

**A Comparison of Canine Antagonists in *Call of the World* and *Hounds of Baskervilles***

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**Abstract**

Dogs have been an inseparable part of our existence. They are oozing in multitudes on our streets, in the wilderness and in our homes. They have been called man's best friend. Eulogized in literature, we have frequently seen their positive heroic side but they have a negative side as well. Science tells us that dogs can never be villainous but two famous novels from the past century have canine antagonists and they are extremely popular with the masses. This paper analyses the canine antagonists of *Call of the World* and *Hounds of Baskervilles*.

**Keywords:** Canine antagonists, detective, narrative

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*“The world is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance ever observes.” - Sherlock Holmes, *The Hound of The Baskervilles**

Dogs, whether tamed or untamed had been an inseparable part of our life. Our quotidian lives have been since times immemorial, gratified by the numerous outcasts that can be seen oozing in our streets in myriad of hues and textures. They are our universal soldiers, robin hoods, knights in shining armor, messengers of ill happenings and what not. No wonder they have added their traits in many of our proverbs and superstitions. We find ourselves blurting out, “Every dog has his day” when we spot an unworthy person basking in glory or “You can’t teach an old dogs a new trick” to establish the now incorrect fact that old people can’t learn new things. Talking of superstitions, the Greeks and the Romans blamed Serious, the belligerent Dog Star from Canis Major constellation for the summers and sacrificed a brown Canine at the advent of the season.

The love of faithful dogs has been time and again expressed through the immortal pen of literature ergo the very first canine that we hear of in the canons of literature is Argos. He was the loyal and royal dog of the warrior king Odysseus in *The Odyssey*. He had supposedly postponed his own death to fulfill his guard duty. He is famously depicted as the sole connoisseur of his master’s identity upon his return post an extended and exhilarating voyage lasting around twenty years. Homer, the writer tells us that “he dropped his ears and wagged his tail” but their acknowledgement meant that the master lost his disguise. Who can possibly forget the nimble footed sidekick, a Wire Fox Terrier named Snowy from *The Adventures of Tintin* by the Belgian cartoonist Hergé. Tintin would have died many deaths if it hadn’t been for his four footed furry friend. There is a long list of such sidekicks, assistants, companions in the history of literature and its subsequent filming.

All of the characters named above are glorified examples of loyalty and camaraderie. We had had them as adorable protagonists as in Tulip in JR Ackerley's *My Dog Tulip*, Stephen King's *Cujo*, *Flush: A Biography's* Flush by Virginia Woolf, Missis, Perdita, Pongo etc from Dodie Smith's *The Hundred and One Dalmatians* or helpers such as Toto from *Wizard of Oz*, Ghost in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Jip from *David Copperfield*. Canine protagonists are surplus but canine antagonists are hard to find. This paper attempts to compare two novels in the light of their portrayal of villainous dogs named Buck and an unknown hound.

The famous 1903 short adventure novel *Call of the Wild* by Jack London depicts the perspective of a kidnapped dog in Canada during the 1890 Klondike Gold Rush. The previously serialized book about the monstrous St. Bernard- Scotch Shepherd, Buck became extremely popular as a tale of survival. He is shown as responding to his innate nature which is that of a wild beast and transforms from a domesticated dog to an intimidating lone wolf lose in the wild. The hound in *The Hound of The Baskervilles* also is a wolf like giant creature that has terrorized people in a previously serialized book.

When we look at the trouble at Baskervilles, we have to look at the legend of Squire Richard Cabell. The church stands atop the magnificent edifice of Buckfast Abbey downhill. Squire Richard Cabell reportedly lived in the 1600's in Brook Manor and died in 1677. Legend has it that he had supposedly sold his soul to the devil after murdering his wife.

"The night of his internment saw a phantom pack of hounds come baying across the moor to howl at his tomb. From that night onwards he could be found leading the phantom pack across the moor usually on the anniversary of his death. If the pack were not hunting they could be found ranging around his grave howling and shrieking." (Harris, H. 1996 *The Church on the Hill*, Devon Books, Tiverton)

Arthur Conan Doyle was drawn towards the Devon town of Buckfastliegh in England to the fiendish history of Buckfastleigh Church that housed the sepulcher of the Cabell family and particularly that of the 'evil' squire. Buckfastliegh, the longest place name in England, is a small market town and parish. Conan Doyle had heard a narrative from a 30 year old *Daily Express* journalist named Bertram Fletcher Robinson.

"In Fletcher's version, the Richard Cabell thought his wife was being unfaithful to him so gave her a savage beating; she ran out of Brook Manor and fled onto the moor. The squire gave chase and caught up with her and in a fit of temper stabbed her to death, whereupon her faithful hound flew at him and tore his throat out. Both dog and Squire fell to their deaths. After that event the ghost of the hound prowled the moors howling piteously and reappeared to each generation of

the Cabell family. Having heard this story, Conan Doyle visited Devon where both he and Fletcher drove around the moor in a coach drinking in the atmosphere and formulating the book, the coachman who drove them around was – Baskerville. ” (Weller, P. 2001 *The Hounds of the Baskervilles – Hunting the Dartmoor Legend*, Devon Books, Tiverton)

Jack Griffith London, who had worked in a cannery and as a fish patroller before joining the gold rush; had the good fortune of witnessing the hound he immortalized as Buck in his *Call of the Wild*. A steamer returned with two tons of gold from northwest Canada and people flocked to the gold mines of Klondike, convinced that gold nuggets could be picked from the very ground. Like millions of English, who were suffering in the depression of the economy, Jack London set sail from San Francisco to turn the tides of his destiny in 1897. On the shores of Linderman Lake, in a great tent city, London and his three companions built a pair of flat- bottomed boats he christened the Yukon Belle to carry them downstream to Dawson, a city sprawled between the Yukon and Klondike rivers.

The White Pass or the Dead Horse Pass is a narrow gauge that used to be littered with the carcasses of dead horses that couldn't survive the steep ascent to reach the Klondike mines. Hence they were replaced with Alaskan Husky sled dogs with thick fur that were much desired and costly. Buck was based on a St. Bernard- Scotch Collie dog, owned by London's friends, brothers Marshall Latham and Louis Whitford Bond at Dawson. Landon later wrote about their dog, “Yes, Buck is based on your dog at Dawson.”

While we are presented with a clear picture of the hound in Klondike, we have a very vague imagery of the one at Baskervilles. We encompass the mountain canine, Buck in flesh and blood and know about his abduction and human like account of transformation. The Hound in Baskerville is a masked murderer, completely veiled behind the local legend of Devon in Dartwood. The element of horror is established as the permanent emotion (sthayibhava) and a sense of false horror and suspense hangs in the air till the very end. It is difficult to say whether the locals used the legend of the hell hound/ Yeth Hound to their purpose or the author provided an intricately woven mystery to his eccentrically brilliant detective.

Buck is a one forty pound St Bernard- Scotch Shepherd mix domesticated canine who had “ during the four years since his puppyhood, lived the life of a stated aristocrat; had a fine pride in himself and was trifle egotistical.” He did not have to yearn for food as his master was a prominent and prosperous judge and was prominent and prosperous himself. He has descended from a long ancestry of royal soldiers who have now retired to a life of opulence. He had the

innate nature of a long suppressed savage beast that he awakens in the later part of his life. Nothing of the hound's puppyhood and ancestry is found in the account of Baskervilles.

Both the dogs were made sinister by the conduct of their masters and wrongly accused to be antagonists of their respected novels. Buck was transformed by his new masters, who kidnapped him by the rule of the club. They awaken the latent soldier of the wild in him. His individual talent of survival in the violent atmosphere is cemented by the generations of brave hearts whose blood run in his veins. He shares the same genes as the wild beasts, who have survived as the fittest contenders against the harshness of nature. We see the account in the very first chapter of the novel,

“He was beaten (he knew that): but he was not broken. He saw, once for all, that he stood no chance against a man with a club. He had learned the lesson, and in all his afterlife he never forgot it. That club was a revelation. It was his introduction to the reign of primitive law, and he met the introduction halfway. The facts of life took on a fiercer aspect; and while he faced that aspect uncowed. He faced it with all the latent cunning of his nature aroused.”

The hound of Dartmoor is not given the chance to be justified. Notice that Buck is referred to in the entire novel in the second person pronoun ‘he’. The hound on the other hand is given a fiendish treatment since the inception of the novel and referred to as ‘it’. All we hear about is the description of the blood cuddling howl that is heard repeatedly by the locals and the detective as his assistant equally. The howl is described as agonized and his master, Stapleton, a distant relative of the aristocratic family is an embezzler who uses the local legend to his purpose thereby torturing the canine. We find upon Holmes’ investigation that he had captured and chained up his wife the same way he had incarcerated the hound. He had devised his evil lair in such a way that no one could decipher the desperate pleas of the bound hound and mistook it to be hellish howls.

“He could hide his hound, but he could not hush its voice, and hence came those cries which even in daylight were not pleasant to hear.... It was suggested, of course, by the story of the family hell – hound, and by the desire to frighten old Sir Charles to death. No wonder the poor devil of a convict ran and screamed, even as our friend did, and as we ourselves might have done, when he saw such a creature bounding through the darkness of the moor upon his track. It was a cunning device, for apart from the chance of driving your victim to his death, what peasant would venture to inquire too closely into such a creature should he get sight of it, as many have done, upon the moor?”

The first glimpse of the hound is found in the second last chapter with the same name as that of the book, where Holmes guides Watson and inspector Lestrade to the horrific scene.

“In mere size and strength it was a terrible creature which was lying stretched before us. It was not a pure bloodhound and it was not a pure mastiff; but it appeared to be a combination of the two – gaunt, savage, and as large as a small lioness. Even now, in the stillness of death, the huge jaws seemed to be dripping with a bluish flame, and the small, deep – set, cruel eyes were ringed with fire. I placed my hand upon the glowing muzzle, and as I held them up my own fingers smouldered and gleamed in the darkness.”

The first glimpse is also the last glimpse as the detective and his side kick had successfully killed the beast. The evil master is hinted to have drowned in mire in pursuit of sanctuary on discovery of his plan.

Buck however is stronger, having had many masters who had made him work hard and hit him harder. The death of the last master with whom he had struck a chord of camaraderie unsheathes the desire to revert to wilderness. He embraces his instincts to run and hunt and even joins pack of wolf howling in the full moon night.

Thus we see that both the dogs have been molded into the structure of antagonists according to the concept of binary opposites given by Claude Levi Straus. The antagonist will only have a particular shade of black while the protagonist will be blamelessly white. But every character has shades of black as well as white. In Buck’s case we learn that he was a blameless aristocratic pet at the abode of his master but his kidnapers bring out his dormant genes of a merciless killer. His actions are justified and when we look at him from this perspective he can hardly be classified as the villain. The main culprits are then the kidnapers and tormentors of Buck who hid all this while in his foreshadow. The same can be said of the unnamed hound petted by Stapleton, the actual villain who was in the entire novel concealed behind the legend of the diabolic hound. He furthermore paints phosphorus on the hound to complete the imagination of the locals. Hence the canine antagonists of *Call of the Wild* and *Hounds of Baskervilles* have been wronged by their master to make them appear sinister.

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