

Arthur Conan Doyle's Quest Journey to *The Land of Mist*

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Arthur Conan Doyle employed the quest narrative structure in his Professor Challenger novels and short stories. The themes that were embodied in the journey form were imperialism, positivist science, the male role, evolution, degeneration and atavism. However, in the last of this cycle, *The Land of Mist* (1926) the Victorian quest romance does not go to a lost, prehistoric world in the Amazonas. It takes on a surprising form as now the journey is to the realm of the dead. This destination can be regarded as a result of Doyle's deep interest in spiritualism, but the article will seek to explain this in the context of its contemporary epistemology. It is the hypothesis of the article that doubts and problems of faith, both religious and ideological, could not be answered in any other way than by converting the narratological device of the quest journey into a statement of faith. Yet the positivist and imperialist metaphor of the journey of exploration imploded into morbidity and domestication as a result of the transformation, which sought to reconcile positivist science with the existence of the supernatural or paranormal of the spirit world. The double world-view and its narratological consequences will be explained by the article through its use of Michel Foucault's concept of the episteme.

The Challenger novels

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's writing career falls into distinct phases and groupings. His Sherlock Holmes novels and cases have survived him, whereas his many historical novels and romances are largely unknown today. During the last part of his life, however, he devoted much time and money to the cause of spiritualism. For instance he published *The History of Spiritualism* (Doyle, 1926), and he went on several lecturing tours in Britain, Australia and the U.S.A. as an advocate of the belief in a spiritual afterlife. It is in this context that the third group of his writings, the Challenger novels gains significance, in the own right as entertaining works of fiction, but primarily they can be regarded as documents of the epistemology and ontology of the period in which they were conceived and written. There are three novels: *The Lost World* (1912), *The Poison Belt* (1913) and *The Land of Mist* (1926), and two short stories: "The Disintegration Machine" (1928) and "When the World Screamed" (1929). *The Lost World* establishes the ensemble. There is a journalist, Edward Malone, two professors, Challenger and Summerlee, and an aristocratic adventurer, Lord John Roxton. This group of men is challenged for various reasons to go on an expedition to an unknown part of the Amazonas to prove the existence of prehistoric dinosaurs, and they manage to bring back a living pterodactyl and diamonds to London. The characters reappear in *The Poison Belt*. In this novel professor Challenger warns the others that the Earth is going to pass through a cosmic cloud of poisonous ether, and with tanks of oxygen they together with Professor Challenger's wife, but without his servants, take refuge in a sealed room in his home. Through the panorama window they witness the end of civilization and the extinction of mankind. Nearly suffocated they survive the ordeal, and after 28 hours the people who have not been killed by runaway machines and fires start to wake up from what appeared to be only a coma. In *The Land of Mist* taking place many years later Summerlee and Challenger's wife are now deceased. The journalist Malone together with Challenger's daughter Enid is making research for a newspaper article series about spiritualism. They become convinced that there is an afterlife and that spirits can communicate with the living. With Lord Roxton they witness a spirit in a haunted house, they take part in séances, and they meet with likeable and honest mediums, but also with frauds, who are exposed as

such. Professor Challenger is aggressively and sceptically opposing the spiritualist movement, but after his dead wife has shown herself to him in spirit form, and Enid has shown her abilities as a spiritualist medium, he too is convinced. In "The Disintegration Machine" an inventor, Theodore Nemor demonstrates his infernal machine to Professor Challenger and Edward Malone telling them that he will sell it to the Russians as a weapon to be used against Britain. Challenger tricks the inventor into his own machine and disintegrates him. Also "When the World Screamed" is concerned with science. Professor Challenger has formed the hypothesis that the Earth and other planets are living organisms, and he has hired a skilled artesian-well engineer to sink a sharp drill into the core of the Earth. Challenger is right, and the Earth reacts to the stabbing by screaming and by erupting an organic fluid and secretions from the hole. Volcanoes erupt all over the globe, and the professor is celebrated as a scientific genius.

Thematically the five Challenger texts deal with responses to aspects of modernity. *The Lost World* is about Darwinism and survival of the fittest, or more precisely about degeneration theories that claim that evolution in nature and in society may move backward to earlier atavistic forms. Ironically, the "the greatest brain in Europe" (Doyle, 1995, p. 438), the professor himself, is almost physically identical to the chief of the ape-men on the inaccessible plateau in the Amazonas. Challenger as the so-called higher degenerate (Lombroso, 1876: Greenslade, 1995) is described by the narrator, Malone as "a primitive cave-man in a lounge suit" (Doyle, 1912/1995, p. 438), and it is his primeval aggressiveness that has equipped him with "a driving force that can turn all his dreams into facts." Doyle's societal critique here, in which the lack of basic social skills paired with superhuman abilities becomes an instrument of survival, is again combined with another discourse, the gendered one about the male role. Edward Malone joins the evolutionary, scientific quest to the Amazonas in order to prove his manhood to his fiancée Gladys, who will not have him unless he can display some manly, heroic qualities. Again, Doyle's societal critique is apparent. When Malone returns a better man to his London suburb it is only to find that his Gladys has married a solicitor's clerk, "a little ginger-haired man, who was coiled up in the deep arm-chair" (Doyle, 1995, p. 167).

The apocalyptic novel *The Poison Belt* continues the scientific and evolution discourses in combination with an imperialist one. The poisonous effect of the ether does not affect everybody in the same way: "the less developed races have been the first to respond to its influence. There are deplorable accounts from Africa, and the Australian aborigines appear to have been already exterminated. The Northern races have as yet shown greater resisting power than the Southern... The Slavonic population of Austria is down, while the Teutonic has hardly been affected." (Doyle, 1995, p. 194).

Thematically, the last of the Challenger novels, *The Land of Mist* is a combination of discourses; but now science is combined with religion, and it is this combination within the narrative framework of a quest structure that is the subject of the rest of this article.

The quest romance and the scientific quest

Conan Doyle's production of the Sherlock Holmes cases was highly formulaic, almost mechanically repetitive in its narrative pattern, though the concept was highly original and successful in its time (Christensen, 2010). Also in the Challenger novels the same narrative structure was employed by Doyle. The quest has its root in myths and religions, and it has been a recurring and relatively unchanging phenomenon in cultural history with manifestations in e.g. medieval romances, fantasy and popular films (Campbell, 1949/1975; Vogler, 1995/1999). The quest is a journey. It is circular, and may be compared to the folktale structure of at home – out – home again, as the questing hero is sent on a mission to foreign parts to retrieve some kind of an elixir that can save his homeland. The quest runs through certain steps. The hero is called to adventure; sometimes he is abducted or lured away. He then has to cross the threshold of adventure. The threshold is guarded, and the guard must be defeated or the hero may have to trick or negotiate his way into the otherworld. In some cases the hero is killed at this stage, and the otherworld becomes the land of death. After the threshold-crossing the hero is subjected to various tests in the form of e.g. brother battles, dragon battles or dismemberment. The continued journey can change into abduction, the so-called night-sea journey or underground journey. At this point of the quest journey its clearly symbolic nature becomes apparent, where the otherworld resembles unconscious structures of the mind. Other varia-

tions are the wonder journey, or the hero may be swallowed and enter the whale's or monster's belly. Both before and during the quest journey the hero encounters and is allied with an assortment of helpers, who may each possess a special ability. At the end of the journey, farthest away from home, the hero meets with the goal of his quest. He now has to pass the ultimate test and get the reward for the journey and his pains. The reward may be the hero's sexual gratification with a goddess of the otherworld, and / or reconciliation with a father-figure. The reward may even be apotheosis, and the hero becomes a god-like figure. More negatively, he may have to steal the prize he came to win and the homeward journey becomes flight. The reward the hero brings home is an elixir in some, symbolic or literal form, which can cure the ailing kingdom from which he set off. In itself the homeward journey is filled with obstacles, but the hero returns home a changed and wiser person with the elixir, which also improves or heals his native country.

The Victorian quest romance is a particular instance of the general quest narrative pattern as it has been described briefly above. Apart from Conan Doyle its literary practitioners were R.L. Stevenson (e.g. *Treasure Island*, 1881), H. Rider Haggard (e.g. *King Solomon's Mines*, 1885), Rudyard Kipling (e.g. *The Man Who Would Be King*, 1888) and H.G. Wells (e.g. *The Time Machine*, 1895). One theme that tied these authors' quest novels together was the discussion of the changing male gender role. The very genre was part of this discussion as the relatively short and action-packed quest romances defined themselves in opposition to the prevalent three-volume realistic novel with its largely female readership (Fraser, 1998, p. 3). These male Victorian quest romances were highly topical in their thematics in other respects, too. Positivist science is at the surface of H.G. Wells' production, which is often labelled as the subgenre, the scientific quest. The scientific quest connects the Victorian quest genre per se with science fiction. With forerunners such as Jules Verne the territorial quest could examine the future in the genre of science fiction. However, it is in its very journey form the quest narrative in itself embodies the search for empirical knowledge when the quest is for the confirmation or verification of factual truths. The Empire as a theme is also formally connected to the quest narrative as this genre reflects the imperial expansion and its consequences. Not only the fate of the British

male colonial administrator and his journey overseas, but also the clash of cultures, which was sometimes regarded in a Darwinist light, were stable ingredients of the novels.

The reformulation of the quest romance in *The Land of Mist*

Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* almost follows the narrative quest structure to the letter. Basically, a group of men departed for unknown destinations in search of knowledge, wealth, honour and personal development. The classic quest elements are represented: The call to adventure, an assortment of helpers, an abduction of Challenger by ape-men, wonder journeys up to the plateau, and an underground journey down again, dragon battles with dinosaurs, sexually attractive native women, the brother battle between Challenger and his alter ego, the ape-man chief. The questers did not only gain insights into their own characters and male roles, but they could also return to London with a scientific discovery in the form of a living pterodactyl and £200,000 worth of diamonds.

The Poison Belt is a step towards the rather special way Doyle used the Victorian quest romance in *The Land of Mist*. In the former of the two the call to adventure from Challenger to Malone, Roxton and Summerlee is merely to join him in his comfortable home outside London on a hilltop in pastoral surroundings with a view to a golf course and a railway line, and the bulk of the action takes place in a sealed sitting-room in the professor's home only supplemented with a flow of telegrams from all over the world as the apocalypse strikes. There are quite dramatic occurrences outside the large window as the poisonous ether also reaches this part of England. The questers do not have to journey in this novel as they cross the threshold of adventure in the way that it comes to them in the form of a poison belt of ether with a speed of "some million miles a minute", which kills all humans on its way. The quest structure is actually followed as here the otherworld is the land of death and the return is resurrection near the end of the novels when the questers have run out of oxygen, but at a time when the ether has passed.

Two points are notable in the use of the quest narrative leading on to its further use in *The Land of Mist*. There is the morbidity with the apocalypse and the seeming extinction of mankind as it is depicted in the chapter called "The Dead World" with a journey

through a post-apocalyptic London, and there is the domestication of the quest genre where the action has moved into a closed, claustrophobic room in an English home.

The late date of 1926 in the genre history of *The Land of Mist* and in the history of the British Empire becomes apparent when Lord Roxton has to insert an advertisement in a newspaper to find new quests. The call to adventure in the quest structure now seems to be so low that it can hardly be heard. He has exhausted the "sporting adventures of this terrestrial globe", and is "seeking fresh worlds to conquer" (Doyle, 1995, p. 319); but these so-called fresh worlds are even more gloomy than those in *The Poison Belt* as Roxton specifies them as a haunted house, thus in this reformulation of the Victorian quest romance domestication is combined with morbidity. The domestication of the quest is stressed when its goal, the so-called scientific proof of an afterlife is discovered right in the intimate sphere, as it is the relationship between a husband and wife that provides the sought for evidence, and in this way the structure home – out – home again has imploded: The otherworld is at home, and the geographical quest has become psychic research, or a "psychic quest" as it is called in the novel (Doyle 1995, p. 341). The aim of this quest is verification of an afterlife, and the helpers and guides of the traditional quest narrative have now become spiritualist mediums, who open the way into the realm of the dead for further investigation, and the séance in private-living-rooms the threshold of adventure. Has the quest formula then become a scientific quest? And answer could be that the word "science" together with "scientific" has 52 instances in the novel, but there are numerous other indications that Doyle's motivation for writing this new Challenger novel is a wish to reconcile positivist science with the existence of the supernatural or paranormal of the spirit world.

The narrative form is in itself a sign that it has been necessary to reformulate the quest genre. The narrator of the other Challenger novels has primarily been an omniscient, impersonal one and sometimes the journalist Edward Malone, but the narrator of *The Land of Mist* becomes more and more an intrusive one, and this to the extent that not only the quest formula, but also its fictional status are dismantled. In his attempt to verify spiritualism the voice of the narrator is taken over by Doyle himself. He asks the reader rhetorical questions, and notes and lengthy appendices are added to

the novel. These appendices may contain passages such as: "The scenes in this chapter are drawn either very closely from personal experience or from the reports of careful and trustworthy experimenters." (Doyle, 1995, p. 416) or "The account of Pithecanthropus is taken from the *Bulletin de l'Institut Métaphychique* (Doyle, 1995, p. 419). The text of the novel itself is interrupted by directions to the appendices: "For the incidents recorded in this chapter vide Appendix." (Doyle, 1995, p. 352). The comments of the intrusive narrator are part of the rhetorical pattern of the novel. Prolonged debating sections are inserted into the action of the novel, in which scepticism of spiritualism and the spiritualist movement are given words, only to be refuted again and again. Positivist science and spiritualism are fused when the term "spiritualist science" is used and experiments are described in a laboratory setting (Doyle, 1995, pp. 361-370). One of the results of these experiments is not only the verification of an afterlife, but also of the theory of evolution with echoes from *The Lost World*. The missing link "either an ape-like man or a man-like ape" is summoned during the séance. In *The History of Spiritualism* Doyle's carries the idea of physical evolution into the afterlife, when he writes that "evolution has been very slow upon the physical plane, at it is slow also on the spiritual one...we shall evolve from heaven to heaven until the destiny of the human soul is lost in a blaze of glory whither the eye of imagination may not follow." (Doyle, 1926, Vol. II, p. 110).

The Land of Mist is situated in the context of Doyle's many spiritualist works, which are not fictional. His main spiritualist oeuvre is *The History of Spiritualism* (Doyle, 1926), and some of his other spiritualist publications are: *The New Revelation* (1918), *Life After Death* (1918), *The Vital Message* (1919), *Our Reply to the Cleric* (1920), *Spiritualism and Rationalism* (1920), *The Wanderings of a Spiritualist* (1921), *Spiritualism—Some Straight Questions and Direct Answers* (1922), *The Case for Spirit Photography* (1922), *Our American Adventure* (1923), *Our Second American Adventure* (1924), *The Early Christian Church and Modern Spiritualism* (1925), *Psychic Experiences* (1925), *Pheneas Speaks* (1927), *Spiritualism* (c.1927), *What does Spiritualism Actually Teach and Stand For?* (1928), and in Doyle's autobiography he writes in its last chapter that the psychic question has come to absorb the whole energy of his life, and that he and his wife "have now travelled a good thousand miles upon our quest. We have spoken face

to face with a quarter of a million people." (Doyle, 1924/2007, pp. 342-343). In his letters Doyle writes about his many and successful public lecturing tours about spiritualism, but also about his personal experiences at séances of contacts with deceased family members, especially with his dead son Kingsley (Doyle, 2008, p. 654).

A rupture of epistemes?

The ultimate aim for Conan Doyle and the movement of spiritualism was to produce the empirical evidence of contacts with spirits. If scientific proof of this kind could be irrefutably presented to the world the cause of the spiritualist movement would obviously benefit from it, and the existence of an afterlife could be demonstrated; but also positivist science and religious belief could be reconciled and united within the same world picture. Instead of science overthrowing faith, spiritualism could in other words be regarded as an experimental science about a natural continuation of life after death, and not only as a religious belief, and the supernatural could become natural. This attitude is expressed in *The London Spiritual Magazine*:

Spiritualism is a science based solely upon facts; it is neither speculative nor fanciful. On facts and facts alone, open to the whole world through an extensive and probably unlimited system of mediumship, it builds upon a substantial psychology on the ground of strictest logical induction. Its cardinal truth, imperishably established on the experiments and experiences of millions of sane men and women, of all countries and creeds, is that of a world of spirits, and the continuity of the existence of the individual spirit through the momentary eclipse of death; as it disappears on earth reappearing in that spiritual world, and becoming an inhabitant amid the ever-augmenting population of the spiritual universe. (Wallace, 1892, p. 645)

How does one seek to explain this very often sincere, but also apparently desperate and incredibly credulous attempt to believe both in spirits, which could materialize ectoplasm and in positivist science, which rests on hypotheses that can be tested by empirical knowledge? This question can be rephrased into one of the epistemology of the period, where it seems that two systems conflicted, but also co-existed, in spiritualism. Michel Foucault's concept of epistemes is a possible way to understand this complex epistemology.

In his *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Foucault, 1969/2011) Foucault describes how the epistemology of a certain historical period is based on unconscious assumptions, beliefs and values with accompanying formational rules, systematic shaping factors and conceptual possibilities about specific fields of knowledge, e.g. the human body, the mind, the natural world or economy. Foucault calls these systems epistemes. Negatively, an episteme sets up boundaries for thoughts about a scientific subject in a period. This archaeology of knowledge includes discontinuity and rupture, as an episteme may change rapidly, or one episteme may replace another. This change fundamentally affects what is considered valid knowledge in itself, and the very content of scientific discourses changes.

Though one episteme may supplant another, this does not necessarily mean that the take-over is complete and all-embracing. There may be contemporaneity of two epistemes, and Foucault writes that "one can, on the basis of these new rules, describe and analyse phenomena of continuity, return and repetition" (Foucault, 1969/011, p. 191), and one may not imagine "that rupture is a sort of great drift that carries with it all discursive formations at once (Foucault, 1969/011, p. 193). It is the point of this article that spiritualism as an epistemological effort is an instance of double epistemes in the sense that spiritualism as it is also depicted in *The Land of Mist* both manifested a full acceptance of the positivist scientific, new, modern world and also retained the episteme of a pre-secularized world without being ready yet to let go of it. It is in this way that the apparent contradictions in the movement and in one of its fictional manifestations *The Land of Mist* can be understood and explained.

Conclusion: The best of two worlds

Spiritualism as it is described in Doyle's novel was on a quest to use the scientific world-view of a new episteme to maintain the religious or supernatural of the episteme that had already been ousted and supplanted, and thus attempting to merge the best of two worlds.

This article has described how the territorial journey of the quest narrative as used narratologically in *The Lost World* with its evolutionary scientific, epistemological discourse was transformed in both *The Poison Belt* and in *The Land of Mist*. In these two Challenger novels Conan Doyle domesticated the geographical quest, and in the latter novel he also disrupted the novel genre with an

intrusive narratorial voice and appendices that again and again stressed a scientific approach to the subject of spiritualism. The contradiction inherent in this simultaneous fictionalisation of two Foucauldian epistemes had its costs. One, as pointed out, was the break-down of the Victorian quest romance; another was the general apocalyptic and morbid atmosphere and sense of loss and pessimism of the two last Challenger novels that contrasts strongly with the sense of epistemological victory and triumph in the first Challenger novel, *The Lost World*.

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