

## **The Subversion of Atavism in Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of The Baskervilles***

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Much like one of the central themes in *The Hound of The Baskervilles* (1901-1902), the novella itself can be considered a throw-back, a return to the familiar. It was the first Sherlock Holmes story published by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle after the legendary detective's demise in "The Final Problem" (1893), and though Holmes was not quite raised from the dead – at least not yet –, as it was a story occurring before the events of "The Final Problem", it was definitely the reappearance of a familiar character for the devoted audience. Besides the thrilling process of the investigation, the serialized novella also explores topics such as the re-emergence of the familiar or the relation of the primitive and criminal, both of which strongly relates to the notion of atavism. In this essay, I would like to argue that Arthur Conan Doyle subverts the predominant ideas of atavism present in the 19th century and questions whether the disposition to commit crimes is an innate characteristic or one's own personal responsibility.

In order to be able to discuss the way Conan Doyle's depiction of the criminal relates to atavism, the definition of the term must be examined. The word itself comes from the Latin word 'atavus', meaning 'ancestor', therefore atavism is related to the ancestral, but the way this notion was approached differed in each domain, whether it was used in biology, criminology, or in our case, literature. Primarily, the term has been used in its biological sense, describing mainly instances of disorders and illnesses present in ancestors that reappeared in an individual after several generations. According to the biology professor, Bryan K. Hall, it refers to "the reappearance of a lost character (morphology or behaviour) typical of remote ancestors" (89). Other phrases used to describe atavism include the "tendency to reproduce the ancestral type", the "reversion to a previous evolutionary state", or a "throwback" (Hall 89), definitions that can be examined in a broader context when it comes to other domains, rather than just considering them as their strict scientific interpretation; and will gain further relevance in a latter part of this essay.

With the appearance of Darwinism and the theory of evolution in the mid-19th century, there was a growing interest in genetics and subsequently in atavism, a phenomenon that could not escape Conan Doyle's attention. Lawrence Frank suggests that when Conan Doyle had written *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, he had "a need for the rendering in detective fiction of

a coherent vision of the universe in a post-Darwinian moment” (337). Even the writer himself admits in his autobiography that as a young student he was overwhelmed by the ideas of Darwin and other philosophers of the time, such as John Tyndall (*Memories* 26), a Romantic materialist according to Frank (339). Another interesting connection between Arthur Conan Doyle’s literary writing and the scientific scene of the time, is his reference to one of Tyndall’s work. When he has to justify his means of deduction to Dr. Mortimer, Holmes says “[i]t is the scientific use of the imagination, but we have always some material basis on which to start our speculation” (Doyle, *Hound* 41). Probably not so coincidentally, one of John Tyndall’s essays is titled “Scientific Use of Imagination”, and knowing from Doyle’s *Memories and Adventures* that he was familiar with the works of Tyndall, it is entirely plausible that this phrase in Holmes’ answer was a conscious reference to this essay (Frank 346).

Atavism was a notion that has also been discussed in medical journals and among professionals, which is illustrated in several issues of the *British Medical Journal* in 1869. On April 24th, as an answer to a letter from a Mr Lawson Tait, J.M. Winn refers to his own book published on the topic of hereditary tendencies that might help to explain atavism (Winn 388). He also references that this book was noticed in a previous issue of the journal, appearing on February 20th of the same year. Interestingly, another scholar publishing an article in the same issue – although on an unrelated topic – was Joseph Bell (159), the very same man who Conan Doyle worked for as an out-patient clerk (Doyle, *Memories* 20) and who was most probably the inspiration behind the famous detective (“The Original of Sherlock Holmes”). Although there is no concrete evidence that Conan Doyle did in fact read this specific issue of the *British Medical Journal*, this connection illustrates that he moved around in such scientific circles and he had every possibility to be acquainted with theories of the time.

Based on the aforementioned examples of possible influences of scientific works on Conan Doyle’s writing, it can be argued that he could have also been attracted to the idea of atavism. Beside his familiarity with the contemporary scientific circles, there is another reason to believe that he was aware of the newly emerging notion of atavism, as the doctor in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Dr. Mortimer himself, publishes articles in medical journals, such as “Is Disease a Reversion?”, “Some Freaks of Atavism” or “Do We Progress?” (Doyle, *Hound* 5), titles which consciously refer to these theories. Furthermore, these titles can also pose questions that refer to themes that the writer addresses in the novella, such as the reversion to a more primitive state, themes that will be further analysed in the essay. Based on his connection to the scientific world at the time and his mention of the specific term, one could conclude that the motif of atavism was intentional of Doyle, and besides giving some background information

of one character and the contemporary setting, it also could have foreshadowed an overarching theme of the novella.

In addition to its biological sense, an even more relevant meaning of atavism might come from its importance in criminology. Perhaps one of the most influential and controversial advancement of the 19th century regarding criminology was the Italian physician's and psychiatrist's, Cesare Lombroso's, theory of the born criminal. He and his and his followers "postulated contemporary theories of degeneration and atavism as a scientific explanation of criminal behaviour" (Clausson 63), believing that dangerous individuals were marked by physical and psychological abnormalities that resembled the traits of primitive peoples and animals:

[“T]he atavism of the criminal, when he lacks absolutely every trace of shame and pity, may go back far beyond the savage, even to the brutes themselves.... [The] facts prove clearly that the most horrible crimes have their origin in those animal instincts of which childhood gives us a pale reflection”. Such instincts break out in the born criminal as atavistic regressions that “are governed by silent laws, which never fall into desuetude and rule society much more surely than the laws inscribed in [its] codes”. For Lombroso, ... such laws are biological and hereditary (qtd in Frank 342).

He believed that his theory was “proving that the most dangerous criminals were atavistic throwbacks on the evolutionary scale” (Lombroso 1). In his most famous work, *The Criminal Man*, he claims “to have turned the study of crime into a science that draws its conclusions from empirical data and clinical case studies” (7). The idea of a more scientific process of investigation is also what makes Sherlock Holmes distinctive of his fellow literary detectives, however, Conan Doyle's idea about the relevance of atavism in criminology seems to differ from that of Lombroso.

The perfect example of Lombroso's archetypal criminal in the novella would be Selden, the brother of Mrs Barrymore and the escaped convict from a nearby prison. He lives out on the moor, a place representing the prehistoric and the primitive, a place where time stopped: the landscape is filled with so-called ‘tors’, the ‘homes of the ancestors’. Stapleton elaborates to Watson: “[p]rehistoric man lived thickly on the moor, and as no one in particular has lived there since, we find all his little arrangements exactly as he left them” (Doyle, *Hound* 85). According to Clausson, there is a sharp contrast in the novella between the civilized present and the primitive past, which also aligns with the opposition between “progress (or evolution) and

degeneration (reversion)” (65-66). Therefore the moor clearly represents the latter, a primitive place of degeneration and reversion, which housed the ancestors in the past. However, in the present, it also houses the “throwbacks” of the ancestors, one of which is the escaped convict, Selden. The description of Selden aligns with Lombroso’s idea of the atavistic physical characteristics of a criminal:

[T]here was thrust out an evil yellow face, a terrible animal face, all seamed and scored with vile passions. Foul with mire, with a bristling beard, hung with matted hair, it might well have belonged to one of those old savages who dwelt in the burrows on the hillsides. The light beneath him was reflected in his small, cunning eyes which peered fiercely to right and left through the darkness like a crafty and savage animal who has heard the steps of the hunters (Doyle, *Hound* 123).

According to this description, and especially with some knowledge of Lombroso’s criminal anthropology, any reader could be convinced that the criminal sought by the detective must be Selden. He is of a lower social status, his physical features resemble those of a primitive, prehistoric man, and his history in prison all prove perfectly reasonable arguments for him being the villain. And though Conan Doyle does not deny his culpability in other crimes, the antagonist of the novella turns out to be someone else. Selden’s character is also softened by revealing that he is Mrs Barrymore’s brother, and as someone potentially worthy of a kind woman’s help, the reader cannot help but sympathise with his character. Nonetheless, Selden receives his punishment for the crimes he did commit as he dies when mistaken for Sir Henry Baskerville.

The real culprit of the novella turns out to be Mr Jack Stapleton, who has a double identity: he disguises himself as a naturalist living in the neighbourhood by the edge of the moor, while in fact he is a relative of the Baskervilles: he is the long lost son of Sir Charles’ younger brother, Rodger. This double identity also reflects on the two aspects which both portray him as a man of progress, rationality and of a higher status, aspects which contradict Lombroso’s idea of atavism. On the one hand, he is a well-educated man, who has previously owned a school, and is present in Dartmoor as a naturalist, a specialist in such natural elements as butterflies or rare plants. On the other hand, he comes from an aristocratic family and is a possible heir to a fortune. These all go against the idea of the primitive, savage-like personality of an ideal criminal.

Stapleton's atavistic characteristics manifest on different planes in Conan Doyle's depiction. Upon discovering the astonishing likeness between Stapleton and Sir Hugo Baskerville's portrait, Sherlock Holmes claims that, "[y]es, it is an interesting instance of a throw-back, which appears to be both physical and spiritual". Stapleton's character becomes a "throwback", not solely because of his physical likeness to the infamous aristocrat, but also because of his "tendency to reproduce the ancestral type" on a spiritual level: regardless of his aristocratic status, he is just as rotten and corrupted as his ancestor was. The "reversion to a previous evolutionary state" is also apparent in his character and his spatial position in the novella: he lives on the edge of the moor, quite literally on the border of the prehistoric, primitive space and civilized society. While he retains his educated persona, he is also able to navigate the Grimpen Mire, but as soon as he succumbs to his crimes, he is lost in the mire and is possibly drowned, receiving punishment for letting his primitive, criminal side prevail.

Although it seems in both the case of Selden and Stapleton, that the prehistoric space of the moor proved to be fatal as they both succumbed to their primitive side and ultimately, to their death, there is one person who lived out on the moor, who did not suffer the same fate. This man is none other than Sherlock Holmes himself, who in order to insure the success of the investigation, disguised himself and lived in one of the prehistoric huts of the moor. Grylls points out that Holmes "often in the canon, is paired throughout with his villainous antagonist" (159). Here Stapleton becomes a foil character to the detective: both clever, educated, with special interests within their field. Stapleton also gives Holmes' name to a cabman at the beginning of the novella, importing the motif of the double into the novella (Frank 341). As a reaction to Stapleton's his name, the detective himself says: "I feel a foil as quick and supple as my own" (Doyle, *Hound* 61). However, while Stapleton abandons reason and succumbs to his villainous side, Holmes remains rational, representing intelligence and civilization.

The idea of Holmes representing the scientific and the rational is further highlighted by his association with light. One way the motif of light emerges in the novella is through the Baskervilles, as Henry Baskerville continues his uncle's progressive endeavours and decides to install electrical lightning at Baskerville Hall, a place long overshadowed by the darkness of the past. This way, the light becomes a symbol for progress and invention. Light as an important element is, however, introduced even earlier in the story, through Dr Watson's comparison to the detective, Sherlock Holmes. The novella starts with a discussion between Watson and Holmes, when the two try to figure out who the owner of the found walking stick could be. Most of Watson's conclusions turn out to be incorrect, but helpful for Holmes to figure out the truth. In regards to this, Holmes says the following: "It may be that you are not yourself

luminous, but you are a conductor of light” (Doyle, *Hound 2*). While this remark served the purpose of highlighting Watson’s inabilities, Holmes also positions himself as the source of this luminosity. This further consolidates the detective’s association with light and with “enlightenment, science and progress, as he seeks to shine the rational light of science on crime and criminal” (Clausson 66).

The parallel drawn between Holmes and Stapleton suggests that the presence of the prehistoric space is not simply enough to corrupt the rational, civilized mind. To refer to the adjective used by Holmes when describing the double nature of Stapleton’s likeness to Sir Hugo Baskerville, it was a “spiritual” corruptness that differentiated Stapleton from the morally righteous and rational detective. It was this kind of spiritual atavism in both Stapleton and Selden that lead to their demise: rather than something innate, it was something they allowed to corrupt them; a question of morality rather than of biological inheritance or physical circumstances. As Grylls points out, “Dr. Mortimer, like Holmes, is a student of atavism; Stapleton, like Selden, is an instance of it” (156). This highlights the idea present in the overall Sherlock Holmes canon, that reason and rationality are powerful tools against evil, and that the civilised individual can overcome their primitive counterpart. In other words, being moral or immoral is not a physical feature one is born with, it is a question of mind over matter.

Another way Lombroso’s idea of genetical features signifying criminal tendencies is contradicted in the novella is through the relatives of the criminals. Adhering to Lombroso’s theory about the hereditary nature of criminality, if becoming a criminal is encoded in one’s genes, a criminal’s family members should also show a proneness to similar tendencies. However, neither Selden’s sister, Mrs Barrymore, nor Stapleton’s relatives, Sir Charles or Sir Henry Baskerville, show any sign of corruption. There is a point in the novella when Mrs Barrymore, the escaped convict’s sister, might seem suspicious, especially when her husband, the butler, is mistaken for the disguised Stapleton. She is also described by Dr Watson in his report to Holmes as a “heavy, solid person, very limited, intensely respectable, and inclined to be puritanical” (Doyle, *Hound 101*). Watson believes that it is hard to imagine a less emotional subject, yet she was seen crying several times, which also made her the subject of suspicion. However, as it later turns out, the stern appearances hid a deeply caring woman, as her only fault was that she tried to help her own brother on the run. As to Stapleton’s relatives, the Baskervilles, they are more the victims of the atavistic crime rather than the subject of it, while also being the representatives of progress and morality. Therefore, once again, biological determinism and the hereditary criminality is questioned and contradicted in Conan Doyle’s work.

As a conclusion, one could go back to Dr. Mortimer's article titles, "Some Freaks of Atavism", "Is Disease a Reversion?" and "Do We Progress?". It is evident that these titles were not simple elements to give depth to the character, but also the questions and topics of the novella itself. After revealing these titles, Arthur Conan Doyle manages to portray "some freaks of atavism": the primitive Selden on a prehistoric ground and the ancestral criminal Stapleton. In both of these occasions, atavism is not present either in the biological or in the criminological sense, it becomes more of a spiritual atavism: going back to the primitive, to the ancestral, to the sinful and criminal. The question proposed "Is Disease a Reversion?" could be viewed as turned on its head as one of the novella's main conclusion could be formulated as "Reversion is a Disease", deeming reversion to a primitive state as the cause of crime, a metaphorical "disease". The question whether we, as a society or perhaps as humanity, progress, remains open. The novella suggests that progress is in the hand of the individual: as long as one fights the urge to return to a previous, more primitive state and remains a civilized, rational human being, progress is possible and one's fate is not predetermined by outsider factors. With these possible interpretations, Conan Doyle manages to reflect on the ideas of atavism and biological determinism present in the 19th century, while also subverting them and portraying them in a new light.

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