Racial and Cultural Anxieties in Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*

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American author Edgar Allan Poe’s dark, cryptic, and often morbid works have captured the attention of literary critics and engaged the world in scholarly conversation and critical analysis. Among such works is Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, a text that recounts Pym’s horror-filled experience with mutinous and murderous uprisings on the Grampus, a devastating shipwreck that results in a ravenous act of cannibalism, and ultimately, the unfortunate landing on the southern island of Tsalal. It is on this island, which is symbolically black in entirety, where the Gothic and travel narrative plots begin to fuse with the deeper concepts of racial and cultural concerns of the 1800s. A novel that examines issues of race and racial divisions, *Pym* is riddled with racial and cultural polarities, highlighting the tensions between the two distinct regions of antebellum North and South United States. In fact, based on a world where North and South, white and black, and civilized and savage tragically collide, it is hard to escape the continual presence of racial conflict on the southern island of Tsalal. Moreover, through Pym’s emphasis on documenting Tsalal’s peculiar physical nature, along with the racial and cultural polarities between the white, northern men and the black, southern natives, Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* suggests that man has a natural desire for cultural and racial division. Furthermore, through the desire for racial division and the brutal conflicts that ensue between Pym’s crew and the natives, Poe highlights the South’s cultural anxieties about slave uprisings in the mid-19th-century.

Influenced by both Gothic fiction and travel narrative, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* follows Pym, a resident of Nantucket, and his desire for adventure at sea. Snuck on board the Grampus by his close friend Augustus, Pym hides in the shadows below the boat’s deck where he faces starvation, thirst, decay, and horror. Eventually resurfacing on deck, Pym takes part in helping Augustus and Dirk Peters, a “hybrid” native, overthrow the mutinous uprising that has occurred during Pym’s prolonged confinement. After successfully regaining command of the ship, Pym, Augustus, Peters, and Parker, a merciful activist in the uprising, soon fall victim to a storm that leaves the Grampus in floating pieces. While floating for weeks on fragments of the vessel, hopeless and hungry, the men resort to cannibalism, a great trial for Pym. After Parker is viciously murdered and Augustus has died from severe wounds and exhaustion, Pym and Peters are soon discovered by Captain Guy and the Jane Guy of Liverpool. During the crew’s extensive exploration of the uncharted South, they come across the peculiar island of Tsalal, a place dominated by black and void of white. Struck by the foreign characteristics of the island and the seemingly friendly, curious natives, the crew establishes trade and northern culture. As the novel progresses, however, the men grow wary of the subtle increase of the number of natives, an increase that leads to the gruesome and horror-filled attacks on the white northern men. Through attempts to bury the men alive, explode the *Jane Guy*, and eliminate any evidence of white culture, the “savages” are swept into a rage of barbaric fury. In a desperate attempt to flee Tsalal, Pym, Peters, and their native captive steal a canoe and begin their trek north, where blackness fades into the distance and whiteness enters on the horizon. After the strange, racially-influenced death of Nu-Nu, Pym and Peters witness an ambiguous figure at the conclusion of the novel, as they sail off to their suggested deaths.

**Genres in Pym**

Thomas Willis White’s 1834 establishment of *The Southern Literary Messenger* provided Poe the much-needed economic opportunity to publish his work, as well as exposure to popular, influential, 19th-century literary genres. With the establishment of his magazine, White hoped “to stimulate the pride and genius of the south, and awaken from its long slumber the literary exertion of this portion of our country” (100). Soon after the magazine’s release, however, White, self-educated and feeling “inadequate to making editorial decisions that involved literary judgments,” felt overwhelmed and required help (100). In correspondence with Poe in early 1835, White invited Poe to write for the magazine. Seeing the opportunity to support himself and his wife, Virginia, Poe quickly accepted. In his biography on Poe, *Edgar A Poe: Mournful and Never-Ending Remembrance*, Kenneth Silverman explains:

> Nothing in Poe’s literary expertise entitled him to speak so confidently about the business of magazine publishing. But his air of expertise was well founded on a canny understanding of what interested the growing republic. And much of his understanding, in turn, came from his eager effort to find an audience for his own work. (101)

Though not an experienced editor by any means, Poe understood the importance of appealing to his audience through popular genres, and recognized that by doing so, his works...
might earn him an income. With this understanding, Poe quickly embraced his reading public’s interest in the Gothic genre, evidenced as Gothic elements began to make dominant appearances in Poe’s work. Drawing upon the uncanny, horror, the supernatural, and other Gothic components in Blackwood’s magazines, Poe’s work emphasized the fear of:

Enclosure and premature burial, animated portraits and tapestries, putrescence and physical decay; the depiction of garishly lit dwellings, particularly mansions and castles, as enclosing a nightmarish domain of the fantastic and irrational; the use of mirrors, interior decor, and external landscape to reflect psychological states. (Silverman 112)

In fact, many of these components exist in Poe’s Pym, such as Pym’s forced enclosure and premature burial, along with the foreign landscape of Tsalal that reflects cultural anxieties of the 1800s. However, Silverman importantly points out that Poe’s understanding of Gothic fiction was not simply limited to the above mentioned ideas. Silverman elaborates that Poe not only imitated popular Gothic tales, but also “enriched [Gothic tales]” texture, managing to preserve the narrative drive of some central action while embroidering the whole with philosophical speculation and lore that deepen the mood of a dire awe, and with sense details that lend the improbable events a feeling of reality” (112-113). Silverman asserts that the Gothic events that occur in Poe’s writings often touch upon issues of reality. As I will shortly discuss, Poe’s Gothic elements portray “philosophical speculation” and “improbable events [that elicit] a feeling of reality,” and draw upon 19th-century cultural anxieties of slave revolts (113). By using gothic horror to emphasize such fears, Poe not only captures the reading public’s attention by creating a novel that embodies their interest in Gothic fiction, but also verifies and accurately captures a culture’s fear.

Much like the prominence of the Gothic in Poe’s work, the travel narrative genre, too, played an important role in the writing of Pym. With society’s increasing interest in the exploration and expansion of America, the reading public’s interest also grew. In her critical exploration of race in American literature, Dana D. Nelson, author of The World in Black and White, explains, “Between 1800 and 1850 America witnessed a simultaneous surge in scientific professionalization and expansionist fervor which cumulatively resulted in the Anglo-American theory of Manifest Destiny” (92). She continues, “Pym’s fictional adventure is situated squarely in this expansionist, Anglo-Saxon ideological context” (93). As Nelson suggests, the 19th century was a period of exploration and scientific explosion. The growing emphasis on Manifest Destiny, the widely held belief that Americans were destined to expand throughout the continent, sparked an interest for the reading public to learn more about American expansion. Consumed by the thought of discovery, readers longed to hear the accounts of foreign and adventurous travels, a demand that contributed to the travel narrative’s canonization as a 19th-century popular genre, as well as the travel narrative’s significant influence in Pym.

A fictional story that documents not only Pym’s secret confinement, experience as a hostage, and cannibalism-inducing shipwreck at sea, Pym also documents the Jane Guy’s southward exploration of wildlife, vegetation, and weather on the multiple islands of Tristan d’Acunha, Kerguelen, Marion, and Tsalal. In the preface of Arthur Gordon Pym, Poe records his encounter with a group of “several gentlemen in Richmond, VA., who felt deep interest in all matters relating to the regions I had visited, and who were constantly urging it upon me, as a duty, to give my narrative to the public” (432). The exploration-promoting men who confront Pym desire the public announcement of his experience and discovery. Interestingly, Pym’s society seems to parallel Poe’s reading public, a society that places value on the documentation of exploration and expansion. Although Poe draws upon the Gothic and travel narrative, Arthur Gordon Pym can be interpreted as a text that reflects 19th-century America’s views on race, an interpretation that will be explored throughout this essay. With this interpretation, it is important to note that Pym is a work of fiction, and therefore, does not necessarily represent Poe’s personal views on race. However, this is not to say that critics and scholars have dismissed this idea. In his critical text “Antebellum Slavery and Modern Criticism,” John Carlos Rowe argues that Poe was an avid proslavery Southerner and that such racial views are reflected in Pym. Contrarily, Terence Whalen’s “Average Racism” explores the scholarly debate that Pym emphasizes the “insidious and terrifying” realities of slavery and race relations (925). While both scholars may provide compelling evidence to support their assertions, one cannot necessarily determine Poe’s personal beliefs from his fiction.

**Tsalal’s Peculiar Nature**

As a text greatly influenced by the travel narrative, Pym provides detailed and vivid descriptions of the unique and odd characteristics of Tsalal, particularly documenting the strange phenomena of the island’s natural elements. Soon after landing on the island, Pym is thrust into a peculiar and foreign environment, different “essentially from any hitherto visited by civilized men” (530). Pym records the island’s unique vegetation, explaining, “The trees resembled no growth of either the torrid, the temperate, or the northern frigid zones, and were altogether unlike those of the lower southern latitudes we had...
already traversed” (531). The overwhelmingly foreign landscape of Tsalal is unlike anything Pym and the crew have previously encountered during their exploration. As Pym delves further into the wilderness, he comes across a stream, noting that the water “was not colourless…the whole mass of liquid was made up of a number of distinct veins, each of a distinct hue; that these veins did not commingle; and that their cohesion was perfect in regard to their own particles among themselves, and imperfect in regard to neighboring veins” (531). The Tsalalian water and its strange composition seem peculiar to the Northern men, to say the least. The water, composed of varying veins of colors, and furthermore, varying shades of color, depicts the organized separation of different entities within the stream, segregated from those of different colors. Dana D. Nelson's insightful exploration of racial polarities in Pym touches upon the idea of the vein’s segregated state as she writes, “A Manichean world where…colors dominate but do not mix, Tsalal in effect underwrites the color line of the antebellum South, and Pym's observations of the island highlight its segregated nature” (96). Nelson argues that importance must be placed upon the separation, or better yet, the aversion of colors in Pym. Furthermore, her assertion motions for a deeper analysis of the water, its veins, and its composition.

Captivated by the water's foreign characteristics, Pym continues to observe how the veins react to his attempts to mix them. Pym remarks, “Upon passing the blade of a knife athwart the veins, the water closed over it immediately…all traces of the knife were instantly obliterated. If, however, the blade passed down accurately between two veins, a perfect separation was effected, which the power of cohesion did not immediately rectify” (531). Pym’s initial attempt to blend the veins by cutting the veins “athwart,” or across, is unsuccessful (531). The veins remain in their segregated state. Yet when Pym tries to cut “between” the veins, that is, a calculated cut along their edges, he finds that his cut segregates the veins even further. Through both attempts, Pym is unable to mix the naturally segregated state of the veins.

The water and its veins’ peculiar aversion and refusal to mix create an interesting and illuminating image that reflects the cultural and racial issues of 19th-century America. More specifically, the water and its veins represent individual and national bodies during this time, both figuratively and physically. By equating the water’s intricate color system with veins, Poe prompts his readers to associate the water’s veins with physical bodies. If the veins are representative of bodies, then the veins of differing colors and shades parallel the differing skin colors that exist in America. It can then be deduced that the segregated state of the veins represents the segregated state of 19th-century America. Furthermore, the veins’ aversion to mix is a representation of 19th-century America’s hesitancy for races to mix, an idea that will be explored throughout this essay.

Tsalian Aversions to White

In exploring the strange and symbolic landscape of Tsalal, Pym is once again thrust into an environment that is different from his own, forced to experience a culture dominated by the color black. Through his exploration, Pym finds that the Tsalianians’ complexions are “jet black, with thick and long woolly hair. They were clothed in skins of an unknown black animal…their arms consisted principally of clubs, of a dark, and apparently very heavy wood….the bottoms of their canoes were full of black stones” (528). The animals, too, are “covered in black wool” (533). The Tsalian's fondness for and interaction with the color black are indeed very strange: their clothes, tools, weapons, animals, and even complexions are black in entirety. However, with the landing of the Jane Guy upon Tsalal, the Tsalianians’ black culture is intruded upon by white objects, the first instance occurring as Captain Guy waves a white handkerchief to signify peace. It is in this moment that the natives’ initial aversion to the color white is portrayed. Pym explains, “Captain Guy now held up a white handkerchief on the blade of an oar, when the strangers made a full stop, and commenced a loud jabbering all at once, intermingled with occasional shouts…they continued this for at least a half an hour” (527). Through their shouting of “Anamoo-moo!” and “Lama-lama!” the Tsalianians exhibit their strange reaction, and perhaps rejection, to the color white. However, this is never made clear as their language is incomprehensible to the white northerners (527). And although Poe's audience is never directly enlightened on the reason behind this wild reaction to white, Poe takes great care to show that the natives do not like the idea of the interaction of white and black in their culture.

Through the interactions between the white, northern men and the black, southern islanders, Poe begins to illuminate the racial polarities between the two different cultures. Nelson examines this idea as she asserts, “Racialist polarities structure the island of Tsalal….The narrative suggests that the all-black Tsalianians instinctively avoid anything white. Their surprise at sighting the crew of the Jane Guy signals to Pym ‘that they had never before seen any of the white race’” (96). The natives not only fear the color of the crew, like Nelson suggests, but also the items that the crew carry on the boat. As the natives curiously and systematically explore the vessel, they show a natural aversion to anything white. Pym explains, “We could not get them to approach several very harmless objects – such as the schooner’s sails, an egg, an open book, or a pan of flour” (530). Nelson explains that the natives “recoil” when faced with white, which she asserts “indicates a ‘natural’ aversion between
races, shared by black and white alike” (96).

Much of this text is influenced by 19th-century American culture. As noted above, the natives “recoil” and reject anything white, anything different from what they are used to. This suggests that black has a natural hesitancy to mix with white (529). On the other side of the racial spectrum, Pym and the crew view the natives as “savages,” and constantly carry around arms for protection. These instances and actions reflect each culture’s reciprocal fear of the other. In regard to this idea, Nelson remarks, “Isn’t it interesting that the Tsalalians seem to consider white to be as evil and dangerous as we consider black?” (96). An illuminating point; perhaps Nelson suggests that the white northern men believe themselves to be superior to the natives, believing that only black is to be feared, not white. Nonetheless, through both cultures’ fearful reaction to the other, Poe highlights the animosity between the two drastically different cultures.

The conclusion of the novel brings with it Nu-Nu’s death, which depicts nature’s inability to fuse two cultures, and reiterates Poe’s idea that man desires cultures remain segregated. Having miraculously survived and escaped the brutal and fatal attack by the natives, Pym and Peters leave the island with Nu-Nu, a black native whom the men have taken hostage. As the white men and their hostage set sail on the stolen canoe, they embark on their journey northwards, away from “savagery” and toward “civilization,” away from the looming blackness of Tsalal and toward the bright whiteness of the North. Through Nu-Nu, we witness, yet again, the islanders’ natural aversion to white. Pym explains, “We attached a sail made of our shirts… the sight of the linen seemed to affect him in a very singular manner. He could not be prevailed upon to touch it or go near it, shuddering when we attempted to force him, and shrieking out Tekeli-li!” (558). Here we see the black aversion to white, the incomprehensible shouting of fear and rejection. Poe then continues to describe the act of removing black from its natural habitat, the forcing of Nu-Nu away from the South and into the culture of the North.

As the trek northward continues, more whiteness is introduced to Nu-Nu, which ultimately results in his death. Pym records, “A fine white powder, resembling ashes - but certainly not such - fell over the canoe…Nu-Nu now threw himself on his face in the bottom of the boat, and no persuasions could induce him to arise” (559). (The white powder that Pym documents would fall over the canoe…Nu-Nu now threw himself on his face in “A fine white powder, resembling ashes - but certainly not such.) Nu-Nu, refusing to accept the snow and its whiteness, reacts not only by throwing himself into the bottom of the boat, but soon after, as if making a last act of defiance and reminder of his culture, separates his lips and displays “the teeth which lay beneath it. These were black. We had never before seen the teeth of an inhabitant of Tsalal” (559). Nu-Nu, realizing that his separation from Tsalal is growing farther and farther, defiantly asserts his black culture by baring his all-black teeth. He soon after perishes.

To many critics, Nu-Nu’s death symbolizes the result of what happens when two very different cultures forcefully mix. Toni Morrison, author of Playing in the Dark, Whiteness and the Literary Imagination, reflects on Nu-Nu’s death as Pym, Peters, and Nu-Nu embark on their journey away from black and towards white. Morrison analyzes the initial transition from black culture to white as she writes, “The first white image seems related to the expiration and erasure of the serviceable and serving black figure, Nu-Nu” (32). Morrison asserts that it is whiteness that kills Nu-Nu, the fear of leaving his black community and being forced into a white world. Through Nu-Nu’s rejection of mixing with a white world, which results in his death, Poe implies that nature does not want to intermingle with significantly different aspects of itself. Nelson adds to the abundance of scholarship surrounding this event as she argues, “These events offer a segregationist parable: in the state of nature, black doesn’t want to mix with white. Nu-Nu provides direct affirmation of this, convulsing and expiring in the face of an increasingly white environment” (97). Nu-Nu does not want to mix with white culture. The light purple veins of the water do not want to mix with the dark purple shades. The natives do not want to interact with the northern mens’ white objects. Through all of these cultural and racially charged interactions and rejections, Poe suggests that man desires for cultures remain segregated, that the North and South remain divided.

**The Tsalalian Rebellion**

The latter half of Pym’s experience on Tsalal is filled with horror, as a result of the savage attacks on the white men. Although the planned attacks are brutal, gruesome, and fatal, the buildup to the attacks are subtle and gradual. Poe first comments on the slowly growing number of natives as he records, “In the whole of this adventure we saw nothing in the demeanour of the natives calculated to create suspicion, with the single exception of the systematic manner in which their party was strengthened during our route from the schooner to the village” (535). Pym initially seems untroubled by the growing group. But his concerns slowly intensify over the course of the narrative, building until Pym realizes that “a very short while sufficed to prove that this apparent kindness of disposition was only the result of a deeply-laid plan for our destruction, and that the islanders for whom we entertained such inordinate feelings of esteem were among the most barbarous, subtle, and bloodthirsty wretches that ever
contaminated the face of the globe” (538). In a description filled with disgust, Pym foreshadows the tragic conflict that would soon ensue between the unknowing northerners and the “barbarous,” “bloodthirsty wretches” (538).

Pym’s diction in the above passage is illuminating, as it depicts the northerners’ negative and horror-filled views of the savages. Yet, Pym’s reflection is hypocritical. He comments on the natives’ fake kindness that hides a “deeply-laid plan,” while simultaneously boasting the crews’ “inordinate feelings of esteem” for the savages (538). But did not the northerners, too, have ulterior motives that prompted their warm greeting of the natives? On a journey to explore uncharted territory, the crew was most likely prepared to set up trade among colonies if they found them on their way. On Tsalal, the men do just that. After playing nice with the natives, Pym explains, “In return for these good things we presented the natives with blue beads, brass trinkets, nails, knives, and pieces of red cloth… We established a regular market on shore, just under the guns of the schooner” (536). But while Pym may suggest that the crews’ interactions with the natives are friendly, does referring to the natives as “savage” portray the crews’ “inordinate feelings of esteem” (538). Likewise, does establishing the trade with the natives “under the guns of the schooner” create a friendly and trusting environment? (538). In this moment, Poe highlights the reoccurring hypocrisy of the northerners, their failure to see that they are just as hostile as the natives.

Some scholars may argue that this passage, and Pym as a whole, reflects Poe’s critique of white racism and colonialism, an assertion that is supported throughout the novel. The above passage portrays the white crews’ ethnocentricity, as they immediately refer to the natives as “savages,” simply because the natives’ culture is different from their own. Furthermore, upon landing on Tsalal, the men soon after establish trade and propose to “erect suitable houses,” both of which are sure signs of colonialism (536). Nelson’s The World in Black and White examines this very idea of colonialist and expansionist happenings in Pym, specifically as she explores the concept of “rightness of whiteness” and the perceived correlation between “native” and “evil” (92). But whereas most 19th-century travel narratives expose their readers to the advantages of colonialism, Poe’s Pym portrays colonialism’s horrifying repercussions. And because such brutal attacks on white men occur within Pym, the assertion that Pym is a critique of white racism and colonialism is clearly evidenced. Furthermore, scholars who assert that Pym is a critique of racism and colonialism would perhaps interpret the natives’ attacks as a warning against colonialist motives and actions. Through Poe’s casting of colonialism as having gruesome repercussions, he critiques expansionist actions, suggesting that colonialism will not be accepted by all cultures, as seen through the natives’barbaric attempts to cast white presence out of their environment. Having drawn many readers in through the highly desired genre of the travel narrative, Poe exposes his readers to the horrors of rejected colonialism. But while the text illustrates the northerner’s colonialism, it also vividly captures and emphasizes the revolting tragedies that come with it. Moreover, Poe’s portrayal of conflict between the white men and the natives, I argue, has a more centralized focus on 19th-century cultural anxieties over slave uprisings, rather than providing a critique on white colonialism.

To be more specific, the 1830s was a time dominated by racial concerns regarding slavery and slave uprisings. Poe’s Pym was written in the middle of the worrisome haze of southern slave revolts. John Carlos Rowe, author of “Antebellum Slavery and Modern Criticism,” explores the fear of slave uprisings in Poe’s Pym, looking through the lens of the Nat Turner revolt, a Virginian slave rebellion with the highest number of fatalities recorded in the American South. In his critical text Rowe argues, “Poe writes this long narrative in the historical context of decades of Southern white anxieties regarding the possibility of widespread slave revolts, recently made real in Turner’s revolt” (912). With such tragic events occurring just seven years before Pym’s 1838 publication, and furthermore, in one of Poe’s home states, it is hard to ignore the parallels between the historically documented southern fear of revolts and the same racially charged revolts depicted in Pym.

While Rowe argues that Pym was influenced specifically by the Nat Turner revolt, Daniel Rasmussen’s historical narrative, American Uprising, exemplifies the parallels between 19th-century slave revolts and the uprisings that occur in the latter half of Pym. Rasmussen’s text vividly captures, recreates, and documents the New Orleans slave rebellion, occurring between January 6 and January 29, 1811. The uprising was spurred not only by the slaves’ desire for independence, but also by their contempt for plantation owners and militia. The slaves’ destruction and brutal clashing with New Orleans slave owners is what links these events with those that occur between the white northerners and black Tsalalians in Pym. Furthermore, Rasmussen’s text is an illuminating exploration of a historic 19th-century slave revolt, a revolt that left southern slave owners with the looming and haunting fear of possible slave uprisings in their community. This ingrained fear of a slave revolt was present in both Poe and his southern readers’ minds during the publication of Pym, evidenced by the countless parallels between the events depicted in American Uprising and the Tsalalian rebellion in Pym. It is important to note, however, that although the 1811 revolt was alive and present in Poe’s mind during the writing of Pym, Poe does not
directly use the 1811 New Orleans slave revolt as a rubric for his novel. Within the context of this exploration, Rasmussen’s *American Uprising* is instead a tool that exemplifies how the Tsalalians’ rebellion in *Pym* closely mirrors 19th-century slave revolts. This then illustrates how Poe draws upon cultural anxieties surrounding slave revolts, and incorporates those same concerns into his text.

Such gruesome and fatal attacks previously mentioned begin with the natives’ attempt to crush the northern men with rocks. Before being cast into a world of darkness, Pym describes the sudden awareness of “a concussion resembling nothing I had ever before experienced” (540). He describes being “tomed alive,” the “blackness of darkness which envelops the victim, the terrific oppression of lungs, the stifling fumes…[that] unite with the ghastly considerations that we are beyond the remotest confines of hope” (540). Because of the natives’ revolt, Pym experiences the horror of confinement, the dread of blackness that surrounds him, and the heavy, overbearing oppression of the rocks. Through this, the black natives force Pym into a seemingly inescapable captivity. Pym is filled with horror, shock, and dread. Within this moment, Poe draws upon the cultural fears of slavereligion. Poe, a white male, comes to represent the white slave holders of the South. The natives, completely black, come to symbolize revolting southern slaves. It is Pym, a representation of the white South in this instance, who falls victim to the savage and fear-instilling attacks of the natives, or, the black southern slaves.

Rasmussen’s *American Uprising*, much like Poe’s *Pym*, captures the destruction of property and the murder of white men. Rasmussen recounts from the 1811 revolt that “there was a large number of rebel slaves moving down the river, pillaging the farms and killings whites,” actions that resemble the Tsalalians’ raid of the *Jane Guy* and their murder of the crew on board (108). Having escaped the avalanche of the rocks, Pym and Peters stumble upon a hideous and tragically gruesome scene, where Poe documents the *Jane Guy* “surrounded by an immense multitude of desperados evidently bent upon capturing her at all hazards,” an echo of the 1811 slaves’ attempts to take over white plantations and communities (544). Pym continues:

> Our men were borne down at once, overwhelmed, trodden under foot, and absolutely torn to pieces in an instant. Seeing this, the savages on the rafts got the better of their fears, and came up in shoals to the plunder. In five minutes the Jane was a pitiable scene indeed of havoc and tumultuous outrage. The decks were split open and ripped up; the cordage, sails… demolished as if by magic. (545)

The savages, enraged and swept into a fit of madness, destroy everything in their sight, as if in spite of the northern explorers. Pym’s crew and friends are viciously murdered while he is forced to witness the chaos from a distance. The images of the white crews’ murder closely resemble the murders of white slave holders in the New Orleans slave revolt, in which “slaves lunged…slicing passing bodies with three long cuts… hack[ing] Gilbert Andry into pieces” (Rasmussen 99-100).

The demise of the *Jane Guy*, specifically the moments leading up to and after her explosion, are important to emphasize, as both instances work to portray the natives’ actions as influenced by their contempt for white. The six remaining crew members, in a last attempt to fend off the natives, fire the boat’s cannon, killing some, but not enough. Soon after, the relentless and barbaric natives forcefully overtake the boat and its crew. Even after the barbaric deaths of several of the shipmates, the natives’ savagery continues. In a desperate and brutal attempt to completely eliminate the presence of white in their culture, the natives set the *Jane Guy* on fire. Upon the deadly explosion, Pym documents, “The whole atmosphere was magically crowded, in a single instant, with a wild chaos of wood, and metal, and human limbs” (546). This instance, in which the black savages work to destroy any remnants of white crew members and objects, represents 19th-century southern fears of slave uprisings that were believed to result in crippling destruction, gruesome deaths, and the inability to stop it. This image, of uncontrollable and explosive destruction, resonates with Rasmussen’s portrayal of the New Orleans community members’ inability to stop the 1811 slave revolt. Rasmussen depicts such physical limitations as he writes, “With the white residents of the area clustered behind the city gates and the black slaves marching from the fields, it seem all [anyone] could do was pray” (121). This historic description of helplessness during the New Orleans slave revolt aligns with Pym’s feelings of vulnerability as he watches the natives tear apart the *Jane Guy*.

After the explosion that results in the death of 1,000 Tsalalians and the mangling of another 1,000, Pym witnesses some peculiar ceremony on the shores of the island. As he watches the crowd of Tsalalians surround something, a gap in the circle allows him to notice “something white lying on the ground…at length we saw that it was the carcass of the strange animal with the scarlet teeth and claws which the schooner had picked up at sea on the eighteenth of January” (547). The animal Pym sees is indeed the cat-like animal referenced in Pym’s January 18th journal entry. Described as having “straight silky hair, perfectly white,” the animal that the Tsalalians surround symbolizes the last remains of white culture (527). Through the natives’ explosion of the *Jane Guy* and their celebratory
dance around the animal while screaming “Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li,” the Tsalalians not only assert their hatred for white by casting the last remaining remnants of white out of their society, but also assert their dominance as a black culture.

Looking through the lens of the natives’ brutal revolts, Rowe proposes that the conflict between white and black on Tsalal is not the only instance in the novel where the black race seems to be the aggressor. He draws upon the earlier events in Pym, which depict the murderous mutiny onboard the Grampus where the white race fall victim to the savagery of the black race. Specifically, he examines the Black Cook, the leader in charge of the murderous uprisings and the slaughter of dozens of white men. Through this casting of barbaric actions by the black race, Poe reiterates his culture's fears of a black rebellion, fears that were heightened during the 1831 Nat Turner Rebellion. Rowe comments specifically on this idea as he continues, “Like Nat Turner, the Black Cook strikes his victims on the head, testifying to the symbolic danger to reason posed by the emergence of irrational savagery so many Southern whites imagined would accompany slave rebellion or even legal emancipation” (914). Through analysis of Poe's description of savagery attacks by members of the black race, both on the Grampus and on Tsalal, Rowe echoes Poe's suggestion that the fear of slave rebellions in the 1800s, and the black race itself, was a fear ingrained into American culture. In fact, many 19th-century canonical works follow and mimic Poe's racially-charged footsteps, such as Herman Melville’s 1846 novel, Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life. Typee explores Polynesian native life and themes regarding cultural absorption, but also depicts the native practice of cannibalism and acts of “noble” savagery. Both Poe and Melville’s 19th-century works are drawn to the primitive, uncivilized, and savage cultures of native islanders, which suggest an ingrained cultural interest and fear of native race and culture.

**A Haunting Figure**

The ambiguous concluding scene of Pym, in which an indistinguishable figure emerges, is a racial topic belonging to its own category. Poe's description of the figure has sparked countless scholarly debates and conversations regarding its meaning. G. R. Thompson, editor of The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe, footnotes the multiple interpretations of the ending's significance. He explains, “The ambiguous conclusion of the narrative and the mysterious figure have generated numerous critical interpretations from the literal to the symbolic and allegorical: e.g., fog, and ice formation, the figurehead of the returning ship Penguin, Christ, God, an angel, Death, the Ancient Day” (560). However, I would like to propose something different—that as Pym and Peters “rushed into the embraces of the cataract, where a chasm threw itself open to receive us,” the men see, either figuratively or literally, the outline and figure of a penguin (561).

As a text largely influenced by the travel narrative, Poe spares no expense in documenting the surrounding environment that Pym passes through during his southward adventure toward Tsalal. While sailing south on the Jane Guy, Pym documents the animal life found on Kerguelen’s Island. He records descriptions of vast numbers of sea elephants, and more importantly, the abundance of penguins. “Penguins are very plenty,” Pym writes:

> and of these there are four different kinds....They carry their heads high, with their wings drooping like two arms, and, as their tails project from their body in a line with the legs, the resemblance to a human figure is very striking, and would be apt to deceive the spectator at a casual glance or in the gloom of the evening (513)

Something like that “gloom of the evening” is present at the time in which Pym sees the figure, as he describes the “cataract, where a chasm threw itself open” (560) and the “fine white powder, resembling ashes,” presumably snow (513). With the combination of fog and mist from the cataract, along with the falling snow, the poor visibility Pym experiences masks the defining features of the penguin, dissembling and blurring its outline into the appearance of something else entirely, such as the multitude of interpretations scholars have previously suggested.

Poe’s emphasis on the cultural fear of southern slave uprisings and racial mixing serve as evidence that the “shrouded human figure” is in fact that of a penguin (560). Considering Poe is writing in the antebellum period, a time filled with tension surrounding the idea of race, the significance of a penguin at the end of the novel, the natural mix of both black and white, may indeed make sense. As Pym witnesses the horrors of what happens when black and white interact, both culturally and racially, he faces brutal and gruesome realities. This ghostly figure of the penguin as Pym leaves the island reminds Pym of the horrors he encountered between the natives and himself, of what happens when black and white forcefully collide. Yet if Pym’s experience in the latter half of the novel serve to represent the southern fear of slave revolts, then the penguin’s looming black and white presence not only serves as a reminder to Pym of his horrific experience while on Tsalal, but also represents the South's haunting, lingering fear of the mixing of black and white in their culture.

Scholars who argue that the figure at the conclusion of Pym represents God or Christ may rebut this argument, asserting
that the figure is entirely white, and thus, does not portray a penguin. They may draw upon Pym’s description of the figure, in which he states that “the hue of the skin of the figure was of perfect whiteness of the snow” (560). This description suggests that the figure is white in entirety, but consider the visibility and darkness that surround the canoe. Pym explains, “the sullen darkness now hovered above us… the darkness had materially increased, relieved only by the glare of the water thrown back from the white curtain” (560). If the figure is indeed a penguin, the black portions of its figure would mix with its dark surroundings, resulting in its display of more realistic proportions, as the loss of black area creates a more slender, human figure.

On the contrary, if we take this description literally, that the penguin is entirely white, then does this shatter the argument that the penguin is a symbolic representation of Pym’s gruesome and fearful experience on Tsalal? Does this then ruin the assertion that the penguin portrays America’s racial and cultural concerns for antebellum America? Perhaps not. In her critical text, Morrison observes, “The image of the white curtain and the ‘shrouded human figure’ with skin ‘the perfect whiteness of the snow’ both occur after the narrative has encountered blackness” (32). This observation is interesting, as it illustrates not only Pym’s physical movement away from blackness and toward whiteness, but also suggests his increasing desire for only white. Moreover, having been exposed to the black culture of the Tsalalians, Pym has a desperate desire to return to white society. Pym fears the natives, he fears their culture, and most importantly, he fears black. Having witnessed the tragedies and aggressions that result when cultures mix, Pym now understands what will happen if black and white collide. Knowing this, Pym strips the penguin of its natural blackness not only because he fears it, but because he desires for black and white to remain segregated. Through Pym’s rejection of black, Poe captures white slave holders’ desire for race to remain segregated during the early and mid- 19th-century.

Although I have argued that the penguin serves as a looming and haunting reminder to both Pym and antebellum South that black and white should never mix, it is important to acknowledge other critics’ suggestions that the figure holds divine or angelic importance. As scholars assert that the figure is that of “God, Jesus, [or] an angel,” some imply that the figure serves as a positive or hopeful representation of Pym’s encounters on Tsalal (560). With the understanding that the figure is that of a penguin, then perhaps the penguin’s looming presence works to represent a desire for racial harmony. A natural mix of black and white, the penguin proves to the doubtful Pym that black and white can coexist in nature, and therefore, in his community. If we view the penguin’s mixture of black and white as positive, then we can also assume that perhaps, after witnessing and experiencing the devastation of clashing black and white cultures, that the penguin symbolizes Pym’s longing for a community that exists in racial harmony. By viewing the penguin in a positive light, then it becomes clear as to why countless scholars have imagined the ambiguous figure as angelic or divine. However, this argument becomes more complex when we consider the setting and situation in which the penguin appears. The penguin, “shrouded,” looming, and blurred, makes its appearance after the catastrophic destruction of the Jane Guy and brutal murder of the white crew (560). Appearing as Pym flees Tsalal in desperate search for white civilization, the penguin’s presence serves a darker and bleaker significance (560). While scholars may claim that the penguin holds angelic importance, I argue that the penguin’s looming black and white presence serves not only as a haunting reminder to Pym of his experience on Tsalal, but also portrays the South’s lingering fear of the cultural mixing of black and white.

Edgar Allan Poe’s The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym is a truly remarkable representation of cultural divides between antebellum North and South in the 1800s. Through his combination of gothic fiction and travel narrative, Poe masterfully captures the attention of a wide ranging audience. An exciting and thrilling, yet dark and morbid text, Pym’s plot not only captures the audiences’ attention, but holds it. With this undivided attention, Poe is able to submerge his readers into a world of racial and cultural polarities, a world where neither black nor white dominate, but instead, avoid each other at all costs. Pym’s documentation of the peculiar characteristics of the water serves a deeper meaning within the text, portraying nature’s fear of the mixing of colors. Through this illuminating metaphor, Poe suggests that 19th-century America, too, has anxiety over the mixing of two drastically different cultures and races, a fear for the cultural mixing of white slave owners and their black slaves. In the latter half of Pym, the brutal happenings that ensue between Pym and the natives vividly capture the cultural anxieties of slave revolts in the South, which were believed to end with only catastrophic destruction and gruesome, racial upheaval. And ultimately, an interesting and highly debated figure at the conclusion, the penguin comes to serve as a looming and haunting reminder to not only Pym, but to the antebellum South, that black and white should never mix. Moreover, although a gritty and tension-filled work, Poe’s The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym is a thought-provoking work that affirms 19th-century American culture and anxieties, as well as tells a written escapade that encapsulates a young man’s journey of adventure and heartbreak, gain and loss, thrill and terror, and black and white.
Works Cited


About the Author

Alyssa Amaral is a senior majoring in English and minoring in history. Her honors project was completed in the fall of 2014 under the mentorship of Dr. Ann Brunjes (English) and made possible with funding provided by Bridgewater State University’s Office of Undergraduate Research. Alyssa plans to attend graduate school in the fall of 2016, pursuing a Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) and English.