Gothic Conventions in “The Hounds of Baskerville”

For this assignment, I chose to examine Gothic conventions in the BBC TV show *Sherlock*’s episode “The Hounds of Baskerville.” This episode was an adaptation of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s original novel *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Rooted in characteristics of Conan Doyle’s original, show creators utilize Gothic conventions in this work to set up suspense and heighten emotion by departing from the usual fact-and-evidence-based storylines of Holmes.

“The Hounds of Baskerville” uses embedded narratives, or stories-within-stories, in the form of Henry Knight’s childhood story of his father’s murder and his own ensuing trauma. This tale is interwoven alongside the primary plotline of Sherlock Holmes’ and John Watson’s investigations. Henry first presents his plight to Sherlock and John in their flat through use of a documentary he had taken part in about the monster of the moors of Dartmoor, demonstrating how show creators made use of their medium of television while also providing exposition and setting up suspense for the story. Henry’s embedded narrative give context for and complements the story of Sherlock and John. Portrayal of Henry’s story also allows the audience to connect with him as a character, which makes his psychology more evident and his subsequent spiral into hysterical madness all the more painful and poignant.

“The Hounds of Baskerville” also explores emotional and psychological extremes. The murder of his father leaves Henry with lasting psychological trauma that is exacerbated over the course of the story as he revisits the site of his father’s death and attempts to cope through therapy sessions and the investigative assistance of Sherlock and John. Fast-paced sequences with jarring music recreate Henry’s memories and portray his distressed present state onscreen, inciting similar feelings in viewers. The recurrence of such sequences and images represent Henry’s psychological deterioration. Given the circumstances, Henry’s distress is explainable, and could even be written off by audiences if it weren’t for the distress Sherlock experiences midway through the episode. After a seemingly unexplainable encounter with the Hound on the moors, Sherlock appears white, and comments on his own hand shaking. “I’ve always been able to trust my senses, the evidence of my own mind, until last night,” Sherlock states. The sight of usually unflappable Sherlock in a state of clear terror is a sign that audiences too should be afraid for their heroes. By delving into psychological states, creators manipulate audiences into experiencing similar psychological extremes alongside protagonists.

Terror is the next Gothic convention employed, both through seemingly supernatural occurrences and sheer uncertainty. In addition to descriptions early in the episode of the terrifying Hound – “Did you see the Devil that night?” “Yes. It was huge – black fur with red eyes…” – various sequences of suspense reinforce mounting terror in characters and audience alike. The initial investigation of the moor at night contains darkness with only glimpses of torchlight, and eerie, swelling music, both of which provoke feelings of uncertainty and concern in characters and the audience alike. Suspenseful sequences also occur when Henry witnesses unexplained blinding flashes of lights when inside his house, and when John hides in the laboratory at Baskerville, unable to see but convinced that the Hound has cornered him. In each of these scenes, sensory deprivation on the part of the characters and therefore the audience exacerbates fear of the unknown, provoking terror. Another example of this deprivation is the fact that the Hound itself, though described, is never shown until the climax of the episode, shortly before all is revealed. Terror draws audiences closer to characters throughout this episode and instills them with a desire to understand and see the mystery through to the finish.

Sherlock’s investigations into the animal transformations and genetic mutations performed in the Baskerville labs provide the backbone of the episode, demonstrating a modern example of Gothic-style monstrous transformations. The reason Sherlock is initially intrigued by the case is because of Henry’s peculiar description of the monstrous Hound. Sherlock wants to be able to explain the unexplainable, give a scientific explanation to a phenomenon that seems fantastic. The Hound’s monstrous nature makes the story intriguing as audiences work alongside the detective to figure out whether such a creature could truly exist and how. The monstrous Hound also drives much of the terror and suspense of the episode. In particular, Sherlock’s initial sighting of the Hound jars the character and audiences both, as neither know whether to trust the evidence of Sherlock’s own senses. Monstrous transformations provide the heart of this mystery as the episode builds towards its climax and explanation.

The supernatural explained provides the denouement of the story, allowing Sherlock, in his classic style, to explain a case that appeared unexplainable. This convention was particularly important for show creators, who had to not only provide resolution in their story, but also do so in a way that was still satisfying and exciting for devotees of Sherlock Holmes who would have already been familiar with the original tale. The episode gives multiple incorrect explanations of events before the big reveal, keeping audiences on their toes and trying to figure out the mystery alongside the detectives. In the end, the horrifying Hound was created through a drug that provokes hysteria through “fear and stimulus,” introduced to the characters’ systems through a chemical fog just outside the Baskerville laboratories. The explained supernatural leaves the audience relieved and satisfied by Sherlock’s consistent ability to deduce even the most petrifying and wild of cases, allowing resolution within this Gothic-convention-strewn tale.

Gothic conventions in BBC *Sherlock*’s “The Hound of the Baskervilles”

* *Embedded narratives* – the story of Henry, within the tale of Watson and Holmes
  + Framing device – ad on television Henry brings about ‘the horrors of Baskerville’ – sets up suspense and provides exposition
* *Monstrous transformations* – the Hound
  + “animals, bred for the battlefield” in Baskerville – introduced in first 5 min of episode
* *Exploration of emotional or psychological extremes* – Watson in the lab; Henry’s terrors at home and in therapy
  + Fast-paced images with jarring music, recreating Henry’s traumatic memories
  + Recurring instances representing Henry’s psychological deterioration
  + Henry’s distress seems explainable, but seeing usually unflappable Sherlock’s distress is the most alarming
    - Shaking, white, contradicting John and his usual logic/facts
    - “I’ve always been able to trust my senses, the evidence of my own mind, until last night.”
  + HOUND experiment entirely based around exploring psychological extremes
* *Terror* – through uncertainty and supernatural occurrences
  + “Did you see the Devil that night?” “Yes. It was huge – black fur with red eyes… it got him.”
  + Departure from usual Holmes stories, which are suspenseful but not terrifying
  + Moor at night – swelling, eerie music, darkness, characters are distressed
  + Omitting of actual figure of Hound until ending – unknown builds fear factor
  + Lights on and off on Henry’s porch – unrelated to story, but alarming and builds psychological distress (Henry carries gun)
  + Lab sequence with John – low light, quick breathing, sound effects of Hound
* *Explained supernatural* – story’s denouement, when Holmes finally solves the case that seemed at first unexplainable
  + Double layer to this in the BBC remake, because they had to undermine preexisting audience expectations to maintain suspense
  + Multiple “explanations” before the big reveal – the pub owners buying a dog and feeding it meat, Hound in lab with John fabricated by Sherlock, sugar, a drug…
  + Actual explanation during climactic conclusion – the drug is in the fog