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Sherlock Holmes

Abstract

This is a review of *Sherlock Holmes* (2009).

“Mr. Holmes, you must widen your gaze. You underestimate the gravity of coming events.”

Guy Ritchie’s Sherlock Holmes is a return to the elementary fabric of Doyle’s creation. Gone is the omniscient, Victorian detective with a deerstalker cap; this is a vision of Holmes as an eccentric, irresponsible manic-depressive who can hold his own in a fight. This apocalyptic and apocalyptic thriller is also Guy Ritchie’s first attempt at reaching a larger American audience.

The film opens with a frantic pursuit about the dark alleys and alcoves of Victorian London – shadows from whence Jack the Ripper could likely emerge. Holmes (Robert Downey Jr.) and Watson (Jude Law) intrude upon the satanic Lord Blackwood (Mark Strong) and intervene before the dark figure can commit an even darker act. Blackwood is hanged under the eye of Watson for several murders and the darkness in which he has held London. Before he is hanged though, he has a final conversation with Holmes during which he reveals to the detective that “you and I are bound together on a journey that will twist the very fabric of nature...tomorrow, the world as you know it will end.”

The following day, Blackwood arises from the dead, shattering the confines of his tomb, to once more walk among the living. This act leaves the city of London in apocalyptic dread, with crowds deeming the dark Lord the very incarnation of

the devil and the author of the impending apocalypse. Holmes and Watson reopen the case and begin a quest to once more apprehend the madman.

In the strand of Indiana Jones and Dan Brown, the film plays upon the public obsession with secret societies and the sacred. Such a society is at the center of the plot, with Lord Blackwood purporting to be the most powerful, and evil, member. This is a group that has numerous similarities to the conspiracies surrounding the Masons and/or the Templars. Additionally, while highly secretive, the organization is composed of the most powerful men in the world, i.e. they control everything.

Many myths and rituals are repackaged as part of the black arts and the murderous machinations of Lord Blackwood. When first apprehended, Blackwood is in the midst of a ritual sacrifice of a young woman - dressed in white. Blackwood's actions also coincide with the Greek elements: rising from the dead (Earth), a drowning (Water), consumption by flame (Fire), and a poison gas attack (Air). Likewise, four other symbols have prominent roles in the film: the Man, the Lion, the Ox, and the Eagle. These animals are also linked with the evangelists of the four canonical gospels: Matthew (a Man/angel), Mark (the Lion), Luke (the Ox), and John (the Eagle). Blackwood constructs his murders with these symbols in mind upon a map of the city, creating a cross.

An apocalyptic aura hangs over the film and is vital to the reputation of Lord Blackwood. Blackwood intends this tale to play out as an apocalyptic drama with himself as a key player. The tones and themes are quite overt; Blackwood, in fact, quotes from the Book of Revelation. There are also interesting contrasts given Blackwood's title of "Lord". But if Lord Blackwood is the Antichrist, would that make his foil, Sherlock Holmes, the savior of the world?

Sherlock Holmes and film are in many ways indelibly linked. The *deus ex machina* of theater and film is highly relevant to Holmes: the god is an illusion, no more than a man on a rope. It is then quite curious that while the very essence of a Holmes tale is to expose the machinations of illusion (a British Toto pulling back the curtain to Oz), a modern audience would watch Sherlock Holmes embracing the illusion of the film.

There is a curious twist at the end of the film - a sort of spiritual wink. Lord Blackwood hangs perilously from London Bridge while Sherlock Holmes discloses to him the secrets of his tricks and how he discovered his plan. All spiritual visages are seemingly dismissed from the film at this point, as Lord Blackwood is left with no determinable taints of black magic; yet, in a surprising turn, Blackwood plummets from the bridge entangled in chains and is conveniently hanged (accompanied by an ominous musical crescendo). This scene, coupled with Holmes' earlier exploration of a black magic ritual, hint at the indelible nature of

the sacred. Although Lord Blackwood may have been a fraud, perhaps there are things beyond the reason and logic of Sherlock Holmes.