

Imagery in Literature and Its Relation to White Supremacy

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Philosophy

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While it is easy to find examples of racist portrayals that uphold ideas of whiteness as being superior to blackness in literature through the creation of stereotypical characters from historical and recent examples of literature both within and outside the United States, I believe that there is a more subtle form of this issue at work. In books and short stories written by some of the most revered American authors, who are not coincidentally white men, as the Western literary canon is largely authored by white males, images of whiteness are often presented against blackness in ways that allow for the readers of the works to develop associations that may not be obvious upon first examining the text, particularly because the way in which these associations are created is common across multiple works (Morrison 33). In this paper, I argue that one of the ways in which whiteness is constructed as superior to blackness is through the use of images of whiteness in contrast to what author Toni Morrison refers to as 'Africanist presences' (33) and how the way in which these things are defined, or in some cases undefined, position whiteness as superior to blackness.

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Images of whiteness, which can include a variety of things including but not limited to snow, cliffs, or simply white fog, are often found in writing by American white males at the end of a narrative, and in contrast to what Morrison refers to as an 'Africanist presence.' Morrison defines this 'Africanist presence' as including both the presence of black characters within the text or the actual continent of Africa (33). One example of this can be found in Edgar Allen Poe's, *Narrative of A. Gordon Pym*, or, as Morrison refers to it, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (31). While the story does have an end note addressing the sudden death of the narrator, the narrative itself ends with an entry from Pym's journal on the last days of a sailing journey across the world, ending in the Antarctic Ocean (Poe 769). The text refers to a darkness which is "relieved only by the glare of the water thrown back from the white curtain before us," and describes, "many gigantic. . .white birds," flying from the white veil (769). The appearance of these white birds comes with the discovery that the one African on the trip has died suddenly (769). The text ends with the travelers and their boat being flung into a chasm and approached by a shrouded figure with skin, "of the perfect whiteness of the snow." This short novel contains both an image of whiteness through the white veil, the birds, and the shrouded figure, operating in the presence of blackness, in this case, the one African on the trip who perishes just as the images of whiteness are making themselves known. This trend is also apparent in the short story "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" by Ernest Hemingway. In this story, the main character, Harry, dies due to a mishap on a hunting trip in Africa. The last thing Harry sees before his death is the top of Mount Kilimanjaro which he describes as being, "great, high, and unbelievably white in the sun. . ." Harry's death is brought about by gangrene, but only because of the failings of the African guides that were hired to lead the safari Harry is on, being unable to fix the car to get Harry to a doctor in time to save his life

(Hemingway 28). As in *Narrative of A. Gordon Pym*, "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" possesses white imagery that is presented in contrast both to Africans and the continent of Africa itself. These are just a few of the many examples of images of whiteness set in contrast to Africanist presences that can be found in the works of white American male authors. In her book *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison also makes reference to work by William Faulkner, William Styron, and Saul Bellow as containing these images of whiteness in contrast to Africanist presences, exhibiting the widespread nature of these occurrences in the works of famous, white, male authors.

The Africanist presences in these works come to represent different things not only across the different works, leaving one with associations of blackness that are not always good but not always bad, either. In *Narrative of A. Gordon Pym*, the narrator engages in cannibalism not after encountering "black savages" as would be expected per the stereotypical views held of black people in the time in which the novel was written but before encountering black people (Poe 719), assigning to the white characters the characteristic of 'savage.' The black characters that are later encountered provide the crew with fresh provisions for the trip that they were in desperate need of, assigning them the label of saviors (748). In this way, traditional ideas of whiteness and blackness could be considered to be reversed, what with the white characters taking on a traditionally 'black' characteristic, savage, and the black characters taken on a traditionally 'white' characteristic, savior. In "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," while the African guides are helpless to save Harry from dying (Hemingway 6), Harry says that he was at his happiest in Africa. While not the full reversal that was exhibited with Poe's work, these two different characterizations leave the reader with associations of blackness as being both helpless and comforting, though the comfort Harry finds within Africa is in its

lack of luxury, something that brings with it its own stereotypical assumptions that could be considered problematic (11).

In the cases described above, blackness is easily defined, described by Morrison as being both, “evil *and* protective, rebellious *and* forgiving, fearful *and* desirable—all of the self-contradictory features of the self,” (Morrison 59). Morrison sees the use of the Africanist presence as being blank, “silenced, black bodies” (38) on which artists, “transferred internal conflicts.” This is most clearly demonstrated within “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” in which the African characters within the text are almost literally silent, only speaking when spoken to and only engaging in short conversations, often answering yes-or-no questions (Hemingway 5). When examining the images of whiteness that accompany these Africanist presences, one finds that it is much harder to come to conclusive definitions about what these images represent, unlike with the images of blackness that the text presents. Poe uses the words, “overwhelmed,” and “limitless,” to describe the white veil in his text (Poe 769). The white top of Kilimanjaro as described by Hemingway is “great” and “unbelievable” and described only as white, despite the title itself referring to the ‘snow’ of Kilimanjaro, a much more concrete term (Hemingway 27). Morrison writes that in literature such as this, “Whiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable,” (Morrison 59). Morrison identifies whiteness as existing within American literature as being “mute” and “meaningless” (Morrison 59) whereas blackness is definable. While Morrison leaves her analysis here, simply calling attention to the way in which whiteness and blackness are defined and undefined within the text, I would argue that this very lack of definition for whiteness, its seemingly meaningless quality as described by the revered white male authors of America, positions whiteness as superior to the easily definable blackness encountered in conjunction with images of whiteness in their works of literature.

Worth noting about these two texts in particular is that these images of whiteness are presented with the idea of moving on to the afterlife, in the case of "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" this whiteness being the last thing Harry is described as seeing before the reader discovers he is dead (Hemingway 27) and in *Narrative of A. Gordon Pym* this whiteness is also the last image afforded to the reader before it is discovered that the narrator has died (Poe 769). Because of this, the question could be raised that this whiteness is not an association with the undefinable and the superior, but instead an association with the afterlife. After all, films that fade to white are thought to mean that the main character has died (Fade to White) and many near death experiences are accompanied by, "the unimaginably whitest light," (Hausheer 2, Nelson 1). With this in mind, it could be possible to say that Morrison was reading too much into these images of whiteness that appear alongside death, seeing whiteness as 'undefinable' when instead this whiteness is simply representative of its association with death and the afterlife, an idea prevalent throughout our cultural imagination. While this may be true, I do not think that any association of whiteness with death negates my claim that the images of whiteness presented in the works I have identified work to position whiteness as superior through their undefinability. As philosopher Berit Brogaard has stated, ". . .positing a perceptual norm has unwarranted consequences," (Brogaard, 133). Although Brogaard is discussing the concept of whiteness in terms of color theory and its relation to white purity, her conceptual frame suits my understanding that when one views a link between whiteness and death as a perceptual norm, the unwarranted consequence is that this very association with death furthers the superiority of whiteness. Morrison points out that these images of whiteness are often left undefined (Morrison 59) and connecting whiteness with death only furthers this idea. Death and the afterlife are the ultimate unknowable, things that are undefined and will likely

continue to be undefined for centuries to come. By linking whiteness with such an unknowable, inevitable force as death and presenting it as some sort of 'norm' as exhibited through the examples found in literature like the ones I have identified, it is impossible not to come to associate whiteness with superiority because it is unable to be known.

Upon first reading, the choice by Hemingway and Poe to end their narratives with whiteness appears to make sense, because in addition to ending a narrative these images of whiteness coincide with the ending of a life. But when one looks to the "unwarranted consequences" (Brogaard 133) of such a choice, considering how whiteness comes to be associated with the ultimate unknowable, it is possible to see that the undefinable nature of these images of whiteness positions whiteness as superior. Though the definitions of blackness within these texts are contradictory and not always negative in nature, the definitions themselves reduce blackness to something that is less than whiteness because it is easily understood and easily identifiable. Whiteness, on the other hand, is given otherworldly status in its lack of definition, whether this lack of definition be taken at face value or expanded to include the undefinable nature of death itself, positioning it as being superior to blackness. I had hoped to find a link between whiteness being associated with transcendence, in these cases, death, and religion, but discovered that this is under-theorized. I believe that this under-theorization of the connection between white symbolism and transcendence helps to further the unknowable nature of whiteness. However, research into the study of white symbolism in literature and art is lacking. In future work, I plan to pursue this connection further.

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