A MATTER OF FACT

Rudyard Kipling

Analysis by Francesco De Sorbo

Short Story

Rudyard Kipling’s short story “A Matter of Fact”, first published in 1892, features the representation of a fictional submarine volcanic eruption off Cape Town. Not only is Kipling’s depiction of sea volcanism employed to build an eerie atmosphere for the narrative, but it also reflects Victorian fascination with geology and the Imperial view of colonies as uncanny environments.

Year of Publication	1892
Publication Place	Unspecified
Editor	Unspecified
Entity	Submarine Volcano
Collection	Many Inventions (1893)
Magazine	People (First publication)

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Volcanic eruption Submarine Volcano

LITERARY EVENT

Time	[1800-1900]
Location	South Africa
Coordinates	-36.879621, 14.062500
Impacted Areas	the sea near Cape Town
Emphasis Phase	Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics), Post-disaster (consequences)
Base/Complex	South Atlantic Ocean
Volcanic Risk Ref.	Referenced
Typology	Gases, Lapilli, Emission Of Pumice Stones

Volcano/Eruption Typology	Submarine
Ecological Impacts	Landscape Changes, Destruction Of Animal Species, Atmospheric Changes

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	Frithiof, The Dane
Gender	Male
Native Place	Norther Europe
Nationality	Swedish
Reactions	Anxiety, Apprehension, Unease, Discomfort

Name	The Captain
Gender	Male
Reactions	Unease

Name	The Narrator
Gender	Male
Native Place	England
Nationality	British
Reactions	Unawareness

Reactions

Name	Frithiof, The Dane
Gender	Male
Native Place	Northern Europe
Nationality	Swedish
Reactions	Prayer, Cowardice, Fear, Panic

Name	The Captain
Gender	Male
Reactions	Order, Doubt, Fascination

Name	The Narrator
Gender	Male
Native Place	England
Nationality	British

Reactions	Astonishment, Trauma, Scepticism

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	Humans
Reactions	Distress, Unawareness

Affects/Reactions

Name	Humans
Reactions	Immobility, Passiveness, Despair

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords	“Warm Water” (Kipling 165) “Warm Night” (165) “Shouted” (167) “Black Water” (167) “Submarine Volcano” (171), “Ooze” (170), “Gray” (174), “Fog” (168), “Poisonous” (170)
Metaphors	“cold spell” (Kipling 168)
Similes	“one-half of the sea seemed to shoulder itself above the other half, and came on in the shape of a hill” (Kipling 167)
Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	Locus Horridus, Death, Violation Of Laws Of Nature, Cruel Nature, Mythical Creatures, Supernatural

“STRICKEN TO DEATH BY A SUBMARINE VOLCANO”: UNDERSEA VOLCANISM AND SUPERNATURAL ENCOUNTERS IN RUDYARD KIPLING’S *A MATTER OF FACT*

Rudyard Kipling’s short story “A Matter of Fact”, first published in January 1892 in the magazine *People*, and republished the following year in the collection *Many Inventions*, features the representation of a fictional submarine volcanic eruption. In this work, Kipling tells the story of a group of journalists that witness the eruption of a volcano while sailing near Cape Town.

Considering the linguistic choices and the symbolic constructs used to represent the dynamics of underwater eruptions, it is possible to highlight how Kipling focused on the macroscopic effects of sea volcanism to build an eerie setting for his tale. From a cultural perspective, his thematic and stylistic choices reflected Victorian culture’s fascination with geology.

From a postcolonial angle, his portrayal of volcanic events shows how English writers often used colonial environments as settings for exploring ‘radical otherness’ in the imperial era.

Kipling’s life and writing was marked by travelling and exploration. Born in Bombay in 1865 and awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1907, Kipling was one of the most iconic writers of the Colonial Period. Through his immense literary production, featuring novels, poems and several collections of short stories, Kipling was able to represent the complex nexus of cultural encounters brought together by the routes of the Empire. Among his most celebrated works are: *The Jungle Book* (1894), *The Second Jungle Book* (1895) and *Kim* (1901), all of which are set in the British Raj. The (cultural) landscape of South Asia is not the only presence in his works, as Kipling began his career as a reporter, travelling across India and the US, and also lived in Canada, Japan and Britain. All his life experiences are somehow reflected in his literary production. Indeed, Kipling’s immense *ouvre* expresses his vast curiosity towards exotic, fascinating realities, unknown as much as uncanny (Baiesi and Gebbia 430-31).

Kipling’s short stories have often been read through the lens of the so-called *Imperial Gothic* mode. This term refers to adventure stories with Gothic elements which combine “seemingly scientific, progressive, often Darwinian ideology of imperialism with an antithetical interest in the occult” (Brantlinger 227) and are usually set in the most isolated parts of the world. These settings are also characterised by wild and immense natural spaces or shapeless landscapes, where white European characters are often led to confront supernatural or mysterious beings/events. Driven by their curiosity for other worlds, Kipling’s characters must confront their fear of *going-native* and be assimilated into the indigenous culture. On a metaphorical level, these tales are often read as a figurative representation of the encounter between the two civilisations, i.e. those of the colonisers and the colonised. As a result, Imperial Gothic narratives often thematise this clash of cultures in alien environments designing a space in which the foreign invaders recognise their helplessness and their illusion of being in control of the colonised world (Albertazzi 38-39).

This fascination with uncanny realities and the realisation of human faltering control on natural forces is something pertaining not only to *Imperial Gothic ‘s* themes, but also to the disciplinary field of geology itself. Quite interestingly, both *Imperial Gothic* narratives and geological history became very popular genres during the Victorian period.

Geology and volcanology underwent significant development during this time and gained widespread interest. On the one hand, this was possible thanks to the groundwork of scientists such as Charles Lyell and Roderick Murchison, who contributed to renew the understanding of geological process within the Earth's crust. On the other hand, the long 19th century witnessed two spectacular yet catastrophic eruptions, which sparked interest in volcanoes, namely those of Mount Tambora in 1815 and of Krakatoa in 1883. These eruptions not only captivated scientific attention but also demonstrated the far-reaching consequences of volcanic activity, with Tambora's eruption causing global climate anomalies that led to crop failures and famine across multiple continents, as the eruption “led to the ‘year without a summer’ of 1816” (Pyle 22). Following a similar pattern, Krakatoa’s eruption “killed tens of thousands of people along the coasts of Java and Sumatra” (22) and its emissions disrupted weather patterns and contributed to economic instability in various regions. In particular, the eruption of Krakatoa had a great impact on public opinion as its early phases were photographed, redesigned and coloured, and finally published in a Royal Society report. Events like the Krakatoa's eruption demonstrated how natural phenomena in distant places could impact people's lives across the globe. For example, "the Krakatoa eruption became celebrated in part because this was the first such catastrophe that played out in the news many thousands of kilometres away; and its effects — sea waves and atmospheric disturbances — were detected around the world" (22).

Geological entities characterised by unpredictable behaviours were often used to shape the eerie atmosphere of Colonial literary settings, and emphasize the mysterious and potentially threatening nature of non-European territories.

Accordingly, the storyworld in a “A Matter of Fact” is constructed through an interplay between realistic and supernatural elements. This alternation is present since the beginning of the text. Similarly to many of Kipling’s stories, the narration is preceded by a short poem, foreshadowing the

apparition of “the blind white snake and his bride / Who, drowsing, nose the long-lost ships / Let down through darkness to their lips” (Kipling “The Palms”, lines 14-16, 163). The beginning of the story features the representation of a realist setting, with the boat *Rathmines* sailing from Cape Town to Southampton. Despite the apparent ordinariness of this voyage, the placid atmosphere of an ideal cruise, in which “three ordinary men would have quarrelled through sheer boredom” (164), is suddenly interrupted by the helmsman’s remark that something strange is happening to the ocean. Indeed, ‘Firthiof, the Dane’ notices that “there is a feel in the water” (166), as if the ship were running “downhills or something” (166). His anxiety and distress are shared by the narrator and crew’s uneasiness, who are yet unable to explain “the laws that govern the pulse of the big waters” (166). The degree of awareness of geological hazard is not specified in the text and the only signal of geological activity understandable for the crew is visible at surface level, with a “regular oily swell” (166) which seems to follow the Rathmines.

Kipling’s depiction of pre-eruptive phenomena – such as the oily swell – and his portrayal of the geological reality of the place lacks scientific foundations. It is true that the southern parts of the Atlantic Ocean present two submarine seamounts, respectively the Discovery Seamounts and the Walvis Ridge. However, although both these chains reveal the activity of hotspots located in the mantle under the ocean plate, it is unlikely that Kipling’s story is based on records of geological activity in this region. Indeed, despite their intermittent activity, volcanism in South-Western Atlantic Ocean floor is hardly capable of producing events with macroscopic effects visible from the surface. For instance, the depth of the Walvis Ridge is located approximately at 1,000 to 3,000 meters below the ocean surface. Consequently, the explosive seafloor activity in this region can only be observed indirectly, with the aid of technological devices such as hydrophones (Haxel and Dziak L13609).

Therefore, it is more likely that Kipling gained inspiration from other macroscopic eruptions. Those could have been subaerial explosive events or, otherwise, he could have also witnessed or heard stories about underwater eruptions during his voyages, especially across the Pacific. This would be the case of Surtseyan eruptions, which are a type of explosive volcanic event occurring when rising basaltic magma violently interacts with water. This interaction leads to rapid fragmentation of the magma, resulting in explosive eruptions characterised by the emission of ash, lapilli and steam that can occur underwater or subaerially (Verolino et al. 79).

In Kipling’s story, the volcanic presence is only perceivable through its effects on the seascape. Accordingly, after the emersion of the oily swell, another crucial signal for the eruption is a series of freak waves occurring amidst strange currents, as if “one-half of the sea seemed to shoulder itself above the other half, and came on in the shape of a hill” (Kipling 167). It is the captain who later explains how the waves must have been caused by a “volcano”, producing a “blow-up under the sea” (168). This information is not considered sound by the protagonist, who feels that the volcano “hasn’t warmed anything” and feels “bitterly cold, and cold was almost unknown in those waters” (168), which are now, inexplicably soaked with “white” and “cold fog” (168).

Being submerged, the volcanic agency is signalled by the text through the representation of pyroclastic elements ejected during the eruption and the environmental modifications at the level of the ocean and the atmosphere. All these phenomena are sensorily perceived by the crew aboard the ship and are highlighted through semantic polarities and strong sensorial connotations. The first element that plays an important role in stressing the strangeness of the post-eruption environment is heat. At the beginning of the text, the narrator describes the weather as mild, with “warm water” and “warm night” (165). These meteorological references create an initial impression of comfort and pleasantness. However, the volcano’s outburst immediately capsizes the situation, making the temperature plummeting. Although this state of cold experienced by characters after the eruption could be linked to their state of fear, the effect produced are counterintuitive and uncanny, as one would be prompted to associate volcanoes with fire and heat. Indeed, the captain is confused by these new weather conditions, observing that “our sea-thermometer [that] says the surface water is 44º, and it should be 68º at least” (169). Quite interestingly, the unexpected as well as strange temperature drop is referred to as a “cold spell” (169), highlighting the state of uneasiness experience by characters but also the uncanny agency of the volcano, apparently able to subvert characters’ commons sense. The reference to the sphere of magic, specifically witchcraft, is echoed in Frithiof’s reaction to the event, which leaves him utterly terrified. In his view, “the sea is bewitched” (170) and the geological

dynamic are imagined as a twist of the natural order of things, as if the sea had been "turned upside down" and characters had found themselves "walking along the bottom" (170).

This kind of disorientation also affects the level of sight and, to some extent, touch and smell. While volcanoes have been often framed under "familiar analogy of fire (Pyle 29), and, therefore, with shades of red, the colours for the scene of the sea voyage during the eruption are much darker and duller. In addition, colours diverge as well from the blue typically used to describe water. The pyroclastic materials have polluted the now "oily sea" (Kipling 167), whose "black water" (167) and "silver-gray wave[s]" (170) contains "gray ooze" (p. 173) and "gray slime" (174). Quite interestingly, Kipling uses uncommon lexical items to depict water. Far from being pure and pristine, the ocean after the eruptions contains enough pyroclastic residue, which changes water's state to become 'slimy' and 'slushy'. The unpleasantness evoked by this chromatic spectrum is further stressed through olfactory details, since the crew feels that "the air smelled wet and muddy, like that of an emptied aquarium" (168).

The similitude employed to refer to the atmosphere after the eruption as an 'empty aquarium' is significant as it activates an imagery related to the semantic field of death, which correlates with a collective feeling of dread:

> The dead and most untouched deep water of the sea had been heaved to the top by the submarine volcano – the chill still water that kills all life and smells of desolation and emptiness. We did not need either the blinding fog or that indescribable smell of musk to make us unhappy – we were shivering with cold and wretchedness where we stood. (171)

The oceanscape after the submarine explosion is connoted as a *locus horridus*. The violence of volcano not only has been capable of *lifting* "the bottom of the sea […] a few feet somewhere or other" (169), but it has also let emerge the deepest water of the ocean. Similarly to the volcano, the deepest water, which smells of 'desolation' and 'emptiness', can also "kill". These verbs related to harm, and, therefore, to potential hazard, are then functional to highlight characters' sense of abandonment, hopelessness and their fear of death, to become part of this "sea, gray with mud, […] and empty of all life" (173). Nonetheless, in its tragical condition, the crew experiences a supernatural encounter. From the "fathomless deeps of the sea" (170), two sea serpents emerge. The first has risen from a bubble formed in the ocean which:

> became like the pot of ointment that the Bible speaks of. From that wideringed trouble a Thing came up–a gray and red Thing with a neck– a Thing that bellowed and writhed in pain. […] we could see that the thing on the water was blind and in pain. Something had gashed and cut the great sides cruelly and the blood was spurting out. The gray ooze of the undermost sea lay in the monstrous wrinkles of the back, and poured away in sluices. The blind white head flung back and battered the wounds, and the body in its torment rose clear of the red and gray waves till we saw a pair of quivering shoulders streaked with weed and rough with shells, but as white in the clear spaces as the hairless, maneless, blind, toothless head (173).

Thanks to the biblical reference, this creature, the 'Thing', can be associated with mythical sea serpents such as the leviathan. The causes of its pain and subsequent death are reconducted to the volcanic agency. Initially, the crew sees that something has 'gushed' and 'cut' the beast, while later they notice how the serpent's wrinkles are soaked with 'the gray ooze', which 'pours in sluices'. This picture potentially suggest that the creature might have been hit by the emission of pyroclastic material and that his 'writhe' could be caused by burns. Furthermore, the idea of the impact with volcanic emissions is also sustained by the narrator's remarks and how he distinguished the two serpents. Whereas the dying creature is "in its death-throe" (174), the healthy exemplar is

“untouched” (173), i.e. not having been involved in the ‘blow-up’. This outburst has been so destructive to cause the death of a supernatural, terrifying beast, who “would have lived till the Judgment Day” (174) had it not been “stricken to death by a submarine volcano (180), as the protagonist comments while thinking about the publication of a story from his encounter at the end of Kipling’s tale.

In conclusion, Kipling situates his story in the southern Atlantic Ocean and craft two imaginative events—the submarine eruption and the encounter with leviathans— that unsettle both the characters and the readers’ perceptions of space and environment in extra-European territories. The story’s final twist hinges on the overwhelming force of the volcanic eruption, proving to be even more powerful than the supernatural creatures which abound in *Imperial Gothic* tales. This narrative turn suggests a potentially shift toward a more realist understanding of geological forces, portraying them as tangible and formidable sources of danger.

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