Gothic Villains in Three Sherlock Holmes Stories

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The classic detective story emerged with the publication of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes narratives in the 1890s, which coincided with the resurgence of the Gothic. By drawing comparisons between Gothic genre conventions and Doyle's fiction, this paper argues that there are two Gothic plot devices in "The Speckled Band," "The Creeping Man," and "The Sussex Vampire": the illusion of supernatural interference and the villainous father who destroys his family. The apparently unnatural events occur due to the ominous presence of animals as both instruments of wrongdoing and images of racial degeneration. Thus, these Gothic Holmes stories negotiate anxieties about degeneracy and declining paternal authority.

Keywords: Gothic, detective fiction, evolutionary theories, criminology, degeneration

1 Introduction

The Gothic is an extremely versatile mode of writing that transcends the period – the second half of the eighteenth century – in which it emerged. Its marked characteristics are preposterous and eventful plots, eerie atmospheres, representations of transgressive behaviour and extreme psychological states, the staging of "supernatural or seemingly supernatural phenomena," and an overall effect that excites the readers' emotions (Hurley 2002, 193–94). There is a critical consensus today that the Gothic, far from being the purveyor of self-indulgent or gratuitous titillation, fulfils a useful cultural function: that of processing the social anxieties of the given era (Faber and Münderlein 2024, 4; Zigarovich 2018, 3). According to Kelly Hurley, "[t]he Gothic is […] a cyclical genre that reemerges in times of cultural stress in order to negotiate anxieties for its readership by working through them in displaced (sometimes supernaturalised) form" (2002, 194). The source of these anxieties shifted from time to time. In the second half of the eighteenth century, and parallel with the rise of Romanticism, the Gothic emerged as an imaginative and emotional reaction against the Enlightenment (Botting 2005a, 1), conveying

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aversions to feudal excess and tyranny, and asserting the social values of a burgeoning middle class (4). By the 1830s, the Gothic had ceased to be a unified or identifiable mode of writing. Instead, Gothic features were dispersed across many other genres, including realist and historical fiction, which dominated Victorian literature (Killeen 2009, 3). After decades of a "haunting absence" (qtd. in Killeen 2009, 3), the Gothic returned in the 1890s, when fears connected with Britain's position as a colonial power (Hurley 2002, 194), the explosive growth of the metropolis, women's emancipatory movements, political upheavals across Europe, and rapid advances in science generated a need to convey and expel such terrors through fiction (Dryden 2003, 1). Whereas Fred Botting defines the Gothic as a "literary mode" (2005a, 9) rather than a genre, he agrees that the Gothic is diffused across periods. Significantly, Botting stresses the proclivity of the Gothic mode to merge with different genres: "[t]he diffusion of Gothic features across texts and historical periods distinguishes the Gothic as a hybrid form, incorporating and transforming other literary forms as well as developing and changing its own conventions in relation to newer modes of writing" (ibid.). One of the genres that has Gothic inflections is detective fiction, which emerged in its fully-fledged, classic form in the 1890s, thus coinciding with the return of the Gothic. As a result, all nineteenth-century detective fiction can be regarded as inherently Gothic: "There are traces of Gothic in most crime narratives, just as there are crimes in most Gothic novels" (Spooner 2010, 246).

The Gothic had been considered low-brow literature until the late twentieth century, when critics discovered its important sociocultural function: it sets itself the task of enacting and exorcising social anxieties. By the same token, crime fiction, which was also used to be seen as escapist, is now regarded as a genre that is of "intrinsic interest in society" (Thompson 1993, 8). Thompson explains that "[t]oo often crime fiction, especially detective fiction, is regarded as purely escapist, as providing the reader with comfortable and reassuring myths of modernity. […] What this cliché overlooks is the extent to which crime fiction dramatizes the contradictory experience of modernity. In this sense, crime fiction is not escapist but hermeneutic: it explores what it means to be caught up in the maelstrom of modernity" (Thompson 1993, 8). Thus, crime fiction is now seen to stage and negotiate social tensions.

Critical perceptions of crime fiction have changed radically over the last century and, according to Jesper Gulddal and Stewart King, this transformation can be divided into three main stages. The earliest criticism of crime fiction emphasised its ludic quality, constructing it as an intellectual game rather than serious literature (2020, 14). It was especially detective fiction that was considered a game and was therefore treated as escapist. According to Richard Bradford, classic detective fiction offered glimpses into the criminal underworld and delivered the thrills of penny

dreadfuls, while retaining a degree of respectability. This is why it appealed to a male middle-class readership. In the Holmes stories, Dr Watson, as a figure of middle-class propriety, ensures that the presentation of events, which in themselves are dubious or downright disreputable, remain within the bounds of good taste (2015, 16–17). The second stage in the progress of crime fiction criticism constituted an attempt to make the study of crime fiction viable in academic settings by highlighting the formulaic nature of the genre. This wave of criticism, which emerged in the 1970s, identified archetypal plot structures in crime stories. Finally, more recent criticism highlights the mediating function of crime fiction, arguing that the genre "links specific narrative forms to particular sociocultural questions and concerns" (Gulddal and King 2020, 14–15). Since crime fiction is concerned with social issues, these critics contend, it must be taken seriously. Criticism engaging with crime fiction either treats crime fiction and detective fiction as synonymous (Dove 1997, 1) or regards the latter as a subgenre of crime fiction (Messent 2013, 4), which is the position taken by recent criticism (Ascari 2020, 27).

Whereas their cultural functions may differ, detective fiction is, arguably, a descendant of the Gothic mode. Firstly, both Gothic novels and detective stories have fast-paced and sensational plots (Ascari 2020, 27). Their proximity can also be illustrated by the fact that Poe, a master of Gothic horror, was the inventor of the detective story (Cassuto 2017, 158). Devandra Varma mentions both the suspenseful plot and Poe as the originator of the genre when she states that "the methods and technique" of Gothic novelists "inspired the use of suspense in short stories by Poe and his successors, and eventually the mystifications and solutions of the modern detective novels and thrillers" (1923, 213). A third common denominator may be the dichotomy of light and darkness. While reason can "shed light on reality," there is also "an acknowledgement of the constitutive darkness of the human" in both Gothic writing and detective stories (Ascari 2020, 28). However, an important difference lies in detective fiction's foregrounding of "pure reason" and the process of intellectual inquiry, which were Poe's innovative additions to the Gothic, the forerunner of the then new genre (Cook 2011, 3–4).

By identifying distinctive features of the Gothic mode in Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Speckled Band" (1892), "The Creeping Man" (1923), and "The Sussex Vampire" (1924), this paper argues that these Holmes stories have Gothic inflections due to their plot devices of paternal sin and seemingly supernatural events and are therefore the vehicles of negotiating sociocultural anxieties, much like Gothic fiction is. These stories represent fathers who committed criminal or sinful acts in the past and are otherwise despotic, controlling, or unjust; thus, they are Gothic villains, although not necessarily criminal offenders. By shedding light on the father's sins, and, in the case of "The Speckled Band," his criminal transgressions, these stories interrogate

paternal authority and demonstrate its dramatic decline between the late Victorian and the interwar period. Moreover, these villainous father characters demonstrate the transition from aristocratic villains, who dominated classic Gothic texts, to the bourgeois, professional-scientist villains of later Gothic fiction. The other principal Gothic trait of these stories is the depiction of events that – at first sight – cannot be readily explained by reason and therefore seem otherworldly. The apparently supernatural quality of the events is due to non-human agents, namely, toxins and animals. The latter fuse with the protagonist or indicate the wrongdoer's identity or secret actions. As a result, the Gothic villain is represented as a liminal, half-human, half-bestial creature, whose monstrosity reflects Victorian anxieties about moral and racial degeneration.

2 Paternal Crime in "The Speckled Band"

One reason why the events in "The Speckled Band" seem supernatural is that the problem presented by the client seems intimately connected to a "locked-room mystery" that happened some years before. A young woman – the client's twin sister – died, apparently due to "pure fear and nervous shock" (Doyle 1996, 219), which she suffered while sleeping alone in her own room, inaccessible both from outside and inside the house. A locked-room mystery is "the telling of a crime that appears to be impossible" (Penzler 2014, xiii). In this type of story, the murder takes place at a location where the victim is "utterly inaccessible" (ibid.). Owing to a lack of readily available explanations, a locked-room mystery necessarily appears supernatural. Michael Cook contends that the locked-room mystery is more than a plot device that heightens the puzzle-effect. It is also the underlying pattern of all stories of detection as evidenced by Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), widely considered to be the first detective story. Moreover, this pioneering story endowed the locked-room mystery with the sociocultural – or even metaphysical – connotations of human isolation "with its accent on enclosures, death and references to sequestered lives" (2011, 1–2).

Another reason why the occurrences in "The Speckled Band" might be attributed to supernatural phenomena is that there are non-human agents involved, namely, poisons and animals, which also serve to provide a rational explanation to the events. Whereas the use of poison is revealed at the end of the story as the solution to the mystery, the presence of animals is obvious from the beginning. The villain, Dr Grimesby Roylott, keeps Indian animals as mementos of his years spent in Calcutta. A cheetah and a baboon roam freely on the grounds of his estate, signalling to all

potential trespassers – as well as to his family – the owner's dangerous nature. While Roylott's predatory violence is symbolised by the cheetah, his possessiveness and jealously territorial behaviour are embodied by the baboon. The third animal, the venomous snake that he keeps hidden in an iron safe, represents his cunning as well as his secretiveness, and it is the snake's poison that is the undetected but lethal toxin.

Thus, the animals owned by the villain indicate his personality traits and hint at his fundamentally bestial, and therefore regressive and degenerate nature. Of all the unpleasant bestial characteristics, it is the baboon's deformity and obnoxious lack of self-control that terrify Holmes: "out from a clump of laurel bushes there darted what seemed to be a hideous and distorted child, who threw itself on the grass with writhing limbs […]. [Holmes's] hand closed like a vice upon my wrist in his agitation" (Doyle 1996, 226). The sight of the baboon as a deformed child throwing a fit becomes an image of racial degeneration, which was a widespread fear in late Victorian British society: "[d]egeneration theory posited that certain physical and nervous disorders […] could be both spread and inherited by social contact, and might even be passed down to offspring in aggravated form" (Hurley 2002, 196). Jonathan Cranfield defines "degeneration" as "a scientific term used to describe the simplification of complex organisms but which became reactionary shorthand for the cultural decline of Europe and its empires" (2019, 84). Cranfield attributes the preoccupation with degeneration in the 1890s to the work of Galton and Lombroso. Their theories derived from, but significantly simplified, Darwinian science, so that their ideas could be reduced to the easily accessible narrative of a "struggle between the forces of progression and those of regression or degeneration" (ibid.). The baboon as an image of degeneration is reminiscent of the repulsive facial features of the villain: "[a] large face, seared with a thousand wrinkles, burned yellow with the sun, and marked with every evil passion, was turned from one to the other of us, while his deep-set, bile-shot eyes, and his high thin fleshless nose gave him somewhat the resemblance to a fierce old bird of prey" (Doyle 1996, 220). The years spent in India seems to have made Roylott's face resemble the natives. Moreover, by likening Roylott to a bird of prey, Dr Watson draws attention to the man's bestial qualities.

In both instances, there is a disquieting conflation of the human and the animal. The nascent social science, criminology, Botting argues, shaped late nineteenth-century Gothic. Influenced by Darwinian science, Cesare Lombroso found that criminals are "more primitive and bestial in their nature than others" and can be identified by their anatomical, physiological, and psychological characteristics (qtd. in Botting 2005a, 89). This external as well as internal resemblance to animals was called atavism and was closely associated with criminality (ibid.). Criminals were conceived of "as degenerate throwbacks to an earlier stage in humanity's evolutionary

development" and criminal behaviour was seen as evidence of a bestial character (Karschay 2019, 98). Cesare Lombroso sums up his major tenet as follows: "the criminal [is] an atavistic being who reproduces in his person the ferocious instincts of primitive humanity and the inferior animals" (1911, xv). His early criminological works assert that criminals display the characteristics of various animals, including rodents, apes, and birds of prey (Hurley 2002, 197). These theories informed literary works produced in the era. Cranfield contends that there is a causal relationship between the popularisation of criminology and the rise of the iconic figure of the detective (2019, 84). The most salient evidence of criminology's influence on fiction is the prevalence of "marked descriptions of facial features as telling signs of character" (Botting 2005a, 89). Holmes stories also abound in references to the atavistic features of offenders (Karschay 2019, 99). For example, Roylott's nose is a hallmark of the born criminal, based on Cesare Lombroso's work: "the hooked nose, so often imparts to criminals the aspect of birds of prey" (Gina Lombroso 1911, 7). By casting one glance at him, Holmes ascertains that Roylott is a criminal.

Roylott is a curious mixture of the aristocratic villain, descended from Radcliffian Gothic, and the professional–scientist villain, characteristic of the 1890s. Ann Radcliffe created the emblematic aristocratic villain, who is "brutal" and "predatory," in the character of Montoni in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794; Chaplin 2014, 206), whereas the professional rogue and evil scientist of the late Victorian era is epitomised by Dr. Jekyll's character in Stevenson's novel (Botting 2005b, 117). On the one hand, Grimesby Roylott is a descendant of an old aristocratic family of considerable wealth. However, the family became impoverished due to the profligate lifestyle of earlier generations, which is a sign of gradual degeneration, linking Roylott to feudal excess. On the other hand, he also exemplifies the professional hero–villain. In his youth, Roylott attempted to reverse the family's decline by taking a medical degree and establishing a practice in India. His choice of the far-flung colonial location is also indicative of Roylott's determination to disentangle himself of his tainted heritage. He marries a wealthy young widow with two baby daughters, presumably in the hope of starting his own family.

Notwithstanding his efforts to mend the family fortune by dint of industry, entrepreneurship, and professional skill, the strain of degeneracy in his blood manifests itself unexpectedly when, having discovered a robbery in his home, he kills a native servant. This crime, committed in a fit of rage and triggered by an encroachment on his property, reveals his besetting sins: wrath, lack of self-control, and possessiveness. Having served a long prison sentence, he returns to England a changed man: bitter, disappointed, and resentful. To compound his misfortunes, a fatal railway accident deprives him of his wife. Even so, his situation is not desperate as he inherits a considerable sum, which enables him to live modestly. However,

Roylott lacks the resilience to adjust to his circumstances. He renounces his chance to set up medical practice in England and returns to his ancestral home.

In Gothic fiction, the ancient country house is the site of regression and inherited doom. Botting remarks that "the old house, as both building and family line […] became the site where fears and anxieties returned in the present" (2005a, 2). Roylott's inherited violent tendencies are exacerbated by this setting, and his constant quarrelling with neighbours and villagers makes life miserable for his stepdaughters. He grows one with the cursed ancestral house, which is in the last stages of dilapidation. Continual but haphazard attempts at renovation prove ineffectual at transforming the cumbersome old mansion into a modern dwelling; they merely result in a monstrous lopsidedness. Its resemblance to a crab is an indicator of the ancestral home's backwardness. Its two wings, one completely fallen to ruin, the other refurbished, represent Roylott's dual nature: impoverished aristocratic villain and professional man turned rogue. Notwithstanding its relative modernity, the refurbished wing is also unfinished and partly damaged, conveying Roylott's incomplete transformation into a middle-class physician. His return to the family home shows that Roylott has succumbed to his inherited evil nature and grudgingly resigned himself to the doom overshadowing his family.

One feature that makes Roylott a terrifying villain is his refusal to adjust to civilised norms of behaviour. The most obvious sign of this nonconformity is his lack of self-control, which manifests itself in ungovernable rage. His gestures of intimidation and violence are preceded or accompanied by yelling and cursing. Another proof of his antisocial attitude is his habit of travelling with the Gypsies whom he allows to camp on his estate. This indicates a defiance of civilised society, which constructs Gypsies as incompletely human. Bartoș and Hegarty report that in many European countries, "anti-Gypsy prejudice […] is closely tied to dehumanisation and claims of cultural inferiority: Gypsy traditions were construed as 'primitive.'" Gypsies were widely regarded "as being outside the […] nation, both culturally and biologically; participants even suggested that Gypsies may not be fully human" (2014, 196). Similarly, Maass et al. assert that "a regional outgroup was mainly associated with the animal kingdom […]. Some social groups are associated with specific animals, such as Gypsies with wild animals" (2014, 161). A third indicator of Roylott's defiance of social norms is his adoption of Indian animals. His socially transgressive behaviour, in its specific manifestations of uncontrolled outbursts and his habit of associating with Gypsies and wild animals, heightens his resemblance to beasts. Holmes's client, Helen Stoner, implies as much when she remarks that the cheetah and the baboon "are feared by the villagers almost as much as their master" (Doyle 1996, 217).

Notwithstanding his rebellious and undisciplined conduct, Roylott has a sophisticated side that makes him akin to the professional rogue of late Victorian

Gothic and therefore a formidable enemy. In the 1890s, the supernatural monsters and villains belonging to the aristocracy or the Church were increasingly replaced by modern characters such as "scientists, fathers, husbands, madmen, criminals and the monstrous double signifying duplicity and evil nature" (Botting 2005a, 2). These middle-class protagonists assume the monstrosity of their predecessors. Roylott is cunning and secretive: when his stepdaughters become engaged to be married, he ostensibly approves of the arrangement, while conniving at their murder. He also monitors the women's movements and outside contacts; for example, he quickly traces Helen to Holmes's apartment. Roylott's possessiveness is a powerful motive for his crimes: by killing his stepdaughters before they could marry, not only does he retain their share of the inheritance but also prevents them from deserting him for other men. Also, despite his present circumstances, Roylott is still a professional physician, which is highlighted by Holmes's remark: "When a doctor does go wrong, he is the first of criminals. He has nerve and he has knowledge" (Doyle 1996, 226). His professional training enables him, when he must, to retain a degree of self-control necessary to carry out his sinister plans.

Capitalist–bourgeois attitudes have been sufficiently absorbed by this doctor of aristocratic origins to control his stepdaughters by means of Foucauldian disciplinary techniques: the "art of distributions." Roylott applies enclosure, "the protected place of disciplinary monotony" (Foucault 1995, 141), when he isolates the young women from their neighbours and the villagers, confining them to the ancestral house. He also deploys partitioning, an important disciplinary method, according to which "[e]ach individual has his own place; and each place its individual" (143). This technique is brought to bear on Helen when she is forced to sleep in her late sister's room, which was modified in a specified way: "The lady could not move her bed. It must always be in the same relative position to the ventilator and to the rope" (Doyle 1996, 226). Thus, each object is assigned to a place and the individual's position is exactly circumscribed by these fixed objects. Therefore, despite his seemingly disorderly lifestyle, Roylott is an adept technician of discipline.

The character of the evil stepfather introduces the oldest Gothic plot device into this detective story: the sins of the father that destroy the family. Botting points out that this basic plot originated in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and that Walpole formulated it as the intended moral of the novel in his preface (2005a, 86): "the sins of fathers are visited on their children to the third and fourth generation" (Walpole 1766, viii). In an attempt to provide his whimsical plot with a moral underpinning, Walpole refers to Deuteronomy 5:9. What makes the motif of paternal sin especially emphatic in this story is that the villain himself is afflicted by his ancestral legacy: "Violence of temper approaching to mania has been hereditary in the men of the family, and in my stepfather's case it had, I believe, been intensified

by his long residence in the tropics" (Doyle 1996, 216). To some extent, therefore, Roylott is also the victim of paternal sin. However, he has forfeited all compassion by his criminal deeds, so that his death can be seen as deserved punishment, as Holmes implies: "I am no doubt indirectly responsible for Dr. Grimesby Roylott's death, and I cannot say that it is likely to weigh very heavily upon my conscience" (229).

Another traditional Gothic plot device is the introduction of a strained father–daughter relationship as this can carry familial tensions and illustrate the unequal power relations between oppressor and oppressed (Botting 2005a, 13). Roylott confines his stepdaughters to the family home by refusing to socialise with his equals, quarrelling with both neighbours and villagers, and discouraging the young women from social visits. Botting highlights that the home was regarded as a sanctuary in Victorian culture as it offered shelter from disquieting external forces and spiritual loss. Nevertheless, this refuge could easily turn into a prison (2005a, 84). Many persecuted heroines, such as Helen Stoner, are also oppressed daughters in Gothic fiction. Botting points out that the "new Victorian hero, the amateur detective" is especially prone to see the oppressed female protagonist "as an image of loss and suffering" (85). Indeed, the description of Helen Stoner is suggestive of prolonged harassment at the hands of a predatory antagonist: "her face [was] all drawn and grey, with restless, frightened eyes, like those of some hunted animal" (Doyle 1996, 214).

Although Roylott bears a close resemblance to formidable Gothic villains, his paternal authority is not absolute, and its weakening results in his downfall. Helen's determination to seek professional assistance despite her stepfather's intimidation and her fiancé's deprecation show that the heroine no longer trusts paternal and masculine authority and knowledge. During her consultation with the detective, Helen unavoidably divulges private family matters and details from Roylott's past. In addition, Holmes intrudes into the carefully sequestered family home without Roylott's knowledge or permission. These interventions effectively infringe on the father's privacy and thereby undermine his authority. Thus, the story illustrates the tendency of Gothic fiction to depict and carefully examine male authority through its villains (Botting 2005a, 13).

3 The Bestial Double in "The Creeping Man"

A more flagrant and less justifiable intrusion into the father's privacy takes place in "The Creeping Man." It is the unusual and therefore unsettling quality of the father's behaviour that causes the client to seek Holmes's assistance. According to Botting, in an increasingly disciplined and well-ordered late Victorian society,

transgressive individuals "became fascinating objects of scrutiny" (2005a, 8), which is why Professor Presbury's strange behaviour requires monitoring and intervention.

In contrast to "The Speckled Band," no crime is committed or planned in this story. However, it still belongs in the larger generic category of crime fiction according to the open definition of this genre provided by Nilsson et al. In their extended though tentative definition, they emphasise "the presence of the detective" as the primary requirement, since the character has a "central function in the genre." Secondly, the crime depends on "its society's legal apparatus and juridical system." Furthermore, "[t]hrough the detective's investigations, power structures, institutions, police procedures, and civil codes are portrayed, as are human behavior and psychology" (2017, 5). Since the story meets the most important of these criteria, namely, the presence of the detective, it qualifies as crime fiction. More specifically, "The Creeping Man" fits the subcategory of detective fiction, in which, according to Murch's definition, "the reader's sympathy is invariably engaged […] on the side of law and order, and the hero is not the criminal, but the detective" (qtd. in Ascari 2020, 24).

Even though the protagonist, Professor Presbury, commits no crime, his atavistic traits indirectly threaten the moral order, and his bestial behaviour, based on Victorian constructions of deviance, makes him resemble a criminal. He can be considered a villain insofar as he transgresses not only the limits of socially acceptable behaviour but also the bounds of human physiology because he refuses to accept the natural course of life that entails ageing.

Holmes's assistance is requested by Presbury's secretary, Bennett, who is worried about his employer's strange behaviour. He has been closely observing the Professor's conduct and keeping a record of unusual occurrences. Bennett is uniquely positioned on the threshold of the public and the private sphere: he is both a professional assistant and a member of the family as he is engaged to the Professor's daughter and lives in his house. Accordingly, Bennett's betrayal is motivated by a mixture of professional curiosity and personal anxiety. The conflict between his various roles as assistant, confidant, disciple, and prospective son-in-son-in-law is apparent from his justification of keeping track of events: "I learned method among other things from my great teacher. From the time that I observed abnormality in his behaviour I felt that it was my duty to study his case" (Doyle 1999a, 55). In addition to monitoring him, Bennett also spies on Professor Presbury actively; for example, he removes a secret address from his blotting paper. Even Holmes acknowledges that the intrusion into Presbury's private life seems unwarranted, while the Professor's anger at being scrutinised is justified: "from his point of view he has something to explode about if detectives are put on his track and he suspects his own household of doing it" (63).

As in the previous story, the unusual occurrences have an air of the supernatural. The previously gentle and affectionate family dog has taken a dislike to his master and attacked him on several occasions. Also, Presbury was seen by his daughter as he was looking in through her second-floor bedroom window. Both phenomena appear inexplicable and strongly connected to the Professor's changed behaviour. However, a supernatural explanation does not even occur to Holmes. Climbing up to the window is instantly deemed possible by Holmes upon inspecting the premises, whereas the dog's sudden hostility merits longer consideration: "A dog reflects the family life. […] And [dogs'] passing moods may reflect the passing moods of others" (Doyle 1999a, 51). The implication is that animals' intuitions must be taken seriously. Animal behaviour becomes the grounds for suspecting human wrongdoing, since beasts might perceive covert passions or intentions imperceptible to civilised human beings.

Holmes also excludes psychological illness as the reason for deviant behaviour. The detective's rejection of psychological explanations, Luc Boltanski argues, is required by the conventions of the genre. Abnormal behaviour is not unlawful if the perpetrator is insane because a mentally ill person does not have legal responsibility. The insane perpetrator has no moral responsibility either. Since detective fiction deals with the criminal, legal, and ethical ramifications of actions, a perpetrator who is exempted from such responsibilities precludes the detective's intervention (2014, 52).

The non-human agents that lend an aura of the supernatural to the occurrences are, as in the previous story, toxins and animals. Also, in a similar fashion to "The Speckled Band," the two are intimately related, since the toxin is produced by, or derived from, animals. In this case, Presbury's changed deportment is due to a rejuvenating serum, extracted from a species of monkey. Although the serum's effectiveness is testified to by Bennett – "he has actually more energy and vitality than I can ever remember, nor was his brain ever clearer" (Doyle 1999a, 65) – there are significant side effects. Essentially, the Professor is turning into a monkey, which is evinced by his nightly excursions in and around the house.

The scene in which Presbury is goading the hostile family dog encapsulates the Gothic horror of the mingling of human and bestial characteristics in one creature. The "still dignified figure" of Presbury is "crouching froglike upon the ground," teasing the wolfhound "by all manner of ingenious and calculated cruelty" into a frenzy of rage (Doyle 1999a, 68). This is an example of the liminal or "abhuman" body, characteristic of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Gothic fiction (Hurley 2002, 190). Hurley argues that the liminal body, which is on the threshold between the traditional cultural dichotomies of human–animal or male–female, had a particular fascination for the literature of the era. The "hybridised and repulsive Gothic body" preserves some remnants of human identity

while exhibiting the characteristics of a non-human other, and this transformation is often described in the literary text (ibid.). Indeed, Holmes and Watson witness the Professor's metamorphosis into a half-simian creature: "an extraordinary change came over him. He sank down into a crouching position, and moved along upon his hands and feet, skipping every now and then as if he were overflowing with energy and vitality" (Doyle 1999a, 67). Presbury's recurring transformation into a monkey-like creature by means of some mysterious drug is in keeping with the Gothic's fascination with doubles and alter egos. The double is considered by Hurley a variety of monstrosity or liminality since it "breaks down the boundary between self and other" (2007, 139).

Presbury's experimentation resonates with deep-set anxieties about the bestial features of human nature and the irrepressible primitive urges lurking within even the most sophisticated individuals. These anxieties, Botting explains, were a reaction to Darwinian science, which "identified the bestial within the human" (2005a, 8). Not only criminology but also medical sciences were informed by Darwinian theories. Consequently, many kinds of deviance, whether mental or physical, were attributed to the resurgence of bestial features and thus were deemed to threaten the human species with degeneration, a term that was used almost synonymously with abnormality (Karschay 2015, 3–4). Darwinian science also affected constructions of humanity in the widest sense. The theory of evolution seriously undermined the cultural premise of mankind's superior position, as it "implicitly posited a closer relationship between humans and animals than many had hitherto been comfortable with" (Cranfield 2019, 82).

Darwin's evolutionary theory claimed that each species has passed through various stages of development, inhabiting "different animal forms" (Hurley 2002, 195). Thus, the implication in *The Origin of Species* (1859) was that humankind evolved from more primitive forms. This was reaffirmed in *The Descent of Man*: "all the races of man are descended from a single primitive stock" (Darwin 1871, 220). Since species are liable to change and extinction, it seemed possible that they may not only evolve or progress, but also "move backwards" or regress (Hurley 2002, 195). Therefore, Presbury's metamorphosis stages the nightmarish scenario of mankind's regression to a more primitive stage of existence. The bestial features of the Professor are revealed one by one. First, his unseemly sexual passion becomes apparent in his infatuation with, and vehement courtship of, a very young woman. Second, his increased vitality finds an outlet in irascible behaviour by day and exuberant scrambling by night. Finally, he manifests a latent streak of sadistic cruelty when he taunts the dog. Nevertheless, not all of these features are represented as morally reprehensible. Presbury's heightened agility and exuberance are shown as innocuous and, perhaps, enviable: "[f]rom branch to branch he sprang, sure of foot and firm

of grasp, climbing apparently in mere joy at his own powers, with no definite object in view" (Doyle 1999a, 67).

Although the Professor causes no harm by any of these passions, his uncontrollable vitality, sexual urges, and outbursts of temper are all equally transgressive. The Gothic depicts desires, passions, and sensations that exceed reason and therefore transgress social proprieties (Botting 2005a, 2). It also represents the consequences of transgression, involving "not only the loss of sanity, honour, property or social standing but the very order which supports and is regulated by the coherence of these terms." Therefore, the representation of transgression serves the useful purpose of reaffirming social norms, values, and limits (5). Presbury's secretary uses the word "excessive" when he gives voice to social disapproval with regards to Presbury's amorous pursuit, but he is even more censorious of his employer's enhanced vigour: "He was never in better health […]. In fact, he is stronger than I have known him for years. But […] we feel in some strange way that we are drifting towards disaster" (Doyle 1999a, 56–57).

This emphatic social disapprobation of individuals' dynamic movement stems from the need to control subjects. This starts with the curbing of excessive individual exuberance, which is not conducive to a disciplined and amenable population. The disciplinary techniques introduced in the eighteenth century ultimately aimed at optimising processes of labour, thus enhancing productivity. Of the methods intended to control activity, as explained by Foucault, the "time-table" and the "temporal elaboration of the act" convey the most precisely the close relationship between purposefulness and efficiency of movement. A precise schedule results in efficiency and productivity: "[t]ime measured and paid must also be a time without impurities or defects; a time of good quality, throughout which the body is constantly applied to its exercise" (1995, 151). Next, the efficient use of time and movement must be interiorised by subjects: "The act is broken down into its elements; the position of the body, limbs, articulations is defined, to each movement are assigned a direction, an aptitude, a duration; their order of succession is prescribed. Time penetrates the body and with it all the meticulous controls of power" (152). Presbury's impetuous, aimless, and gratuitous exercise of climbing trees represents an appalling waste of both potentially productive energy and valuable time in the capitalist social order; therefore, it cannot be tolerated. Both human energy and its expenditure must be regulated by the disciplinary techniques that were first instituted when capitalist modes of production, pervasive by the 1890s, were in their nascent state in the eighteenth century.

The Professor's transgressive simian regression scrutinises the issue of degeneration. Holmes's meditation highlights this anxiety: "There is […] a very real danger to humanity. Consider, Watson, that the material, the sensual, the worldly would all

prolong their worthless lives […]. It would be the survival of the least fit. What sort of cesspool may not our poor world become?" (Doyle 1999a, 70). Cranfield argues that "[t]he story stages a confrontation between the forces of degeneration and those that guard against it" and that Holmes "becomes the watchdog of genetic and moral propriety" (2019, 92). The detective's musing obviously echoes Darwinian theories but also conveys their critique. In this case, the rejuvenating serum is supposed to prolong human life with a view to extending the period when sensual pleasures are afforded by a youthful body. This means that those who will survive, that is, live longer due to this scientific concoction, will be those whose main aim in life is bodily gratification. In Darwinian science, the continued existence of various species is due to their physical adaptability, while the psychic dimension of creatures is not treated. The implication is that the human spirit does not signify. When Holmes declares that "[t]he spiritual would not avoid the call to something higher" (Doyle 1999a, 70), he implies that the late Victorian construction of human existence as a Darwinian struggle for survival projects a godless universe, "a world of moral chaos," in which, like in the realist novels of the age, "[l]ife [is] sordid, desperate and […] pointless" (Dryden 2003, 5).

To counter the perceived degeneration of humanity, which was identified in physical deformations, moral laxness, and unbridled sexual appetites (Dryden 2003, 9), many turned to science as a means of explaining hidden forces and recovering spiritual content. This led to the foundation of the Society for Psychical Research, which investigated paranormal phenomena, in 1882 (Freeman 2012, 105). Doyle himself was devoted to spiritualism, a system of beliefs which conflicted with his fictional detective's rational worldview (Pascal 2000, 9). Perhaps Holmes's deprecation of materialism and sensuality conveys Doyle's own convictions that morally strong individuals may not want to "survive" in a world dominated by brute force and base pleasure-seeking.

It is because he offends against middle-class propriety that Presbury is portrayed as a Gothic villain. He has many characteristics of the Gothic overreacher, such as his transgressive sexual desire and uncontrolled outbursts of rage, even though he is not a perpetrator. He does not commit any criminal act, neither does he mean harm to others: "[c]limbing was a joy to the creature, and it was a mere chance, I take it, that the pastime brought him to the young lady's window" (Doyle 1999a, 71). His unexpected defiance of social proprieties might be due to his long self-denial throughout his respectable life as an academic and widower. The constraints imposed on him caused him to accumulate a great deal of frustration. Botting argues that late Victorian Gothic frequently "articulate[s] disaffections with the reductive and normalising limits of bourgeois morality and modes of production, limits whose repressions produced the divided lifestyles of the middle

classes, respectable by day and pleasure-seeking by night" (2005a, 89). Presbury revolts against social discipline by wresting freedom out of the animal realm, but he must pay a heavy price for this fleeting sense of liberty.

4 Degeneration and Otherness in "The Sussex Vampire"

Whereas in "The Speckled Band" and "The Creeping Man," there are merely unspoken doubts as to the natural origin of the occurrences, the seemingly inexplicable events are explicitly labelled as supernatural in "The Sussex Vampire." However, it is only the client that suspects vampirism; Holmes remains steadfast in his denial of the existence of supernatural monsters: "This agency stands flat-footed upon the ground, and there it must remain. The world is big enough for us. No ghosts need apply" (Doyle 1999b, 73). Boltanski argues that a firm background of reality is essential in order for the mystery to stand out from other "normal" events (2014, 50). Detective work, based on reason and logical inferences, cannot be effective otherwise. Supernatural explanations cannot be "integrated into the inferential network of *ratio*" (52) and therefore must be ruled out.

The story is framed by legal or business correspondence. The partial delegation of narrative tasks to letters by representatives of law firms or commercial agents is a common device in 1890s Gothic fiction. This feature dovetails with detective fiction's reliance on law and reason. The Gothic, too, strives to rectify the narrative and reaffirm the connections between "law, reason and identity" by disentangling "the webs of deceit woven by the villains" (Botting 2005a, 86). Thus, by starting and concluding the narrative with correspondence with a law firm, Doyle grounds the story in a reality structured by the experience and values of a professional middle-class, who take part in capitalist modes of production. Nonetheless, an abundance of documents can also create an atmosphere of uncertainty due to the multiplicity of viewpoints. For example, Stoker's *Dracula* "questions how we can obtain veracity from such a welter of documents with their inevitable lacunae and shifting points of view" (Lenhart and Cordeiro 2024, 27). Consequently, the business correspondence that frames the story serves as much to heighten the atmosphere of Gothic dread as to emphasise the detective's rationality.

The laissez-faire economics of the late nineteenth century gave rise to the image of the "economic vampire," a parasitic but also contagious monster (Ford 2025, Chapter 1). The parasitism of capitalist modes of production affects the private sphere as well. Therefore, instead of being a refuge from the corruption of the larger society, the family reflects and reproduces its parasitic relations. Ferguson made his

fortune through commerce, the exploitative quality of which is indicated by his "fine collection of South American utensils and weapons" (Doyle 1999b, 80), as well as by the fact that he brought home a Peruvian wife, who also leads a parasitic existence. Being a foreigner and a Catholic in Protestant England, she is completely dependent on his husband for social acceptance.

However, the family member whose parasitism is the most conspicuous is Jack, Ferguson's son from his first marriage. His spinal injury, the result of a childhood accident, seems to have feminised him, which is shown in his exaggerated displays of affection towards his father: "He rushed forward and threw his arm round his neck with the abandon of a loving girl. […] Ferguson gently disengaged himself from the embrace with some little show of embarrassment" (Doyle 1999b, 83). The boy's gesture of affection is like a stranglehold over the father, who "disengages himself" from the clinging youth. Jack's parasitism, which takes the form of emotional dependence on his father, also manifests itself in abusing his baby half-brother. By stabbing the baby's neck with a poisoned dart, he leaves marks associated with vampirism. Moreover, the toxin he uses is curare, which paralyses the victim and causes suffocation if the dose is lethal. His choice of weapon and toxin conveys his parasitism, since he tries to drain the baby of its health and beauty by crippling him. Also, by paralysing the child, he would make it resemble himself, similarly to the vampire that turns its victims into parasites like itself.

Non-human factors are also present in this narrative in the form of a particular toxin – the curare – and an animal, the family dog. They both indirectly contribute to creating the impression of supernatural agency. The paralysing poison is first injected into the dog to see its effect. As a result, the spaniel suffers from an ailment resembling Jack's spinal injury. In addition, the word "spaniel" might be a pun on "spinal," reinforcing the parallel between the dog and the boy. Therefore, the spaniel's paralysis both foreshadows the wrongdoing and points at the perpetrator.

The spinal injury is a metaphor for moral degeneration. Jack's jealousy of his baby half-brother's blooming health turns into bitter hatred and a vengeful desire to cause a disfigurement in the child. The degenerate, whose physical deformity is a sign of inner depravity, wants to spread his weakness as an infectious disease, contaminating those more vulnerable than himself: "His very soul is consumed with hatred for this splendid child, whose health and beauty are a contrast to his own weakness" (Doyle 1999a, 87). Physical enervation is closely connected to moral decrepitude in this case. Holmes evidently thinks that physical hardship and exercise strengthens the moral constitution: "I think a year at sea would be my prescription for Master Jacky" (88).

Whereas paternal guilt is obvious in the other two stories, the father's sin is only implicitly represented in "The Sussex Vampire." Jack's maniacal jealousy and parasitism, though essentially stemming from his "spinelessness," are exacerbated by

the invidious familial situation which his father has created. He forces his teenage son to live with a stepmother, who is seen as a usurper of his mother's place, as well as a flawlessly beautiful baby stepbrother, whose presence makes Jack feel his deformity even more keenly. Believing that he is surrounded by enemies, he becomes emotionally dependent on his father and craves his attention. However, the wife's situation is scarcely less fraught with tension. Ferguson evidently married her for her youth and beauty. He soon tires of her, finding her inscrutable and "alien" due to her foreignness and Catholicism. This places the wife in a precarious position, since she has been uprooted from her own culture and family and settled in a foreign land with no one to rely on, except her husband. Therefore, both wife and son are exceptionally vulnerable and dependent on Ferguson's affection and benevolence.

As soon as Ferguson loses interest in his wife, he develops a certain resentment towards her: "after a time his love may have cooled towards her and he may have come to regard their union as a mistake" (Doyle 1999b, 74). As a result, he takes Jack's side in any conflict that may arise between his wife and son. Without any further investigation into the circumstances, Ferguson takes both his wife's culpability and his son's innocence for granted: "Twice the wife was caught in the act of assaulting this poor lad in the most unprovoked way" (74–75). He expresses pity for his crippled son ("poor"), assumes his innocence ("unprovoked") and charges his wife with wrongdoing ("caught in the act"). The father's distrustful attitude undermines the possibility of honest communication between the family members. The wife does not dare to tell Ferguson about Jack's wrongdoing, since she reasonably assumes that her accusation would be turned against her. Husband and wife are essentially strangers to each other, and Jack uses this mutual distrust to his advantage. He hurts the baby with impunity and fawns on his father to secure his indulgence.

Ferguson's self-absorption blinds him to the real nature of the family members. He blames his wife for his own rash decision to marry her, and, in punishment, treats her as a stranger. He purposefully ignores his son's hostility towards his stepmother. When Holmes points out the discrepancy between Jack's supposedly affectionate nature and his dislike for his stepmother, Ferguson replies: "Never in the world could there be so devoted a son. My life is his life. He is absorbed in what I say or do" (Doyle 1999b, 79). Evidently, Jack's sycophantic behaviour flatters Ferguson's self-love and vanity, which is why he condones the teenager's hostility towards other members of the household: "Jacky has very strong likes and dislikes […]. Luckily I am one of his likes" (85).

The revelation of Jack's guilt consists in the discovery of his duplicity. Holmes secretly observes his face while Ferguson engages with the baby: "His face was clearly reflected in the glass of the window where the shutter formed a background. I saw such jealousy, such cruel hatred, as I have seldom seen in a human face" (87). The windowpane functions as a mirror and reveals the boy's distorted facial

expression, exposing his hidden self that is motivated by envy and animosity. The mirror, as Botting remarks, is one of the typical Gothic devices that convey unsettling aspects of the personality (2005a, 7–8).

In this story, too, the father can be considered the villain, even though he is not the perpetrator. The story enacts Walpole's formula of the destructive effect of paternal sin. Ferguson's lust for the young Peruvian woman, his later neglect of both his new wife and disabled son, as well as his excessive adoration of his newborn child, show his egocentrism, which proves to be the root cause of the family's disintegration.

The son's criminal tendencies may have been inherited from the father. Holmes considers heredity an important factor in developing criminal habits, as his mention of an earlier case reveals: "I was able, by watching the mind of the child, to form a deduction as to the criminal habits of the very smug and respectable father" (Doyle 1999a, 51). Stephan Karschay observes that children are likened to animals and savages, and therefore, to criminals, by Lombroso. Children are at an early or primitive stage of ontogenetic development; likewise, adult offenders, resembling animals, represent a previous stage of phylogenetic evolution. Thus, the teenage Jack exemplifies the criminal nature of children (2019, 100–101).

Although the crime is committed by the son and the responsibility ultimately lies with the father, it is the mother who is accused of assaulting the baby. The wife locks herself up in silent protest against her husband's accusations, and her seclusion is reminiscent of the imprisonment suffered by the persecuted Gothic heroine. Mrs Ferguson's self-imprisonment renders her husband's punitive measure – the separation of mother and baby – a visibly Gothic torment inflicted upon the wife. Botting points out that, in later Gothic fiction, the amateur detective is the hero who liberates the persecuted wife, while the monastery or castle as locations of confinement are replaced with the asylum and the country house (2005a, 87).

Being both a woman and a foreigner, Mrs Ferguson finds herself in an extremely insecure position. Hurley explains that late Victorian constructions of women were highly paradoxical. On the one hand, women were regarded as the safeguards of domestic bliss and as ethereal angels. On the other hand, in popularised medical discourse, they were seen as repulsively physical monsters, unable to think rationally, and prone to hysterical outbursts (2002, 200). These exaggerated and conflicting accounts of female nature arose from the premise of Victorian science that women are "imperfectly human," more circumscribed by their physicality, therefore less intelligent and self-controlled than men. Due to their instability, their "disgusting metamorphoses are in some sense not unexpected" (202). The coexistence of the contradictory conceptions of women as both monstrous and angelic is apparent in Ferguson's statement about his wife: "The lady began to show some curious traits, quite alien to her ordinarily sweet and gentle disposition" (74).

Another reason why Mrs Ferguson is particularly vulnerable to accusations of deviance is her foreign extraction. In Sherlock Holmes stories, foreigners, especially female ones, are inherently suspicious due to their inscrutability (Boltanski 2014, 46). This suspicion is heightened to panic when the least sign of deviance from social norms is observed. Although Doyle plays on British readers' fear of the Other and their proclivity to identify the foreign woman as the villain, the *dénouement* surprises by revealing the innocence and loyalty of the South American wife and the guilt and deviousness of the "pale-faced and fair-haired" English boy "with excitable light blue eyes" (Doyle 1999b, 83). In contrast with Watson's offhand description of the "brown-faced" (81) Peruvian maid, Dolores, his depiction of the wife is more tactful, referring only to her "glorious eyes" (82) and omitting any reference to skin or eye colour. Mrs Ferguson's character might be seen as a cautiously progressive ideological gesture on Doyle's part, which may show that he attempted to implement, albeit warily, the implications of Darwin's conclusions regarding the common human ancestor of the various human "races": "[w]hen the races of man diverged at an extremely remote epoch from their common progenitor, they will have differed but little from each other" (Darwin 1871, 221). In defiance of the commonly accepted discourse of British racial superiority as well as the notion that women are incompletely human, "The Sussex Vampire" favourably contrasts a foreign female protagonist with a British male one.

"The Sussex Vampire" displays an unsettling mixture of the familiar and the strange. This can be seen in the title that juxtaposes a quintessentially English county with a supernatural monster associated with Eastern Europe. This hybridity is also apparent in Ferguson's country house, which combines the oldest English traditions with South American curiosities. Christine Berberich argues that, in Holmes stories, the English country house is contaminated by the foreign Other, either through the alien habits acquired abroad by the English proprietors – as is the case in "The Speckled Band" – or through the ancestral house being inhabited by foreigners. The pernicious influence of the Other transforms "homely spaces" into "*unheimlich* (uncanny) spaces," a change that undermines English identity. The task Holmes undertakes in such cases is not only the solution of a mystery but also the restoration of the English identity of places that have been tainted by foreign otherness (2019, 57).

The intrusion of the foreign Other – in this case, the Peruvian wife – results in "Gothicising" the family home (Berberich 2019, 61). The Gothicised, partly unfamiliar home is indicative of the sinister changes in the family: "the family became a place rendered threatening and uncanny" (Botting 2005a, 7). It is no coincidence that Jack uses a South American dart to inject the baby with poison. Even if the foreign wife is innocent, the alien culture that she introduces into the English home aggravates the inherent criminality of the degenerate boy.

Compared with the other two stories, "The Sussex Vampire" shows paternal authority at its lowest point. Both Roylott and Presbury resent and try to prevent the detective's intervention in their family affairs, and in both cases, Holmes's services are requested without their knowledge and approval. In contrast, in "The Sussex Vampire," it is the father himself who turns to the detective for help when he has proven incapable of settling the familial conflict. It demonstrates a dramatic decline in paternal authority that the husband asks an outsider to determine the culpability of his wife, and, indirectly, protect his child. Holmes enquires into, observes, and intervenes in intimate familial relationships between husband and wife, father and son, as well as between siblings. Ferguson needs Holmes's unbiased judgement and perspicacity to restore order in his family, of which he has lost control: "'For God's sake, Holmes,' he said hoarsely, 'if you can see the truth in this matter, do not keep me in suspense. How do I stand? What shall I do?'" (Doyle 1999b, 85). In short, Ferguson surrenders his paternal authority to Holmes completely.

Although Holmes's reply to the law firm that recommended him claims that "the matter has been brought to a satisfactory conclusion" (88), there remains a lingering sense of unease about the integrity and cohesion of the family. In consequence of Holmes's explanation of the events and the true motives of family members, a reconciliation takes place between husband and wife. Nevertheless, the implication of Holmes's advice that Jack be sent away is that the transgressive son cannot be reintegrated into the home. It is also doubtful whether sufficient mutual trust exists between husband and wife to sustain the family. Mrs Ferguson's words, spoken in an apparent delirium, seem to foreshadow the family's future more accurately than Holmes's letter: "It is finished. All is destroyed" (82). By defamiliarising the old house through the intrusion of Otherness and latent moral degeneration, "The Sussex Vampire," like much Gothic fiction, engages with Victorian anxieties about the home and the family.

5 Conclusion

In these three Holmes stories, the distinctly Gothic plot devices of paternal sin and the hint of the supernatural are clearly identifiable. The supernatural atmosphere of the occurrences is created by the presence of toxins and animals, both of which convey anxieties of social, moral, and racial degeneration, prevalent in the late Victorian era. Whereas toxins or drugs are associated with either the modern concoctions of science or Britain's geopolitical situation as a colonial empire, liable to contamination by the otherness of its colonial outposts, animals

are symbolic of fears spawned by Darwinian science. In each of these stories, the animals represent the wrongdoer's degeneracy: his close association or monstrous fusion with the animal conveys the popularised theories of a nascent criminology, which identified regression into primitive, bestial stages of development with criminal propensities.

Concerns about degeneration are closely related to the decline in paternal authority, due to beliefs that moral deficiencies spread like an infection and could be genetically inherited. In Gothic fiction, the father is often the tyrannical Gothic villain, whose masculine authority is staged and scrutinised. Similarly, in these stories, the fathers have many characteristics of the Gothic villain whose transgressions threaten to ruin the life of his family, even though only "The Speckled Band" features paternal crime in the legal sense. The shrinking authority of the father is indicated by the detective's intrusion into the father's home and intimate family affairs. While "The Speckled Band" and "The Creeping Man" depict threatening and unreliable fathers, whose authority is defied with the detective's assistance, "The Sussex Vampire" stages the complete collapse of paternal control. Inasmuch as Doyle's detective stories are hybrids with prominent Gothic features, they, similarly to classic Gothic fiction, negotiate the social anxieties of their period.

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