

Re-examining Arthur Conan Doyle

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Edited by

Nils Clausson

**Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing**



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This book first published 2021

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-7281-1

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-7281-2

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INTRODUCTION

NEW DIRECTIONS IN CONAN DOYLE STUDIES

For the past several decades commentaries on Arthur Conan Doyle, and especially on the Holmes stories, have been dominated by new historicist, postcolonial, and cultural studies approaches. As I noted in my book on Conan Doyle's fiction, the preferred method of recent Conan Doyle criticism has been to tie him to a chair, shine a postcolonial, new historicist, or Foucauldian light on him, and beat a confession out of him. What all of these approaches share is the assumption that the novels, stories and tales are best approached as cultural documents that afford insights into major social, and political, and cultural developments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including imperialism, colonialism, and the rise of criminology as a social science. These studies, focused primarily on the Holmes stories, have certainly uncovered aspects of Conan Doyle's works that earlier criticism overlooked, and sometimes willfully ignored. However, it now seems that there is little more to be said about Conan Doyle's imperialist representation of the colonial Other, or the ways the Holmes stories construct the foreigner as criminal, or how the stories both reflected and contributed to contemporary developments in the new 'science' of criminology. These veins have pretty much been exhausted, although in the present critical climate they will undoubtedly continue to attract scholars.

This collection, as the title indicates, tries to break new ground in Conan Doyle criticism and scholarship by shifting attention to overlooked and neglected aspects of his works and to apply alternative methods to reading them. Since Conan Doyle's continuing popularity rests on the Holmes stories, the majority of the essays focus on them. However, the non-Holmes stories are well represented. For example, Nicholas Ruddick, who has written widely on the history of science fiction and edited H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, offers the first comprehensive critical survey of Conan Doyle's science fiction, and Catherine Wynne, who has published extensively on him, illuminates the cultural significance of Conan Doyle's interest in sport, particularly boxing, and its relation to class.

Kate Holterhoff offers the first intensive analysis of the way Conan Doyle and *The Strand Magazine* took advantage of recent developments in combining printed text with photographs and illustrations, anticipating today's graphic novels. Both fans and critics of the Holmes stories are familiar with Sidney Paget's illustrations of the Holmes stories. Less attention, regrettably, has been paid to the illustrations in Conan Doyle's other works, particularly the Challenger novels. Holterhoff's groundbreaking chapter, "'An absurd parody of the Professor': Illustrating Professor Challenger in *The Lost World*," examines *The Lost World*, Conan Doyle's most reprinted non-Holmes work, in the context of the expanded use of illustrations and photographs in early twentieth-century popular fiction. The illustrator was Harry Rountree, and Holterhoff persuasively argues that his illustrations for the original serial publication of the novel in the *Strand* from April to November 1912 are an integral part of the novel. Her chapter is a fine example of the application of reception theory to Conan Doyle's novel. "Illustration studies scholars," she points out, "have shown that the role of pictorial paratexts in serialized literature can no longer be marginalized in literary or cultural studies scholarship." She places the illustrations and photographs in *The Lost World* in the context of the increasing use of illustrations in early twentieth-century serialized fictions. Her analysis shows how the "visual paratexts that accompanied *The Lost World*—photographs, paintings, cartoons, and line-drawings reproduced in halftone and engraved forms—open up this text in unexpected and crucial ways." More specifically, Holterhoff explains how these paratexts are essential to Conan Doyle's comic characterization of Professor Challenger, which is easily overlooked when one reads the novel in a modern edition that excludes the original paratexts. "Beyond promising adventure and parodying real scientific discovery," she points out, "images of Challenger firmly ensconce comedy and visual culture." I have always believed that *The Lost World* successfully blends the adventure story with the comic novel. Holterhoff's chapter confirms this judgment.

In "'Fowlers, Shooters, and Hunters of Dogs': Violet's Success and Watson's Failure in 'The Copper Beeches,'" Sheldon Goldfarb, the author of *Sherlockian Musings* (2019), expands the method used in the brief musings of his book to offer a refreshingly new reading of "The Copper Beeches," one that makes Watson the central figure, if not the hero, of the story. Goldfarb approaches the story from a Jungian perspective, arguing that it "is both a fairy tale depicting a successful journey and a more modern tale showing the obstacles that lie in wait for a modern man

(Dr. Watson) who can't really be a fairy tale hero or a Gothic heroine." Goldfarb's approach reminds me of the "eccentric" readings of the Holmes stories in *The Secret Marriage of Sherlock Holmes and Other Eccentric Readings* (1996), in which Michael Atkinson offered a Jungian reading of the two narratives in *A Study in Scarlet*. Goldfarb's perceptive analysis calls attention to the generic dissonances in what is usually taken as a typical detective story. Drawing on Cynthia Griffin Wolff's reading of Radcliffe's Gothic romances and Gilbert and Grubar's classic feminist study *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Goldfarb argues that what initially appears to be an analytic detective story can be read as a Gothic romance within a well-established literary tradition. He also shows Conan Doyle's indebtedness to the conventions of the fairy tale: Holmes and Watson "show up like the brothers at the end of the Bluebeard story to rescue the heroine," but she has already been rescued by her fiancé, who emerges as more of a hero than the late-arriving Holmes. One of ironies that Goldfarb's analysis reveals is that Holmes's contribution to the plot is the least interesting part of the story.

Perhaps the most original feature of Goldfarb's chapter is the way he deftly decenters Holmes, shifting the focus of critical attention to Watson and to the client, Miss Violet Hunter. "What we take away from this story" is not the success of Holmes, the nominal hero, but "the amazing power of Violet Hunter, who fights through the oppressions imposed on her by the Rucastles and in the end discovers exactly what is going on . . . and after succeeding in this discovery she is then free to go on to an adult life as the head of a private school." "The Copper Beeches" is thus a coming of age story, as female Gothic tales often are, and Conan Doyle, at least in this story, turns out to be a proto-feminist. Perhaps Goldfarb's revisionist reading of the story will prompt a reconsideration of the women in the Holmes stories from the perspective of the late-Victorian New Woman. What is needed is a study of women in the Holmes stories, one influenced by Elaine Showalter's *Sexual Anarchy* (1991).

Likely the most controversial aspect of Goldfarb's reading is his questioning of the conventional view of Watson as "the loyal supporter of the great detective, his publicist and assistant," and shifting critical attention to Watson. In Goldfarb's reading, Watson remains, like Alice Rucastle, "something of a passive double of Violet. Violet has many doubles in this story. There is Alice, who symbolizes the passive side of her that she must overcome. There is Fowler, who is the alter ego who carries out the rescue she is working towards. And there is Watson, another Alice but also the portrait of a grown man trapped in a role he dislikes. While Violet, Alice, and Mr. Fowler function in the fairy tale side

of the story, Watson's plight seems more something out of a realistic novel or drama." In contrast to Violet Hunter, Watson ends where he begins, as Holmes's subordinate, and whereas "Violet slays Bluebeard, Watson remains locked in his tower, in his abusive relationship with Holmes." This is certainly a provocative and controversial interpretation, but it opens up an alternative way of reading the Holmes stories from the perspective of Jungian archetypes and the literary conventions of Gothic romances and fairy tales. Goldfarb demonstrates that what is needed are more readings of the Holmes stories within *literary* history.

Nicholas Ruddick's chapter, "'How Narrow Is the Path of Our Material Existence': Arthur Conan Doyle's Major Contribution to Science Fiction," offers a fresh perspective on Conan Doyle's undeservedly neglected science fiction. "Doyle's towering contribution to detective fiction," Ruddick observes, "overshadows his work in other popular genres." As a result, there is comparatively little criticism of his science fiction, which anthologies often lump together indiscriminately with his Gothic tales. Professor Ruddick's chapter is the first significant attempt to survey Conan Doyle's science fiction and to place it within the history of the genre. Ruddick conveniently divides Conan Doyle's sf into three periods: the first from 1885 to 1894 to 1914; the second from 1895 to 1914; and the third encompassing the late stories of the 1920s.

Ruddick also illuminates the stories thematically by classifying them according to the sf tropes that govern them: the Identify Exchange trope, the Transmutation of Elements Trope, the Futuristic Technology trope, the Speculative Powers of Electricity trope, the Psi-Powers trope, the Prehistoric Survivals or Lost World trope, the Futuristic Weapon trope, the End of the World/Last Man trope, the Future War trope, the Living World trope, and the Alternate World trope. This classification scheme enables Ruddick to place all the stories in a literary-historical context that reveals the extraordinary range of Conan Doyle's sf. One of the strengths of Ruddick's chapter is the broad and deep knowledge of the history of science fiction that he brings to Conan Doyle's sf stories, enabling him to demonstrate both how a particular story is indebted to a prior example of the type and how it has influenced later sf writers. For example, he points out that *The Doings of Raffles Haw* (1891) likely influenced H. G. Wells's story "The Diamond Maker" (1894) and Frank Lilly Pollock's novella "The World-Wreckers" (1908). Ruddick is certainly justified in his conclusion that "Doyle's legacy, though not always sufficiently acknowledged, is everywhere in contemporary sf." All specialists in science fiction will find Ruddick's chapter a valuable guide to an underappreciated sf writer. The

chapter is certain to stimulate further research into Conan Doyle's sf. That research would, in my opinion, be assisted by a scholarly edition of Conan Doyle's sf.

Adrian Tait's chapter, "Storied Matter: A New Materialist Rereading of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes," draws on theories of new materialism, specifically on material ecocriticism's focus on storied matter, to offer a new perspective on two Sherlock Holmes stories, "The Cardboard Box" and "The Blue Carbuncle." So far as I know, this is the first application of the methods of eco-criticism and the new materialism to the Holmes stories. Once readers become accustomed to the terminology of these disciplines (such as "agentiality"), they will, as I did, come to view familiar aspects of the stories in a new light. For readers unfamiliar with these disciplines, I recommend that they take the time to peruse one or more of the theoretical texts listed in Tait's Works Cited, specifically *Material Ecocriticism*, edited by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism*, and *Environmental Humanities: Voices from the Anthropocene*, edited by Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino. I also recommend the journal *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*.

The premise of Tait's methodology is that since matter is "storied," and since the ecocritic focuses on "the refractive and diffractive relationships between matter and discourse . . . narratives can themselves be reconsidered . . . as stories that have something to say about matter, as accounts of matter's own stories." As Tait observes, "From the troublesome and incriminating photograph in 'A Scandal in Bohemia,' whose disruptive power over those *in* power cannot be wished away in a blizzard of denials, to the type-written letter in 'A Case of Identity,' which [as Holmes remarks] has [quoting Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*] "quite as much individuality as a man's handwriting" and the succession of objects in 'Silver Blaze' (from cataract knife to curried mutton and milliner's bill), the things in these stories are [in Bennett's words] 'a source of action,' independent and autonomous."

To illustrate his thesis, Tait offers readings of "The Cardboard Box" and "The Blue Carbuncle." The carbuncle itself is "a beautiful, mesmerising object," and, as Holmes says, the "nucleus and focus" of an extensive history of crime and violence. "Watson's description of it," Tait points out, "emphasises what is unusual about an object that would normally be thought of as inert and passive: it scintillates; it radiates; it twinkles 'like an electric point.'" "This stone is not yet twenty years old," Holmes explains, but "[i]n spite of its youth, it has already a sinister

history. There have been two murders, a vitriol-throwing, a suicide, and several robberies brought about for the sake of this forty-grain weight of crystallised charcoal.”

The major advantage of Tait’s approach to the story, in my view, is that it shifts attention from Holmes’s investigation and solution and shifts it towards the blue carbuncle. As Tait says, “the stone influences those who come into contact with it in often profound ways.” For example, the thief, Ryder insists that his action in taking the jewel was entirely out of character: “I never went wrong before! I never will again.” Holmes, Tait points out, “is sufficiently convinced of the stone’s power to affect and distort a decent man’s behaviour that he lets Ryder go free.”

A significant component of the image of Conan Doyle that has come down to us is inseparable from his image as the quintessential late-Victorian sportsman. He was an avid boxer, cricketer, rugby player, golfer and cyclist, and he even claimed to have introduced the use of skis to the Grisons district of Switzerland. Catherine Wynne’s chapter, “Conan Doyle’s ‘young, athletic sporting men’: Class, Empire, War and the Boxing Body,” offers an analysis of the broader cultural significance of Conan Doyle’s life-long commitment to sports, and particularly to boxing. Her analysis “uncovers the meanings and significance of the ‘noble old English sport of boxing’ [as Conan Doyle himself described it] in Doyle’s writing in the years immediately before and after the Second Anglo-Boer War. In his writing boxing enables dialogue between classes (whilst maintaining class hierarchies), generates a sense of national identity, and prepares men for war.” Wynne places Conan Doyle’s writing on boxing, specifically his novel *Rodney Stone* and the ‘medical’ boxing story, “The Croxley Master” (1899), in the context of nineteenth-century attitudes to boxing as essentially a British sport that embodied ideals of sportsmanship and fair play. In the early nineteenth century there emerged a ‘mythology’ of boxing that portrayed it as a characteristically English and “especially natural to Englishmen.” “British men boxed,” she says, “while foreigners (Continental) used the knife.” In the Holmes stories, Wynne points out, boxing and sport in general exemplify the self-discipline of physical training. “The novel speaks to the period of its publication when Britain was engaged in an aggressive imperialism at the end of century. The multi-racial Regency boxers of Doyle’s fiction cohere with an imperial identity of the late nineteenth century which includes the races of empire.”

A good deal of attention has been paid to Conan Doyle’s interest in spiritualism, but much less to his interest in mesmerism and hypnotism. Gordon Bates’s chapter, “The Fascinating Fictions of Arthur Conan Doyle:

Hypnotism and Mesmerism in “John Barrington Cowles” and *The Parasite*,” attempts to fill in this gap in Conan Doyle studies. Bates points out that Edinburgh University, where Conan Doyle took his medical training, was a centre of research into hypnotism and mesmerism: “Edinburgh was known for its interest in subjects relating to the mind and for investigations into practices such as mesmerism and hypnotism, as well as dreams and somnambulism. In the first half of nineteenth-century it had produced several of Britain’s most significant medical mesmerists and hypnotists.” For example, James Braid, of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, coined the term hypnotism.

One of the more fascinating cultural aspects of the reception of the Holmes stories is the creation of Holmes societies, first in New York and London, and then spreading around the world so that today there are several hundred of them. In his chapter, “Early Sherlockians and Sherlockiana, 1927-1934,” Benoit Guiliemo, thoroughly explores, for the first time as far as I am aware, the emergence of the Sherlockian phenomenon and the origins of the New York and London societies. I am not aware of any author whose works have been subjected by non-academics, to the extraordinary scrutiny and analysis that the Holmes stories have been. A striking feature of the men (along with a few women) who were the original Sherlockians is that they were literary intellectuals and university graduates with a background in the classics and the history of English literature. They were not ‘fans’ in the sense that term is used today. As Guiliemo points out:

The early Sherlockians had a solid classical education. They were all well-versed in the Classics, Shakespeare, and the tradition of literary criticism. They adopted towards Doyle’s narratives the same scholarly stance that they took towards these classical works while playing a literary game based on a particular interpretation of a defined and accepted text: the corpus of the Sherlock Holmes stories. The pioneers of “Watsonian scholarship” borrowed and mimicked the methods of literary and textual criticism and applied them to Doyle’s popular detective fiction.

Early examples were a parody of contemporary textual scholarship on Shakespeare and Homer, as well as on character-based criticism of Shakespeare’s plays, such as A. C. Bradley’s *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904), which was satirized by L. C. Knights in his famous 1933 essay “How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?”

The quotation in Nicholas Ruddick's title—"How Narrow Is the Path of Our Material Existence"—is particularly relevant to my chapter on "The Devil's Foot." Conan Doyle, says Ruddick, 'was a conservative imperialist who sought a belief system, no matter how irrational, to replace the Roman Catholicism of his upbringing, and whose aim in most of his sf was to cast doubt on the ability of scientific materialism to account for paranormal phenomena.' This aim is also evident in his Gothic tales, as my chapter on "The Devil's Foot," "The Gothic 'Circle of Misery and Violence and Fear' and the Return of the Repressed in 'The Devil's Foot,'" attempts to show. This Holmes story, rather than extoling Holmes's much-vaunted 'science of deduction and analysis, actually exposes the limitations of the "scientific materialism" that the stories are widely believed to endorse. Although the late Victorian Gothic has received considerable attention in recent decades, its relation to detective fiction, and particularly to the Holmes stories, has, with only a few exceptions, been neglected. My chapter on "The Devil's Foot" offers not just a rereading of a single Holmes story but also an example of an alternative way of understanding the role of the Gothic in the Holmes stories.

As Ruddick points out, "*The Parasite* may be viewed as sf because of its interest in examining the trope of Psi-Powers from a scientific perspective, though horror is undoubtedly the emotional effect Doyle sought." What Ruddick's commentary on the novella shows is that the rather rigid distinctions between Gothic, sf, and detective fiction that we have grown accustomed to are not always helpful in talking about Conan Doyle's fiction, which often blurs generic distinctions. The chapters by Goldfarb and Tait also explore the Gothic element in the Holmes stories. A study of Conan Doyle's fiction that demonstrates the thematic relationships between the Holmes stories, the Gothic tales and the science fiction stories is yet to be written, demonstrating the essential unity among stories that only appear to belong to distinct genres.

Conan Doyle is regularly classified as a popular writer, most of whose tales and stories fall into the category of genre fiction. In the final chapter of this collection, I try to question the validity of the distinction between popular (genre) fiction and literary fiction by showing how the methods that we have learned in the academy to read 'literary' fiction can be applied to a Sherlock Holmes story, "The Golden Pince-Nez." My revisionist reading of the story is intended to illustrate how the problematical distinction between literary and popular fiction has had the

unfortunate consequence of determining both the interpretation and the evaluation of the Holmes stories.

There are, regrettably, gaps in this collection. There is, for example, no essay on Conan Doyle's historical novels, nor on his poetry or his journalism. My hope, however, is that the essays collected here will stimulate further interest in Conan Doyle beyond the perennially popular Holmes stories—enough, perhaps, to justify a sequel to *Re-examining Arthur Conan Doyle*.

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THE GOTHIC “CIRCLE OF MISERY AND FEAR” AND THE RETURN OF THE REPRESSED IN “THE DEVIL’S FOOT”

NILS CLAUSSON

“What is the meaning of it, Watson? . . . What object is served by this circle of misery and violence and fear?”

—Conan Doyle, “The Cardboard Box”

“[The] ‘return of the repressed,’ or emergence of whatever has been previously rejected by consciousness, is a fundamental dynamic of Gothic narratives.”

—Valdine Clemens, *The Return of the Repressed*

“Perhaps all short stories can be understood as ghost stories, accounts of visitations and reckonings with traces of the past.”

—Michael Chabon, *Maps and Legends*

I

When the Sherlock Holmes story “The Adventure of the Devil’s Foot” was first published in the *Strand Magazine* in 1910, it was identified, in a superscription, as “A Reminiscence of Sherlock Holmes,” a descriptor that was subsequently dropped, although the last collection of Holmes stories, *His Last Bow* (1917), which included “The Devil’s Foot,” was subtitled *Some Reminiscences of Sherlock Holmes*. The action of the story takes place thirteen years earlier in March of 1897. What prompts Watson to make the case public is a telegram from Holmes in which he suggests, “Why not tell them [Watson’s readers] of the Cornish horror—strangest case I have handled.”¹ To which Watson responds: “I have no idea what backward sweep of memory had brought him to desire that I should recount it; but I hasten, before another cancelling telegram may arrive, to hunt out the notes which give me the exact details of the case, and to lay the narrative before my readers” (DF 68). So the decision to make the story public after thirteen years of suppression comes from Holmes, not

2 The Gothic “Circle of Misery and Fear” and the Return of the Repressed in “The Devil’s Foot”

Watson. One would think that Holmes would have welcomed Watson’s publication of his “strangest case,” but after solving it in 1897 he was strangely eager to “dismiss the matter from our mind” (DF 94) so that he can return to his philological research into the Chaldean roots of the Cornish language. The obvious question that the delayed publication raises, then, is why was the publication of Holmes’s “strangest case” suppressed for thirteen years? The answer Watson gives is that because “all popular applause was always abhorrent” to his friend, he has been forced “to lay very few of his records before the public” (DF 68). But this explanation is not very convincing. Why in 1910 is Holmes no longer reluctant to receive public applause? The “backward sweep of memory” that prompts Holmes to make the case public years later is, I argue, best explained as an example of the return of the repressed, and what Holmes has repressed for thirteen years is the full significance of the two murders that he investigated and appeared to have rationally explained thirteen years earlier. Therein lies the unsolved mystery of “The Devil’s Foot.”

To solve this mystery will require that we reassess the role of the Gothic in “The Devil’s Foot” and, concomitantly, that we cease reading the story exclusively as a classic detective story (a whodunit) and instead read it as a generic hybrid of detective story and Gothic tale, specifically an example of late-Victorian Gothic, a genre whose expanding popularity coincided with that of the detective story. Although Conan Doyle considered “The Devil’s Foot” one of his favourite stories, critics have neglected it, largely, I suspect, because the dominance of the Gothic elements in it frustrates readers’ expectations of what a Holmes story should be. What critics have not adequately explored is the relationship between these seemingly contradictory genres. That is the gap I propose to fill in. Although late-Victorian Gothic has received considerable attention in recent decades, its relationship to detective fiction, and especially to the Holmes stories, has, with only a few exceptions, been neglected despite the fact that Conan Doyle published a dozen Gothic tales before and during the period he wrote the first twenty-six Holmes stories. This chapter, then, offers not just a reading of a single Holmes story but a test case for an alternative way of understanding the role of the Gothic in the Holmes stories. It might very well be subtitled “How to Read a Sherlock Holmes Story.”

My revisionist Gothic reading of “The Devil’s Foot” contests the current orthodox Gothic reading of “The Devil’s Foot” contests the current orthodox approach to the Holmes stories, an orthodoxy that has, unfortunately, led to a questionable ideological reading of them. For several decades, the Holmes stories, despite a few dissenting voices, have been read as ideological narratives demonstrating the power of reason and

science to elucidate and dispel mystery. “What Conan Doyle created,” says Iain Pears in his introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* and *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (2001), “was the perfect positivist, the embodiment of Victorian faith in rationality and science, convinced that the right combination of method and reason could overcome all obstacles.”² Perhaps the most influential statement of this view is Catherine Belsey’s analysis of the stories in her 1980 book *Critical Practice*. According to her and those who have followed her lead over the past four decades,

The project of the Sherlock Holmes stories is to dispel magic and mystery, to make everything explicit, accountable, subject to scientific analysis. . . . Holmes and Watson are both men of science. Holmes, the ‘genius’, is a scientific conjuror who insists on disclosing how the trick is done. The stories begin in enigma, mystery, the impossible, and conclude with an explanation which makes it clear that logical deduction and scientific method render all mysteries accountable to reason. . . . The stories are a plea for science not only in the spheres conventionally associated with detection (footprints, traces of hair or cloth, cigarette ends), where they have been deservedly influential on forensic practice, but in all areas. They reflect the widespread optimism characteristic of their period concerning the comprehensive power of positivist science.³

This view of the stories, which has calcified into a virtually unquestioned orthodoxy,⁴ appears to be confirmed in “The Devil’s Foot,” in which Holmes investigates and successfully solves the murders of two members of the Tregennis family in the hamlet of Tredannick Wollas in Cornwall. This is the position taken by Shelly Trower in her recent analysis of the story, which, she argues, “provide[s] an *entirely* rational explanation for the mysterious, seemingly supernatural occurrences.” In support of this claim, she points to Holmes’s “rational exclusion in the early stages of the mystery of supernatural explanations.”⁵ The mistake of Trower and those who, like her, share Belsey’s view of the “project” of the Holmes stories is to conflate Holmes’s limited investigation, leading to a rational explanation, with the project of the story as a whole.

“The Devil’s Foot” does not, as Trower assumes, provide “an entirely rational explanation for the mysterious.” Holmes does. And that distinction is crucial to my argument. (Prince Hamlet, as post-Romantic critics have insisted, is not coextensive with *Hamlet* the play.) The project of the Holmes *stories* is not to dispel magic and mystery, to make everything explicit, accountable, subject to scientific analysis. That is *Holmes’s* narrow project—a project that the story, through its subversive Gothic narrative and tropes, invites the attentive reader to view critically.

4 The Gothic “Circle of Misery and Fear” and the Return of the Repressed
in “The Devil’s Foot”

As in many other Holmes stories, there are two mysteries in “The Devil’s Foot,” or rather an intellectual puzzle and a genuine mystery. I have elsewhere called these the manifest and latent mysteries.⁶ The manifest mystery is that found in the classic detective story: how the two murders were committed, who committed them, and what the two criminals’ (personal) motives were for committing them—a puzzle Holmes rather easily solves. The motives here are the ones found in countless whodunits: lucre, larceny, and love. However, the deeper (latent) mystery, which the story shares with many *fin-de-siècle* Gothic tales, cannot be satisfactorily explained by Holmes’s science of deduction and analysis, leading Holmes to repress his experience of the case and to pursue the less disturbing puzzle of the origins of the Cornish language.

The two genres that the story comprises, detective story and Gothic tale, are closely associated in the text with two contrasting metaphors: the Gothic “circle of misery and violence and fear” and the logical chain of “Holmes’s simple deduction[s]” (DF 71). The irrefragable chain of logical deductions is the master trope in Holmes’s self-congratulatory account of his successful investigations. In Chapter 2 of *A Study in Scarlet*, “The Science of Deduction and Analysis,” Holmes confidently tells Watson that because the world is causally ordered it is therefore rationally explainable: “. . . all life is a great chain, the nature of which is known whenever we are shown a single link of it.”⁷ In “The Five Orange Pips,” another story in which the Gothic figures prominently, Holmes confidently invokes his favourite metaphor:

The ideal reasoner . . . would, when he had once been shown a single fact in all its bearings, deduce from it not only all the chain of events which led up to it but also all the results which would follow from it. As [Georges] Cuvier could correctly deduce a whole animal by the contemplation of a single bone, so the observer who has thoroughly understood one link in a series of incidents should be able to accurately state all the other ones both before and after.⁸

The story concerns the vengeance wreaked upon multiple generations of the Openshaw family by unknown avengers for unspecified sins, a cycle of death that prompts Watson to ask the unanswered (because unanswerable) question: “What can it mean, this endless persecution?” (“Five Orange Pips,” 116), a question that repeats Holmes’s similar one at the end of “The Cardboard Box” on one of the rare occasions when his faith in the power of reason has been shaken: “What does it all mean, Watson? . . . What object is served by this circle of misery and violence and fear?”⁹ The

most important questions in the best Holmes stories are those Holmes cannot answer.

In the closing lines of “The Devil’s Foot,” Holmes appeals to this metaphor of the chain to sum up the case, which from his point of view vindicates his method:

‘Well, Watson, I will not offend your intelligence by explaining what is obvious. The gravel upon the window-sill was, of course, the starting point of my research. It was unlike anything in the vicarage garden. Only when my attention had been drawn to Dr Sterndale and his cottage did I find its counterpart. The lamp shining in broad daylight and the remains of powder upon the shield were *successive links in a fairly obvious chain*. And now, my dear Watson, I think we may dismiss the matter from our mind, and go back with a clear conscience to the study of those Chaldean roots which are surely to be traced in the Cornish branch of the great Celtic speech.’
(DF 94; italics added)

Putting all these “links” together, Holmes easily identifies the two murderers and explains how their crimes were committed. For Holmes the great chain is the master metaphor that explains both the nature of reality and how to arrive at the truth. For him whatever cannot be explained in this way does not exist. Hence his quick dismissal of a supernatural explanation of the puzzling murders: “I take it, in the first place,” he tells Watson after viewing the first crime scene, “that neither of us is prepared to admit diabolical intrusions into the affairs of men. Let us begin by ruling that entirely out of our minds” (DF 77). The Gothic, however, is not necessarily synonymous with the diabolical. Although Holmes calls the case the “strangest case I ever handled,” its strangeness derives not from the supernatural, from “diabolical intrusions into the affairs of men,” but from the prehistoric past erupting violently into present-day Cornwall, a familiar trope in *fin-de-siècle* Gothic. (Dracula emerges from the medieval past of remote Eastern Europe to invade modern London.) This is the truth that the rationalist Holmes seeks to repress because to acknowledge it would expose the limitations of the rationalism on which his science of deduction and analysis, as well as his identity and reputation as the world’s first consulting detective, is founded.

In contrast to Holmes’ logically linked chain, the metaphor that dominates the Gothic part of the story is the circle of repeated violence and death. The paradigmatic Gothic narrative is a story of repetition: the most familiar trope being the family curse, the doomed house, which figures the inescapable inheritance of evil. In Gothic tales, as Mark Edmundson observes, using Poe as the prime example, “the past rises up

to devour any attempt to begin anew: the present is fully possessed by long-ago traumas.”¹⁰ The most powerful Holmes stories—and the most successful artistically—are those in which these two narratives, Gothic tale and detective story, compete for dominance and in which the Gothic trope of repetition subverts Holmes’s rationalist one of the great chain. Thus Conan Doyle’s story, as distinct from Holmes’s investigation and solution of the murders, is a bifurcated narrative. There are, in effect, two narratives competing for mastery in this artfully constructed story: Holmes’s rationalist narrative, reproduced by Watson, embedded within his frame narrative and focused on how he has, to his own satisfaction, explained the two puzzling deaths; and, in contrast, Watson’s Gothic narrative of what the press sensationally dubs “The Cornish Horror” (DF 70). Everything related to the Gothic in the story is narrated by Watson. This is the same narrative structure that a decade earlier Conan Doyle had used successfully in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1901). Within this bifurcated narrative structure, the Gothic functions to expose the limitations of Holmes’s rationalism, which declines to look beyond the manifest motives of greed and revenge to the question of the latent origins of the crimes. “The Devil’s Foot,” then, is a *genera mixta*, a hybrid of the Gothic and the ratiocinative detective story, in which the Gothic plot undermines the confident rationalism of the detective plot. My reading of “The Devil’s Foot,” by inverting the hierarchy of the detective and Gothic genres in the Holmes stories, subverts the orthodox view of the Gothic in them as an illusory threat that is easily exposed by Holmes’s science of deduction and analysis. The Gothic plot of “The Devil’s Foot” functions, as it does in other Holmes stories, to subvert the rationalist assumptions of the detective plot and of Holmes himself, a subversion that Holmes cannot acknowledge and so he represses it.

II

Reading most recent criticism of the Holmes stories, however, one would be unaware that while Conan Doyle was writing the first two Holmes novellas and the first two dozen adventures of Sherlock Holmes published in the *Strand Magazine* between 1891 and 1893, he was also writing a dozen Gothic tales published in a wide range of Victorian periodicals and magazines that were marketed at the rapidly expanding mass readership emerging in the 1880s and 1890s, one of the most successful being, of course, the *Strand Magazine*. Conan Doyle was not alone. As Roger Luckhurst observes, in the 1880s and the 1890s writers “filled the new journals, weekly and monthly magazines of the *fin de*

siècle with a torrent of Gothic imaginings.”¹¹ In February 1884, two years before he began writing the first Holmes story, *A Study in Scarlet*, Conan Doyle wrote to his mother of his plans to collect a number of these tales into a single volume:

I think of publishing my opera collecta or the pick of them if [publishers] Smith Elder & Co see their way to it. What think you of “Twilight Tales” for a name. You see it would have a double meaning—not only as being tales suitable for the gloaming [twilight, dusk] but as treating of the strange twilight land between the natural and the absolutely supernatural (animal magnetism—mesmerism—and these other acknowledged powers play a large part in them).¹²

This plan would not come to fruition until 1890, when Conan Doyle assembled a group of his early Gothic tales in *The Captain of the Pole Star and Other Tales*, the same year that *The Sign of Four* was published. He went on to publish a further sixteen Gothic tales over the next decade, and he published in the *Strand* two more —“The Terror of Blue John Gap” and “Through the Veil”—the same year as “The Devil’s Foot.” The Gothic tale and the detective story were as closely related in Conan Doyle’s *oeuvre* as they were in Poe’s.

To be sure, critics have frequently pointed out that several of the Holmes stories—most notably “The Speckled Band” and *The Hound of the Baskervilles*—contain conventions and tropes that regularly appear in late-Victorian Gothic tales. Among these conventions is the isolated, “ill-omened house” (DF 75) where strange and horrific events take place. However, because the Holmes stories are regularly taken to be exemplary instances of the detective story, the Gothic elements in them (while acknowledged) are subordinated to the rational powers of Holmes, who, in the standard reading of them, triumphs over what only appears to be the non-rational or, in the case of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, the supernatural. According to this view, the stories arouse Gothic fears only to confidently and reassuringly allay them.¹³

Unlike a classic detective story, “The Devil’s Foot” is fissured by a tension between, on the one hand, the confidence bordering on condescension with which Holmes imperturbably explains in the last paragraph how he has easily solved the two ghastly murders—“I will not offend your intelligence by explaining what is obvious” (DF 94), Holmes tells Watson—and, on the other hand, the reader’s sense that his explanation too hastily dismisses—represses, as I argue—the latent (Gothic) mystery at the centre of the story: What makes human nature so prone to committing horrific crimes again and again? The story’s generic

dissonance becomes apparent if we juxtapose the final paragraph with Watson’s earlier description of the horrific effects of the devil’s-foot root that the two of them take as an “experiment” (DF 84, 85) to confirm Holmes’s “hypothesis” (DF 84) that the drug caused both deaths. The language of the detective plot, presided over by Holmes, is the empirical language of scientific investigation. Words and phrases that he repeatedly uses (and are quoted by Watson) to describe his method of investigation include the following: “simple deduction” (DF 71), “investigate” (74) “working hypothesis” (84), “experiment” (83, 84, 85, 86, 89), “theory” (85), “reason” (86), “conclusive” (83) and “successive links in a fairly obvious chain” (94).

However, such language is absent from Watson’s Gothic narrative, which is defined by a sharply contrasting language: “sinister,” “strange,” “mysterious,” “horror,” “horrible,” “dark” and “darkness,” “terror,” and “evil.” These nine words appear 47 times in a 27-page story. The subliminal effect of these repetitions far outweighs that of Holmes’s rationalist language. Clearly, the mind-altering experience of the drug, and not Holmes’s logical explanation of the crimes at the end, is the imaginative centre of the story, and that experience is Gothic. “The feeling most consistently evoked in Gothic tales,” says Valdine Clemens, “is the terror of the life-threatened creature, wholly at the mercy of forces that are neither controllable nor understandable; a terror that at its most elemental makes little distinction between ‘natural’ and ‘supernatural’ causes.”¹⁴ The terror—“unspeakable” terror, neither controllable nor understandable—that Watson describes perfectly exemplifies Clemens’ characterization of the Gothic. Watson points out that his “brain and imagination were beyond all control” (note, too, how often the words I listed above occur):

At the very first whiff of it my brain and my imagination were beyond all control. A thick, black cloud swirled before my eyes, and my mind told me that in 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. A freezing horror took possession of me. . . . I broke through that cloud of despair, and had a glimpse of Holmes’s face, white, rigid, and drawn with horror—the very look which I had seen upon the features of the dead.
(DF 85-86)

Watson’s account is consistent with what Chris Baldick calls the “Gothic effect”: “For the Gothic effect to be attained, a tale should combine a

fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space, these two dimensions reinforcing one another to produce an impression of sickening descent into disintegration.”¹⁵ Watson’s phrase “some unspeakable dweller upon the threshold” significantly echoes the phrase Conan Doyle used in the 1884 letter to his mother quoted earlier—“the strange twilight land between the natural and the absolutely supernatural”—and encapsulates what Kelly Hurley in *The Gothic Body* refers to as “the grey area at the borderline between known and unknown, or extra-rational phenomena.”¹⁶

Close attention to the language of the passage reveals its relation to the rest of the story. The vague shapes that “*swirled* and swam in the dark cloud-bank” are a “menace and a working of something coming,” just as “the sudden *swirl* round of the wind” and “the blustering gale from the south-west” portend something coming: the deaths of seamen in their “last battle” with the “creaming breakers” (DF 69). Like the winds and waves of the “sinister semicircle of Mounts Bay,” Holmes’s dangerous experiment almost becomes a “death-trap” for himself and Watson. The image of the thick black cloud that is “about to *spring* out upon” Watson’s “appalled” senses echoes the earlier image of Holmes, who we are told, “sat coiled in his armchair” and suddenly “laid down his pipe and *sprang* to his feet” (DF 77). Holmes confesses that he “never imagined that the effect [of the drug] could be so *sudden* and severe” (DF 87), a remark that echoes Watson’s earlier description of “the *sudden* swirl round of the wind” that leads to the death of “innumerable seamen” (DF 69; italics added). In the final paragraph of the story, however, Holmes “dismiss[es]”—that is, represses—this “unspeakable” Gothic experience from his mind and focuses exclusively on how he has logically followed the “successive links in a fairly obvious chain” to solve the puzzle of the murders. After participating in an experiment that nearly kills both himself and Watson, Holmes, instead of drawing on this horrific experience to suspect that there may be something “monstrous and inconceivably wicked in the universe,” returns to his philological investigations seemingly unaffected by what has happened. His repression of this experience clearly marks it as a trauma.

The detective plot, which expresses Holmes’s unwavering belief in reason and science (in the form of theories, hypotheses, “simple deduction”), attempts but ultimately fails to repress the unexplained—“the unspeakable dweller upon the threshold” (DF 86)—released by the Gothic plot, forces that cannot be so easily dismissed as Holmes would have it. What is obviously disturbing in this story, as in many *fin-de-siècle* Gothic tales, is what remains unexplained, and what Holmes cannot explain—“the unspeakable”—he dismisses. Holmes’s dismissive rejection of the

experience—“I think we may dismiss the matter from our mind”—is a classic case of repression. In her study of the Gothic, *The Return of the Repressed*, Valdine Clemens argues, “This ‘return of the repressed,’ or emergence of whatever has been previously rejected by consciousness, is a fundamental dynamism of Gothic narratives. Something—some entity, knowledge, emotion, or feeling—which has been submerged or held at bay because it threatens the established order of things, develops a cumulative energy and demands its release and forces it to the realm of visibility where it must be acknowledged.”¹⁷ The repressed will necessarily return, and it returns here in the form of the repetition of the original trauma, at Holmes’ insistence, in Watson’s delayed Gothic narrative, which gives a much fuller and frightening account of the “unspeakable dweller on the threshold” than Holmes’s “successive links in a fairly obvious chain.”

III

Watson’s retelling of the story at Holmes’ insistence reveals what Holmes’s original solution in 1897 had tried to repress: the real nature and origin of the two ghastly murders. Whereas the detective plot, presided over by Holmes, had offered a rationalist explanation of the crimes in terms of personal motives (greed and revenge), Watson’s Gothic narrative relies not on Holmes’ science of deduction and analysis but on three tropes commonly found in Gothic narratives: the ill-omened house (or family curse) as found in Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher,” the emergence of the past, especially the prehistoric past, into the present, as in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) and Arthur Machen’s *The Great God Pan* (1894), and the double, as in R. L. Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, published the year before the first Holmes story appeared. These tropes combine to subvert the authority of Holmes’s science of deduction and analysis.

In conformity with the first of these tropes, the Tregennis family home is, in Watson’s telling words, “this ill-omened house in which they had met their strange fate” (DF 75). The fact that the house is “ill-omened” and that the deaths of two Tregennis family members and the descent into madness of two others (the brothers of Brenda and Mortimer) are fated implies, within this Gothic convention, that the deaths in the story are pre-determined and thus not entirely explainable in terms of personal motives. As Mark Edmundson observes in his study of the Gothic in American culture, *Nightmare of Main Street*, “the gothic sensibility affirms . . . how much of life has been scripted in advance.”¹⁸ With the deaths of Brenda and Mortimer Tregennis and the madness of their brothers, the Tregennis family, like Poe’s Ushers, will come to an end.

The Gothic trope of the “ill-omened house,” with its implication that deaths are fated, is reinforced by the repeated use of the terms tragedy and drama. To make sense of the horrible events and to impose some kind of intelligible form on them, Watson and even Holmes imagine them as a tragic drama, in contrast to Holmes’s primary metaphor of a chain of logically connected links. Watson, for example, describes Holmes as “absorbed in the strange drama which had broken in upon our peace,” and then a few lines later Holmes repeats Watson’s metaphor when he asks Mortimer Tregennis, “How far is it to the house where this singular tragedy occurred?” (DF 72). This is soon followed with another question: “Thinking back at the evening which you spent together, does anything stand out in your memory as throwing any possible light upon the tragedy?” (74). Watson repeats the trope when he describes “the spot at which the tragedy occurred” (75) and the room “where this strange tragedy had actually occurred” (76). When Tregennis is found dead, Watson reports that “the tragic end had come to him in the early morning” (82), and later refers to “the morning of the tragedy” (84). After he and Watson perform the dangerous experiment of subjecting themselves to the potentially lethal drug, Holmes asks, “I take it, Watson, that you no longer have a shadow of doubt as to how these tragedies were produced?” (DF 87), and later refers to his investigation as “reconstructing this drama” (89). To call the deaths a tragic drama implies an alternative metaphor to the chain of logically connected events, giving them the inevitability of a tragic drama rather than the logic of a Euclidian proof.

The inevitability of tragic deaths in an “ill-omened house” is closely related to the setting of the story. Mounts Bay, on the tip of the Cornish peninsula, is more than local colour or atmosphere to provide a bit of frisson to an otherwise rationalist detective story. The setting is pure Gothic, for it is a place where the violent past, as in so many Gothic tales since *The Castle of Otranto* (1765), erupts inevitably into the present, and it clearly foreshadows that Holmes and Watson’s “simple life and peaceful, healthy routine” will, like the lives of the Tregennis family members, soon be “violently interrupted” (DF 70).

From the windows of our little whitewashed house, which stood high upon a grassy headland, we looked down upon the whole sinister semi-circle of Mount’s Bay, that old death-trap of sailing vessels, with its fringe of black cliffs and surge-swept reefs on which innumerable seamen have met their end. With a northerly breeze it lies placid and sheltered, inviting the storm-tossed craft to tack into it for rest and protection.

12 The Gothic “Circle of Misery and Fear” and the Return of the Repressed
in “The Devil’s Foot”

Then comes the sudden swirl round of the wind, the blustering gale from the south-west, the dragging anchor, the lee shore, and the last battle in the creaming breakers. The wise mariner stands far out from that evil place. (DF 69)

The violent deaths of seamen fighting a “battle” with the winds and water in “that *old* death-trap of sailing vessels,” Mounts Bay, is immediately linked to the “*prehistoric* strife” of the combatants of “some vanished race”:

On the land side our surroundings were as sombre as on the sea. It was a country of rolling moors, lonely and dun-coloured, with an occasional church tower to mark the site of some old-world village. In every direction upon these moors were traces of some vanished race, which has passed utterly away, and left as its sole records strange monuments of stone, irregular mounds which contained the burned ashes of the dead, and curious earth-works which hinted at prehistoric strife.
(DF 69)

The repetition of “old” links the “old” watery death trap to “some old-world village” and ominously to the “hamlet of Tredannick Wollas” (DF 70) where the events of the story take place. The Gothic “old-world” setting—“the furthest extremity of the Cornish peninsula” (DF 69), together with the nearby “lonely and dun-coloured moors”—is not only a sinister and “evil place” (DF 69); it is also an ancient one where the past remains sinisterly visible in the present. The moor here resembles the moor in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, which Watson describes as “this most God-forsaken corner of the world,” adding that

When you are once out upon its bosom you have left all traces of modern England behind you, but, on the other hand, you are conscious everywhere of the home and the work of the prehistoric people As you look at their grey stone huts against the scarred hillsides you leave our own age behind you, and if you were to see a skin-clad, hairy man crawl out from the low door, fitting a flint-tipped arrow on to the string of his bow, you would feel that his presence there was more natural than your own.¹⁹
(*Hound* 75)

When Holmes and Watson leave London for Cornwall, where the rest of the action takes place, they similarly “have left all traces of modern England behind.”

The history of Mounts Bay (properly Mount’s Bay) is especially relevant to the events of the story. The bay takes its name from St Michael’s

Mount, a tidal island in the bay. Although relatively sheltered from the prevailing offshore Westerly winds, in winter onshore southerly and south-easterly gales present a danger to sailing ships. In the nineteenth century more than 150 ships met their end here. The bay's long violent history is not, however, limited to the "countless seamen" who drowned as a result of shipwrecks. In 1595 during the Anglo-Spanish War, a Spanish naval squadron burned and sacked several towns along the bay, including Penzance. In 1625, as part of the Barbary Slave Trade, Turkish slave traders seized about sixty men, women and children from a local church and absconded with them. In 1755 the Lisbon earthquake caused a tsunami that struck Mount's Bay. (For a contemporary account of the tsunami, see <http://www.penwithlocalhistorygroup.co.uk/on-this-day/?id=269>.) This violent history, which reinforces the Gothic elements of the story, would have been familiar to many of Conan Doyle's contemporary readers.

This violent history needs to be taken into account for a full understanding of the two deaths in the story, for they are not violations of an otherwise peaceful community, as murders often are in classic detective stories. Rather they are the latest manifestation of the violence and death that are integral to Cornwall's long history going back to prehistoric times. Readers familiar with Gothic conventions will know that violent death is not safely confined to the past and so they will hardly be surprised when the "prehistoric strife" of the "vanished race" whose ashes are buried in the "irregular mounds" that dot the "sinister landscape" inevitably resurfaces in the present in the form of two horrific murders. Modernity is as thin as the whitewash on Holmes and Watson's rented cottage overlooking the "sinister semi-circle of Mounts Bay."

Just as he did in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Watson emphasizes the primitiveness of the moor by calling attention to its extinct prehistoric inhabitants, who are linked not only to the strange monuments, irregular mounds and curious earthworks on it, but even more sinisterly to the "prehistoric strife" that suddenly (but inevitably) erupts yet again in the late nineteenth century. Conan Doyle subtly connects the description of the setting to the events that transpire there in the present, a connection that is signalled by the repetition of the word *sinister*, which appears five times in the story. The *Miriam-Webster Dictionary* gives three meanings of *sinister*: singularly evil or productive of evil; accompanied by or leading to disaster; presaging ill fortune or trouble. All these meanings apply to this story. Watson uses the word to describe not only "the whole sinister semi-circle of Mounts Bay" and the moor's "sinister atmosphere of forgotten nations" (DF 69) but also the "sinister mystery" (DF 79) of the two murders, thereby linking the "prehistoric strife," the violent deaths of

“innumerable seamen” in the death-trap of Mounts Bay, and the modern-day strife that arises from “a family quarrel” (DF 87) and leads to both deaths. Watson also tells us that a glimpse of the two Tregennis brothers being taken to a house for the insane “left a most sinister impression on me” (DF 75). Significantly, Holmes never uses the word *sinister*, only Watson, who is the voice of the Gothic in the story.

The Gothic is consistent with the multiple references to archaeology in the story, which, like Holmes’s interest in philology, are irrelevant to the detective plot. Early in the investigation, Holmes proposes that he and Watson take a break from the case to go on an archaeological excursion: “Meanwhile, we shall put the case aside until more accurate data are available, and devote the rest of the morning to the pursuit of neolithic man” (DF 79). Holmes’s pursuit of Neolithic artefacts appears at first glance to be, as Watson calls it, a diversion from the criminal investigation and evidence of his remarkable powers of “mental detachment” (DF 79). But this seemingly extraneous pursuit is actually related to the criminal investigation, not in the sense that it leads to the discovery of clues to the murders, but in the sense that these pursuits suggest an alternative understanding, unexplored by Holmes, of the crimes in terms of the Gothic intrusion of the violent, primitive past into the present, rather than Holmes’s rational understanding of them in terms of links in an obvious chain in the present. Holmes, despite his interest in “neolithic man” (DF 70), has not investigated deeply enough. The modern inhabitants of Cornwall, as the descendants of those vanished races, are no less prone to “strife” than they. The “prehistoric strife” of “some vanished race,” the Gothic implies, did not disappear with the extinction of a “vanished race” (DF 69). Rather it endures, re-emerging in the present.

The Gothic view of crime, in contrast to that of the rationalist detective story, is that it is bred in the bone, not the result of modern social conditions or purely personal motives. It is predetermined. Criminals in Gothic tales bear little resemblance to the nephews in whodunits who murder wealthy aunts before they change their wills. The Gothic cuts much deeper. Modern man, the story implies, is only superficially civilized. Thus the Cornwall horror is evidence, from the perspective of the Gothic, that “strife” and violence are always lurking just below the civilized surface; the criminal, from this perspective, is not a rare anomaly, a throwback, as late nineteenth-century criminology hypothesized, but yet another instance of the sudden eruption of man’s primal nature within a modern society that is only superficially civilized.