

The Hound of the Baskervilles

By Steven Canny and John Nicholson

From the Novel by

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

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A STUDY GUIDE

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THE AUTHORS. The stage version of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is the work of three authors: the playwrights Steven Canny and John Nicholson, who dramatized the novel of the same name in 2007, and Arthur Conan Doyle, who wrote the novel in 1901.

Born in Edinburgh 1859, Arthur Conan Doyle was educated by the Jesuits before enrolling in Edinburgh University to study medicine in 1876. He served as a ship's surgeon on voyages to the Arctic and Africa before entering private practice as a physician in 1882. His first published story appeared in 1883, a seafaring tale derived from his maritime experiences. His breakthrough to literary fame occurred in 1887 with the appearance of the novel, *A Study in Scarlet*, the first of what would become a voluminous output of stories featuring Sherlock Holmes and his companion in adventure, Dr. John Watson.

Conan Doyle produced a second Holmes novel in 1890, *The Sign of Four*, and in 1891 embarked on the monthly publication in *Strand Magazine* of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, a succession of short stories featuring the now sensationally popular detective. He continued this until 1893 when, wearying of the incessant need to invent clever puzzles for Holmes to solve, he arranged for Holmes's extinction by tossing the detective and his great antagonist, Professor Moriarty, to their deaths over the Reichenbach Falls in Switzerland. Subscriptions to *Strand Magazine* also plunged, falling immediately by 20,000.

Eliminating Holmes by no means ended Conan Doyle's career as a writer. In the next several years he published short stories, novels, and verse, as well as a non-fiction account of the Boer War, in which he served as a medical officer.

But a clamorous public demanded the return of Sherlock Holmes, which occurred in 1901 with the serialized appearance of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* in the *Strand*. The author finessed the problem of Holmes's death by setting the action in the 1880s, well before the fatal plunge in Switzerland.

Conan Doyle finally brought Holmes back to life in 1903 with the publication of "The Return of Sherlock Holmes" in the *Strand*. There followed another quarter century of Holmesian adventures, ending in 1927 with the publication of *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes*, a collection of the final twelve stories about the world-famous fictional detective.

During the last decades of his life, Conan Doyle emerged as an ardent believer in spiritualism, which holds that the dead regularly communicate with the living at meetings called "séances" through the instrument of spiritual conduits called "mediums." He wrote prolifically in defense of this supernatural phenomenon, and was widely ridiculed for his credulity. However, he remained unmoved in his convictions, and shortly before his death in 1930 he recorded an interview on film in which he emphatically confirmed his absolute faith in the reality of spiritualism. Given Conan Doyle's training as a physician and man of science, together with his admiration for the calculating—and thoroughly materialistic—rationality of Sherlock Holmes, it has seemed to many unfathomable that he would turn so enthusiastically toward this kind of mysticism.

Steven Canny and John Nicholson are British playwrights who have produced a sizeable body of work for the stage, some of it original, some adapted from already-existing material.. They have frequently worked in tandem, with *The Hound of the Baskervilles* being their most well-known collaboration. They have also collaborated on *Origins*, a comedy about Charles Darwin, and *Spyski*, a parody of espionage stories focusing on the assassination of a Russian dissident in London.

THE SETTING. Conan Doyle's novel is set in the canonical sites dear to all good Sherlockians: the shared rooms of Holmes and Watson at 221B Baker Street, various foggy and sinister London locations, and a dark and spooky house in a remote corner of Britain, in this case, among the desolate moors and mires of Devonshire.

The stage version nods toward these familiar places, but makes no bones about the fact that the setting is, in fact, the theater—specifically, the theater in which the performance we are watching is being played. The Canny-Nicholson adaptation opens with a brief enactment of the death of Sir Charles Baskerville, but disrupts the official narrative with a scene in which the actors introduce themselves and caution the audience about the terrors they will encounter as the story unfolds. A similar interruption occurs again, about halfway through the play, so as to maintain the sense of fractured narrative which is introduced by the first episode, and which continues with the scrambling of Conan Doyle’s novel in performance.

Following the introductions and the warning, the actors proceed to present, more or less faithfully, the scenes from Conan Doyle’s novel, but with no attempt to achieve the frightening and suspenseful Gothic atmosphere of the original. Instead, the performance continually calls our attention to the artificial, self-consciously theatrical nature of the proceedings. Thus, characters hold up a window frame to suggest that they are looking out a window, or they wrap towels around their street clothes to indicate that they are in a steam bath which, according to the script, “TURNS INTO A HANSOM CAB.” As a result, we are constantly reacting with amusement to the scenic inventions of the performers rather than responding with fear and suspense to the dreadful events of the narrative. By emphasizing the make-believe nature of the situation on stage, the production underlines—and undercuts—the Victorian contrivances of the original.

THE PLOT. As noted above, the Canny and Nicholson adaptation generally follows the contours of the novel. As the action begins, Holmes is making brilliant deductions about the walking stick left behind at Baker St. by a man who had visited earlier in the day. The stick’s owner, Dr. Mortimer, then enters, eager to engage the services of the famous detective.

He begins by recounting to Holmes and Watson the legend of the Baskervilles, which tells of an ancient evil deed that has cast a baleful shadow over all the heirs of the family. According to the tale, Sir Hugo Baskerville, the 17th century lord of the manor, abducted a peasant girl, intending to use her wickedly. However, she managed to escape his clutches, whereupon Sir Hugo declared that he would “render his body and soul to the powers of evil” if he were to succeed in recapturing her. Mounting his horse, he galloped off in pursuit of the innocent maiden and disappeared over the moors. When his drunken companions finally caught up with him, the girl was dead, while next to her body “a great black beast shaped like a hound, yet larger than any hound that ever mortal eye has rested upon . . . was tearing out the throat of Sir Hugo Baskerville.”

Ever since, the heirs to the Baskerville estate have lived in dread of that hell-hound, fearful that Sir Hugo’s fate might befall them, and mindful of the legend’s admonition to stay away from the moor “in those dark hours when the powers of evil are exalted.”

In view of this sinister tradition, Dr. Mortimer is deeply disturbed about the circumstances surrounding Sir Charles Baskerville’s recent death. Sir Charles’s body was found on a pathway

outside Baskerville Hall, where he had ventured during the night, presumably to keep some mysterious rendezvous. Mortimer has diagnosed the cause as heart failure, but what perturbed him deeply about the scene of the death was the ghastly expression of fear on the face of the corpse, evidently brought on by some unbearably terrifying experience. Even more alarming was the presence of the footprints of a “gigantic hound.” Has Sir Charles fallen victim to the curse of the Baskervilles? And will the same doom also afflict Sir Charles’s successor, the young Henry Baskerville, who is about to arrive in London from his native Canada even as Mortimer and Holmes speak? In the face of such uncanny circumstances, Mortimer seems more than half inclined to accept the supernatural implications of the legend and the curse.

The rational Holmes, of course, dismisses such notions as nonsense, but because the case interests him he agrees to take on the job of protecting Sir Henry by solving the mystery of the monstrous hound. And with that, the game’s afoot!

Holmes meets with the heir, and learns that Sir Henry has received a disturbing letter, formed by pasting together words cut from a newspaper: “If you value your life, keep away from the moor.” Holmes also learns that Sir Henry has had a shoe stolen from outside his hotel door. With these mysterious bits and pieces in his mind, Holmes arranges a rendezvous with Sir Henry on the “morning train from Waterloo” which will take them down to Dartmoor and Baskerville Hall.

Meanwhile, Holmes and Watson observe a “suspicious looking man with a suspicious black beard getting into . . . [a] cab.” They eventually establish that this figure has passed himself off to the cabbie as Sherlock Holmes, another piece of the Baskerville puzzle now lying unsolved before them.

When the detective and the doctor return to Baker Street, Holmes declares that he will send Watson down to the moors by himself, where he will serve as Holmes’s eyes and ears, dispatching detailed reports of his observations back to London on a regular basis. Surprised but pleased, Watson agrees to the plan, and the next day travels with Sir Henry to Dartmoor and Baskerville Hall—where there is no shortage of mysterious and unsettling events.

Watson learns that a desperately dangerous criminal, Slasher Seldon, has escaped from the local prison and is now a fugitive on the moor, and that servants in Sir Henry’s manor house have been sending him signals by candlelight. He encounters a beautiful woman who implores Sir Henry, in English and Spanish, “for the sake of [his] life . . . to leave this place now!” He also meets a man who introduces himself as that woman’s step-brother, a naturalist named Stapleton, who saves Watson and Sir Henry from being sucked into the great Grimpen Mire, a swamp into which people and animals regularly sink to their deaths. And all the while spine-chilling howls, as from an enormous hound, are heard ringing across the moor.

Further peculiarities occur in the Canny-Nicholson version: Watson and Sir Henry never enjoy a proper meal because the food in Baskerville Hall keeps vanishing. As does Sir Henry’s clothing, leaving him awkwardly undressed on stage. A hermit claiming to be Sherlock Holmes

inexplicably appears in the village, while Watson and Sir Henry discover that the escaped criminal is the brother of Mrs. Barrymore, the cook and housekeeper of Baskerville Hall. She has been furtively supplying Selden with food purloined from Sir Henry's kitchen, and clothes swiped from his closet—which accounts for the skipped meals and the missing pants.

But just as the plot is thickening nicely, we are again forcibly reminded that it is all just a play when one of the actors “enters in a t-shirt . . . very freaked out,” demanding that the lights in the theater be turned on “NOW” because, “Something, someone. . . I don't know what . . . something just grabbed me in the wings.” Not only that, but the same actor has discovered in his costume pocket a sinister note pasted together from words and letters cut from the program of the show in progress: “*If you value your life, stay away from this theatre.*” Sinister echoes of the Baskerville curse! Then, moments later, “a large weight falls from the flies, narrowly missing him.” Pandemonium erupts on stage, and one of the actors takes advantage of this climactic moment to step forward and announce that it's intermission time.

The second half of the show begins in the same vein, with actors reading and reacting to imaginary comments from audience members on their performance, and then presenting a “highly abridged version of first half at breakneck speed” including all sound cues and special effects.

Once this whirlwind subsides, the plot again begins lurching forward. The inexplicable hermit has revealed himself as Holmes in disguise. Using this fake identity as a shield, the detective has been personally investigating the various strange events and suspicious persons popping up all over the moor. Watson was a red herring, deployed to convince whomever might be the culprit that Holmes was safely distant from the scene of criminal activity, posing no threat to the malefactor.

As the second half commences, however, Sir Henry, presumably in flight from some terrifying pursuer, drops down on stage from an invisible precipice above. All Holmes's efforts to protect him have seemingly been for nothing, as the dead Baskerville lies in a crumpled heap before him. Angered and frustrated by his failure, Holmes kicks the corpse repeatedly and viciously, while asserting, without being able to offer any evidence, that the naturalist Stapleton is the culprit in the whole complex affair.

Leaving the body on the heath, Holmes and Watson return to Baskerville Hall, where they encounter, to their amazement, Sir Henry, not merely alive, but entirely unscathed. What's the explanation? Surprisingly, it is Watson who grasps it at once: thanks to Mrs Barrymore, Sir Henry's missing clothes have wound up on the escaped criminal's back, but still bearing the scent of Sir Henry. It was this that attracted the murderous hound, which then chased the terrified fugitive over the cliff, resulting in a body they mistook for Sir Henry's because of the misleading clothing.

Sir Henry and Watson then venture out onto the moor to retrieve Selden's corpse, where they meet Stapleton who is visibly shocked to learn that the body is not that of Sir Henry, but of the

escaped convict. Recovering himself, Stapleton invites Sir Henry to dinner, following which the latter confesses to Watson his intense love for the naturalist's sister, Cecille.

The next day, Watson goes among the villagers inquiring about possible enemies of Sir Henry, while Holmes discovers that Stapleton is not really Stapleton, but has previously been known as a Brazilian lepidopterist named Vandeleur, who is in fact not the brother of Cecille, but her husband. It only remains to determine why this imposter would want to kill Sir Henry.

The answer to that question is to be found in the snooker room of the Hall. (Snooker is a British game similar to pool or billiards.) As Holmes and Watson play a match together, another of the actors holds a picture frame around himself, miming the portraits of ancient Baskervilles decorating the room. Suddenly, Watson notices that one of the portraits—that of the evil ancestor, Sir Hugh—bears a striking resemblance to Stapleton. Further study of other portraits unearths the fact that the recently deceased Sir Charles had a younger brother, Roger, who left England in search of success in Brazil, where he fathered a son by a Brazilian woman, an offspring never since heard from.

The light bulb shines and the penny drops as Holmes solves the puzzle in a grand flash of deduction: Stapleton is that missing Baskerville, and he means to kill off all the heirs that stand between him and possession of the estate and the title.

Confident of their conclusion, they nonetheless withhold their information from Sir Henry because they want to use him as an innocent lure to capture their culprit. They urge him to accept Stapleton's invitation to dinner, even though Cecille, knowing her husband's intentions, begs him to decline. But Sir Henry, in love with Cecille, ignores her pleas, and even invites Holmes and Watson to accompany him. Knowing this would prevent Stapleton from loosing the hound on Sir Henry—an act that would expose him as the malefactor—they decline, underlining their repudiation of Sir Henry's friendly offer with a string of insults, thereby guaranteeing that he will attend the dinner alone, with no expectation that Holmes and Watson will be anywhere in the vicinity. But of course they will be. Unaware of his protective escort, Sir Henry will give no indication to Stapleton that a trap has been laid for him.

And so, dinner at an end, Sir Henry returns home across the moor. Holmes and Watson, the unseen watchers, follow his every move. And, just as they expected, the hound appears, stalking their man. But a complication has arisen: a dense fog is settling over the scene, obscuring their view of the action, and making an accurate shot at the dog ever more difficult. But shoot the beast they do, leaving it dead in its tracks.

However its master remains alive, and attacks Sir Henry; but the combined forces of Watson and Holmes are too much for him, and he rushes off into the Grimpen Mire, thinking to escape through this landscape so well-known to him. But not even Stapleton, the naturalist who has

threaded the Grimpen labyrinth on innumerable occasions in pursuit of rare flora and fauna, can avoid its treacherous sinkholes. He blunders into one of them, and dies a condignly gruesome and ignominious death.

A happy ending ensues, with Sir Henry and Cecille declaring their mutual love, and Holmes and Watson returning to Baker Street, where they decide to reward themselves with a night at the opera for “working like dogs.”

THE CHARACTERS. The Sherlock Holmes we encounter in Conan Doyle’s stories, like his creator, is a study in contrasts. An acute observer of both objects and people, he is nonetheless a loner, emotionally unattached to anyone except Watson, whom he keeps as a kind of human pet. Brilliantly rational, he is nonetheless subject to bouts of depression, and engages in opium-induced sessions of deep, inscrutable silence. Although an impeccable gentleman in his ethical and social conduct, he holds almost everyone at emotional arm’s length, probably because he senses his intellectual superiority to the common run of humanity. He knows everything there is to know about what today we call forensic science, but he is ignorant of the fact that the earth orbits the sun—a piece of information he dismisses as irrelevant to the detection of crime. His knowledge of the material world is deep, but narrow, and his confident materialism is often punctuated by spells of boredom, even of melancholy and depression. Like many Victorian intellectuals, he often seems in a state of spiritual crisis, sensing that the certainties of modern science do not, in fact, answer all the questions of existence.

The Holmes we encounter in the Canny-Nicholson version shows some of these traits, particularly the implicit contempt Holmes feels for others. This is turned into an opportunity for comedy, as when Holmes, revealing his hermit disguise to Watson, asks insultingly, “You didn’t really think I’d leave you here alone, did you?” We also see his egotism in a running gag in which various characters, to his extreme chagrin, refer to him as the world’s *second* greatest detective. This never fails to provoke a resentful, and laugh-inducing, response from the supposed master of rational self-possession.

Conan Doyle, in a filmed interview done in 1930, himself refers to Watson as “rather stupid.” This is, of course, a paradox, since it is Watson who figures as the narrator of the Holmes stories, the skilled author who is observant and intelligent enough to capture the character of the great detective and transmit it to the reader. Certainly Holmes overawes him, and inevitably baffles him with feats of almost supernatural ratiocination—but who wouldn’t be bowled over by such a commanding figure? And Watson—unlike Holmes—manages to function in the everyday world of normal human affairs. He has served in the army, has maintained a practice as a physician, and eventually marries. By contrast, Holmes exists only in

the cocoon of crime detection, having no human contacts outside that sphere. So Watson's "stupidity" is purely relative: compared with Holmes, as he throws off brilliant deductions like sparks from a metal-grinder, who wouldn't seem stupid?

Unfortunately for Watson, the films depicting him, especially the Basil Rathbone-Nigel Bruce series, present the good doctor as more or less genuinely—as opposed to relatively—thick-witted. There are two reasons for this: the first is that Watson is not the narrator of the films. In the stories his authorial voice reaches us directly, impressing us with his intelligence and literary skill. In the films he is just an object for the camera's gaze. Which leads us to the second reason for Watson's cinematic doltishness: what the camera wishes to see is a character who is maximally different from Holmes. The great dramatic couplings on film and television have always relied on extremes of contrast between the partners: Lucy and Desi; Gleason and Carney; Humphrey Bogart and Walter Brennan. And so it is that in the movies Watson must be Holmes's opposite: where the detective is brilliant, quick-witted, and endlessly knowing about cigar ashes, soil samples, and grades of note paper, the doctor is perpetually baffled, incompetent, and dumb.

Carney and Nicholson opt for the dumbed-down cinematic version of Watson, making him slow-witted and almost childishly literal-minded in his exchanges with Holmes and the other figures in the story. One example will suffice to convey the gist of Watson's character in their hands. Holmes asks Watson if he "could swear to that man's face within the cab." Watson, confused by the word "swear," answers, "Yes. I'd use any language you consider necessary."

THE THEMES. As noted above, Conan Doyle was himself a contradictory figure: on the one hand, a rationalist and man of science; on the other a passionate spiritualist. Something like this antithesis between hard-headed logic and the longing for the mysterious, the terrifying, and the uncanny shapes many of the Holmes stories, and certainly defines the narrative architecture of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

The author goes to great lengths to build up the atmosphere of a supernatural horror story, giving us ancient curses, demonic monsters, inexplicable deaths in the night, a gloomy old mansion, a foggy moor prowled by a murderous fugitive, the periodic howling of some terrifying beast, and the Great Grimpen Mire, waiting to suck its unwary victims down to a horrible death. Ghastly and inexplicable incidents accrue as the narrative stalks to its conclusion, raising the possibility that there may indeed be dark, otherworldly forces at work, and that the powers of evil are truly exalted.

This kind of literary composition is often referred to as Gothic fiction, “a style . . . that emphasizes the grotesque, mysterious, and desolate” (*The American Heritage Dictionary*). The ultimate derivation of the word is from the Goths, a Germanic tribe that was frequently at war with the Roman Empire. The Medieval period, which followed the fall of Rome, was often referred to as the Gothic era because the Goths came to dominate much of the territory formerly controlled by the Empire. Gothic architecture is one of the cultural products of this era. (The Basilica of Sts Peter and Paul in Lewiston is a 20th century example of this style.) Another invention of this period is a body of stories featuring brave heroes who encounter dragons, giants, demons, dwarves, witches, and desolate old ruins, often in the course of rescuing a damsel in distress, or dispelling an ancient curse. Later narratives featuring any combination of these elements—like the Conan Doyle novel—therefore came to be called “Gothic fiction.” Many contemporary fantasy films, including *The Hobbit*, are also descended from this medieval tradition.

Despite all its Gothic trappings, however, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* comes to a thoroughly rational ending. Sherlock Holmes arrives to dispel the darkness, defang the demons, and reveal that what had seemed a diabolical web of unnatural horrors is merely a ruthlessly greedy plot by Sir Henry’s cousin to take over the family fortune. Reason prevails, and the world returns to its orderly operations.

And we have had a deeply satisfying binary experience. We get to relish the pleasures of a ripping good yarn, snug in our easy chairs, savoring our Gothic dread, allowing ourselves to shiver at the curse, the hound, the foggy moor, and the aura of the supernatural. But then we also exult in the bracing splash of rationality that wakens us from our anxious dream of the dark, and reminds us that it’s time for bed.

This binary property is not a feature of the Canny-Nicholson stage version, which makes a point of poking fun at the Gothic machinery of Conan Doyle’s story, making it seem anything but “scary.” The stage version is a “parody,” which *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines as, “A literary or artistic work that imitates the characteristic style of an author or a work for comic effect or ridicule.” The more distinctive and emphatic the style, the more vulnerable it is to ridicule. And there is no question about the Gothic distinctiveness and brio of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. (The same holds true of individual people: think how much easier it is to caricature the physical and vocal mannerisms of Bill Clinton or Ronald Reagan than those of John Roberts.)

We can find other modern examples of parody in the Austin Powers films, which mock James Bond movies, and in the sketch comedy of tv shows like *Saturday Night Live*, which make fun of network newscasts, game shows, talk shows, and contemporary Hollywood movies.

But while it seeks to ridicule, a parody also acknowledges the power of the thing it imitates. No one parodies an obscure or inconsequential work. Parody, therefore, may also be a kind of homage.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why do we like to be frightened by books and movies?
2. What do most people think about Sherlock Holmes? About Dr. Watson?
3. When Sherlock Holmes kicks the corpse of the man he thinks is Sir Henry, what is our response?
4. What is the most recent “scary” book or movie you have read or seen? What made it scary? Was it “Gothic” in any way?
5. Are we pleased or disappointed to discover that the mystery has an ordinary, every-day explanation?