

NO SUCH THING AS A BAD DOG: A DEFENSE OF THE HOUND

by Cathy Gill

He is a creature out of your nightmares - "savage," "appalling," "hellish."

His jaws drip with foam and blood, his eyes blaze with unearthly fire.

His howl can freeze the blood, and his appearance can paralyze the hardest of men.

He is Satan, Lord Voldemort, and Hannibal Lecter - in canine form.

He is the Hound of the Baskervilles, and he is coming for you.

Pity poor Sir Henry, attacked by this mad beast, and thank Heaven for the presence of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson.

Holmes, who is usually inclined to leave the gunplay to Watson, empties five barrels of his revolver into the creature.

There lies Sir Henry, knocked down by the creature, who had been "worry[ing] at his throat."

Holmes and Watson tear open Sir Henry's collar, and they find - he does not have a mark on him.

Wait a minute, run that by me again?? "There was no sign of a wound, and the rescue was in time."

How can there be no sign of a wound if the attack is really a savage one? This is no miniature poodle jumping on Sir Henry, but a dog "as large as a small lioness."

One would expect this dog to be a more efficient predator, if he were as dangerous as we are told.

Could it be that the Hound of Hell is not so ferocious after all?

Ah, but what about the way he causes Seldon's death? The convict is being chased by the hound, misses his footing, and falls to his death.

FALLS to his death.

No tooth-marks, no blood - no attack at all.

Is a pattern beginning to emerge? My suspicions were sharpened when I read Watson's description of the dog - "not a pure bloodhound and ...not a pure mastiff; but it appeared to be a combination of the two - gaunt [and] savage."

Gaunt?

Yes, I imagine that he was - especially since Stapleton had engaged in a systematic program of starvation where this creature was concerned.

The scraps of bone in the dog's kennel on the moor may have been his only food, not the remains of it.

But what about "savage?"

You may search the text of "The Hound of the Baskervilles," but you will not find even one incident of the dog causing one drop of human blood to be shed.

This is more than you can say for the humans.

Selden and Stapleton are both vicious murderers.

Stapleton beats his wife.

We have concrete evidence of their crimes, but not a shred of evidence to substantiate the alleged crimes of the Hound.

Let us consider the "savage" dogs from which this hound was bred.

Mastiffs have been bred for centuries - as guard dogs, not attack dogs.

Bloodhounds are scent-hounds, surely a valuable asset for Stapleton as he trained the hound to track Sir Henry.

Yes, these dogs are master trackers, but ridiculous failures when their handlers have tried to train them to be menacing.

A bloodhound will happily track a criminal, then lick his face as if to say, "Tag! You're 'it!' Want to play?"

Even Holmes and Watson acknowledge that the dog's appearance has been enhanced to play up any imagined ferocity.

This brings us to another matter - just how ferocious is a dog who allows his owner to paint him with phosphorus?

Unless Stapleton is using a mighty long paintbrush (which I doubt), it sounds like this dog will let humans do anything to him, as long as they are giving him some attention.

And let us not forget that Stapleton is the man who is keeping this dog in its confined and semi-starved state.

But the hound lets Stapleton put paint around his eyes, his flanks, his mouth.

That mouth is full of some very impressive teeth, yet we never hear of Stapleton receiving so much as a nip of reproach.

I postulate that the Hound is a victim of stereotyping - big dogs are more vicious, more dangerous, and basically untrustworthy, right?

I am a retired postmaster, and any letter carrier will tell you that "ankle dogs" are far more likely to bite.

I heard of one incident in which a letter carrier was knocked down and pinned to the ground by a 195-pound dog - who proceeded to lick the carrier's face for ten minutes before he could be called off.

The Wuss of the Baskervilles?
Perhaps.

Well, what about the horrible howls?

They surely must have come from a dangerous beast, musn't they?

Let us recall how Watson described the Hound's cry: "A long, low moan, indescribably sad, swept over the moor."

Later, when Watson is with Sir Henry, the cry is again described, this time as "a rising howl and then a sad moan."

The good doctor also says the cry is "strident, wild, and menacing."

Those descriptions don't quite go together, do they?

"Sad" and "menacing" are two very different sounds.

It is as if Watson suddenly realized that he was supposed to make the creature seem ferocious, and threw in a few sinister adjectives out of left field.

The more we consider the evidence, and the more we think about the dog - not as "The Hound," but as a blank canine canvas, the sadder and more pathetic his case becomes.

He is cursed with the most dreadful of masters, yet he seems eager to please him.

He is lonely and hungry, yet he does no harm.

And his devotion is rewarded by neglect, starvation, and violent death.

To be fair, it is understandable that Holmes and Watson acted as they did.

They were only human, after all - remember, the hard-nosed Lestrade was so frightened that he threw himself down on the ground.

But I cannot help believing that the detective and the doctor ended the life, not of a hound of Hell, but of a poor creature who had been starved and brutalized, but was still willing to let his master approach him, and who died trying to track the man his master had wanted him to find.

Had Holmes and Watson been a bit more perceptive, they would have realized that Stapleton's treatment of non-human creatures predicted his callousness regarding those of his own species.

Consider the incident on the moor, when Stapleton treats the pony's demise with nonchalance, while the compassionate Watson is appalled at the creature's agonizing death.

While not intended as a criticism of naturalists, we should also remember that Stapleton spends his time capturing living creatures, killing them, impaling them on pins, and adding them to his collection.

This does not imply a reverence for life.

"Good" characters in "The Hound of the Baskervilles" are shown as dog-lovers.

Dr. Mortimer is most distressed when his spaniel disappears, and Watson is hesitant to tell him the truth.

Earlier, on the journey from London, Dr. Watson describes his own happy time playing with the spaniel.

(And for those who think the hound killed Mortimer's dog, I refer them to Holmes's views on circumstantial evidence. My money is on Stapleton.)

It is not surprising that the Canon reflects a positive view of dog-lovers.

It has been said that the English would starve their children to feed their dogs, and there is considerable truth in that remark.

After all, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was founded at least thirty-five years before a similar society for the prevention of cruelty to children.

("The little buggers can bloody well look after themselves!")

In all of the stories, we can pretty well judge whether a character is a "good guy" or "bad guy" by how he treats his dogs.

And those dogs are generally portrayed in a positive light.

The first of these is Toby, the creosote-sniffer of "The Sign of the Four."

He provides the set-up for that wonderfully comedic scene in which he follows the wrong trail to the creosote barrel in the timber yard.

Toby's owner, Mr. Sherman, comes across as a sort of odd eccentric Dr. Doolittle with his menagerie.

In contrast, we are cued to the character of the Rucastles (COPP) both by the son's delight in cockroach-smashing and his father's treatment of Carlo the mastiff.

This echoes Stapleton's method - starving a dog in an attempt to make him vicious.

In Carlo's case, the method succeeds only too well.

Like the Hound, Carlo is executed while attacking a man.

However, I have always rather felt that Dr. Watson shot the wrong creature - Rucastle was a much more deserving target.

In later stories, we see that "dog-killer" always equals "villain," and that dog-haters are punished.

Sir Eustace Brackenstall, who cruelly sets his wife's dog on fire, is killed by Jack Croaker (note that I said "killed," not "murdered.")

Jacky, the little would-be murderer in "Sussex Vampire," tries out the South American poison on the family dog before using it to try to kill his infant half-brother.

Interestingly, the dog is named Carlo - perhaps to atone for the "bad" Carlo of "Copper Beeches.

"For his sins, Jacky is sent off for a good spell of "rum, sodomy, and the lash," as Winston Churchill described the British Navy.

Serves him right.

The good/bad dog-lover/hater rule has a sort of exception in "The Lion's Mane."

Ian Murdoch throws Fitzroy McPherson's dog through a plate glass window.

Murdoch does not die for this offense, but he is attacked by the Lion's Mane.

And, in addition to Carlo and the Hound, there are other "attack" dogs in the Canon ("Creeping Man" and "Shoscombe Old Place"), but they only attack bogus owners.

So, the overall theme of the Canine Canon is that dogs are good, and people who mistreat them are bad - and are punished accordingly.

The dogs who appear to be exceptions to this rule of goodness are the victims of cruel owners.

And the most tragically misunderstood of these allegedly bad dogs is the Hound of the Baskervilles, who chased Selden and Sir Henry, but who harmed neither of them.

This creature is Stapleton's least-acknowledged victim.

Not a bad dog at all, only a dog cursed with a bad owner.

FOOTNOTE 1: A recent book, "Sherlock Holmes Was Wrong: Reopening the Case of 'The Hound of the Baskervilles'," by Pierre Bayard, also defends the innocence of the Hound - but for very different reasons, and drawing a VERY different conclusion about murderers and victims in this novel.

FOOTNOTE 2: This paper was submitted for presentation at The Gathering of Southern Sherlockians V in Chattanooga, TN.

Cathy had to cancel her scheduled attendance, so the paper was presented by Carolyn Senter.

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