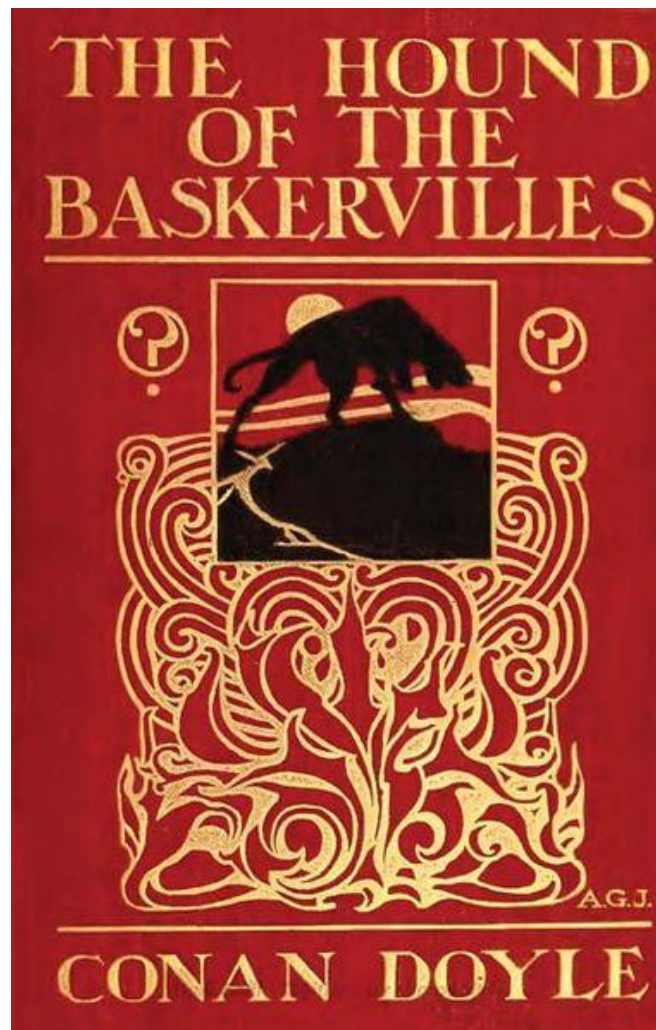


BOOK DISCUSSION KIT



The Hound of the Baskervilles

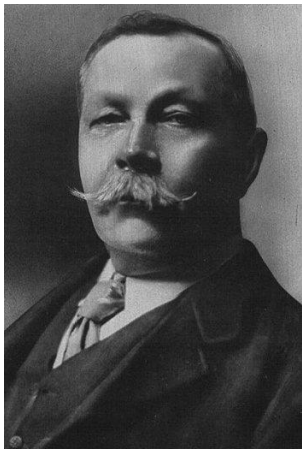
by Arthur Conan Doyle

Summary

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's most famous tale in which Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson travel to the bleak wastes of Dartmoor, England to solve the mystery surrounding the late Sir Charles Baskerville and a ghostly hound.

Author Information

Arthur Conan Doyle was born in Edinburgh, Scotland on May 22, 1859 to a reasonably well situated Irish family. Doyle credited his mother, Mary, with instilling a love of books and storytelling in him at an early age. His father, Charles Doyle, was a Victorian artist who suffered from extended bouts of depression, as well as dementia and alcoholism. Doyle's father spent much of his later life in homes or asylums, and eventually died in the Crichton Royal Institution in 1893.



After finishing his primary and secondary education, Doyle studied medicine at the University of Edinburgh. It was during his medical studies that Doyle met Dr. Joseph Bell, a professor who so struck Doyle with his talents of observation and logic that he is generally thought to be the primary model for Sherlock Holmes. Doyle published his first short story during his university years, with a non-Holmes mystery that appeared in a local Edinburgh magazine.

Doyle finished his medical degrees, and had several unsuccessful career ventures before opening his own practice in Portsmouth. Soon thereafter, he began seriously trying for recognition as an author. By 1886 he was writing the novel that became *A Study in Scarlet*, the first Sherlock Holmes adventure. He released a non-Holmes related novel soon thereafter, called *Micah*. At about the same time, Doyle was also working on a supernatural novel titled *The Mystery of Cloomber* and a historical novel called *The White Company*.

The success of the Holmes stories led Doyle to become increasingly frustrated by their overshadowing of what he considered his more serious and literary work. Anecdotes of Doyle conversing at dinner parties, while haphazardly tossing off the next Holmes story with a notepad on his knee are common. His disdain for the Holmes stories finally led him to kill the character, sparking an international outcry and pressure from his readers that eventually led to Holmes' spectacular resurrection in *The Adventure of the Empty House*. *The Hound of the Baskervilles* occupies a unique place in the Holmes chronology, as it was written due to popular demand after Doyle had already killed Holmes in *The Final Problem*, but before his "official" return. Doyle set *The Hound* earlier in Holmes' career to avoid completely committing to reviving the character.

Doyle passed away at home from a heart attack in 1930, at the age of 71.

Other Sherlock Holmes titles by this author:

- *A Study in Scarlet* (1887)
- *The Sign of Four* (1890)
- *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892)
- *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (1894)
- *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* (1905)
- *The Valley of Fear* (1915)
- *His Last Bow* (1917)
- *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes* (1927)

About the Novel

Originally serialized in *The Strand*, the *Hound of the Baskervilles* was published in book form in 1902, becoming the fifth book featuring Doyle's famous detective Sherlock Holmes. Though Doyle had already killed off Holmes in his last story eight years before, *Hound of the Baskervilles* was set earlier in the Holmes timeline, before his death. Doyle would later give in to public pressure and resurrect Holmes for good in his follow-up book, *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*, published three years after *Hound*.

The story was inspired by the tales of a Dartmoor country squire named Richard Cabell, who was believed to have been cursed. It was rumored that he murdered his wife and sold his soul to the devil in exchange for immortality. Cabell died in 1677, but was long believed to haunt the moors around his home, leading a pack of phantom hounds.

Doyle set his eerie tale in Devon, a region of England that also held a well-known folktale about a black dog or 'yeth dog.' According to stories, the dog was believed to be the spirit of an unbaptized child doomed to roam the earth in the form of a headless black hound wailing in the night. This legend is quite likely to have inspired Doyle's black hound of the moors. (More information on black dog legends has been included in this book kit for those who are interested.)

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Historical Overview

The Hound of the Baskervilles, set in the late 1890's, and written in 1901, falls within the latter days of the Golden Age of the British Empire. Britain was the largest Empire on earth at that time, their colonies and interests spanning

the globe from Africa, Australia, China and India in the east, to Canada, Central America and the Caribbean in the west. Over of a quarter of the world's population was under British rule. Britain also enjoyed unrivalled control of world trade through her dominant naval presence, growing rich through the products and raw materials shipped from her colonies, such as spices, sugar, timber, and gems. The country was also rapidly industrializing, and developing one of the first truly modern economies. Britain's economic, political and scientific progress was internationally envied, and London, her capitol, was considered one of the world's great metropolises.

Class distinctions were extreme in the Victorian age, and it would not be impossible for a London aristocrat to go through life having never encountered a member of the working class outside of their own servants. Upper class British society and culture influenced the manners, tastes, and fashions of the civilized world, while the lowest classes often lived in conditions unimaginable in even the poorest present day American or British communities. It was largely the stark economic and class divisions in Victorian London that inspired Karl Marx to write *The Communist Manifesto*.

In contrast to Britain's imperial might were a variety of problems that plagued the nation and the city of London in particular. Britain's population, particularly in urban areas such as London, exploded during the Victorian age. By Arthur Conan Doyle's time, the population in London had risen to five million, up from one million only ninety years before. London's rapid expansion and industrialization caused chronic pollution and overcrowding. This, coupled with primitive or non-existent sanitation and sewage infrastructure, little or no public healthcare, and constant food shortages among the poor, caused regular outbreaks of cholera, typhus and other diseases. Housing shortages led to the development of vast slums, known as "Rookeries" because of the large numbers of people forced to occupy single rooms together with no personal space or privacy. Economic conditions forced entire families, including children, to work dangerous jobs for below subsistence wages. Homelessness and even starvation were commonplace, with government officials in the mid 1800's reporting over 30,000 homeless and impoverished children in the city. Many of today's charitable institutions, such as The Salvation Army and The Children's Society originated in Victorian efforts to respond to these issues.

The epidemic squalor and poverty led to an odd paradox amongst the British upper class. On one hand, it became socially popular to champion charitable causes aimed at educating, housing and feeding the poor and underprivileged. On the other hand, fear of being victimized by theft or violence from those same poor and underprivileged became nearly pathological among many upper class Londoners and government officials. This concern led to attempts to modernize and reform law enforcement in London. Previous eras had seen the military called in during times of public unrest, but Victorian era London viewed the lower classes as such a constant threat that reforms were put in place to turn that duty over to the Police, who could maintain a more continuous presence. Efforts aimed at maintaining "public order" among the poor and working classes became common, with new legislation targeting vagrancy, loitering, "suspicious behavior" and the like. Police agencies essentially adopted a policy of attempting to prevent crime by constant observation and harassment of those they deemed most likely to commit them. This had predictable results on the working class attitude towards the police, which provides an obvious explanation for the popularity of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories. Holmes was a civilian, who often made his own disdain for the methods and conduct of the official police force abundantly clear. He also notably took cases based on their interest and merit, rather than differentiating based on the social class of the victim.

Historic events in Britain, 1895-1905

1895- Oscar Wilde imprisoned for “sodomy and gross indeceny”.

1896- Anglo Zanzibar War, the shortest declared war on record. British warships attacked the capital on the morning of August 25th. After a forty minute bombardment and land assault, the Sultan's palace was captured. A new pro-British government was installed by the afternoon.

1897- Diamond Jubilee: Queen Victoria celebrates 60 years as reigning monarch of Britain. The occasion was marked with state celebrations and parades.

1898- Lewis Carroll, author of *Alice in Wonderland* dies on January 13th at the age of 65.

1899- The second Boer War begins in October. Conflicts between Boers and British colonists lead to British military action in South Africa as Britain attempts to control recently discovered gold and diamond deposits in the area.

1900- Winston Churchill is elected to the British Parliament for the first time.

1901- Queen Victoria dies on January 22nd at 81 years of age.

1901- In August the first installment of *Hound of the Baskervilles* is published in *The Strand* magazine.

1902- Edward VII crowned King.

1903- British Forces take the city of Sokoto, in present day Nigeria, ending the Fulani Empire.

1904- The British expedition to Tibet, an attempt to force trade agreements with the Himalayan kingdom, erupts into open warfare between British and Tibetan troops at the Battle of Guru.

1905- HMS Dreadnought, the world's first modern battleship, begins construction. It becomes the flagship of the Royal Navy's Home Fleet. The ship sparks a naval arms race, increasing tensions between Great Britain and Germany that ultimately contribute to the start of World War One.

Countries and areas ruled by the British Empire during the Victorian Age:

Aden (Yemen), Anguilla, Australia, Bahrain, Barbados, Basutoland (Lesotho), Bechuanaland (Botswana), Bermuda, British East Africa (Kenya), British Guiana (Guyana), British Honduras (Belize), Somaliland, Brunei, Canada, Cayman Islands, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Cook Islands, Cyprus, Falkland Islands, Fiji, Gambia, Gibraltar, Gold Coast (Ghana), Grenada, Hong Kong, India, Jamaica, Kuwait, Malaysia, Maldive Islands, Malta, Mauritius, Montserrat, Newfoundland, New Zealand, Nigeria, North Borneo (Sabah), Nyasaland (Malawi), Oman (United Arab Emirates), Papua New Guinea, Pitcairn Islands, Samoa, Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), St. Helena/Ascension Island, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Singapore, South Africa, South West Africa (Namibia), Sudan, Tanzania,

Trinidad, Uganda, and Zanzibar. Britain also controlled various tiny Polynesian and Caribbean Islands, often used only as water sources or emergency ports for ships.

Discussion Questions

1. Did the crime itself and the nature of the criminal become clear to you before the end of the story? If so, where and when did you have suspicions?
2. *The Hound of the Baskervilles* was set before Holmes' death, yet was written later during a time when Doyle considered Holmes to be dead. This seems to be reflected in Watson having to manage much of the investigation on his own without any input from Holmes. How did Watson do as a detective? Did he make any obvious mistakes?
3. Although not blessed with the deductive faculties of his friend Holmes, Dr. Watson nevertheless serves a number of important functions in the story. How does Watson help the reader engage with, and move through the story?
4. The story contains a number of contrasting settings: urban London versus rural Devonshire, as well as the modern versus ancient Devonshire. How do these contrasts influence the story?
5. *The Hound of the Baskervilles* was written at a time where Gothic Horror novels, such as *Dracula* were very popular. What elements of the story seem borrowed from that genre, and how are they used to build the story?
6. The moors are so central to the plot of the story that they can almost be considered another character. How would you describe their role in the tale? Did you notice any similarities between the moors and the human characters in the story? Could this story have taken place anywhere else?
7. The Holmes stories are generally thought of as the first “modern” detective stories. In contrast to the gothic and supernatural elements, did you notice scenes or plot devices that seemed more in keeping with modern murder mysteries or police procedurals?
8. Arthur Conan Doyle was, by all accounts, a very superstitious person. He was a devout Spiritualist, which is a religious faith that was most popular during the Victorian age, and held the view that the souls of the dead could be contacted through séances and mediums. He also believed in fairies and other supernatural creatures. Do you see Conan Doyle's supernatural beliefs coloring the story?
9. Despite Doyle's own fervent belief in the supernatural, the character of Sherlock Holmes has become an archetype of logic, reasoning, and scientific inquiry. Do you see any evidence in the story that Holmes seems swayed by the supernatural explanation for the events? What about Dr. Watson?