler and housekeeper, display suspicious behaviour, including Mrs. Barrymore's nocturnal weeping and Mr. Barrymore's signalling with a candle to the moor.
- Watson meets the Stapletons, a brother and sister who are neighbours, and the eccentric Mr. Frankland, all of whom become subjects of his initial scrutiny.

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Part 3: Watson's Unravelling Threads



Watson diligently records his observations, sending detailed reports back to Holmes. He discovers that the Barrymores are secretly providing food and clothing to Selden, Mrs. Barrymore's brother, a notorious escaped convict hiding on the moor. This revelation initially explains some of their secretive behaviour but also raises further questions about their true loyalties and knowledge of the Baskerville curse. Watson also becomes increasingly suspicious of Mr. Stapleton, particularly after an incident where Stapleton's sister, Beryl, mistakes Watson for Sir Henry and warns him to leave the moor, believing his life is in danger.

Watson's investigations lead him to a mysterious, solitary figure living in an ancient stone hut on the moor. He also learns of Laura Lyons, a local woman who had been receiving financial assistance from Sir Charles and was scheduled to meet him on the night of his death. These disparate threads begin to weave a more complex picture, suggesting a human element behind the supposed supernatural events. Watson's efforts, whilst lacking Holmes's

incisive deductions, are crucial in gathering the raw data and establishing the groundwork for the eventual solution, highlighting his invaluable role as Holmes's chronicler and field agent.

KEY POINTS

- Watson uncovers the Barrymores' secret: they are aiding Selden, Mrs. Barrymore's brother, an escaped convict hiding on the moor.
- Beryl Stapleton mistakenly warns Watson, believing him to be Sir Henry, to leave the moor, intensifying suspicion around the Stapletons.
- Watson discovers a mysterious, unknown man living on the moor and learns of Laura Lyons, a woman connected to Sir Charles, adding more layers to the human mystery.

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Part 4: Holmes's Emergence and the Trap

The mysterious man on the tor is revealed to be Sherlock Holmes himself, who has been secretly observing the proceedings from a distance, having arrived on Dartmoor shortly after Watson. Holmes explains that he had feigned his continued presence in London to allow the true villain to act more freely, whilst he gathered his own evidence. He has already deduced that Mr. Stapleton is the true antagonist, a distant relative of the Baskervilles who stands to inherit the estate if Sir Henry is eliminated. Stapleton's true identity is Rodger Baskerville, the presumed-dead younger brother of Sir Charles, who had fled to South America and changed his name.

Holmes reveals Stapleton's elaborate plot: he has been using a terrifying, phosphorescent-painted hound, trained to attack the Baskervilles, to perpetuate the family curse and frighten his victims to death or to kill them.

outright. Laura Lyons, a woman Stapleton had seduced and manipulated, was used to lure Sir Charles to his death. Holmes and Watson, along with Inspector Lestrade, set a trap for Stapleton. They arrange for Sir Henry to walk home across the moor at night, knowing Stapleton will unleash the hound. The plan is fraught with peril, as the hound is a formidable and terrifying beast, and Stapleton is a cunning and ruthless adversary.

KEY POINTS

- The mysterious man on the moor is revealed to be Sherlock Holmes, who has been secretly investigating, allowing the villain to expose himself.
- Holmes identifies Mr. Stapleton as the true villain, revealing him to be Rodger Baskerville, a distant relative with a claim to the inheritance.
- Holmes uncovers Stapleton's method: using a giant, phosphorescent hound to mimic the legendary curse and murder the Baskerville heirs, manipulating Laura Lyons in the process.
- A dangerous trap is set, with Sir Henry as bait, to catch Stapleton and his monstrous hound in the act, involving Holmes, Watson, and Inspector Lestrade.

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Part 5: The Climax and Resolution

The trap is sprung. As Sir Henry walks across the moor towards Baskerville Hall in the dense fog, the monstrous hound, glowing with phosphorus, emerges from the mist and attacks him. Holmes and Watson open fire, and after a terrifying struggle, the beast is shot and killed. Upon closer inspection, they discover it is not a supernatural creature but a massive, half-blood mastiff-bloodhound cross, painted with phosphorus to enhance its terrifying

appearance. They then pursue Stapleton, who attempts to escape across the treacherous Grimpen Mire, a vast and dangerous bog.

Stapleton, intimately familiar with the few safe paths through the mire, attempts to use his knowledge to evade capture. However, in the thick fog and his desperate haste, he misses his footing and is swallowed by the bog, his cries for help fading into the desolate landscape. Holmes and Watson discover Beryl Stapleton, Stapleton's wife (not sister, as he had presented her), bound and gagged in his house, revealing the full extent of his manipulation and cruelty. She confirms his identity as Rodger Baskerville and details his meticulous planning and ruthless ambition. The case is closed, the curse lifted, and the Baskerville line is finally safe, albeit scarred by the ordeal.

KEY POINTS

- The phosphorescent hound attacks Sir Henry, but Holmes and Watson intervene, shooting and killing the beast, revealing it to be a painted, mortal dog.
- Stapleton attempts to escape across the Grimpen Mire but perishes in the treacherous bog, bringing his reign of terror to an end.
- Beryl Stapleton, revealed to be Stapleton's wife and victim of his manipulation, confirms his true identity as Rodger Baskerville and the full extent of his villainous plot.
- The Baskerville curse is definitively broken, and the family line secured, with the rational explanation triumphing over the supernatural dread.

★ Conclusion

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's 'The Hound of the Baskervilles' remains an enduring masterpiece, celebrated for its ingenious plot, vivid characterisation, and unparalleled atmospheric tension. It stands as a testament to Doyle's narrative brilliance, seamlessly weaving together the elements of a classic detective story with the chilling undertones of Gothic horror and folklore. The novel's enduring appeal lies in its masterful construction of suspense, where the rational and the supernatural are held in a delicate balance, only for Holmes's formidable intellect to ultimately assert the triumph of logic over primal fear.

Critically, the book is often hailed as one of the finest Sherlock Holmes stories, showcasing the detective at the height of his powers, even when operating from a distance. Watson's role as the on-the-ground investigator and narrator is particularly strong here, providing the reader with a more intimate and often terrifying perspective on the unfolding events. The detailed descriptions of Dartmoor, with its desolate beauty and inherent dangers, elevate the setting beyond mere backdrop, making it an active participant in the unfolding drama.

'The Hound of the Baskervilles' is more than just a detective novel; it is a

unfound exploration of human nature, the dominating influence of greed and

profound exploration of human nature, the corrupting influence of greed, and the eternal conflict between reason and superstition. Its intricate plotting, memorable characters, and chilling atmosphere have cemented its place as a cornerstone of English literature and a perennial favourite amongst readers, continuing to captivate new generations with its timeless tale of mystery and terror. It is, without doubt, a literary achievement that continues to resonate deeply.