

The Hound of the Baskervilles: Natural versus Supernatural



It's impossible to discuss *The Hound of the Baskervilles* without engaging, in some way, with a debate between the natural world and a possibly unseen, supernatural one. The titular hound, after all, is believed to have come from Hell in pursuit of a Baskerville who sold his soul to the Devil. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle recognizes early on that humans have a tendency to quickly, even lazily, attribute inexplicable occurrences to the supernatural rather than doing the work of explaining them.

Dr. Mortimer, who Holmes points out is a man who has dedicated his young life to science, is thoroughly convinced that the hound of the Baskervilles is a spectral hound that has come from Hell to destroy the Baskerville family. Mortimer believes this, even though he has seen the hound's footprints and admits that the moor is full of large dogs (used by the residents for herding sheep). Despite his skepticism of Mortimer's claims, and his general reliance on science and reason, even Holmes admits that there is such a thing as the devil, though he says he would be surprised if such a being bothered taking part in human affairs. It is precisely this willingness to believe in a supernatural basis for the Baskerville deaths that Jack Stapleton depends on to hide his crime. That is, Stapleton exploits the tendency to explain through the supernatural towards a murderous end.

Stapleton does more than exploit fear of the supernatural to cover up his crime, however. He actually uses that fear in the commission of the crime. Neither of the hound's victims, Sir Charles Baskerville and the escaped convict Selden, are killed by the hound itself or even by Stapleton. Instead, they are killed out of their own fear of the hound. Sir Charles dies as a result of a heart attack while running in fear. Selden also dies as a result of a fall, which occurred as a result of running in fear. While it is natural that both men would fear a large dog chasing them, Holmes points out that their fear was worse than that normal fear might be: it was a fear approaching madness. They were brought to this level of fear through Jack Stapleton's artifice, the painting of the hound's mouth and eyes with phosphorous to make it appear spectral and otherworldly. So, in reality, both men died of fright as a result of their belief in the hound's hellish origins.

Recognizing the danger inherent in such easy turns to the supernatural, Holmes says that should he and Watson find themselves "dealing with forces outside the ordinary laws of Nature, there is an end to our investigation. But we are bound to exhaust all other hypotheses before falling back on this one." Had they failed to investigate other avenues, Sir Henry Baskerville would be dead. Stapleton, the only remaining heir to the Baskerville fortune, would then take his place, becoming a rich man—as well as a murderer.

Doyle himself fell victim of the dangers of an easy belief in spiritualism. His belief in the otherworldly had greatly injured his reputation in society (as much as declaring a belief in ghosts would do to one's reputation today). Of the four novels that Doyle published featuring Holmes, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is the only one to take a supernatural theme. It's possible that Doyle wished to address the subject openly, making it clear that he believed in science and rationality above all else.

That *Hound* remains the most beloved and well-known of the collection, however, is a testament to how much the supernatural still captures readers' imaginations—and perhaps how quick people are to fall into its fallacies.