

TODAY YOU WILL...

- + GAIN AN INTRODUCTION TO ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS NOVELS EVER WRITTEN, AND ONE OF LITERATURE'S MOST FAMOUS CHARACTERS
- + START TO CONSIDER THE CONTEXT SURROUNDING A WORK OF LITERATURE
- + CONSIDER ASPECTS OF GENRE, BOTH DETECTIVE FICTION AND THE GOTHIC

YOU WILL NEED...

- + THESE EXERCISES ARE DESIGNED TO BE TACKLED BEFORE STUDENTS HAVE GOT TO GRIPS WITH THE NOVEL, BUT THE EDITION USED AS THE REFERENCE FOR THIS ARTICLE IS THE VINTAGE EDITION WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY RUTH RENDELL (2008)

HUNTING THE HOUND

Learners will be desperate to read Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's classic work of detective fiction, following **Jerome Monahan's** engaging workshop activities based on the text...



If excuse were needed for applying art and drama-based approaches to the teaching of the Hound of the Baskervilles, then one justification is that several of the characteristics associated with Sherlock Holmes have nothing to do with the original stories and everything to do with the pictorial, theatrical and cinematic 'after-life' of the tales. It is thanks to Sidney Paget's illustrations for the stories in *The Strand* magazine that the character gained his deer-stalker and cape, and we owe the phrase 'Elementary, my dear Watson...' to the American actor William Gillette, who was the first to depict Holmes on the stage first in New York in 1899 and London in 1901.

The Hound of the Baskervilles as an early 20th century work of fiction may present modern young readers with a number of challenges. It is couched in language that may be quite archaic and demanding for some; relying for its atmosphere on some quite lengthy (though wonderful) descriptions of Dartmoor and Baskerville Hall. What follows then are some suggestions as to how to get students engaged with the novel in advance of their reading it, and also aware of some of the circumstances that surrounded its creation.

STARTER ACTIVITY+

Begin – paradoxically – with the death of Holmes in a story written in 1893 called *The Final Problem*. In it Conan Doyle fulfilled his dream of getting shot of a character that had become burdensome to him; only in understanding the impact of this act of literary assassination can students come close to appreciating the joy and excitement at the detective's resurrection* in 1901 for the Hound of the Baskervilles.

Get students into a circle and then explain that they are to read the following passage from the *Final Problem*. The challenge is that each student says only the next word in sequence but that with concentration and speed, the performance must sound like a single person reading. If there are lapses in concentration and gaps

then don't be slow to take it back to the beginning again – at least that way students get a chance to hear the language several times.

"An examination by experts leaves little doubt that a personal contest between the two men ended... in their reeling over, locked in each other's arms. Any attempt at recovering the bodies was absolutely hopeless, and there, deep down in that dreadful caldron of swirling water and seething foam, will lie for all time the most dangerous criminal and the foremost champion of the law of their generation."

(The Final Problem – Strand Magazine, 1893)

Now invite the students to re-read the passage around the circle, but this time add an action to the speaking of their word. This is easy enough for the 'lexical' words – verbs; nouns and adjectives that are

immediately image-generating, but students can also have fun with the 'functional' language: the articles, conjunctions and prepositions. This should prove a lot of fun, but it is also a great way of engaging students with language, perhaps by getting students to make the case for one of their words being the most evocative or helping them spot where Watson's shifts from a more factual tone to an emotional one – possibly from the word 'hopeless' onwards, as he recalls the terrible nature of the site of his friend's death.

*In the strictest sense Conan Doyle was not 'resurrecting' Holmes in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* since the story is set before his death-plunge of 1893. The character's actual revival would only occur in *The Adventure of the Empty House* (1903).

MAIN ACTIVITIES+

1 HOLMES' METHOD

Invite students to practise saying the following line to one another, experimenting with different registers or trying to make it sound as sinister as possible: *"As you value your life or your reason keep away from the moor."*

Explain that this is the mysterious message received by Sir Henry Baskerville at his London hotel. The challenge is then to come up with as many possible 'questions' about the note and its envelope that might generate clues as to its writer. If time and patience allow it would be great to create a facsimile of the message with the words cut from a copy of the Times newspaper apart from the word 'MOOR', which should be printed in capitals in ink, presented in an envelope with the address *SIR HENRY BASKERVILLE, NORTHUMBERLAND HOTEL*

written in crude block capitals.

If this is beyond the call of duty, then provide simply the facts as offered in the novel, namely, that the letters were cut with scissors from an article in a previous day's newspaper. They were not neatly arranged in a line but some 'appear higher than others'. Meanwhile, there is an indication that the pen or ink well were running short of ink as the writer needed to renew the ink on several occasions merely to get through the simple address on the envelope.

Invite students to come up with as many questions as they can. No solutions are necessary, since the point of this is to suggest how much evidence might be derived from so seemingly ordinary an item. It has been said that the Sherlock Holmes stories are not really



HOME LEARNING

Students might like to investigate the story behind *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. There are a number of on-line sites where students can begin their investigations, including *History Today* (tinyurl.com/tshound2); *BBC Devon* (tinyurl.com/tshound3); and *Wikipedia*: (tinyurl.com/tshound4)



first sees the Moor and Baskerville Hall. An active approach to the numerous descriptive passages might involve breaking them up into single lines and giving these out to students to learn in a pair – the challenge being to then perform the line as a chorus but with actions added, giving particular expression to key words or capturing the underlying mood. It is fascinating how this exercise can really help students measure ‘the pulse’ of a piece of writing. It is highly likely that the line: ‘*The road in front of us grew bleaker and wilder over huge russet and olive slopes, sprinkled with giant boulders...*’ will generate gestures that suggest the open horizon plus the occasional interruption posed by the word ‘boulders’. The activity might also highlight the word ‘sprinkled’ which rather counterpoints the scene’s menace in a way that may seem poor judgement on Conan Doyle’s part or carrying a suggestion of Watson’s inherently positive (unimaginative?) outlook represented by so ‘domestic’ a term.

ones in which the reader is invited to play detective, spotting clues themselves that might lead them to a solution – after all their main pleasure is being astonished at Holmes’ powers of deduction and his ability to call upon obscure, catalogued information, be it train timetables or cigarette brands. And this may be just your pupils’ view when they read the inferences that Holmes draws from the Baskerville letter (Chapter 4, pages 33-34).

it in a letter to his mother: “*It is a very great place, very sad and wild, dotted with the dwellings of prehistoric man, strange monoliths and huts and graves*” (April 2, 1901). Students need to grasp how the Moor almost comes to be a character in the novel; an untamed region in which the legend of a hell hound might be thought to have substance and which stands in contrast to modern civilisation as represented in the early London-set scenes and also Holmes’ rationality.

It is in Chapter 6 that Watson

2 HOLMES’ LANDSCAPE

In an article in *Sherlock* magazine (Issue 53, 2003), Bert Coules – the adaptor of the tales for BBC radio – describes the Hound of the Baskervilles as less a detective story and more ‘a novel of landscape and atmosphere and weather and raw nature than a simple whodunit’. Conan Doyle came to know Dartmoor thanks to a tour he took of it with a young journalist called Bertram Fletcher Robinson. He described

SUMMARY

End the lesson by distributing a list of ten possible candidates, with thumbnail sketches of their characters, for the principle evil-doer in the Hound of the Baskervilles (clearly, this will only work if the class is unaware of the solution!) An active approach might be to get the students to take responsibility for a character individually or as a pair or three and then line up in order of suspiciousness – ‘least’ to ‘most’. Having decided their position in the pecking order of potential evil, students have to justify their allocation of guilt based on the slim character study with which they have been provided.

+ ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jerome Monahan has taught for over 20 years. In 1999, after a decade working in London secondary schools – both state and independent – he became a freelance teacher, educational writer and journalist. His background is English, drama, humanities and film/media studies. Borrowing from all these disciplines, he has since 2000 devised and delivered a broad programme of primary and secondary inset and student workshops across the UK and internationally. An Active Approaches To The Hound of the Baskervilles workshop is one of the most recent additions to his repertoire.