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Modernity's Gems: World War I and Science in Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Poison Belt*

Stories surrounding the end of time are not necessarily new. Records as far back as the *Bible* to as recent as the most recent episode of *Supernatural* have dealt with ideology regarding the end of the world. It is a theme which is constantly being revisited, revised, and updated for current generations. Although humanity has seen some fairly interesting things, and for many those tragedies have marked the end of time, we have yet to completely extinguish ourselves. In a less literal sense, during the span of recorded time, several events have occurred which have completely changed the world, marking a distinct beginning and a distinct end to the ways in which humanity interacted with the world and with each other. World War I was one such event.

Particularly for those living in Europe, the war which was coined, "the war to end all wars," proved to be a drastic turning point. It was not quite the ending of the world, but it certainly marked a complete shift from the pre-war world. Published in the *Strand Magazine* mere months before the outbreak of World War I, Doyle's narrative is uniquely positioned to engage with ideas which would become concrete through the historical details, literary commentary, and societal conscience of Great Britain throughout the war. Like many apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic tales, *The Poison Belt* by Arthur Conan Doyle utilizes narrative to reflect, explore, and comment upon societal anxieties.

The story follows the adventures of a young journalist named Mr. Malone, a scientist named Professor Challenger, and their friends as they experience the end of the world. It is a

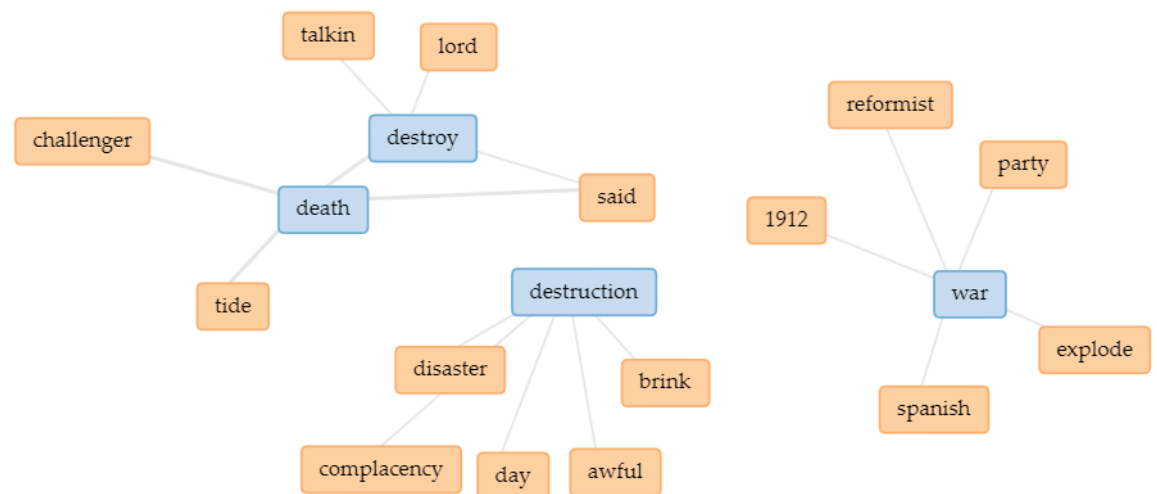
follow up to Doyle's novel *The Lost World*, and follows the same group of people. Professor Challenger notices some strange disturbances in the atmosphere, and invites the group to lunch. He instructs them bring oxygen. When they arrive, they learn that the earth is passing through a dangerous belt of poison air which has already started to make people act strangely, and will eventually kill everyone. With the help of the oxygen, they are able to watch from an air-tight room as every living thing dies. The next day, as their oxygen is running low, they break a window and find the earth has passed through the poisonous belt and they are likely the only living organisms on the planet. After an excursion through London where they note the effects of the gas on everyone, they return home and find everyone waking up. As it turns out, the gas only made everyone pass out temporarily and everything largely goes back to where it was. Doyle spends a lot of time moralizing, and a fair amount of time exploring existentialist questions, but largely it is a rather cheery apocalyptic tale.

Despite the rather cheery tone, Doyle spends quite a bit of time exploring rather grim topics. *The Poison Belt* was published in the *Strand Magazine*, which was known for decent entertainment for the whole family; however, Doyle certainly mixes humor with sobering topics. Although rather different in tone from typical canonical modernist fiction, *The Poison Belt's* exploration of apocalyptic themes allows Doyle to comment on modernist mentalities. Throughout this essay, I will explore apocalyptic allusions to World War I, and the role of science expressed throughout *The Poison Belt* in an effort to better understand pre-war perspectives.

In many ways, Doyle's work was particularly attune to those ideas which would come to define Great Britain during and after the war. *The Poison Belt* speaks extensively on what would happen to the various systems of Great Britain if suddenly no one was around to make them

function. After the great wave of poison passes, the bodies strewn across the countryside would have been more significant to a post-war audience than to the audience of 1913, but still very recognizable. Even small details, like the clownish way in which the people’s faces rest in an “awful grin” (Doyle), or the fact that it is an American that comes bounding up to the professor after the ordeal is done allude to hallmarks of World War I. The word “war” only mentioned once, and it is in reference to the 1912 war, but the words “destruction,” “death,” and “destroy” are commonly linked words (See Figure 1).

Figure 1



The proliferation of words such as “destruction,” “awful,” “disaster,” and “death” move Doyle’s tale from a light-hearted science fiction story, to one which contemplates darker themes.

Ultimately, it is impossible to say whether the inspiration for Doyle’s story of poisonous gas was directly inspired by his musings on the war. However, the themes of *The Poison Belt* are rather similar to those which would be found in war literature, and it is not a far step to look at a story written by a politically active man on the brink of the Great War through such an ideological lens.

The similarities to a post- World War I world, and a post-apocalyptic world are rather interestingly intertwined. In his essay *Uses of the End of the World: Apocalypse and Postapocalypse as Narrative Modes*, Connor Pitetti asserts:

In many contemporary texts, cataclysmic events are used to give structure to the otherwise chaotic and incomprehensible experience of history. Presented as abrupt ruptures or pivots between old and new worlds, these events frame a series of clearly defined moments or epochs, and such narratives thus evoke ideas of a coherent process of historical development in which traumatic upheavals trigger transitions between distinct world-systems (437).

Many apocalyptic texts have a clear differentiation between the pre-apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic worlds, and in a similar manner, the world of pre-war and post-war Europe were very different. The traumatic events completely changed the way in which the world functions, and certainly Doyle's fictional apocalypse reaches towards this tendency. He starts his story by noting the date will be "forever memorable in the history of the world" (Doyle), and after the poison belt has cleared, the narrator explicitly states, "I think it is safe to say that things can never be quite the same again" (Doyle). However, Doyle adds a twist to his story.

In the very chapter where the narrator exclaims that things can never be the same again, the world awakes, causing the narrator to ask if it had all been "an elaborate dream," (317) and particularly noting "Everyone had unconcernedly taken up the thread at the very point where they had dropped it" (Doyle). Naturally Doyle mentions a few of the aftereffects of the great poison, and the world is not entirely unchanged. However, beyond the words of the narrator, very little is given as evidence that there is much permanence in the change. The scientists write and article, and the journalist writes a solemn article noting the significance of the day, however,

nothing *happens* to suggest any deviation from the normal course after the initial loss of a day. Although the poison belt had been given its opportunity to reset the world and effectuate an “abrupt” pivot “between old and new words” (Pitetti), the world was returned to “the very point” (Doyle) it had been previously. Unfortunately, that was not the story of the apocalypse of World War I.

World War I constituted a great shift in perspective. Certainly in reading the poetry and literature of the era, one can get a sense of a definite shift from the hopeful to the disillusioned soldiers. A propaganda pamphlet from World War I proclaims, “MORAL: The Most Important Factor” (Shirley), while Sigfried Sasson writes of “Suicide in the Trenches,” and condemns the “smug-faced crowds.” Although the question of war had been on the minds of Britons for quite some time before *The Poison Belt* had been published, it is clear that Doyle’s piece was published before that “very point” (Doyle) had occurred in world history. The war did what Doyle was unable to do in *The Poison Belt*. He writes a hopeful ending where the world returns, but Great Britain was never able to return from the war.

In addition to the great shift experienced by the effects of World War I, modern literature also experienced a great shift because of their relationship with science. Although Darwinism had come along several decades earlier, the rise of scientific thinking is one of the major characteristics of modernist literature. *The Poison Belt* is no different in the way in which it grapples with scientific questions.

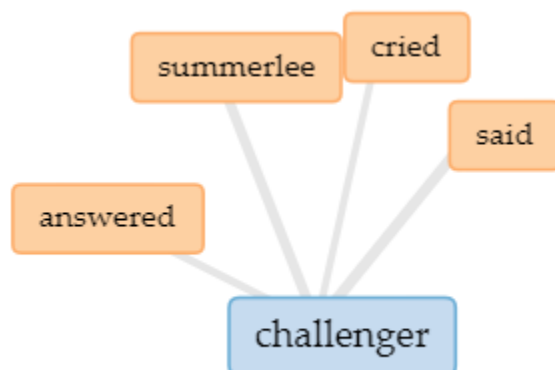
Science plays a particularly interesting role in *The Poison Belt* because of the way in which it acts as an authority figure. Although the apocalyptic narrative utilized by Doyle could have very easily swerved towards the religious, Doyle very conscientiously chooses not to go there. There is no mention of God, and the word “religion” is only mentioned when Professor

Challenger's wife suggests they pray. Challenger's responds, "You will pray, dear if you wish... We all have our own ways of praying. Mine is a complete acquiescence in whatever fate may send me—a cheerful acquiescence. The highest religion and the highest science seem to unite on that" (Doyle). Challenger is set up as an authority figure throughout the narrative. He is the one who is informed about the effects of the gas, makes the decisions on how to survive, and lectures the rest of the group as they wait. His decision to decline religion not only equates "the highest religion and the highest science" with each other, but his choice seems to invalidate a religious response to the end of the world.

Similarly, although the end of the world is often painted in religious terms, Doyle chooses to paint it in scientific. There is an opportunity for an Adam and Eve allusion when Professor Challenger and his wife discover they are the only couple left on earth, however, it is a man of science who is left instead of a prophet. Even the resurrection at the end of the story is explained by scientific reasoning and measured by scientists in Greenwich. Science has usurped religion and serves as they key authority figure.

Professor Challenger, as the man of science, is clearly illustrated as the authority figure. "Challenger" is the second most commonly used word throughout *The Posion Belt*, and he is always talking (See Figure 2).

Figure 2



The words which are associated with Challenger are words of authority, such as “answered” or “said.” In the Voyant links, the only word associated with him which is not a type of speaking is “Summerlee,” which is the name of the other scientist in the journey. Even this adds to emphasize Challenger’s position of authority, as Summerlee is very rarely correct when he challenges Challenger’s perspective. It should be noted that although Challenger acts as an authority figure throughout the adventure, he reaches the end of his understanding fairly often. He is not the one who enacts the ending of the world, but one who reads the signs, recognizes what is happening, and calmly accepts his fate.

With the usurpation of religion, the end of the world takes on a very fatalist twist. Tholassidis argues throughout World War I, “religious terminology shaped people’s understanding of the war as a combat between the forces of good and evil” (3), but Doyle once again studiously subverts this expectation for his apocalyptic tale. Although the world is destroyed, it is not through a malignant “evil,” but through an indifferent universe. The Christian “paradox” that “creates and resolves the tensions between the multiple opposing categories that make up the ironic patterns of the text” (Leigh 23) is not even made a question. In explaining the fate of the world to his companions, Challenger compares them to “infinitesimal but noxious bacillus” which will “in an instant be sterilized out of existence” (Doyle). There quite simply is no bad guy, and nothing to be defeated. The only thing left is “cheerful acquiescence” (Doyle).

It ought to be noted that many of the most commonly occurring words are either words which relate to knowledge, such as “head,” “know,” and “think,” or words which have to do with fate, such as “inevitable,” “universal,” or “passed.” The few action words which are utilized are typically more lethargic action words such as “lay,” “sit,” or “wait.” (Pratt). These men of

science have the knowledge and authority to understand what is happening, however, nothing is done about it.

There is a strange inevitability in Doyle's tale. Although Challenger knows the key to surviving is to get oxygen and stay in an air-tight room, he chooses not to share that information with anyone beyond his group. He tells everyone the world is ending, but literally beats off reporters who come to ask about his claims. Challenger is the figure of authority, but it does not make him an active figure. His role is to disperse knowledge, and allow fate to work her course.

Modernity is a fascinating era precisely because of the way in which they were forced to grapple with so many questions. As science overtook religion as the main way of understanding the world, the way in which the world worked changed. With the advent of World War I, the first global war in a world which was technologically driven, the characteristics of science took over the events of Christianity. These shifts fundamentally changed the way people interacted with the world around them, and made the world a darker, more isolated place in many ways. Although *The Poison Belt* maintains a light tone, it follows many of the major thematic changes of the literature of the day. As the world continued to pivot past their apocalypse, and into their post-apocalyptic world, writers such as Doyle continued to observe the world and record.

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