

## WATSON'S WEIRD TALES: HORROR IN THE SHERLOCKIAN CANON

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A thick, black cloud swirled before my eyes, and my mind told me that within this cloud, unseen as yet, but about to spring out upon my appalled senses, lurked all that was vaguely horrible, all that was monstrous and inconceivably wicked in the universe. Vague shapes swirled and swam amid the dark cloud-bank, each a menace and a warning of something coming, the advent of some unspeakable dweller upon the threshold, whose very shadow would blast my soul.

We are all familiar with these words from “The Devil’s Foot,” words that as easily could have been written by H. P. Lovecraft as by John H. Watson. Without doubt, this passage describing the effects of the devil’s-foot root represents the sort of horror story that would have found itself very much at home in the pages of *Weird Tales*, the publication in which Lovecraft and so many other authors of terrifying tales saw their work in print.

The question, however, that concerns us is to what degree the recorded adventures of Sherlock Holmes may be seen to represent the horror genre (not to mention the unpublished cases with their giant rats, Gila monsters, red leeches, remarkable worms, and disappearing ghost ships). The answer lies partially in one’s definition of horror.

When I was young, I owned an anthology of horror stories with an introduction, as best I can recall, by Boris Karloff. In it, Karloff distinguished between terror and horror: Terror, he argued, comprises a momentary shock—akin to the cheap trick of a horror film’s hero bumping into hanging chains, with an appropriate deafening jingle on the soundtrack, when one expects the “advent” of some genuine “lurker upon the threshold”—or, at best, the sudden, frightening apparition that sends galvanic shock through the limbs. Horror, on the other hand, Karloff described as a sort of settled revulsion, possibly a nauseating influence, but certainly the sinking of the heart and the sickening of the soul with which Poe acquaints us in “The Fall of the House of Usher.” With the exception, for example, of Walpole’s dragging a fairly benign ghost or two across the stage in his fiction, the gothic novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries became progressively adept—in their best incarnations—at awakening within us a leaden depression resulting from our awareness of human depravity. We may reasonably assume that when Holmes says to Watson, “Why not tell

them of the Cornish horror,” he means it, not only in terms of the immediate terrors of the devil’s foot drug but of the horrors experienced during the investigation of the crime. And even in “The Copper Beeches,” a tale that is not patently a horror story, Holmes still comments on the terrible “sin” that lurks undetected in isolated country homesteads—by which he may refer to anything from child abuse to murder. “They always fill me with a certain horror,” he avers, surely alluding not simply to the startling but to the genuinely horrific.

In considering canonical tales as horror stories, it is important also to note that before the great horror films of the 1930s and the revival of horror fiction and film that began in earnest in the 1970s and is with us still in the twenty-first century, it was during the nineteenth century and the earliest decades of the twentieth that the horror story became commercially viable. The successes of *Frankenstein*, *Varney the Vampire*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *Dracula*, *The Invisible Man*, and others spawned the publication of hundreds of horror stories of various sorts, including such appearances in the *Strand* side by side with Sherlock Holmes—some even written by Arthur Conan Doyle (for example, “The Silver Mirror,” “How It Happened,” and “The Horror of the Heights”). Beyond question, a substantial number of the Holmes adventures may be classified as horror stories. But in the skillful hands of Watson (and on occasion even of Holmes himself) these works may be said to have gone out of their way to embrace the gruesome, the grisly, or the gothic. Perhaps the reason was indeed commercial. Or perhaps it was simply because, in his tireless search for the *outré*, Sherlock Holmes was attracted to cases that, whether he knew it or not at their outset, would be calculated to chill a reader’s blood.

It is ironic to note that, largely because of film, we have come to associate fog with Sherlock Holmes. Even Vincent Starrett writes of the “ghostly gas lamps” that “fail at twenty feet” as archetypal of the Holmes *mise en scène*. Yet only nine of sixty Holmes stories feature fog, while something more than twenty of them—fully one-third of the Canon—may be described in some sense as horror stories. Maybe those ghostly gas lamps ought to be ghastly gas lamps.

For many readers and viewers of film, the horror story, almost by definition, seems to embrace the supernatural, even though Poe, for example, in stories like “The Pit and the Pendulum,” demonstrated that this is not always the case. Nevertheless, a number of canonical adventures suggest or include elements of classic supernatural horror, and we shall examine them in due course. But it is wise to be aware of the astonishing horror that exists in the world of Sherlock Holmes quite independent of any supernaturalism at all.

The image of Captain Peter Carey pinned to his cabin wall “like a beetle on a card” seems antiseptic enough until added to it are the floor and walls of the cabin awash in blood and appearing “like a slaughter-house” and the truly flesh-

creeping “*droning like a harmonium*” [emphasis added] of “flies and bluebottles.” In “Black Peter” we do not have wait until burial for the Conqueror Worm; the flies and bluebottles are already on the scene. And while the words here are those of Inspector Stanley Hopkins, it is Watson who chooses to report them.

In fact, considering that much of the Canon was written and published in an age that valued delicacy and manners, publicly at any rate, it is surprising how much of it is simply gruesome, repulsive, and horrifying. This occurs from the very beginning: The description of Enoch J. Drebber’s body, contorted in a “writhing, unnatural posture,” the expression on its twisted, ape-like face one of hatred and horror, caused Watson to note that “I have seen death in many forms, but never has it appeared to me in a more fearsome aspect than in that dark, grimy apartment.” And yet, in Holmes’s very next recorded case, within the upper chambers of the bizarre and melancholy Pondicherry Lodge and under the cold, blue light of the moon, exactly as in a Hawthornean romance, Watson describes Bartholomew Sholto’s death-mask features as “set . . . in a horrible smile, a fixed and unnatural grin . . . more jarring to the nerves than any scowl or contortion.” This is the *risus sardonicus* caused by tetanus of the facial muscles, and it was considered a horrific enough image to have been used, *mutatis mutandis*, in Conrad Veidt’s 1927 silent film *The Man Who Laughs*.

Of course, the madman’s shrieking laughter is far worse than the faces of the dead contorted by fear, hatred or, for that matter, tetanus. Poe knew this when he described it in “The Haunted Palace”: “A hideous throng rush out forever/And laugh—but smile no more.” To find it in the Canon we need look no further than “The Devil’s Foot,” in which Owen and George Tregennis, “an expression of the utmost horror” on their faces, are found “laughing, shouting, and singing, the senses stricken clean out of them.” They are last seen being carried away to Helston, when Watson catches a glimpse, through the carriage window, of a “horribly contorted, grinning face glaring out at us.”

And lest we consider these aberrations, we have but to consider the discovery of Blessington’s body in “The Resident Patient”: “As he dangled from the hook [Blessington’s flabbiness] was exaggerated and intensified until he was scarcely human in his appearance. The neck was drawn out like a plucked chicken’s, making the rest of him seem more obese and unnatural by the contrast. He was clad only in his long night-dress, and his swollen ankles and ungainly feet protruded starkly from beneath it.” The swollen ankles, of course, are from the livid blood that settles to the lowest portion of the body after death. The Sherlockian Canon is not for the squeamish.

Of the four stories to which we have just alluded, only “The Devil’s Foot” involves even intimations of the supernatural. Yet elements of horror, as we have noted, even in cases that do not seem to fall within the definition of a clas-

sic horror story, seem to be as much the canonical rule as the exception. Critics often point to the sentence, “Mr. Holmes, they were the footprints of a gigantic hound!” as among the most chilling in the Holmes adventures, and one surely agrees. But for all its fame, the statement is probably no more truly horrifying than this one from “The Blanched Soldier”: “You are in the Leper Hospital, and you have slept in a leper’s bed.” Kipling, at his grittiest, couldn’t have said it better.

Not to draw this out, let us simply remark on the adventures that most prominently feature such gore. There is the engineer’s severed thumb lying on a window sill; brains blown all over a ship’s cabin in “The *Gloria Scott*”; Charles Augustus Milverton into whose dead face a woman’s heel is ground; Sir Eustace Brackenstall in “the Abbey Grange,” whose brains have spattered his wife’s clothing; a corpse in *The Valley of Fear* whose face is shattered by blasts from two shotgun barrels; severed ears in a cardboard box; the dreadful weals left on a corpse by the Lion’s Mane; the pathetic mutilation of a woman’s face in “The Veiled Lodger”; the arguably justified mutilation of a man’s face by hissing vitriol in “The Illustrious Client”; and not one but two stories involving murder and attempted murder in gas chambers in “The Retired Colourman” and “The Greek Interpreter” (it’s little wonder that William Gillette incorporated the Stepney gas chamber into his 1899 stage play *Sherlock Holmes*).

The classic horror story, unlike the Canon’s more realistic cases, can be described as incorporating elements of Gothic Romanticism, a term actually comprising two parts. Gothicism (often dated from Walpole’s 1764 *Castle of Otranto*) made use of many of the trappings of the Middle Ages, including dark castles, secret passages, haunted forests, stormy nights, gloom, and, almost always, ultimately revealed crime or sin. Romanticism was a loosely knit and loosely defined literary movement that occurred in the late eighteenth century and extended into the mid-nineteenth. Its name having been derived from the medieval Romances, romanticism emphasized the power of the imagination and the value of emotional and subjective experience of the world over the objective empiricism that had preceded it in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. *Frankenstein* of 1818 is a solid example of a gothic romantic work, while *Dracula*, published in 1897, is a novel in which the Gothicism that surrounds the Count is at odds with modern forces of the confederation that does battle with him.

In this sense, *Dracula* has more in common with the Sherlockian Canon than one might at first imagine. The six characters who band together to defeat the King Vampire are products of what Stoker is at pains to insist is a capitalized, industrialized, democratized, and therefore mature world, while *Dracula* represents an egocentric, feudal world whose time, like *Dracula*’s own, is past. *Dracula*, according to the Dutch Professor Van Helsing, “be not of man-stature

as to brain [sic],”<sup>1</sup> by which he means that Dracula’s thinking reflects the child-like “id,” the “child-brain” Van Helsing calls it, and that is why Dracula can be defeated. Sherlock Holmes too, with his logical positivism, celebration of science and ratiocination, and egalitarian commitment to law, represents everything that the dark denizen of Dracula’s gothic world does not.

But Sherlock Holmes actually goes Professor Van Helsing one better. While he, too, is able to defeat an id-creature like Grimesby Roylott by the exercise of mature intellect, he rejects utterly the world of gothic romance. He irritably berates Watson for his “little fairy-tales” (“The Empty House”) and charges the doctor with “tinge[ing]” his accounts of the cases “with romanticism” (*The Sign of the Four*)—even when one such account involves the abject terror of a poisonous serpent slithering down a bell-pull toward its unconscious victim, an image so famous that “The Speckled Band” is probably the most anthologized Holmes story. So much, as far as Holmes is concerned, for romanticism. As for Gothicism, in “The Sussex Vampire,” he solemnly intones the credo that “The world is big enough for us. No ghosts need apply.” And yet, again and again in the Canon, ghosts—the ghosts of gothic romanticism—do apply, insistently.

One is surely tempted, as we have noted, to consider *The Sign of the Four* as gothic romance, and so we may. Mary Morstan’s friend, Mrs. Cecil Forrester, declares of the case, “It is a romance! . . . An injured lady, half a million in treasure, a black cannibal, and a wooden-legged ruffian. They take the place of the conventional dragon or wicked earl.” “And two knights-errant to the rescue,” adds Mary Morstan. However, though this novel may be among the very best in the Canon and is quite certainly romantic in tone as presented by Watson, it is not in the classic sense a horror story.

The adventure that indisputably is, however, is *The Hound of the Baskervilles*—a confection of horror that, in its own way, seems to some degree to inform the elements of horror in other canonical tales. Though Holmes’s detective powers are evident from the first in his analysis of Dr. Mortimer’s stick, as the tale progresses the supernaturalism seems to grow. We are confronted by the Baskerville family legend that derives from a relatively recent though sufficiently antiquarian past, a legend concerning enough sin and supernatural retribution that it would be perfectly comfortable in the pages of an eighteenth-century gothic romance.

Though it has been debated in just what part of England the story of the black hound originated, there definitely was (and may still be) a persistent legend in Devon that a supernatural black hound appeared frequently between Torrington and Coplestone. These tales were collected in 1956 by Barbara Carbonell with reference to apparitions in the 1920s and ’30s.<sup>2</sup> J. Wentworth Day remarks that the “Black Dog of Essex [Black Shuck] is one with the Ghostly

Hound of Dartmoor who haunts the moor and hunts terrified humans to their death in the quaking bogs.”<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, for much of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, it scarcely matters that the Hound shall ultimately be revealed as a creature of flesh and blood. The narrative is left in the hands of the romantic Watson, who operates in a vacuum left by Holmes’s absence—a vacuum filled with swirling moorland fogs, flashing lights among the night-time crags, and a mysterious silhouette upon a tor etched against a full autumnal moon. In this context the Hound of the Baskervilles becomes as real to us as the various Black Hounds that have long existed in British oral tradition. However, like *Moby Dick* whose presence pervades Melville’s massive novel but is actually seen rarely—and only clearly at the book’s climax—when the Baskerville hound emerges, its life on the canonical stage occupies a scant few paragraphs. We hear its baying across Dartmoor’s forlorn landscape, but it is that landscape itself—the setting—that functions to instill fear.

For Celtic Britons—as well as for sensitive readers—the presence of neolithic standing stones, cairns, burial barrows, huts, henges, and hill-forts comprises a haunted landscape and, in literary terms, a usable past. In such a setting, modern archaeology is so inextricably bound up with the almost-palpable presence of faery, wee folk, sprites, goblins, and spirits of place that Hounds of Hell lurking among the ruins become only one further manifestation of how very thin the veil between material reality and the otherworld may be perceived as being. It is worth mentioning that when the Rev. Mr. Roundhay in “The Devil’s Foot” exclaims, “We are devil-ridden, Mr. Holmes! My poor parish is devil-ridden!”, we must remember that his Cornish parish, like the moorlands of Devon, is studied with ancient stone circles and dolmens that create in it a supernatural aura and a folk-memory that far predates Merlin and the druids.

It is in this setting—the old baronial manor house, the wild moors, the groaning Grimpen Mire into which so many lives have been sucked down, the rocky tors, the prehistoric ruins, in the autumn, the dying time of the year, and under a full moon no less—that we see as clearly as anywhere in the Canon all the trappings of gothic horror. When Holmes, Watson, and Lestrade confront the monster, it is upon the moors with the fog so thick that they cannot at first see the thing. “Hist!” says Holmes with frightening urgency, cocking his pistol. “Look out! it’s coming!” Holmes refers to the hound, but he may as well refer to the summit of all our fears.

The whole book has carefully, skillfully manipulated the reader’s emotions, immersing one in a novel-length mire of uncertainty and unease, and has built toward this moment. When the creature does appear from the fog bank, Lestrade throws himself to the ground in terror. Watson tells us that the hound is “enormous” and “coal-black” with “[f]ire burst[ing] from its open mouth, its eyes

glow[ing] with a smouldering glare, its muzzle and hackles . . . outlined in flickering flame.” This is the apparition for which we’ve been waiting—because we know that we’ve been reading a horror story. Even after the hound has savaged Sir Henry and been shot dead, the Holmes whom we expect to explain everything can exhaustedly utter only, “It’s dead, *whatever it is*” [emphasis added]. The explanation comes a paragraph later, but there is that one moment of delicious *frisson* when even the great detective has no idea just what it is he has shot.

Frankly, does it matter in the least that the hound is revealed to be completely corporeal and merely the agent of a cold-blooded murderer instead of a true Hound of Hell? Clearly not, for it is arguable that those who read the novel simply attempting to unravel the puzzle it presents miss its true value. It is the book’s supernaturalism that has brought generations of readers to *The Hound*.

This is not the case with stories like “The Sussex Vampire” and “The Creeping Man.” In these—far less informed by the gothic romanticism of *The Hound*—the question that pervades our thinking is how Sherlock Holmes, exponent of reason and enemy of irrationality, can conceivably demonstrate that what are patently unearthly situations actually have solid, earth-bound solutions.

But when a reading public quite aware of the success of 1897’s *Dracula* sees Holmes holding a letter headed “Re: Vampires,” surely the human hunger to believe in supernature is stimulated. Even Holmes admits, “For a mixture of the modern and the mediæval, of the practical and the wildly fanciful, I think this is surely the limit.” Of course, we expect Holmes to “snarl,” “Rubbish, Watson, rubbish. What have we to do with walking corpses who can only be held in their grave by stakes driven through their hearts?” But readers rub their hands together—and possibly lick their lips.

In his essay “The Philosophy of Composition,” Poe describes the highest literary emotion as an elevation of the soul to new heights of experience—the most profound of which are melancholy and horror. Aesthetes of horror understand this well. Robert Ferguson’s letter, therefore, can only ratify such a reader’s keenest desires. For he describes a scene in which his wife, after a cry of pain is heard, is seen to “rise from a kneeling position beside the cot [upon which Ferguson’s child lies]” with “blood upon the child’s exposed neck and upon the sheet. With a cry of horror, [Ferguson] turned his wife’s face to the light and saw blood all round her lips. It was she—she beyond all question—who had drunk the baby’s blood.” It is virtually impossible to forget that when the three “brides” of Count Dracula attempt to attack Jonathan Harker, Dracula forces them back and placates their thirst with his “gift” of a baby, carried unceremoniously in a carpet bag and dumped at their feet. The forces of supernature (or human nature, for that matter) preying upon such innocent creatures is a horror that can scarcely be countenanced.

Though the Ferguson home is a small cottage rather than a gothic castle, it is not lacking in the exoticism that one expects in a vampire tale. It is dark, its ceilings low, and it is furnished with trophies of peculiar weapons presumably of Amazonian provenance. Of course, these play a critical role in the plot, but there is a world of difference between the cataract knife of “Silver Blaze” and a poignard tipped with South American vegetable alkaloid. Just as a large part of *Dracula’s* appeal was the painstaking research Stoker did into the mysteries of old eastern Europe, here—as much as in the similar attacks of the brutal Andaman Islander in *The Sign of the Four*—a far-away world of wild, incalculable evil provides the textual atmosphere for the horror. And while Holmes confidently proves that the story’s vampirism was actually an act to save a life rather than take one, the fact that the villain is an emotionally stunted child is both enraging and sickening. In *The Sign of the Four*, when Watson cries, “A child has done this horrible thing!” we too may be horrified at the assertion. But when this turns out to be true in “The Sussex Vampire,” we are justified in a more horrific revulsion. “I think a year at sea would be my prescription for Master Jacky,” says Holmes. A stake through his little black heart may be ours!

It has been written so often as to have become axiomatic that the function of the detective story is to reaffirm our belief in the assertion of rational social order over anti-social irrationality. This is one principal reason that Sherlock Holmes—and his many fictional offspring—have always been so successful as literary figures. It has often been written, rightly or wrongly, that supernatural horror stories allow us to cope with the concept of death, or at the least to work out our own deepest psychological problems—both of these within the “safe” context of a book or a film, which comes to an end and allows us to proceed with our lives. But it is equally important to note that horror stories, like detective fiction, also argue for social order and the victory of the human heart over evil.

The tragedy of *Frankenstein* is that the title character is a coldly intellectual and morally irresponsible weakling who never really takes responsibility for the evil he has done, while his Creature does take that responsibility, at the same time, however, having become by choice a premeditated murderer. Society wins only when both Frankenstein and Creature have perished. In *Dracula*, it is the simultaneous slashing at the Count’s throat—Jonathan Harker with his British colonial Khukri knife and Quincey Morris with his American Bowie knife—that represents precisely the quartering of the Union Jack with the Stars and Stripes, democratic modernity thus putting an end to the last vestiges of parasitic European feudalism. Even in the work of Poe, we see the bitter struggle in Poe’s own psyche between the reason of the Chevalier August Dupin and the “infecting” madness of Roderick Usher. What horrifies us about Poe’s life is that Roderick Usher proves triumphant when the author dies in that Baltimore hospital.



As Frankenstein and his Creature are “father” and “son” (or perhaps halves of a single self), as Dracula is our id and the confederation that defeats him our superego, and as we see the epic struggle in Poe’s own psyche in his work, “The Creeping Man” suggests itself as the Canon’s Jekyll and Hyde type. It’s not so much that a mid-life crisis pits id against superego; more, it pits id against fear of ageing and death. But it calls up the id nevertheless, and traditionally many monsters, both literary and historical, have represented the id—childlike, uncontrolled, freed of social restraint, greedy to be satisfied.

Professor Presbury’s desire for a younger woman is understandable, even defensible. His solution of using a drug to enhance or restore his youth is no longer herbological myth but fact. Enticing though it is to wish to trace the connection between Viagra and ape-like behavior, we are probably better served to remain with the present topic. It certainly may be said that Presbury’s experimentation with black-faced Langur serum tips his story into the realm of the monstrous. Indeed, of the numerous canonical adventures invested with elements of horror, “The Creeping Man” may be the only one with a classically recognizable monster in it.

As Holmes and Watson observe him from outside his house, the professor is glimpsed in the half-light appropriate to the horror story, for “the clouds were scudding across the sky, obscuring from time to time the half-moon.” Then he appears, sinking “down into a crouching position, and mov[ing] along upon his hands and feet, skipping every now and again as if he were overflowing with energy and vitality.” He then begins to caper in the trees; yes, he is virile again, but unfortunately he’s an ape. It is not until he attains the outside wall of his house that Presbury is described really ominously. For at this point, “With his dressing-gown flapping on each side of him, he looked like some huge bat glued against the side of his own house, a great square dark patch upon the moonlit wall.” This is exactly the same image that we get from Jonathan Harker when he describes Dracula as “crawl[ing] down the [exterior] castle wall . . . *face down* with his cloak spreading out around him like great wings.”<sup>4</sup> As if this almost supernatural vision weren’t enough, it is apposite to recall that in the course of his earlier mountaineering about his house, Presbury has actually peered voyeuristically into his own daughter’s bedroom. It would seem that his newfound “energy and vitality” are a bit indiscriminate where the fair sex are concerned. But then, monsters are not obliged to play by the rules of social convention. In this case, surprisingly, it is not Holmes the bloodhound but Roy the wolfhound that puts a stop to the larger creature’s unseemly cavortings. And it is the decorous Bennett who implores that the matter be hushed up to spare the professor’s reputation and his daughter’s feelings. The point, however, is that social order has been restored by the monster’s defeat, almost the story of Jekyll and Hyde or

Dracula, but attenuated and writ small. It is—one has to admit—more than somewhat difficult to take “The Creeping Man” entirely seriously as a Sherlock Holmes case, however well it may serve as a variety of Victorian science fiction. Yet whatever horror it engenders is as much that of the human psyche as it is of men who creep. But the Canon has other horrors still.

“Shoscombe Old Place” incorporates many of the components of gothic horror, including a genuinely “Gothic” “haunted crypt” in “an old ruined chapel.” Holmes and Watson are led to the place on a moonless night and discover a “melancholy place—dismal and evil-smelling, with ancient crumbling walls of rough-hewn stone, and piles of coffins, some of lead and some of stone.” It is within one of the coffins that they discover “a body, swathed in a sheet from head to foot, with dreadful, witch-like features, all nose and chin . . . the dim, glazed eyes staring from a discoloured and crumbling face.” Though the scene occupies only a couple of pages of the text, beyond doubt the reader has been immersed in such a classic scene of horror that comparable images with which he is familiar come flooding upon him, intensifying the experience.

Even an entire gothic crypt full of coffins, however, cannot attempt to rival the abject horror of premature burial. Poe writes:

There are certain themes of which the interest is all-absorbing, but which are too entirely horrible for the purposes of legitimate fiction. These the mere romanticist must eschew, if he do not wish to offend or to disgust. . . . The true wretchedness, indeed—the ultimate woe—is particular, not diffuse. That the ghastly extremes of agony are endured by man the unit, and never by man the mass—for this let us thank a merciful God!

To be buried while alive, is, beyond question, the most terrific of these extremes which has ever fallen to the lot of mere mortality.<sup>5</sup>

This, of course, is “the lot” of the unfortunate Lady Frances Carfax. The plot of Holy Peters to dispose of the lady in question is as odious as any in Sherlockian history. It is, first of all, the act of a coward. To cite Poe again, we recall that it is because his nerves are too sensitive to commit murder with his own hands that Roderick Usher entombs his sister alive—and then listens for days to her death struggles within the coffin. Peters resorts to the same method, not for any psycho-physical reason but, one surmises, out of sheer criminal perversity.

“Is she gone, Watson? Is there a spark left? Surely we are not too late!” cries Holmes as they wrench open Lady Frances’s coffin. Holmes’s presumption seems to be that either the chloroform or the lack of air in her prison may have killed her. But the alternative, which Holmes does not seem to consider, is that, had she not been rescued, Lady Frances may have awakened in that coffin after

it had been lowered into the ground. That prospect, as it is for Poe, is far too horrible to contemplate, especially within the Victorian gentleman's world of Holmes, Watson, and Conan Doyle.

But of course, this ultimate horror does befall Richard Brunton in "The Musgrave Ritual"—again a tale involving an old manor house, a mysterious history, secret chambers, and buried treasure. Watson describes the dreadful human wreck that they discover "And so under": "It was the figure of a man, clad in a suit of black, who squatted down upon his hams with his forehead sunk upon the edge of the box and his two arms thrown out on each side of it. The attitude had drawn all the stagnant blood to the face, and no man could have recognized that distorted, liver-coloured countenance. . . ."

This is the clinical report of a medical man. What Watson decorously omits is what Poe had already given us and that with which readers of the Canon, both then and now, were and are familiar: the ghastly death-struggle within the sealed chamber, the screaming, the clawing, the bloodied fingers, the slow suffocation, and finally the exhausted slumping into that dazed semi-consciousness that precedes death.

Not just to read the Canon passively but to imagine all that its action *implies* is to understand that from first to last, it is infused with horror—from Enoch J. Drebbler's contorted body in a filthy abandoned building to Dr. Ray Ernest's feeble attempts to scratch a dying clue in a wall baseboard while gasping for a vitalizing breath of fresh air that never came.

When Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, author or literary agent as you may choose, writes in the Preface to *The Case-Book* that Sherlock Holmes is the product of the "fairy kingdom of romance," he was evidently thinking of the diverting kingdom that, as he says, includes "the beaux of Fielding," "the belles of Richardson," "Scott's heroes," and "Dickens's delightful Cockneys." But far from these, the various adventures of Sherlock Holmes, for more than a hundred years, have drawn us into a world of darkness, madness, and death, which only the goodness of Holmes and his Watson has served to mitigate.

#### NOTES

1. Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, Parsippany, NJ: Unicorn Publishing House, 1985, p. 237.
2. John Canning, ed., *50 Great Ghost Stories*, London: Souvenir Press, Ltd., 1971, pp. 365 ff.
3. Canning, p. 364.
4. Stoker, p. 58.
5. Edgar Allan Poe, *The Complete Edgar Allan Poe Tales*, New York: Avenel Books, 1981, pp. 432-433.