

“The devil’s agents may be of flesh and blood”:  
Apollonian-Dionysian dichotomy  
in Victorian *Sherlock Holmes*

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**ABSTRACT:**

Victorian England was a locale well known for sensational beliefs. Doyle used the fear and fascination of the age-old superstitions, and wove the plot of some of his famous stories. In the canon, Holmes is portrayed as this perfect embodiment of the *Apollonian* calm and reserve; however, he often indulges in *Dionysian* excesses like hallucinogens and the playing of the violin at late hours of the night. This shocking clash of the two different sets of values finds a recluse in Holmes. Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, believed that the clash between both the forces may apparently be destructive, but the duality needs to be inextricably unified for artistic enterprise: it is the source of creativity and procreation. The article seeks to problematise this narrative, and analyse how the ‘popular’ discourse of the famous detective can be deduced from two critical standpoints, the *Apollonian* and the *Dionysian*.

**Keywords:** Apollonian, Dionysian, Duality, Unification, Creative Procreation

*Apollonian* and *Dionysian* are terms used by Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* to designate the two central principles in Greek culture. Apollo and Dionysus were gods in the ancient Greek pantheon, despite representing nearly opposing values and orientations. Apollo was the god of light, representing reason, harmony and balance, while Dionysus was the god of wine, revelry, ecstasy and other convoluted emotions. Nietzsche distinguishes the *Apollonian* as all types of forms or structure: rational thought is also *Apollonian* because it is directly opposed to the *Dionysian* drunkenness and madness. All forms of enthusiasm and ecstasy are *Dionysian* in nature. Of all arts, Music is

the most *Dionysian*<sup>1</sup>, since it directly appeals to a man's instinctive and chaotic emotions. The *Dionysian* qualities in a man are unable or unwilling to formally address a rational mind; they are generally associated with the exotic, the wildly emotional as opposed to the reasoning mind. Dionysus is the representative of mad inspiration, advocating effeminacy and enslavement of some kind. The calm reason and measured restraint over the emotions represent the state of the *Apollonian* mind. The Dionysus, on the other hand, surrenders the self and associates with a state of drunkenness – drunk on an inspiration, on an ecstatic identification with a higher entity that usually results in a creative zeal. Nietzsche, however, believed that the clash between both the forces may apparently be destructive, but the *Apollonian-Dionysian* duality needs to be inextricably unified for artistic enterprise: it is the source of creativity and procreation.

This duality is necessary for the process of artistic creation. Nietzsche views the *Dionysian* consciousness as crucial in attaining the state of primordial unity, a state beyond social limitations and boundaries. The ability to resist emotions in the light of reason is at the crux of *Apollonian* beauty. However, the ecstatic state of the *Dionysian* madness brings out a revelrous state of productivity in man. In the character of Sherlock Holmes, we find a near perfect blend of these two binary oppositions. He is a man who is more of a brain; one who mostly seems 'other-worldly' to Watson or his naïve readers. He is all about reason, logic, and science – an epitome of the *Apollonian* rationale. On the other hand, this perfect embodiment of the *Apollonian* calm and reserve, indulges in *Dionysian* excesses like cocaine and the playing of the violin at late hours of the night. This shocking clash of the two different sets of values finds a recluse in Holmes; he is both *Apollonian* in character, as well as a resurrected *Dionysus*, who is a passionate violinist, engaging in titillating his senses with the help of cocaine, to drive away boredom: "A unification of the *Apollonian* and the *Dionysian* ... is witness to the strength of that dual artistic drive of nature ..." (Nietzsche, *Birth* 39)

James Frazer in *The Golden Bough* says, "The god Dionysus or Bacchus is best known to us as the personification of the exhilaration ... His ecstatic worship, characterized by thrilling music ... mystic doctrines [were] appealing

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1 It may be noted here that the original title of Nietzsche's book was *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (1872). A later edition was published in 1886 as *The Birth of Tragedy, or: Hellenism and Pessimism*.

as it did to that love of mystery and that proneness to revert to savagery which seem to be innate in most men” (Frazer 343b-344a). “Dionysus was believed to have died a violent death, but to have been brought back to life again; and his sufferings, death, and resurrection were enacted in sacred rites.” (Frazer 345a) Doyle’s own legendary detective carries a book about Dionysus soon after his own ‘resurrection’, thereby proving Nietzsche’s another theory of ‘eternal recurrence’ that philosophises that “time itself is a circle” (Nietzsche, *Zarathustra* 125), and the idea that all events and characters in the world repeat themselves. Doyle’s conscious identification of Holmes with the Dionysian cycle of death and rebirth is proven by the death and resurrection stories in the Holmesian canon. Like the Olympian God, Holmes is killed in winter; in *The Final Problem*, Watson and Holmes went to Reichenbach Falls in April where they faced winter-like conditions: “We made our way over the Gemmi Pass, still deep in snow, and so, by way of Interlaken, to Meiringen. It was a lovely trip... the virgin white of the winter above.” (Doyle, 477) The opening lines of his ‘resurrection’ story *The Adventure of the Empty House*, also emphasizes this Dionysian parallel: “It was in the spring of 1894 that all of London was interested, and the fashionable world dismayed, by the murder of the Honorable Robert Adair” (Doyle, 483). Dionysus died in winter and was reborn in spring. Holmes, very much like the Greek god, brings a promise of life: in the minds of his ardent worshippers, he is eternally reborn – a force of savage genius who cannot be destroyed even by his own creator.

I find the first proper implication of a Dionysian reference (in the canon) within the plot of the famous short-story, *The Adventure of the Speckled Band*. Doyle borrowed the image of an adder biting a sleeping person from Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “One day Zarathustra had fallen asleep beneath a fig tree, since it was hot, and he had laid his arm over his face. Then an adder came along and bit him ...” (Nietzsche 50) In *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes* Leslie S. Klinger opines that the snake that killed Julia Stoner and Grimesby Roylott could not be of Indian origin because there are no such varieties of snakes in India.<sup>2</sup> “Conan Doyle, while borrowing Nietzsche’s image

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2 “An adder, synonymous with the term ‘viper’, is the name given to any number of poisonous snakes found throughout Europe, Asia, and Africa. They range in length anywhere from one to six feet and are often decorated with diamond or zigzag patterns. The common viper (*vipera berus*), the only poisonous snake in Britain, is also referred to as the ‘adder’, but its venom is not usually fatal to humans. There is, in fact, no known swamp adder.” (Klinger 370)

of the biting adder from Zarathustra, also borrowed Nietzsche's mistaken idea that there were adders in the part of Asia through which Zarathustra travelled." (Rosenberg 86) In the story of *The Adventure of the Speckled Band*, Doyle presents the dramatic image of the Dionysian 'Maenad' who wears a snake as a headdress – the idea of a snake as a "peculiar yellow band" (Doyle, 272) or "strange headgear" (Doyle, 272) "bound tightly round" (Doyle, 272) someone's head is probably related to pictures and ancient art objects related to the Dionysian cult.

According to Conan Doyle, after his retirement from the world of crime, the detective had devoted himself to the cultivation of bees. The reference to the *Dionysian* cult is present even here – the honey-bee is considered to be the sacred insect of the Dionysus: the honey when fermented becomes the intoxicating mead to be used by the worshippers of Dionysus to reach higher levels of ecstasy. The 'un-killable' detective who has managed to survive and out-live his own creator, shares an eternal kinship with the undying god. The metaphor of the Dionysian bee is repeated in 'The Adventure of the Empty House', where Holmes sets up a wax dummy of himself for Sebastian Moran to shoot at. Holmes wrote a book on bees himself, titled, *Practical Handbook of Bee Culture, with Some Observations upon the Segregation of the Queen*<sup>3</sup> which associates the killing of the drone by the fertilized queen bee with the killing of the sacred king by Aphrodite, who mated with her, by tearing out his sexual organs. [Graves 71]

Despite the ambivalence between the double-faceted personality of Sherlock Holmes [the logical and rational mind of Apollo versus the chaotic emotions of his Dionysian habits], and his obvious similarities to both the Olympian gods, I find him to be very much a Victorian gentleman, who sublimates all his erotic desires in analytical drives of crime and detection, research, and cultivation of science. Even his self-needling of hard drugs is essentially anti-aphrodisiacal, and mostly intended to hasten the process of crime-solving by triggering his brain, and thereby nullifying the banal urges of mortal existence. The London-detective is somehow transformed into an allegorical hero by Doyle, revealed in his 'death' story in *The Final Problem*, and the story of his 'resurrection' in *The Adventure of the Empty House*.

3 The reference to this book is found in the short-story "His Last Bow": "Here is the fruit of my [Holmes's] leisured ease, the magnum opus of my latter years! ... Alone I did it. Behold the fruit of pensive nights and laborious days when I watched the little working gangs as once I watched the criminal world of London." (Doyle 978)

*On the Origin of Species* (1859) [full name: *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*] by Charles Darwin was a ground-breaking piece of work, and the emergence of the book in the field of science paved the way for further experimentations in Victorian London – a place and time which was well known for sensational beliefs. Fascination with black dogs and their association with the devil were a common pre-occupation in Victorian minds. Myths about black dogs have existed since the days of Homer. We are all familiar with the Greek myth of Hades, the god of the Underworld, who uses his three-headed black dog Cerberus to guard the land of the dead. Since ancient times, common people strongly believed in witchcraft and the use of black animals to carry out evil deeds. Conan Doyle used this fear of the age-old superstition, and wove the plot of his most fascinating Holmesian novel *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. The moor's criminal master-mind was in possession of an abnormally large and dark hound. He used the legend of the hound and forged it into a primitive weapon to instill fear in the minds of the “poor peasants, who are not content with a mere fiend-dog but must needs describe him with hell-fire shooting from his mouth and eyes. [However] Holmes would not listen to such fancies, and I [Watson] am his agent.” (Doyle, 727) However, despite Watson and Sir Henry's desperate attempts to remain rational and derive scientific explanations out of all the incidents, they too tended to fall into the clasp of fear: the evidences presented by the witnesses and the following events, all pushed them to a near-breaking point – “standing over Hugo, and plucking at his throat, there stood a foul thing, a great, black beast, shaped like a hound, yet larger than any hound that ever mortal eye has rested upon.” (Doyle, 675) It was almost breaking an otherwise strong and sane man, Dr. Watson, until the apostle of the Apollonian reason and structure, Holmes, reunited with him, restoring his faith in logical reasoning and science.

As Watson and Holmes reunited and worked together, the dark and mysterious environment of the moor tended to combat their noble efforts. The fog of the moor was destructive, and the “dark, quivering mire[s] ... tenacious grip plucked at [their] heels as [they] walked, and when [they] sank into it [,] it was as if some malignant hand was tugging [them] down into those obscene depths, so grim and purposeful was the clutch in which it held [them].” (Doyle, 759-60) However, the primitive location of the moor could not threaten the Apollonian scientific-detective enough to detain

him from his pursuit of the hound and its murderous master. Only Holmes seemed immune to the fear of the 'supernatural' hound and he decided to rough it out in the ancient caves located near the Baskerville Hall only for the sake of unraveling the truth. While Watson, being an ex-soldier and a man of medical-science, suggested the possibility of a "spectral hound, black, silent, and monstrous" (Doyle, 714), Holmes admitted that though the setting seems to be appropriate for devilish acts but "the devil's agents may be of flesh and blood." (Doyle, 684) The amazing powers of his deductions came into play as Holmes was quick to point out that the footprints were real enough and there was nothing remotely supernatural about the canine. Holmes relied only on scientific investigative techniques to catch the vicious owner of the murderous hound. His first suspect was Selden, a criminal, who was roaming the moor in search of a secluded place to hide. However, the escaped convict soon became a victim of the hound, thereby eliminating him as a suspect.

The faith in science and reason finally helped him to overcome the fog of supernatural, seemingly clouding the senses of all the residents, and discover the truth behind the devilish hound. Holmes had always been fascinated with studying things which were essentially related to his 'work' – the study of different types of tobacco ash, varieties of poisons, soil-types from different parts of London, to name a few. He was an excellent chemist, conducting his own experiments – his knowledge ranged from cataloguing crimes to the study of different kinds of human skull. His familiarity with phrenology, however, helped him to detect that Stapleton was ultimately a jealous relative of the Baskervilles. Stapleton's greed to own the estate of the Baskervilles compelled him to strategize such a magnificent plan to commit the murders. One evening while Watson and Holmes inspected the paintings at Baskerville Hall, the detective's 'trained' eyes instantly recognized the familiar face and saw through the disguise of Stapleton. The hound was shot down with five bullets, and "[e]ven ... 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" (Doyle, 757) – It emanated a terrifying aura, but flesh and blood nonetheless it was. Stapleton used a "cunning preparation" (Doyle, 757) of phosphorus, to manipulate the appearance of the animal and gave it a supernatural quality to create an atmosphere of illogical fear and thereby satisfy his own murderous intent. However, the rational investigation by the Apollonian detective reduced the sensational hound to an ordinary animal

which was nurtured by Stapleton, and provided with an unnatural glow with the use of chemicals, to leave it in the devouring moor to finally satisfy his own criminal intentions of stealing the Baskerville estate. Holmes's concepts of forensic science and detection, his analytical mind, and ability to detect irrationality, finally helped him triumph over threats to reason and logic.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Friedrich Nietzsche talks about the importance of the instinctual and chaotic tendencies within the self, thereby elevating the *Dionysian* sensuality as one half of a whole creative human experience. The grand narrative of the nineteenth century European scholarship on ancient Greek literature misunderstood the vital importance of raw passion and sublimated them into the *Apollonian* discourse of pure reason and order. However, Nietzsche was of the opinion that a unity of the dialectic between the opposite drives is at the core of a fulfilled life – tragedy or true transcendental art is derived out of a harmony between the *Apollonian* and *Dionysian* aesthetics. “We will have achieved much for the discipline of aesthetics when we have arrived not only at the logical insight but also at the immediate certainty of the view that the continuing development of art is tied to the duality of the *Apollonian* and the *Dionysian*” (Nietzsche, *Birth* 19) The true form of artistic expression can be achieved when these impulses of both intellectual order and creative delights are embodied within the artist. One may discover that Sherlock Holmes could negate his chaotic artistic tendencies to bend more towards the *Apollonian* world of structural symmetry, yet at the same time also show an inclination toward the *Dionysian* impulses; thereby seeking pain, suffering and exultation, to combine both the creative forces and achieve a wholesome comprehension of human experiences, of crime and complexities.

The world, after Darwin's publication of *On The Origin of Species* in 1859, and Nietzsche's subsequent ground breaking declaration of the death of God, encountered a sense of nihilism and existential crises. If the concept of God is a myth, then the idea of morality and a moral order as decreed by the mythic God are all inventions of man. The absence of a superior being judging our conformation to His moral laws brought a sense of de-centering resulting in fear and confusion. The lack of something holy and unassailable which had dominated the 'herd' for so long, paved the way for a sense of hollowness – an inescapable feeling that there was no absolute morality; hence, there was no reward for the morally righteous, as well as no eternal punishment for

breaching the predominant moral codes established by the Judeo-Christian society. The response to this kind of a situation is a rebellious non-conformity to the social norms and a general disregard for any organized religion. Darwin's evolutionary ideas helped Victorians imagine a dynamic world of industrialization where man had successfully tamed nature. This kind of degenerative thought was the source of fear for many notable thinkers of that time; the social, cultural and moral decline of the era influenced great minds like that of Nietzsche. The notions of degeneration and decline that seemed to threaten the European civilization propelled Nietzsche to theorize the concept of the *Übermensch*<sup>4</sup>. The concept of 'free will' that emerged from Darwin's theory provoked a wave of skepticism and pessimism, resulting in a gradual rejection of Christian absolutes and moving towards self-empowerment. Only the 'fittest' would survive; therefore, it was of utmost necessity to be self-aware, to be a part of the socio-cultural power-play and not be solely dependent on an outdated concept of a God who could no longer provide a validation or a center to/for the chaotic confusion of Victorian minds.

Holmes found his 'way' to overcome the chaos and confusion of his surroundings through continuous learning and acquisition of knowledge which he theorised in *The Adventure of the Red Circle*: "Education never ends Watson. It is a series of lessons with the greatest for the last." (Doyle, 907) If we are willful receivers of knowledge, we can learn all through our life. He rejects any concept of absolute truths – discovery of new truths is an ongoing phenomenon which sharpens his famous powers and acquired skills every day. He carefully points out in *A Study in Scarlet*: "No man lives or has ever lived who has brought the same amount of study and of natural talent to the detection of crime which I [Holmes] have done." (Doyle, 25) As a man who is aware of his elevated stature among his contemporaries, he is both careful of his intellectual supremacy as well as conscious of his isolation from the masses, owing to his overreaching tendencies which seem to be beyond anything that the mediocre could consciously comprehend. He continuously baffles the average psyche with his phantasmal exploits. However, to me, he is not only an exact physical embodiment of the Nietzschean Apollonian or Dionysian concepts, but also a protective and loyal companion, restorer of law and order, with his own set of 'weaknesses', set against the background of the gradually degenerating moral order of the era. Holmes is not the typical

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4 *The Superman or The Overman* [roughly translated from the Nietzschean term]

Overman, but a man bred into the Victorian ethos, with his own set of super-human like faculties as well as insecurities which add to his enigmatic aura and set him apart from those whom Nietzsche so disdainfully identifies as the “herd”. (Nietzsche, *Zarathustra* 14)

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