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Social Criticism in Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Poison Belt*: Cataclysm as Contemporary British Tableau

Arthur Conan Doyle's novella, *The Poison Belt* (1913), is one of a number of significant early twentieth-century British disaster narratives. These texts, including H.G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1898), M.P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* (1901), J.J. Connington's *Nordenholt's Million* (1923), Sydney Fowler Wright's *Deluge* (1927) and *Dawn* (1929), and R.C. Sherriff's *The Hopkins Manuscript* (1939), inspired the tropes of the British disaster tradition as it developed after World War II. Yet several of these texts (in particular *The Poison Belt*, *Nordenholt's Million*, and *The Hopkins Manuscript*) are largely marginalized within sf criticism. Conan Doyle's novella is noted by Brian Aldiss, Paul Kincaid, and John Rieder for its contribution to catastrophe fiction, yet dismissed within sf criticism without sustained examination. Brian Stableford and Nicholas Ruddick are more evaluative than critical, drawing comparisons with Edgar Allan Poe, Wells, and Shiel, and to Doyle's earlier works. Such comparisons are entirely appropriate—*The Poison Belt* draws heavily on an intertextual web of influences. It is nevertheless also a culturally significant work that merits more than just a passing mention or such isolated studies as those by Dana Batory, Douglas Kerr, and Terry Thompson. Conan Doyle employs the catastrophe scenario to create a critical tableau of contemporary British culture. Informed by anxieties of social degeneration and by impulses toward spiritualism, the novella uses the catastrophe narrative to explore social, religious, and scientific ideas, as well as to admonish a complacent British population.

The Poison Belt occupies an unusual position in the British science-fiction disaster tradition. While its narrative structure follows a fairly conventional scenario—it explicitly involves a catastrophic event and its aftermath, in this case the titular belt that renders all life apparently dead—the conclusion reveals that the catastrophe's effects are temporary. The reawakening of the poisoned population at the end is both literal and spiritual, as society is transformed by its experience. Thus *The Poison Belt* occupies two border positions. First, its philosophical stance is located between scientific rationalism and spiritual speculation. Second, it is unusual in presenting a catastrophe that is transient; the calamity is not, after all, calamitous. Rather, Conan Doyle uses the cataclysm to exaggerate the protagonists' behavior and to offer a short-term tableau of the contemporary environment, situating his unaffected protagonists beyond time and motion. From this position, the novella allows for an examination and critique of class relations, social behavior, the decline of the British Empire, and modernity. Consequently, the characters' discourse—like the tale itself—is informed both by a transcendent perspective on existence and by reflections on what Conan Doyle presents as contemporary social ills. The

climactic recovery that reestablishes more traditional standards of behavior and encourages the pursuit of “worthwhile” pastimes identifies it as a wish-fulfillment fantasy that is deeply conservative; it also represents Conan Doyle’s gradual journey toward fully embracing spiritualism.

The Poison Belt is the second of Conan Doyle’s PROFESSOR CHALLENGER tales. The first, *The Lost World* (1912), introduces the protagonists: Professor Challenger; Malone, a journalist and the narrator; and Professor Summerlee and Lord John Roxton, two fellow adventurers. The plot of the third in the series, *The Land of Mist* (1926), sees Challenger’s scientific credibility undermined as he and the group convert to spiritualism. Situated between the materialism of *The Lost World* and the spiritualism of *The Land of Mist*, *The Poison Belt* embraces both scientific method and certainty in a spiritual realm. It begins with the adventurers about to reunite at Challenger’s house to celebrate the third anniversary of their “lost world” adventure. Due to a developing “cosmic disturbance” (5) caused by the Earth passing through a belt of ether, the men are instructed by Challenger to bring oxygen tanks. Unaware that they are under the effects of the ether, Malone, Summerlee, and Roxton display increasingly erratic behavior on their journey. Their symptoms are allayed, however, as Challenger uses the oxygen to counter the ether’s effects. Beyond a sealed room specially prepared by Challenger for his party, the world’s population succumbs to a death-like state.

The post-catastrophe world is a barren place. The sleeping population provides a pause in time during which the group can view their surroundings from a detached vantage point and comment reflectively on the society that has apparently fallen, a perspective fundamental to *The Poison Belt*’s conservative agenda. Unlike disaster narratives such as the earlier *The Purple Cloud* or the later *Nordenholt’s Million*, *The Poison Belt* expresses no desire for an eradication of the contemporary world. Rather the text halts modernity—both literally and figuratively—to allow for contemplation of “all that is learned, famous, and exalted” (32).

The Poison Belt’s use of a catastrophe scenario to explore contemporary cultural anxieties is recognizably Wellsian, a factor that has overshadowed some critical discussions. After initially noting that it contains elements akin to Poe’s “The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion” (1839), Ruddick, for example, centers his discussion on the Wellsian qualities of *The Poison Belt*. Such comparisons lead him to conclude that “[t]he sloppiness of the writing ... suggests that Conan Doyle’s imagination is not fully engaged or perhaps that he has been overwhelmed by the Wellsian example,” a rather unjust dismissal of the text (113). *The Poison Belt*’s Wellsian qualities were acknowledged at the time of its publication. In a letter to the author in 1912, Conan Doyle’s friend, James Ryan, expressed his concern that it might be criticized for its textual similarities to Wells’s *The War of the Worlds* (1897): “[o]f course you will be accused of poaching on Wells’ manor.... The destruction of London, you will of course find in Wells’ *The War of the Worlds* which you might glance over so as to keep off his grass-plot” (Lellenberg, Stashower, and Foley 1). Furthermore, the premise is akin to Wells’s *In the Days of the Comet* (1906),

although Conan Doyle's handling of the transformation to a "bourgeois utopia" (Kerr 15) is more conservative than Wells's. Despite such comparisons, *The Poison Belt's* depictions of London are more Shielian than Wellsian. The "suspended animation" that allows the protagonists closely to observe their environment is more uncanny in tone than the ruined London of *The War of the Worlds*. That being said, there are self-conscious allusions to *The War of the Worlds* within *The Poison Belt*. In a distinctly Wellsian passage, Challenger likens the earth's passing through the ether to a

bunch of grapes ... covered by some infinitesimal but noxious bacillus. The gardener passes it through a disinfecting medium.... Our Gardener is, in my opinion, about to dip the solar system, and the human bacillus, the little mortal vibrio which twisted and wriggled upon the outer rind of the earth, will in an instant be sterilized out of existence. (26)

Challenger's emphasis on human insignificance and vulnerability is reminiscent of Wells's comparisons between human beings and "transient creatures who swarm and multiply in a drop of water" (Wells 1). Furthermore, *The War of the Worlds* creates a sense of hierarchical power by establishing that "this world was being watched keenly and closely" by the Martians, who are likened to "a man with a microscope" scrutinizing "the transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water" (1). Alluding to Wells's cosmic perspective, *The Poison Belt* emphasizes the analogous relationship existing between Challenger and his group as observers and poisoned Britain as the observed. Like the Martians, Challenger will examine his society from an observational position, here secured not by some telescopic device but by the effects of the poison belt. Despite Challenger's scientific credentials, however, his comments are as philosophical, or even as theological, as they are scientific.

While the effects of the ether enable *The Poison Belt* to provide a pseudo-rationally achieved tableau of civilization in its contemporary state, Challenger's analogical explanations for the catastrophic event imply the existence of a universal consciousness separate from and greater than humankind. Affirming the smallness and imperfection of humanity, the "Gardener" evokes Judeo-Christian connections with Eden and the Old Testament God. With remarkable economy, the passage unifies the scientific with the spiritual while emphasizing that one of its objectives is social criticism. Furthermore, as Kerr notes, the ether itself is "a trope of both scientific and spiritual discourse": when it becomes toxic "it signals both a physical and metaphysical disaster" (12).

Humanity's hubris is emphasized, Terry Thompson notes, in the repeated references to golf and the golf course throughout *The Poison Belt*. Such references reinforce the theme of the hubristic desire to subjugate, redesign, and subsume nature (180) and offer "nature the way man, not God, intended it to be: manicured and designed, landscaped and engineered" (181). As Thompson highlights, "the golf course that is in the foreground for much of the novel—framed by Challenger's huge picture window—offers a telling metaphor for a species that will always relish the flattering illusion that the 'inexorable forces of nature' are tractable and manageable by man's hubris and ambition" (182). More directly, Challenger himself emphasizes the "monstrous conceit of

mankind which makes him think that all this stage was erected for him to strut upon" (58). His religiously inflected analogy, in which humankind is like "a mouse in a cathedral [that] thought that the building was its own proper ordained residence" (58), draws upon human achievement but emphasizes that it dwells in a *created* environment that has not been engineered exclusively, or even deliberately, for the human species. Thus, Challenger suggests a guiding hand behind the creation of the world while rejecting the notion that the world was created for humanity and can be fully controlled by it. In arguing such a position, *The Poison Belt* embraces both the scientific method and certainty in a spiritual realm beyond the physical without subscribing to a Christian or a wholly "spiritualist" world-view.

The existence of a spiritual realm is suggested through Challenger's speculations about an afterlife, evidenced when he revives his wife after she is temporarily exposed to the ether. Her first-hand and transcendent account of her experiences confirms his personal certainty in life after death. She recounts to him how "[t]he door of death is indeed, *as you said*, hung with beautiful, shimmering curtains; for, once the choking feeling had passed, it was all unspeakably soothing and beautiful. Why have you dragged me back?" (42; emphasis added). This affirmation gains greater credibility because it is positioned near a vindication of Challenger's scientifically based speculation regarding the nature of the poison ether.

As a scientist, Challenger is excited by the possibility of new perspectives being made available to "our psychical selves" (52) after transcending the physical realm. He notes the "opportunities of observation one may have from what we may call the spirit plane to the plane of matter" (44). Here again, Challenger favors the observational eye, a central conceit of the text. In his philosophy, scientific and spiritual ideas are not in conflict; indeed, a faith in spiritual transcendence marks a desire for alternate and perhaps broader scientific perspectives. Although Conan Doyle does not explore such a transformed viewpoint on "the spirit plane," a comparable effect is achieved solely on the "plane of matter" as a consequence of the poison belt. Challenger engineers the acquisition of a transcendent perspective when he preserves their lives for what he thinks is "a few hours ... to see the evolution of this mighty tragedy before we are actually involved in it" (35). With all life suspended, Challenger and his group are provided with a "transcendent" observational position from which to scrutinize and reflect upon the world; the transition to the post-catastrophe "afterlife" allows for scientific discovery. The apparent suspension of time allows the eye—whether it is that of the journalist, scientist, or reader—fully to analyze what it sees.

Despite this emphasis on observing the material world, Challenger's acceptance of the existence of a spiritual realm rejects pure materialism. He refutes Summerlee's wholly materialist outlook by uniting scientific method, emotionalism, and his burgeoning spiritualism. He sees "wisdom and kindness" producing the "tenderness" required to assist each "frightened mortal" from "life to life" (34), that is, from the material realm to the spiritual plane through the process of dying. The fact that he indicates his head—in effect indicating his

mind—as “something that *uses* matter, but is not of it” (34; emphasis added) establishes intellect as a spiritual as well as a biological attribute. It is also apparent, however, that Challenger’s perspective is equally a product of his ego and his unwillingness to accept the annihilation of the self, “something ... which Death can never destroy” (34). The novella never engages with the possibility that Challenger may be wrong about the existence of “the spirit plane.” His “elemental greatness ... the sweep and power of his understanding” (33) is, as in *The Lost World*, never in question; Summerlee, Challenger’s most critical and skeptical companion, is consistently proved wrong in his criticism of the Professor.

Challenger’s conception of mind as something dependent (perhaps only temporarily) upon the material world, but not belonging to it, functions metonymically as the unification of rational and spiritual ideas. The spiritual elements of *The Poison Belt* are important in establishing a reflective position from which Challenger contemplates the “core” of the human character. The fact that he finds it to contain “wisdom and kindness” is significant for the novella’s didactic aims. The assertion that humankind is essentially good at its heart allows for the successful satisfaction of the story’s conservative agenda, when “wisdom and kindness” reemerge to underpin the desired personal and social transformations occurring post-catastrophe. When humanity reawakens at the end of *The Poison Belt* it is fundamentally altered, and a “new human order” (Kerr 3) based on “spiritual cleansing and a moral reawakening” (Kerr 14) emerges. A cultural transfiguration occurs in which contemporary social conduct, critically observed throughout the text, is replaced with more considerate, restrained, and sober behavior (Conan Doyle 83).

The novel’s restrained ending is significant both within and outside of the text. Stableford concludes that the sober ending provides “an illustration of the way that the popular writers of this period were attracted to the themes of scientific romance” and it marks a “conceptual breakthrough” in Conan Doyle’s relationship with science fiction (90). Stableford notes that “Doyle was a professional writer who regarded fantastic ideas of all kinds simply as melodramatic flourishes to decorate literary confections. *The Poison Belt*, however, had an inertia of its own which carried him ... to a serious consideration of the implications of the hypothesis” (89). Such “serious considerations” are much more conservative than they are radical, something not unusual in disaster fiction. As Rieder points out, “what is most persistently at stake in them [disaster narratives] is not the world’s end but its transformation by modernity. Science fiction sometimes is seen as a genre that embraces modernity wholeheartedly, but its visions of catastrophe display a more divided and complex set of attitudes” (113). Such attitudes are, Rieder continues, often the “obverse of the celebratory narratives of exploration and discovery, the progress of civilization, the advance of science, and the unfolding of racial destiny that formed the Official Story of colonialism” (113).

Every bit the “obverse of the celebratory narrative,” *The Poison Belt* is characterized by anxiety regarding social and cultural changes occurring in Britain in the early twentieth century. Indeed, numerous biographers have

commented on Conan Doyle's dislocation from, and dislike of, his contemporary environment (see, for instance, Coren 54). His Victorian views were increasingly at odds with the changing times, a fact Julian Symons points out when he remarks that "his writing and his beliefs about the conduct of life belonged to an earlier age" (119). Conan Doyle treats pre-war Britain's increased celebration of modernization with skepticism. Part of his critique is leveled at what he perceives to be contemporary society's all-consuming preoccupation with wealth for material comfort (75-76). This is made apparent through the character of Mrs. Burston, an elderly lady whom the characters encounter in Lewisham High Street. Following the ether's subsidence, the group ventures from Challenger's home to explore London. On their journey they spot Mrs. Burston, who is the only other survivor of the ether and who contrasts strikingly with the protagonists. Despite the ostensible similarity in her manner of survival—she too breathed oxygen from a tank (and perceived events as a spectator through a window)—she is both physically and intellectually immobile. Displaying "tragic eagerness" (75), her first question upon meeting the group is not about the calamity itself, but about her railway shares. Dependent on shares for her income, her material comfort depends on their value. Nevertheless, her preoccupation with the shares goes beyond dependency. She views herself as having value only in relation to her wealth. Despite having "all necessities of life" (76), she can form "no conception of existence" that is not related to money, declaring "[i]f that is gone, I may as well go too" (76).

The fact that Mrs. Burston's vanished wealth was in railway shares, as well as her subsequent loss of self-worth, constitutes a critical comment on attachment to wealth derived from modernity. The train was, after all, one of the most prominent symbols of modern technological life. Challenger's group deems it "impossible" to have her accompany them and, as they leave, she shows no concern over the effects of the ether. Rather she is left "weeping bitterly" over her vanished stock (76). Significantly, this scene is followed immediately by a vivid description of devastated London. The "frozen traffic" that impedes their progress and the burning ship on the Thames compels the group to retreat to a pastoral location. This movement can be read symbolically as a movement back in time as the group rejects both the emotional effects of capitalist modernity (represented by Mrs. Burston) and its physical embodiments in the modern industrial and technological city.

Conan Doyle's uneasiness with modernity seems likely to have originated from the fact that "much of early twentieth-century culture was preoccupied with rejecting the immediate Victorian past and redefining the world in accordance with radically new precepts and ideas" (Cocks 26). This cultural shift in attitude is one that is examined and critiqued in the reflective space created by the ether's effects. Fundamental to the novella's critique of its contemporary environment is the positioning of the characters as observers rather than agents. It draws attention to their objective "front seat" (44) position when the group watches the disaster unfold beyond the sheet of glass that separates their sealed room from the contaminated environment (46). Malone's

“instinct of recording” (53) confers a sense of authenticity and credibility to his “eye-witness testimony.”

As a journalist, Malone is the ideal narrator. Emerging from a less cynical age in which journalists were perceived as purveyors of trustworthy information, his position as narrator increases the credibility of his account. As with most of the Sherlock Holmes stories, the Challenger tales are not narrated by the central character, but by a professional male observer. Such narration replicates what Diana Barsham calls a truth-discourse “so convincing that the stories pose successfully as ‘statements’ or factual eye-witness testimonies” (56). Furthermore, this discourse provides a viewpoint that reaffirms masculinity (56). The fact that Malone is viewing a world effectively frozen in time from the perspective of a seasoned reporter draws attention to the credibility of this masculine standpoint.

Barsham’s study of masculinity in Conan Doyle’s work argues that his writing career “carried an ambitious project: that of modernizing and strengthening the representation of British manhood to match the directives of a more secular, scientific and Empire conscious culture” (1). In his representations of manhood, Conan Doyle reinforces the principle of masculinity by joining the chorus of praise to that principle (201). This can be seen in the Challenger series’s male protagonists: they are practical and active intellectuals, adventurers, and professionals.

The Poison Belt responds to the contemporary sense of a destabilization of British “manhood” (deriving from a complex set of historical changes involving Empire, the military, consumerism, and emancipation) by presenting idealized portrayals of masculinity. According to Barsham, Conan Doyle felt that women desired either masculine authority or emancipation from a weakened masculinity (146). *The Poison Belt* provides an image of the former: Mrs. Challenger, the only continuous female presence, turns to her husband for guidance throughout the narrative. Tellingly, it is Mrs. Challenger who is able to cast some light on what lies beyond death through what she sees at the moment of death. This is a significant role given the part women played in spiritualism and mesmerism in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century England. It is particularly telling that Conan Doyle provides masculine observers who take an authoritative position over Mrs. Challenger’s spiritual experience, countering her vision with their rational commentary.

The Poison Belt affirms an authoritative viewpoint from which to critique social conditions. Its critical position on modernity is established soon after the cataclysm. Jill Greenfield notes that the new century brought with it fears about urban degeneration. It saw the beginning of a “feminised consumerism” that was considered symptomatic of “wider concerns about national cultural degeneration” (170). The almost entirely “masculine space” established by the effects of the poison belt counters the so-called “feminizing” effects of modernity by paralyzing the modern to allow the emergence of active masculine roles, not in some remote corner of *The Lost World* but in the heart of the British Empire. Challenger exemplifies “the ideal scientific mind,” capable of thinking “out a point of abstract knowledge in the interval between its owner

falling from a balloon and reaching the earth. Men of this strong fibre are needed to form the conquerors of Nature and the bodyguard of truth" (50). In short, scientific minds with the capacity to think quickly and under pressure are essential for the establishment of masculine authority over Nature and as the protectors of truth. Here the falling man serves as a metaphor for Challenger and his group, similarly poised between safety and death, temporarily surviving the effects of the ether. The temporal pause created by the poison belt establishes a narrative space in which the group can contemplate society from "a point of abstract knowledge" as it sinks toward extinction. Their masculine authority is demonstrated in their having conquered Nature—they have survived the ether, at least temporarily—and in their communication of a "truth," their unique observations on their contemporary culture.

The story's conservative wish-fulfilment fantasy goes beyond the reinforcement of masculinity to inflect its representations of class. Written at a time when there was a relative increase in social mobility, especially for the working class, *The Poison Belt* reaffirms class positions and presents the middle classes favorably. On the journey to Professor Challenger's home, during which the ether is already making its influence felt, Malone describes the resulting excessive behavior of the working class in humorous if rather aggressive terms:

I turned away to pay off my taxi, the driver of which was very cantankerous and abusive over his fare. As I came back to Professor Summerlee, he was having a furious altercation with the men who had carried down the oxygen, his little white goat's beard jerking with indignation. One of the fellows called him, I remember, "a silly old bleached cockatoo," which so enraged his chauffeur that he bounded out of his seat to take the part of his insulted master, and it was all we could do to prevent a riot in the street. (8)

Structurally the sequence of events lacks fluency as each event appears separate from, and juxtaposed with, the others. The effect is to produce a series of moments that allow the reader to view the emerging shifts in class relations in detail.

In terms of social criticism, the exaggerated behavior exposes a breakdown of respect between both the laboring and middle classes. The ether exacerbates the dissolution of propriety that Conan Doyle presents as an effect of modernity. It is not only the middle and working classes who are subject to a critical eye, however. The wealthy are also presented unflatteringly in a critique of economic inequality. For example, when traveling through London with his companions following the ether's effects, Malone witnesses a car "of great size and luxurious appearance, with its owner, a fat old man, leaning out, half his gross body through the window, and his podgy hand, gleaming with diamonds, outstretched" (78). This scene, again capturing a moment motionless in time, depicts crass, domineering corpulence. Malone's description emphasizes the gluttony and self-indulgence of the wealthy materialist. Described as a "magnate," a term that associates him with the business community and suggests his membership among the *nouveau riche*, he is "new money" compared to the aristocracy that is not, perhaps due to the novella's inherent conservatism, subject to comparable criticism.

Earlier, while succumbing to the influence of the ether, Summerlee accuses Lord Roxton of being an "ignorant coxcomb" (13). Roxton meets such criticism with restraint. His supreme self-control is indicative of a class structure in which each class is more competent than the one below it. Roxton calms the argumentative situation by refraining from engaging with Summerlee's continued insults. Here and elsewhere, Summerlee is presented as irrational, emotional, and often amusing in his waspishness. Hence the text draws attention to conventional distinctions between a refined aristocracy (Roxton, a particularly adventurous, practical man in *The Lost World*), a gluttonous mercantile class ("the fat old man"), a wide-ranging professional middle class (Professors Challenger and Summerlee, and the journalist Malone), with the working classes below.

At the same time, the plot recognizes that not all members of the aristocracy are as laudable as Roxton, a man characterized by agency and practicality. *The Poison Belt* is much more critical of idle wealth. Drawing attention to the economic and emotional detachment of an "idle" upper class, preoccupied with leisure, compared with a more "industrious" middle class or active aristocracy, the novella emphasizes economic inequality. In London, the group see

three gaily dressed women.... With them were a rakish-looking elderly man and a young aristocrat, his eyeglass still in his eye, his cigarette burned down to the stub between the fingers of his begloved hand.... On one side of the car a waiter with some broken glasses beside a tray was huddled near the step. On the other, two very ragged tramps, a man and a woman, lay where they had fallen, the man with his long, thin arm still outstretched, even as he had asked for alms in his lifetime. (74)

Sectioned in time, the scene cuts across British class relations to highlight the indifference of a leisured upper class.

Encompassing both a vision of luxurious relaxation and abject poverty in a single image, the novella draws attention to and critiques the gulf between the classes. Its solution to such injustice lies in the enhancement of a post-catastrophe "common fund" to raise "the standard of life in these islands," paid for by contributions from those previously preoccupied with "the noisy, foolish hustle which passed so often for enjoyment in the days of old" (83). Accordingly, while class distinctions remain intact, the wealthy now take responsibility for the welfare of the poor.

Because one of the effects of the ether is to amplify tendencies in human behavior, much of *The Poison Belt's* social criticism is achieved through parody and comedy, particularly in its treatment of anxieties surrounding changes in conduct and more relaxed approaches to etiquette and manners. The ether exaggerates these changes, provoking extreme behavior among the protagonists and thereby enabling the novella to comment critically on contemporary attitudes and to advocate a return to Victorian "decorum." In some of the most comic scenes, Summerlee impersonates a "clucking hen" that has just laid an egg, Malone becomes "hysterical," and Roxton talks interminably (14-16). Later, Challenger also breaks the codes of acceptable behavior; he hides under a table and bites his housekeeper on the leg in order, like any good scientist, to observe

her reaction (23). This boisterous, unrestrained conduct is a parody of declining social reserve and a waning capacity to maintain rational discourse. The characters enact the very antithesis of formal and repressed Victorian conduct and comically expose the declining etiquette that the novella seeks to address. Collectively, the conduct of the “cantankerous” taxi driver, the disrespectful oxygen porters, and the protagonists’ own behavior emphasize declining etiquette and expose humankind’s irrational, boorish, and violent nature that, the novella implies, requires repressing. Read in the light of the altered patterns of social behavior that occurred as Victorian restraint was replaced by more relaxed Edwardian attitudes, such events form a critical commentary on what it perceived as social degeneration. In its negative portrayal of such conduct, *The Poison Belt* advocates the founding of a “more sober and restrained” society (83).

The breakdown in decorum demonstrated in *The Poison Belt* is important for what it implies about the role of the British globally. The text symbolically presents the English as the most intellectually developed race in the world through the progression of the ether’s effects across the globe. England is one of the last countries to succumb to the ether’s effects, suggesting English racial superiority, as the poison affects “the less developed races” first (30). As Terry Heller notes, the ether allows Conan Doyle “to lay out a map of racial complexity” (82); Kerr observes that the text’s “late Malthusian imaginings merge with the popular discourse on eugenics, and the eugenic logic of the poison makes it appropriate that Challenger and his friends should survive the longest” (13). Indeed, *The Poison Belt*’s treatment of race emphasizes the importance of the Western “civilizing” process that informed imperial and colonial enterprises. This contrast highlights the key difference between *The Poison Belt* and many other disaster narratives: its wish-fulfilment fantasy is not one of global annihilation but rather of national augmentation in the form of a return to Victorian behavior and empire building.

Challenger is presented as the most highly developed of English minds. Once he realizes that his behavior is being adversely influenced by the ether, he sets about exercising his mind to keep his less rational impulses under control. Although both he and Summerlee are professors, it is Challenger who shows the greater self-awareness, thereby demonstrating his superiority even over those judged to be his intellectual equals. He explains: “There is a mental inhibition by which such symptoms can be checked and controlled.... I cannot expect to find it developed in all of you to the same point which it has reached in me, for I suppose that the strength of our different mental processes bears some proportion to each other” (24). Through Challenger’s instruction, Roxton, Summerlee, and Malone are able to recover themselves and function rationally and coherently again. This victory of “mind over matter” suggests that those with a stronger intellect will be capable of resisting the ether’s mental effects and of educating those of weaker mind to do the same. Challenger’s influence is, in effect, a civilizing process that redeems his companions from their uncivilized behavior.

Although Conan Doyle does not make an explicit connection between Challenger's influence on his companions and the British Empire's potential effect on foreign nations, Challenger's ability to civilize "disordered" minds can be interpreted in a broader context. Challenger is represented as the epitome of English intellectualism, a superior man of a superior race more capable than any other of resisting the influence of the ether. By confirming that the poison belt affects "less developed races first" in the aftermath of Challenger's restoration of his friends' decorum, readers are invited to conjecture that England may be capable of performing a similar role for those framed as less civilized than the English. In short, the English could teach appropriate behavior to those peoples deemed less civilized. In this way, *The Poison Belt* subscribes to the Victorian view of a hierarchy of racial types with the white English as the pinnacle of human evolution, capable of civilizing the less advanced races of humanity (J. Thompson 74). While the racial distinctions within *The Poison Belt* are clear, the allusion to the process of imperial or colonial improvement is more oblique, suggested by Challenger's influence upon his colleagues; he is a manifestation of a great white father figure teaching discipline to his unruly children.

Indicating racial and intellectual difference and suggesting that civilized behavior can be taught, *The Poison Belt* reflects many views that were present in the popular press of the period, particularly the notion that the British Empire undertook the civilizing process of "the white man's burden" (MacKenzie 149, quoting Rudyard Kipling). Challenger's recognition of self-control as a civilizing process is achieved when he summons his more rational self to watch, recognize, and exercise control over his impulses. Although in *The Lost World* Conan Doyle drew attention to Challenger's atavistic features, in *The Poison Belt* the emphasis is very much on his overcoming his baser instincts. After biting his housekeeper on the leg, he remarks:

In an instant I perceived the truth.... I called upon my higher and saner self, the real G.E.C., seated serene and impregnable behind all mere molecular disturbance. I summoned him.... I found that I was indeed the master. I could recognise and control a disordered mind.... I might almost say that mind was at fault and that personality controlled it. (25)

Mindfulness of one's actions allows for the recognition of appropriate and inappropriate behavior. In this context, the breakdown in the protagonists' behavior is more than an expression of anxieties about decorum. Like *The War of the Worlds*, it expresses a fear that the English could lose their elevated position globally. By implication, if standards of behavior in Britain fall, then its claim to the civilizing authority of its people is diminished. Hence, *The Poison Belt* champions self-control as a means of legitimizing and maintaining Britain's global influence. This is perhaps unsurprising. During this period, many commentators felt that the Empire was in decline and Conan Doyle engaged publicly with this changing context. He declared many of his views in his writing for the popular press, establishing himself as a firm believer in the British Empire as a positive "civilizing" influence in the world, a force for good (Symons 69).

Conan Doyle's faith in the British Empire is distinctly Victorian. As confidence in the Empire declined after the second Boer War (1899-1902), British certainty in its masculine and martial prowess was damaged and fears of degeneration increased. John MacKenzie notes that after the Boer War, which was a "severe blow to national pride and prestige," people started to doubt the Empire's civilizing mission (160). In this context, Conan Doyle's conviction of English superiority seems anachronistic: his treatment of the ether's effects as it progresses across the globe functions to reaffirm the pre-eminence of the English.

While *The Poison Belt* reaffirms ideas about English racial superiority, it simultaneously reflects anxieties akin to those found in *The War of the Worlds* about lack of preparation for a coming crisis. In her introduction to the Bison edition of *The Poison Belt*, Katya Reimann remarks how "Conan Doyle's description of an invisible horror that sweeps relentlessly across the settled order and golden beauty of a perfect summer day in the [Sussex] Downs almost presciently describes the England of the summer of 1914" (xv). In effect, the story draws attention to Britain's unpreparedness for the disaster that befalls the country and, by implication, for the possibility of war. Lewis Seaman points out that "the circumstances which had enabled this Empire to be created and maintained had, by the time the twentieth century opened, begun to pass away" and at the same time Germany, since the 1890s, had been developing its military power (35-36). In this context, it is significant that in the year Conan Doyle published *The Poison Belt*, the *Fortnightly Review* ran his "Great Britain and the Next War" (February 1913). Given the growing tensions of the time, it is unsurprising that Conan Doyle had been contemplating the likelihood of conflict and the need for national military preparation. As Challenger declares, "the wisest man is he who holds himself ready for the unexpected" (6).

The relationship between *The Poison Belt* and the "multitude of works appearing in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries, warning a decadent England of the dangers of invasion if nothing was done to rejuvenate the country physically and morally," is, Batory points out, "obvious" (98). For I.F. Clarke, increasing worries about a potential invasion are manifested in the contemporary "plethora of future war stories" that addressed anxiety through narratives embodying the "wish-fulfilment fantasy about an idealised nation in arms" (104-105). In *The Poison Belt* such apprehension is answered through the representation of a small group of men ready for action. The representation of masculinity in *The Poison Belt* valorizes the qualities of curiosity, tenacity, bravery, and professionalism and presents these as the defining features of good character. These qualities are particularly relevant considering the novella's pre-World War I context. Responding positively to the Edwardian "crisis of manliness" (Chapman and Hilton 126), the novel's central characters do not express the physical deterioration many felt had come to characterize the contemporary British male after the Boer War. Conan Doyle's protagonists—including Summerlee, who is significantly older than the rest—are all physically robust and still demonstrate the vigor they expressed during their "lost world" adventure three years previously. Their physical hardiness contrasts

with perceptions of poor physical fitness levels circulating in the first decade of the twentieth century. In this context, such representations of physically fit and authoritative characters would inevitably have been appealing. The text presents a group whose intellect and foresight are matched by their physical capacity to deal with crisis.

Much of the anxiety expressed in *The Poison Belt's* depiction of a human race caught unprepared arises from the hubris recognized by Challenger when he discusses the "monstrous conceit of mankind" (26). This conceit sits, paradoxically perhaps, alongside contemporary concerns around health, morality, and the Empire. While Challenger refers to humankind in general, the pre-war context suggests a more specific interpretation. The restoration of England at the climax of the text represents a wish-fulfilment fantasy of a peaceful, prosperous future secured by a nation prepared for adversity.

Conan Doyle repeatedly highlights British complacency. Austin, Challenger's chauffeur, is a good example. He is a satiric figure, seemingly unperturbed by the prospect of cataclysm. His response is an amplification of Malone's ingrained sense of disbelief. Malone draws upon a sense of familiarity and permanence in describing his restricted view from Challenger's room, observing an idyllic and comforting scene of "great houses" that signal strength and stability and "cosy farms" that connote warmth and provision. The sun "shining as brightly *as ever*" creates a vista of idyllic normality and permanence (26-28; emphasis added). The reassuring qualities of illusory permanence are repeated later when Malone ironically notes the "perfect summer sky" above their "glorious deathbed" (40). This register is juxtaposed with his acknowledgment of "terrific" and "ruthless" destruction (40), emphasizing the sudden danger and vulnerability that comes from a limited understanding of global events.

Austin's lack of concern with the disaster and Malone's inability to comprehend it are significant in relation to the historical context. Whittaker Chambers and Terry Teachout point out that, despite wars and political upheaval, early twentieth-century Britain was a place of "confidence and security.... Crises and war were recurrent, but the mass of men had an almost organic confidence in peace" (224). *The Poison Belt's* reaction against this overconfidence is described by Batory as "a boldface plea for humanity to put its affairs in order.... Doyle was trying to frighten his readers into moral reform—but instead of the usual foreign invasion (or Martian invasion in the case of *The War of the Worlds*) to scare the English, Doyle warned all of humanity by summoning the apocalypse" (100).

Emphasizing the illusory nature of peace, *The Poison Belt* undermines complacency and emphasizes vulnerability, just as *The War of the Worlds* had done. For Ruddick, "[i]t is ironic that this well-rehearsed expression of the need for a raised consciousness of human vulnerability to the natural world should be stated in 1913, on the brink of a war that would render the man-made, rather than the natural catastrophe, from that point on the phenomenon more greatly to be feared" (114). Ruddick overlooks the fact, however, that *The Poison Belt* uses the natural catastrophe as a means of *facilitating* the exploration of broader

sociocultural anxieties, particularly around the “man-made” capacity for disaster. Significantly, anxieties about a lack of preparedness for action and fears of degeneration merge in the novella’s representation of technology. Carelessness in the manufacturing of one of the oxygen tanks used to aerate Challenger’s sealed room, for example, threatens the survival of the group. Summerlee’s conclusion that this is an “excellent final illustration of the sordid age in which we have lived” (64) is an extreme example of the consequences of declining standards. Here, poor-quality goods accelerate the death of the country, personified by Challenger and his survivors. Summerlee’s criticism reflects a belief in the gradual decline of the nation. After the mid-nineteenth century, considered to be the “Golden Age” of British manufacturing, there had been a comparative weakening of the British economy, a slowdown in exports, and a significant reduction in Britain’s industrial position globally (Clarke and Trebilcock 13). Summerlee’s disgust suggests the need for high-quality manufacturing to be a characteristic of British industry if the country is to survive economically and compete globally with Germany and America. The text’s response is to argue for society’s capacity to develop and improve responsibly. Indeed, this change forms a fundamental part of the altered mindset of the population after the cataclysm. They have a “*feeling*” of “responsibility,” “an *appreciation* of the gravity and of the objects of life,” and “an *earnest desire* to develop and improve” (82; emphases added). Attitudes toward standards and development have altered as a consequence of the ether, overturning the perceived decline and careless attitudes of the pre-catastrophe “sordid” age.

In conjunction with its criticism of the failures of contemporary industrial production in Britain, *The Poison Belt* expresses uncertainty regarding the growing dependence on technology. Despite Britain’s industrial and economic slowdown, the Edwardian period saw rapid technological advancements and a concomitant growth in confidence in the efficacy of technology. *The Poison Belt* offers a caution by insisting that technology, now capable of running autonomously, should be under the control of human agents. This is emphasized most clearly in the damage caused by machines after the ether has taken effect (47). Indeed, very little damage is caused by the ether compared to that created by unguided technology, including trains and steamships. The novella emphasizes the need to exercise control over humanity’s technological creations. The text makes this explicit in the post-disaster report (93) published in the *Times* insisting that human agency is necessary to avert technological disasters, including train crashes and steam-powered ships running “full tilt upon some beach” (47). It warns that machines, the very symbols of human progress and prowess are, ironically, potential sources of further catastrophe, a thematic that would come to dominate science fiction throughout the twentieth century.

The Poison Belt makes its most insistent claim for the importance of effective human control over the machine in its treatment of the car. While the text does not reflect the increasing unease about motor transport that emerged during the early years of the twentieth century, it is critical of people’s *use* of the car. As the group drives towards Challenger’s home in a car scarcely under the control

of their ether-influenced chauffeur, they narrowly avoid collisions with other erratic vehicles and almost collide with a group of pedestrians. Importantly, the drivers' lack of control is the consequence of the ether's amplification of their more usual carelessness, suggesting that humanity is already unthinking in its use of machines.

This journey can, however, be read more symbolically. Like the train and the steamship, the car is a symbol of modernity, of humanity's changed relationship with time and space. All three shorten travel time and effectively compress space. In this vignette, those engaged with modernity strike a glancing blow against those who still stand outside of it. The impact, however slight, implies that a swiftly approaching modernity cannot be avoided and, on a careless trajectory, its effects could be potentially damaging. Hence, through such imagery, *The Poison Belt* appears to extend its argument for the control of technology into a call for control over the objects and effects of modernity itself. By extension, this is equally a call for humanity to exercise control over its own behavior, not only in relation to machines but also in its social interactions. Through the sudden and striking effects of the ether, *The Poison Belt* draws attention to the fact that, although modern civilization may have created cars, ships, and trains, it has gained mastery neither over nature nor over itself.

As a result of the ether and its effects, humanity, "a feeble folk before the infinite latent forces which surround" it (92), becomes more aware of its vulnerability; its awakening is, therefore, both literal and metaphorical. The population gains a sublime and humbling appreciation of its own powerlessness in the universe. At the conclusion, the population finds pleasure in reflective pastimes. "[I]gnorant self-complacency" has been replaced with "solemnity and humility" and the alteration has become "the foundations upon which a more earnest and reverent human race may build a more worthy temple" (93). The religious connotations of the prose clearly suggest a new spirituality in the population.

The Poison Belt is a multi-layered text. At one level, it is a theological/philosophical text, but it can also be read as an exploration of the nature of early twentieth-century British society, an attack upon complacency, and a cautionary tale. Infused with anxieties about degeneration, *The Poison Belt* offers a conservative and critical response to contemporary behavior and attitudes. It champions masculine authority, laments a declining empire, and expresses concern about humanity's unthinking use of new technology. Accordingly, it encompasses several wish-fulfilment fantasies. A spiritual dimension to human existence is reaffirmed in the modern world, a reinvigorated masculinity is envisioned, certainty about British racial superiority is confirmed, and what is presented as improper behavior is transformed into something "more sober and restrained" (83). Conan Doyle achieves this by freezing time in a long contemplative pause that exposes the mores of his society to criticism.

Despite the *Times*'s report of an altered humanity, the fact that so many people awake following the ether's departure without realizing that they have slept makes it unclear whether or not they will be genuinely transformed by their experience. Thus, self-consciously aware of the unlikelihood of its wish-

fulfillment scenario, *The Poison Belt* undermines the *Times's* report and the reader must view the didactic qualities of the text ironically. This position is furthered in the fictional article itself, which remarks that the “actuality and cogency” of other, earlier warnings from “prophets” and “philosophers” have diminished. Such an acknowledgment can be read as a rhetorical strategy that encourages the reader to recognize and heed the validity of these cautionary warnings, before a “lesson, an actual experience” is “needed to bring home the realisation of our own limitations and impotence” (92-93). Whether or not contemporary readers encountered Conan Doyle’s text, this is precisely what World War I delivered to Britain in 1914.

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that Arthur Conan Doyle's second Professor Challenger tale, *The Poison Belt* (1913), uses the story arc of a disaster narrative as a means of providing a tableau of contemporary Britain both for the purposes of socio-cultural assessment and for burgeoning spiritualist exploration. A conservative text, *The Poison Belt* uses its science-fictional premise to establish a "condition of England" critique informed by Victorian anxieties about social degeneration before offering a wish-fulfilment conclusion of cultural reinvigoration.