

Racial Manifestations in Poe's *Pym*

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Fear is the name of the game for Edgar Allan Poe in his novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838). The Gothic writer's arsenal is brimming with terrors such as cannibalism, claustrophobia, and starvation. Poe's protagonist, Pym, encounters all these awful maladies after stowing away on a whaling ship called the *Grampus*. Chaos unfolds as the crew mutinies, and Pym and his traveling companions are shipwrecked until they are scooped up by a British schooner and travel as far south as south goes, to the island of Tsalal. The crew schemes to launch a colonial outpost on the island, but the hyperbolically "jet black" inhabitants violently outwit them (Poe 528). While some scholars, most notably Teresa A. Goddu, claim that Poe strives to "collapse the categories of black and white," ultimately revealing race to be an imagined categorization, Poe's own infinite reiterations of the opposition between black and white demonstrate that such implications of racial irrelevancy within the text are unintentional (Goddu 89). The predominant horror of the narrative, more than the idea that race is a social construct, is the fear that whites could lose the upper hand. Poe reaps this tremendous antebellum dread through Pym's obsession with black and white, which are emblems of racial blackness and whiteness.

One such example of Pym's obsession can be found in his meticulous descriptions of the albatross and the penguins that

inhabit the Isle of Desolation. In describing the rookery, Pym regales the reader with a community populated by various species of bird. The predominant species is the penguin, which is significant because of its grayscale coloring. What's interesting, however, is how the white albatross elevates its nest above the shallows of its penguin compatriots. The albatross are literally above the other birds, even if they are similar in number. As an individual scene, these birds don't appear to hold any racialized meaning. However, in the larger context of the novel, the albatross and the penguins take on new significance. The spatial imagery of this scene drives home the idea that Caucasian and African are distinct categories and that white is a superior race. Having asserted this binary, Poe then topples the social hierarchy by describing how the swarming albatross are "mingled with the smaller tribes," how the flock is conglomerated with a variety of oceanic fowls (Poe 515). Even when the albatross leave the penguins behind, they are joined in flight by other species of colorful birds. By integrating color into a world of white, Poe drills into that wellspring of fear that the boundaries of whiteness can be blurred and that whiteness itself can be overthrown.

The fact that this social merging of color occurs in the natural world should not be overlooked. Poe is writing in an age of slavery. The nation was in an uproar over the issue of abolition. While abolitionists rallied on one side of the fence, slavery apologists contended that slavery was divinely appointed and that the institution was "natural" (McDuffie 1). In an 1835 speech to the state legislature, South Carolina governor George McDuffie articulated that African descendants were destined to servitude because of their "intellectual inferiority and natural improvidence." Poe pulls from the animal kingdom (as he does in a number of his works) to demonstrate that this hierarchy of white over black is perfectly natural even as he subsequently stages the dissolution of the

hierarchy as equally natural. The loss of white power, as demonstrated in the albatross and their temporary elevation, would mortify Poe's target antebellum audience. Regardless of whether or not Poe's audience recognized this scene as an equivalent of racial mixing, implying the loss of white ascendancy, the intermingling of the albatross with various other birds successfully boreholes into the era's racial fears and lends itself to the novel's Gothic effects.

There are several other instances where Poe utilizes the natural world to inspire horror in his readers, but he does not simply tap into the terrors of fusion. Throughout the book, blackness overcomes whiteness, and the stability of white power is metaphorically overturned by forces of color. One such natural example can be found in Pym's loyal friend Augustus. Though surviving a mutiny and shipwreck, Augustus sustains wounds that surrender to putrefaction. Pym describes the corporeal disintegration as Augustus' wounds fester, making sure to point out that Augustus' arm "was completely black from the wrist to the shoulder" (Poe 505). Here the novel maps onto the human body the horror of whiteness infected and overpowered by blackness. Eventually Augustus succumbs to his injuries and is thrown to the sharks in the sea, but not before instilling within the reader a riveting fright of whiteness overtaken and previewing Poe's upcoming terrors.

Under normal circumstances, readers might not immediately associate bodily disintegration as a symbol of whites' racial fears. However, Pym's relentless remarking of the black and white around him conditions readers to recognize the dichotomy of race within even the most mundane of details. Putrefaction serves not only as a classic Gothic element within his narrative, but as a grotesque parallel of racial possibility. Because death as well as decomposition

is an inevitability, Poe furthers the fear of racial conglomeration by associating it with the unavoidable expiration of life. Poe casts the fall of white power as not only natural, but also inescapable.

A particularly visceral demonstration of the horrors of decomposition, and by extension the corruption of whiteness, can be found aboard the Dutch brig. The ship's initial appearance inspires hope and elation in Pym and his fellow castaways. This impression is a cruel deception, however, as the ship proves to be teeming with "twenty-five or thirty human bodies...scattered about...in the last and most loathsome state of putrefaction" (Poe 490). Having fallen victim to an unnamed virus, these disgusting, discolored Dutch corpses sour the hope that had rooted in the survivors' hearts. Again we see Poe establish the opposition of black and white. The black brig, seemingly a beacon of salvation, reveals itself to be a harbinger of despair. What's more, the passengers appear to have succumbed to the virus rapidly, and the accompanying decay shows just how quickly and completely the Caucasian race can be overpowered. Contrasting the ship and its passengers are the countenances of the castaways. Their faces whiten at the stench of decay, draining to a hue described as "paler than marble" (490). The Dutch flesh, corroded in decay, polarizes the pallor of the surviving minority. In the face of such rampant black power, the little remaining white becomes whiter still, further emphasizing the contrast. With this singular episode of the Dutch brig, Poe not only reiterates antebellum dread of racial upheaval, but prompts the audience to question the role of fear within the social hierarchy of white over black.

Compounding the fear of toppled white supremacy is Dirk Peters, Pym's faithful partner in tragedy. Peters is a hybrid of American Indian and white descent, who, as Jochen Achilles puts it,

“occup[ies] a middle-ground between...white civilization, and indigenous cultures – between beasts, whites, blacks, and Indians” (263). While Peters does not fall under the label of African descendant, he identifies in Pym’s mind as a man of color, reflecting a vein of antebellum thought evident in the writings of Pequot author William Apess, which classifies African descendants and American Indians together as people of color. Pym’s relationship with Peters metamorphoses over the course of the novel and further sharpens the edge of fear in the narrative. Upon their initial encounter, Pym has no qualms about describing Dirk’s horrific appearance: a “deformed...demon,” bearing a fierce grin and a short but monstrously muscular body (Poe 459). This “brutalization” of Dirk’s character may have been maintained in Pym’s mind indefinitely were it not for the narrator’s incessant reliance on him (Dayan 244). By the end of the narrative, however, Peters has transformed in the eyes of Pym, and is less the grotesque infidel Pym originally describes than a capable man loyal to his compatriots. He is certainly not, as Ki Yoon Jang describes him, a “tamed wild dog,” a mindless animal obeying the commands of a master (Jang 365). Instead, Peters proves not only to possess greater physical capability, but mental sturdiness as well. It is often Peters who is the more reasonable of the survivors, such as when he deduces a method of retrieving rations from the belly of their submerged ship or when he saves Pym on the island of Tsalal (Poe 487). This elevation of a man of color furthers the novel’s narrative arch, again showing how color can surpass whiteness.

Poe drives home this idea of color usurping whiteness in the crew’s struggle with the polar bear off the coast of Bennet’s Islet, and further incorporates Peters into the mix. The beast is “perfectly white,” a behemoth creature that represents the Caucasian race (Poe 252). Though the weather is calm, the bear is not. After taking a few

rounds from the crew's rifles (several in the head, no less), the animal boards Pym's raft and wastes no time exacting its vengeance. It is Peters who successfully fells the beast. This bear-shanking champion, a man of mixed racial ancestry, is the conqueror of the polar bear (and by metaphorical extension, white dominance). Again, Poe offers us a brutal illustration of color dominating whiteness. The fact that the brute is dispatched so quickly and efficiently furthers the fear that white supremacy can topple at any time, that although the skies are clear today, a storm may beset society tomorrow.

The greatest textual example of blackness overcoming whiteness, however, is found on the island of Tsalal. The locals are, as Pym describes, "jet black" in complexion (Poe 528). Everything about them is black, from their hair to their garments. Even their spears are of a dark wood. Upon visiting their village, Pym discovers that their shanties are covered in black skins and carved from dark stone (532). Pym labels them as savages throughout his time on Tsalal, repeatedly commenting on their blackness. The white crewmen stand in direct contrast to these seemingly uncivilized islanders. They are mistrusting of the natives, as demonstrated in their careful attention to the locals' strategic positioning and taking care "to be well armed, yet without evincing any distrust" (532, 530). Ultimately, the crew masks their ulterior motives and suspicions in order to secure the island as a lucrative trade port. Again, Poe has established a hierarchy of white over black so that he may dismantle it.

The true terror comes when blackness, as hyperbolized in the brutal aborigines, outwits and overpowers the crew. The natives, after massacring the crewmen as they approach their village, board the *Jane Guy* and slaughter the remaining men before setting the brig

aflame (546). Whether or not the islanders decimate the sailors to defend their home is irrelevant. The *Jane Guy* is, as Dana Nelson describes, a vessel of “conquest” that in the end is conquered (95). To antebellum readers, the revulsion stems from the idea that the ostensibly superior white race could be overtaken (violently, I might add) by what they thought was a dimwitted and inferior race. Such an idea appalled white antebellum readers because of its frightening possibility during their time.

This episode on the island of Tsalal demonstrates the threat of racial insignificance in addition to the fear of racial upheaval. While Poe provides example after example of color differentiation in the text, Goddu claims that these serve to recognize race as a social institution and thereby dismantle the idea of racial difference. Pointing to the outrageous lengths to which the novel goes to establish distinctions between black and white, she claims that such literary “excess can actually collapse instead of create difference” between races (Goddu 89). There is certainly no denying that the Tsalal polarization situates some interesting parallels between its constituents. Both parties are shocked by the physical appearance of the other, and each group masks its true intentions. The crew of the *Jane Guy* plans to colonize the island and establish a trade outpost while the natives wish to eradicate the foreign white scourge and loot their ship. These parallels do, in fact, blur the distinctions between the two parties. However, this racial disqualifying reaction is a secondary effect of the polarization. The novel makes very clear that white is not black and vice versa. Everything on the island, from the segregated stream currents to the goblin-like animal corpse on the beach, indicates racial separation. Even the differing colors of the stone manifest how color plays a tremendous part of identity. Though the relentless opposition between black and white in the text does in a certain capacity serve, as Goddu states, to blur the color

line, Poe's intention is focused on establishing that dissimilarity so that he may terrify antebellum readers with the overthrow of one by the other.

The aforementioned stream perfectly demonstrates Poe's adherence to the racial binary he establishes. While traveling with the Tsalal natives to their encampment, the band halts to drink from a strange stream. This stream is composed of several distinct veins of color, each a different hue of purple. None of these veins mingle in the least. What's more, after experimenting with the stream water, the crew discovers that the segregation of these different shades immediately revert to their original condition after being disturbed. The different veins would even linger in a state of "perfect separation" if divided, which is quite different from water's normal fluidity (Poe 531). Initially, Pym and the crew refuse to drink from the rivulet for fear of pollution in the water. Yet this stream, with its "not colourless" nature, asserts that while various shades of race exist in the same torrent of existence, they are ultimately unable to intermingle (531). Such a blatant example of racial separation underscores Poe's adherence to the construct of race and, more specifically, the idea that –outside of hierarchical order– black and white are incapable of intermingling without violence. By emphasizing this opposition throughout the novel, Poe is able to exploit the contrast of black and white by demonstrating how the former can overpower the latter, thus capitalizing on what Maureen Corrigan calls the "ultimate scary subject in nineteenth century literature" – black power rising to undo white supremacy.

Fear of racial upheaval is the great edge of Poe's narrative knife. The fall of whiteness to blackness is the overarching terror that Poe weaponizes in *Pym*. This terror is seen throughout the novel, from the penguin nests to the burning wreckage of the

usurped Jane Guy, and it is with this terror that Poe haunts his contemporary readers. Greater than the isolation, greater even than cannibalism, this fear of racial disruption is the piercing fear in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. While this paper contextualizes Pym's Gothicism, historicizing the Gothic raises questions about subsequent readers' encounters with the novel. One may conclude that *Pym* provides an extraordinary glimpse into antebellum society and the racial tensions that haunted it but that it fails to function as a Gothic novel for modern audiences. There is no doubt that twenty-first-century encounters with the novel differ from those during the antebellum period. However, while the passing of time has perhaps eroded the horror of racial upheaval, the racialized fears staged in the novel continue to resonate with modern readers. In other words, by historicizing the novel's Gothic elements, contemporary readers are better suited to recognize the legacies of antebellum racialized systems, including slavery, that continue to shape the present. Gothic horror, while singular and historical, proves to be malleable, echoing through the centuries and reverberating within modern readers.

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