HUNTING THE HOUND

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

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

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

STARTER ACTIVITY+

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

Get students into a circle and then explain that they are to read the following passage from the Final Problem. The challenge is that each student says only the next word in sequence but that with concentration and speed, the performance must sound like a single person reading. If there are lapses in concentration and gaps then don’t be slow to take it back to the beginning again – at least that way students get a chance to hear the language several times.

“An examination by experts leaves little doubt that a personal contest between the two men ended… in their reeling over, locked in each other’s arms. Any attempt at recovering the bodies was absolutely hopeless, and there, deep down in that dreadful caldron of swirling water and seething foam, will lie for all time...”

(The Final Problem – Strand Magazine, 1893)

Now invite the students to re-read the passage around the circle, but this time add an action to the speaking of their word. This is easy enough for the ‘lexical’ words – verbs, nouns and adjectives that are immediately image-generating, but students can also have fun with the ‘functional’ language: the articles, conjunctions and prepositions. This should prove a lot of fun, but it is also a great way of engaging students with language, perhaps by getting students to make the case for one of their words being the most evocative or helping them spot where Watson’s shifts from a more factual tone to an emotional one – possibly from the word ‘hopeless’ onwards, as he recalls the terrible nature of the site of his friend’s death.

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

MAIN ACTIVITIES

1. HOLMES’ METHOD

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

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

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

**SUMMARY**

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