How do I know you?: Identity Problems and Failure of Racial Binary in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*
“...for there is no quality in this world that is not what it is merely by contrast. Nothing exists in itself”

Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*
“...as though a white man were anything more dignified than a white-washed negro.”

Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*
"... is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color and at the same time the concrete of all colors: is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows – a colorless, all color of atheism from which we shrink?"

Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*
Published in 1838, Edgar Allan Poe’s only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, opens with the friendship between Pym and Augustus. From this relationship, all the guts of the story spill forth for without Augustus, Pym would never have thirsted for open sea adventures. More importantly, Poe uses this relationship to exemplify brotherhood and the positive human relationship. He implies that this is how humans behave: when Pym and Augustus take their first journey, they shipwreck the *Ariel* and Pym takes care of his closest friend and fellow man, ensuring that they both survive, despite the danger to his own life. Their dangerous journey comes to an end when the crew of the *Penguin* saves them from an untimely ocean death. This humanism is contrasted with the captain of the *Penguin*, who says, “it is no business of [ours] to be eternally watching for egg-shells; the ship should not put about for any such nonsense; and if there was a man run down, it was nobody’s fault but his own – he might drown and be dead” (13). To this tirade, the *Penguin*’s crew reels, and the Captain is seen as “a fit subject for the gallows” because his speech “evinc[ed] so base a degree of heartless atrocity” (13). Poe is showing us acceptable human behavior: the good, accepted was to treat your fellow man measured against “base” or inhuman behavior.

This scene sets the stage for an exploration Poe undertakes throughout the remainder of the novel: asking himself and his audience the much-pondered question of what is man? Where do we draw the line between man and animal? Human and inhuman? At heart, it is an identity question: how does Pym know himself to be human and specific others to be less than human or not human at all? To answer these questions, Poe strips his characters to the most basic layers of flesh and bone, exposing the very primitive essence of human, taking society’s racial standards and testing them. He refuses
to put his characters in situation of abundance and comfort, instead shipwrecking them often and in remote areas of the ocean with scant supplies, forcing them to, as Geoffrey Sanborn writes in *The Sign of the Cannibal*, experience “humanity shrunken to its smallest possible scope” (41). In line with the traditional shipwreck narrative, Pym and his cohorts must fight for their lives, and this fight tests the extremes to which Pym and crew are willing to venture for survival. Pym is put to the test in “terrible moments of suffering and despair... his [mind filled with] visions of shipwreck and famine; of death or captivity among barbarian hordes; of a lifetime dragged out in sorrow and tears, upon some gray and desolate rock, in an ocean unapproachable and unknown” (18). A significant portion of Pym’s narrative is based on survival; consequently, a significant part of Pym’s text focuses on food. As their journey continues, Pym and crew find themselves in ever-dire straits – and with increasingly limited food options – until finally, the only option left is the unspeakable “last horrid extremity” (Poe 113): cannibalism.

Historically, cannibalism is intrinsically and intimately connected with the Americas. Not until Christopher Columbus came to the “New World” and butchered and othered the supposedly anthropophagic Carib Indians did we get the word “cannibal” and all its relatives (Berglund 3). According to Eric Cheyfitz, “beginning with Columbus, the idea of cannibalism developed not as an anthropological fact but as a political fiction that the West employed to justify its exploitation of Native Americans” (3). Jeff Berglund sees “the birth of such terminology [as] arising from the logic of binaries” (3, my emphasis). The term “cannibal” is thus marked at its root with the language and meaning of misunderstanding, othering, and, of course, race. At first, the application of “cannibalism” was limited to meaning anthropophagy or literally, “man-eating.” Over
time, the term has been expanded from its literal sense to include increasingly figurative interpretations; both are applicable in Poe’s novel. The term “cannibal” is a deeply rooted part of the history of racial differentiation in the Americas.

Poe, an American Romantic author, lived and wrote in the post-antebellum south, operating in the same time period and within the same social constructs as “Nat” Turner, whose rebellion incensed and frightened the white community. That is to say, Poe’s literature necessarily addresses race for “There is no romance free of what Herman Melville called ‘the power of blackness’” (Morrison 37). In Poe and Turner’s day, “whites who ate human flesh under the pressure of famine were understood... to have conditional racial identity” (Hayes 168). The history of racial differentiation in America has many periods. At first, when Africans were first being brought into America, the differentiation was based on religion, and thus society was divided between Christians and savages (Tehranian 829). The problem inherent within religion, however, is the possibility for conversion, and once a black converted to Christianity, he was understood to identify as “civilized” or, as Poe understood it, “white” for Poe “follows [his] predecessors in equating scientific achievement, cultural sophistication, and the very notion of civilization with whiteness” (Tehranian 838). At this point, it becomes important to explicitly note the performative emphasis of racial determination and identity. John Tehranian said it best when he wrote in “Performing Whiteness: Naturalization Litigation and the Construction of Racial Identity”:

...racial categories are largely the constructs of society, situationally malleable, rigid at times, flexible at other times. As such, racial determination has often been accomplished through the lens of performance. This argument closely tracks Judith Butler’s work on gender in which she argues that we are what we pretend to be: Male is as male does and female is as female does. (828)
In this case, then, we understand that black is as black does and white is as white does, for acting black, adopting black practices, and black culture is to constitute blackness, and vice versa (Tehranian 383). We are what we perform.

As time progressed and the number of blacks increased and slavery became a widespread institution, religion was no longer a visible enough form of differentiation. Thus, differentiation based on skin color became the primary means of separating the civilized from the uncivilized, and eventually, the binary shifted from Christian-savage to white-black. This method of differentiation, based on a physical attribute (skin color), spurred the development of the “new Romantic science of comparative anatomy” (Kitson 8), and “Although there were earlier progenitors of the notion that physical characteristics are hereditary and that they signify certain intellectual, moral, or, aesthetic hierarchies, it is in what we commonly call the Romantic period that such ideas become more fully established in the natural sciences and were applied to other forms of cultural writing” (Kitson 7). Well within the Romantic period, the 1830s saw science becoming an ever-increasingly widespread and central method of thought and guidance, assuming a role not unlike that of religion. However, instead of providing evidence against and changing the general belief that black was “evil” or “bad,” science cemented this view. Science was being used to differentiate the races at a basic biological level, through the pseudo-scientific methods of comparative anatomy, physiology, and phrenology. The suggestion was that these physical differences reflected a limitation in mental capacity, capacity for language, and capacity for memory, all qualities thought to distinguish man from beast (Kitson 34). As Nelson writes in The Word in Black and White, there was a “move away from an eighteenth century optimism about man, and faith in the adaptability of man’s
universal ‘nature,’ towards a nineteenth century belief in the unchangeability of racial ‘natures’” (92-93). Thus, “science in the nineteenth century became simultaneously more ‘scientific’ and also more racist – in its insistence on the permanency of racial types, and the existence of a scale of racial worth” (Nelson 93). This scale of racial worth then provided ample excuse for white expansion and racial oppression, or, in other words, the white enterprise of colonialism (Nelson 93).

Knowing the history behind the decade in which Poe wrote *Pym*, we can begin to see the evidence of the 1830s within the novel. The 1830s were particularly important in terms of treatment of African Americans and Native Americans. The decade:

marked the powerful onslaught of Northern abolitionist efforts, as well as the Virginia legislative debates over emancipation..., [which] triggered an intensification of the proslavery debate in the South, leading to works like those of Thomas Dew, which explicitly linked the debased condition of African Americas to their inherent blackness, not to their environment of slavery... (Nelson 93)

In the south, the fear of slave rebellion grew following the “Nat” Turner incident. With respect to Native Americans, the 1830s was the “great decade of Indian removal” (Nelson 93). The decade was a low point for the African American and Native American communities, respectively. Consequently, Poe’s literature is rife with the raced imagination, for “Deep within the word ‘American’ is its association with race...American means white” (Morrison 47). Historically, the color black has been not just any color, but a color rife with meaning. Unluckily, “Slaves....were visible to a fault. And they had inherited, among other things a long history on the meaning of color. It was not simply that this slave population had a distinctive color; it was that this color ‘meant’ something” (Morrison 49), something that marked them as inferior, less than, lacking, not
only in mental capacity but also in *humanity* or the human soul, a remnant from the days when the binary was Christian-savage.

According to Derrida, the most basic of all binary pairs is inside-outside, which is the language of consumption and reflection — the language of cannibalism, for “what is ‘outside’ the territory of the self is bad, and what is ‘inside is good,’ a schematization that unifies many more sophisticated notions of individual and corporate bodies” (Kilgour 4), and in a world defined by the white (male), the raced then becomes the subordinate half of the binary couple — the outside of the inside world. Continuing in the same vein (and extending Morrison’s point), Maggie Kilgour writes in *From Communion to Cannibalism*:

> [binary pairs] are similarly structured, each constituting a divided, hierarchically ordered, and yet apparently coherent system, in which order is guaranteed by the authoritative and superior term’s control of the inferior. Such couples represent experience as a *concordia discors* (discordant harmony) where extremes meet, although not in an equal relation but in an identity achieved through the subordination, even annihilation, of one of the terms. (3)

What Kilgour is ultimately attempting to illustrate is that these binary couples are *negatively* defined — that is, they are structurally compromised and produce meaning only in relation to the other. Indeed, “In the early years of the country, it was not the concept of race alone that operated to oppress Blacks and Indians; rather, it was the *interaction* between conceptions of race... that played a critical role in establishing and maintaining racial and economic subordination” (Tehranian 819). Binary pair positions are “infinitely reversible” (4) and very, very fragile and fluid, a careful balancing of opposites, a careful dance between partners. However, we must also remember that “The relation between an inside and an outside involves a delicate balance of simultaneous identification and
separation” (4) and it involves, unavoidably, “the act of incorporation, in which an external object is taken inside another.” Incorporation naturally implies, “depends upon and enforces an absolute division between inside and outside.” However, “in the act [of incorporation] that opposition disappears, dissolving the structure it appears to produce” (4). Following logically then, white can only mean white when reflected against raced (and this holds true for any binary) for “the subject of the dream is the dreamer. The fabrication of a [raced] persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious” (Morrison 17) and a manifestation of anxieties of inside and outside.

The most basic and universal manifestation of this idea of incorporation creating and collapsing oppositions is eating. For Kilgour, eating then becomes the most basic method of discerning between the inside and outside – the body and identity. Ultimately, Kilgour comes to the point that inside and outside, communion and consumption, all boil down to desiring completion, memberment, or “oneness.” Cannibalism, unintuitively, becomes the method through which we can achieve unity, for once something is consumed (cannibalized), it becomes part of a whole body and thus loses its separate identity. For the purposes of this essay, we will largely be thinking about cannibalism in two ways. The first way is in the purely literal way: people eating people. The literal act of cannibalism is “relatively easy to determine and control (as Ong says, it is a matter of taste, you either do or you don’t, and there isn’t really any tertium quid in the matter)” (10), but this very clear differentiation between having done and having not done is only applicable in the strictest sense of anthropophagy. The second, and more important, way of reading cannibalism is cannibalism as a mental process. In contrast to the bodily
absorption of others, “the mental absorption of others... is much more difficult to
determine and regulate” (10), which Kilgour sees as “At the opposite end of the spectrum
from [physical] cannibalism” (10). But, to, like Priscilla Walton, take a more abstract
definition of cannibalism, “mental acts of identification by which the self knows, not
things, but other humans, and takes them into itself to create its identity... the mental
absorption of others” is an extension of “cannibalism” for “In its metaphorical sense, the
phrase ‘you are what you eat’ very disturbingly calls our basic concepts of personal
identity into question” (Kilgour 10). From birth, according to Freud, we “internalize,”
“introject,” and “trasume” (Kilgour 10) until our idea of self (the internal), who we are
and what we are made of, is composed of the outside: the society and ideologies that we
have internalized. So really, the inside is the outside consumed and made into the self: to
live in the world is to be a cannibal, to be comprised of both eater and eaten and to
internalize the outside. Thus we understand that cannibalism is symbolic, a mechanism
that encompasses the human experience. There is no outside or inside, no independence;
binary opposites are really just dependent pairs, differentiated from one another only in
terms of one another. This then stands to reason that we should be able to evidence, then,
the shifting paradigms of white and black over time and see the tensions and problems of
overlap inherent in attempting to separate and define this particular binary, and in Poe’s
Pym, we do.

For E.A. Poe, these binary opposites – the insides and the outsides, the eaters and
the eaten, the white and the black – all seem to be a solidly structured part of
contemporary society. The beginning of Poe’s Pym upholds his society’s status quo: that
is, his characters abide by their accepted and structured roles in society, with whites in
roles of power over raced figures. He establishes for us the guidelines and then, slowly, these structured separations begin to break down and subsume themselves, showing, as Kilgour writes, that inside and outside are illusions of Eurocentric ideas on structure, which set up “opposites” like white and black as separate from and unreliant upon one another. Rather, white and black are both in opposition and inseparable, consuming and being consumed, carnivorous and cannibalistic in nature. Poe shakes the idea of black as bad and white as good, blurring and collapsing the dividing line until only gray tangles remain. One of the many reasons Poe’s Pym has not enjoyed as much critical and popular exposure as Poe’s other works, most notably his vast array of short stories and haunting poems, is the result of Pym’s very confused and seemingly incongruent storyline. We cannot completely trust the narrator: Pym’s story has too many inconsistencies. Amongst other things, dead characters are mentioned as still alive and certain characters, important to the text, abruptly disappear without explanation. These discrepancies make investing in Pym and his narrative a difficult task for Poe’s audience. It is easier to write Pym off as a poorly conceived and executed maritime adventure story than a valuable text. Really what we need to examine are the huge inconsistencies and oscillations of character in the white and raced members of Poe’s journey, and see what they reveal.

After the unfortunate end to Pym and Augustus’ aforementioned maiden sea journey, the boys return home. Not long after, Pym feels the pull of the sea again and convinces Augustus to sneak him aboard Augustus’ father’s whaling vessel, the Grampus. This plan works, and Pym stows away deep within the vessel, not to reveal himself until it is too late for the ship to turn back. In the meantime, Augustus is to smuggle food to Pym. Their plan is foiled, however, when, shortly into the journey, a
mutiny occurs, wherein Augustus' father, the Captain, and most of his loyal crew are killed. The racial status-quo at this point is maintained: blacks and Indians are portrayed as excessively violent, stupid, and drunk, and the whites are portrayed as, on average, stalwart members of society, victimized (murdered) and betrayed by their underlings. The mutineers comprise "Seven of the [34 person] crew (among whom was the cook, a negro)" (47, my emphasis) and Dirk Peters, the "son of an Indian squaw [and] a fur-trader" (49). The mutineers commit "horrible butchery," but most notably, the narrative focuses on the black cook and the hybrid, Dirk Peters. The black cook is portrayed as the most bloodthirsty of the mutineers (49). While the other six mutineers herd prisoners to the gangplank, the black "cook stands with an axe, striking each victim on the head as he [is] forced over the side of the vessel by the other mutineers" (48). By the butchery's conclusion, of the 27, only five (amongst them, Augustus) are spared, but only because the mutineers grow bored and tired.

The only member of the mutineer crew not ready to put down arms is the "black cook...who in all respects was a perfect demon" (48). But he is forced to, and the narrative then goes into a luxuriously detailed description of Dirk Peters:

one of the most purely ferocious-looking men I ever beheld. He was short in stature – not more than four feet eight inches high – but his limbs were of the most Herculean mold. His hands, especially, were so enormously thick and broad as hardly to retain a human shape. His arms, as well as his legs, were bowed in the most singular manner, and appeared to possess no flexibility whatever. His head was equally deformed, being of immense size, with an indentation on the crown (like that on the head of most negroes), and entirely bald. To conceal this latter deficiency, which did not proceed from old age, he usually wore a wig formed of any hair-like material which presented itself – occasionally the skin of a Spanish dog or American grizzly bear... The mouth extended nearly from ear to ear; the lips were thin, and seemed, like some other portions of his frame, to be devoid of natural pliancy, so that the ruling expression never varied under the influence of any emotion whatever. This ruling expression may be conceived when it is considered that the teeth were exceedingly long and protruding, and never even
partially covered, in any instance, by the lips. To pass this man with a casual glance, one might imagine him to be convulsed with laughter – but a second look would induce a shuddering acknowledgement, that if such an expression were indicative of merriment, the merriment must be that of a demon... anecdotes [were told of] his prodigious strength when under excitement, and some of them had given rise to his sanity. (49-50)

There is no such extensive description of the other characters in the narrative, bar perhaps the Tsali, who comprise not one person but a group of people. Poe does not dedicate this much text even to the physical descriptions of the exotic animals encountered on the journey. It is important, then, to think on why Poe would provide such a detailed description of only Peters. In Poe’s time, phrenology and like pseudo-sciences were given the ultimate authority in determining race. In giving Dirk Peters’ parentage and then immediately following with his deformed physical appearance, Poe suggests a cause-effect relationship, implying that because Peters is an unnatural mix-raced hybrid, his physical appearance manifests the unnaturalness of his person, resulting in Peters’ hideous and unmistakably animalistic figure. Even his teeth are animalistic, “exceedingly long and protruding, and never even partially covered... by the lips.” In short, they give the impression of fangs, an animal trait. This animal image is continuously reinforced by the title “the hybrid” that Poe uses to refer to Peters. “Hybrid” is a term applied to animals, for instance, when breeders breed dogs, they refer to mixed-type dogs as “hybrid” or “mutt,” instead of human terms for mixed-race like “mixed-blood.” Another title Poe gives the mutineers is “ruffian” (67), which means coarse and shares a common root with the word “rough,” casting the mutineers in a lower-class light, in essence, making them “uncivilized” or less human. In fact, Peters, with his animal-like maw “extending from ear to ear” can never change his facial expression and so does not seem to have emotions. Facial expressions are a very arguably human language and a most
effective type of body language as well as a kind of silent communication from one man to another. Because others cannot see the emotion displayed on Peters’ face, he seems foreign. Poe dehumanizes Peters and the black cook (who doesn’t even get the human decency of a name) even more thoroughly when both are compared to demons and are different degrees of animalistic, the cook in his thirst for blood and violence and Peters in his appearance and dress. Peters wears animal skins and furs on his head, and although he is only half Indian, he is thought of as raced because he appears raced. At this point, Poe is following the tendencies of his time period and failing to distinguish between races: Indian or black, Peters still appears black, with a skull like a black man’s. At this point, it becomes relevant to address how Poe uses race within *Pym*. In following the trend of his time period, Poe fails to differentiate between black and Indian, “equat[ing] South Seas natives with Native Americans as similarly alien groups” (Bercovitch 234). Non-white races (black and Native American) mix and become indistinguishable as far as general meaning. Rather than distinguishing every race, the key matrix of racial differentiation in *Pym* is non-raced versus raced, or white versus raced, a matrix that begins by depicting raced figures as inhuman and white as the only true human. At this point in the narrative, we can understand the text as representing white as a lack of race rather than a race in itself.

Adding to Poe’s depiction of the mutineers as inhuman is their startling lack of loyalty to any and everything except self. After the mutineers successfully commandeer the ship, they must deal with each other. The mutineers “had frequent and violent quarrels among themselves” (69). They are not only disloyal to the original crew and captain, but also to each other, lacking true hierarchy, a battle of wills ever-ongoing
between the mutineer “leader,” the first mate, and the black cook. When one of their own “fell overboard, being very much in liquor,” (69), he was “drowned – no attempt being made to save him” (69-70). We can contrast this kind of less humane behavior with the earlier established, tightly loyal, symbiotic bond that Augustus and Pym share and understand that Poe is representing the mutineers in a decidedly negative light, passing judgment. The mutineers finally decide to dispose of four out of the five remaining original crew members, putting them into a small whaling boat in the middle of the ocean with few provisions, not caring that those four men are most likely going to die. After the dispatching of the original crew, we can understand the mutineers as being “raced” (with 2/7 of their group black and Indian), and being violent, bloodthirsty, betayers, murderers, alcoholics, and simply, in the most broad and basic sense of the word, bad. We also understand, in opposition, the remaining members of the crew to be white, loyal, not unnecessarily violent, and, to apply a simplistic blanket word, good. By the time Poe finishes describing the mutineers, there is hardly anything humanly commendable in them.

Now, Augustus, saved by Peters, is the only remaining original non-mutineer crewmember. As this entire mutiny is taking place, Pym is still deep within the ship. After a while, Pym, upon finding his food (specifically, mutton) has gone bad, will not eat it, despite his hunger. He simply waits, controlling his hunger to the best of his ability. Soon after, Pym’s pet dog, Tiger, arrives. The dog has no qualms about eating the rotten meat, consuming it with great hunger and relish. The contrast between man and animal here is very clear: (expand here?), and only made clearer when the dog, so amicable and obedient, begins to act violent, “his eyeballs flashing fiercely [and] growl[ing]” (41).
However, although Pym fears he will die of starvation or thirst, he does not entertain ideas of killing Tiger and eating the dog’s flesh. He cannot “endure the thought of killing him, [although] it seemed absolutely necessary for [his] own [wellbeing]” (41) for the dog, until this point, was a good friend to him. Even after Tiger becomes crazed and attempts to kill Pym, Pym still finds himself unable to leave Tiger to die in the ship’s storage area. Despite the difficulty, after Augustus finally reappears, the two friends “preserv[ed] him. [They] therefore dragged him along with [them] as well as [they] could, although with greatest difficulty and fatigue” (62) because “To leave Tiger in the [storage] was what neither of [them] could endure to think of” (62).

Above decks, the mutineers continue to fight amongst themselves, and, unable to reconcile, “two principal factions [arise] – one headed by the mate, the other by the cook” (57), each with a different plan. As seen above, this loyalty is something Poe stresses again and again, and this failure of loyalty lends a sub-human or “raced” quality to the mutineers. An interesting figure to concentrate on in this vein is Dirk Peters, for although he is a mutineer, he also turns out to be repeatedly instrumental in the survival of both Augustus and Pym. When Poe first introduces Peters, we are put off by his animalistic appearance, believing that the outside must reflect some manner of what lies within Peters, assuming exactly what Pym and Augustus assume. After all, Poe describes Peters’ status as a mutineer and his appearance first, and they comprise our first impression. Then we learn that Pym tells us about Peters because “he proved the main instrument in preserving the life of Augustus” (50), but Poe doesn’t show us the circumstances under which Peters saves Augustus so we still assume that he is as he appears. Trust in Peters and belief in his sanity only develop as the story develops: Peters must prove himself to
Pym and to us. The first role Peters plays, as mentioned above, is mutineer and thus captor to Augustus. Pym remains hidden. But Peters also acts as savior and beneficiary: he "treated Augustus all this day with great kindness, and entered into a long conversation with him respecting the Pacific Ocean, and the islands he had visited in that region. He asked him whether he would not like to go with the mutineers on a kind of exploring and pleasure voyage" (69). Over the course of the text, Peters must prove and does prove himself. Soon after the original coup, because the number of men backing Peters' mutineer faction has severely dwindled, Dirk Peters recruits Pym and Augustus to take back the ship. Their coup succeeds, and only Peters, Augustus, Pym, and Parker remain. Directly after, foul weather strikes and lays waste to the Grampus and the crew is shipwrecked, with no access to food or drinkable water. Peters makes several attempts at getting to the food and fresh water submerged below decks, risking his life and nearly drowning a few times in this "undertaking... of great difficulty and danger" (96), all to no avail. This is the one of the first of many times Peters will risk his own life to help Pym and crew, overturning the animalistic nature attributed to him because of his appearance.

As their situation begins to look desperate, a Dutch brig appears, about two miles off. The ship's movements are erratic; otherwise everything seems in order until the ship gets closer and Pym and crew discover that the ship is filled with severely rotted human bodies (101). It is this terrible scene and this terrible ship that delivers, suggests, or uncovers the very first thoughts towards cannibalism for:

the tall stout figure [of the third sailor], still leaning on the bulwark, and still nodding his head to and fro... his face was now turned from [Pym and crew] so that [they] could not behold it... On his back, from which a portion of the shirt had been torn, leaving it bare, there sat a huge seagull, busily engorging itself with the horrible flesh, its bill and talons deep buried, and its white plumage spattered all over with blood. As the brig moved further round so as to bring us
close in view, the bird, with much apparent difficulty, drew out its crimsoned head, and, after eyeing us for a moment as if stupefied, arose lazily from the body upon which it had been feasting, and, flying directly above our deck, hovered there a while with a portion of clotted and liver-like substance in its beak. The horrid morsel dropped at length with a sullen splash immediately at the feet of Parker. May God forgive me, but now, for the first time, there flashed through my mind a thought, a thought which I will not mention, and I felt myself making a step towards the ensanguined spot. I looked upward, and the eyes of Augustus met my own with a degree of intense and eager meaning which immediately brought me to my senses. I sprang forward quickly, and, with a deep shudder, threw the frightful thing into the sea. (102)

There is a lot going on in this scene, the first of which is the animal acting as a human. When the Dutch brig is still at a distance, the third sailor moving on the deck appears to be smiling and nodding at Pym and crew, as if encouraging them to hold out for what appears to be a rescue (100). But in the scene above, when the ship is at its closest and passing by Pym and crew, we learn that the encouraging sailor is actually only a corpse, and its human movements can be attributed to the seagull feasting on its back. This marks a break down of the human-animal relationship. This breakdown of the human-animal relationship mirrors the breakdown in the human-human relationship that is to come. The seagull, feasting on the flesh of man, makes a suggestion: Pym and crew, so hungry and desperate, can also feed on human flesh. This suggestion is never explicitly stated: instead, all Poe writes is that a piece of the rotting sailor drops from the seagull’s beak and lands at Parker’s feet, and then, “May God forgive me, but now, for the first time, there flashed through my mind a thought, a thought which I will not mention, and I felt myself making a step towards the ensanguined spot. I looked upward, and the eyes of Augustus met my own with a degree of intense and eager meaning which immediately brought me to my senses” (102). Pym, the civilized white man, is beginning to lose his grip on this rational and controlled self. Instead, he finds himself moving, without
thinking, towards the bloody chunk of rotten human with the thought of food. To cement the fall of the white man, when Pym looks into Augustus’ eyes, he sees his own thoughts, reflected back to him, the same “intense and eager meaning” (102), and it is this reflection of himself, the recognition of himself in his friend, that makes him realize exactly what is happening. It is this recognition that brings Pym back to himself and allows him to override his basic instincts and throw the rotted flesh into the water. Back in the hold of the Grampus, Pym, despite his hunger and desperation at being trapped, would not eat the rotted mutton. Instead, it is the dog, Tiger, who eats the mutton, the animal willing to eat anything and everything. Now, we can see a direct contrast: Pym and crew have fallen to far into “animal” or “inhuman” that they not only consider eating rotten meat, but rotten human flesh.

This episode is the gateway: the suggestion of cannibalism grows and festers as Pym and crew, finding no food or water despite extensive and exhausting searching, grow hungrier and more desperate, until the planted idea blooms and comes to fruition in chapter 12. According to Geoffrey Sanborn, the key racial binary (white-raced) begins to shift and collapse when Pym, Augustus, and the other shipwrecked members of the Grampus encounter their own desires for cannibalism. In Poe’s time, Sanborn asserts, an individual who engaged in cannibalism for any reason was raced non-white. So when Pym sees the desire for human flesh:

shining in Augustus’ eyes, if his own eyes are anything like Augustus’, he has forgotten, or almost forgotten, his humanity and his race. There is perversity and then there is perversity, it now appears.... [for] To act without reason [is unnatural for man]. To move impetuously toward the ensanguined spot, is to approach the precincts of the racially defiled. (Sanborn 167-168, my emphasis)
The horror lies in the racial contamination – the breakdown and unification of the binary, for “the theme of mixed blood became a mechanical device, a means of generating the horror of transgressed or collapsed boundaries in the body comparable to boundaries violated and crossed by [racial warfare]” (Bercovitch 224) like Turner’s Rebellion. To eat like the raced is to become the raced. Because “if this inner cannibal did not appear in their eyes, if the survivors exhibited nothing more than a piteous physical need, then their acts could be reconciled with a putatively natural, rational white identity. As long as they held off until ‘the last extremity,’ wrestled with the morality of the act, drew lots when someone had to be killed and divided the body equally, their cannibalism was merely situational, and therefore not really cannibalism at all” (168). That is, Sanborn twists the definition of cannibalism, making it not so much a matter of the act but the rationality and discipline behind the act. That is, as long as Pym and crew dealt with cannibalism without passion, as something only necessary and not enjoyable or any other kind of emotional, then they can still identify as white.

When Pym and crew are, “reduced to the last horrible extremity, [Pym already] had secretly made up [his] mind to suffer death in any shape or under any circumstances rather than resort to such a course” (113). Note, Pym asserts his will – his morality or humanity – over the needs of his body and the animal instinct (and drive) for survival. When Parker comes to him with cannibalism, Pym says he does his best to reason with and dissuade his fellow survivor, telling him that “to resort to such a course was the most horrible alternative which could enter into the mind of man” (113). This sentence suggests, though, like Pym’s unnamed thought when confronted with the rotten human flesh earlier, that cannibalism is not unthinkable, and thus, not outside of the human
realm. But Parker replies that "he had now held out as long as human nature could be
sustained" (113). To argue that Parker is so hungry and desperate that he has been
completely reduced from everything human is to say that Parker is now an animal, and he
now bends his rationality around all lofty philosophical principles and instead uses reason
to push his cause forward, saying "that it was unnecessary for all to perish, when, by the
death of one, it was possible, and even probable, that the rest might be finally preserved"
(113). Pym then takes the next couple pages to tell his reader that he tried everything to
stop and delay the cannibalism and to change Parker's mind. He fails, and Parker informs
Augustus and Peters of his idea. Augustus and Peters have been thinking along the same
lines, not possessing the "strength of mind" (113) (read: self-control) that Pym does, and
so, the plan moves forward.

The men settle on a democratic (read: fair) system for determining who will be
sacrificed: drawing straws (with sticks as substitutes). Here it becomes relevant to note
that Pym and company are holding on to certain social constraints and applying them to
what Pym thinks of as an "animal" act. The next few scenes contradict what Poe has set
up here, and the reader is forced to reevaluate and think about the conditional humanity
of Pym. The desire to survive – the determination to live – when pitted against human
morality wins in this case: cannibalism happens, and condoning it – partaking in it – is
equally as terrible as suggesting cannibalism. Pym could have chosen, on pure principle,
to not take part in the cannibalistic scene, but he does, and with great passion and relish.
The stick drawing boils down to Pym and Parker, and in the moment before Parker draws
the shortest straw, "all the fierceness of the tiger possessed my bosom, and I felt towards
my poor fellow-creature, Parker, the most intense, the most diabolical hatred" (117). By
this point, in the fight to survive, Pym has been reduced to an animal, likening himself to a tiger, and feeling for his fellow man, irrational hatred. But the moment passes, and Parker is killed. While Pym and company’s earlier actions are questionable, their next acts cement their fall: the crew, “having in some measure appeased the raging thirst which consumed us by the blood of the victim, and having by common consent taken off the hands, feet, and head, and throwing them, together with the entrails into the sea, we devoured the rest of the body piecemeal, [over] four... days” (117). Not only does Pym renege on his vow to never commit cannibalism, but he also seems to not mind it all that much. Once Parker is dead, they drink his blood, probably still warm, and then dehumanize him. Removing Parker’s head, feet, and hands (the parts of him that physically signify his humanity), removes Parker’s identity as a human. That is, without hands with opposable thumbs and a white man’s face, Parker ceases to be a man and becomes, instead, only a piece of meat, no different from the steaks at our dinner tables. With no way for Pym, Augustus, and Peters to identify Parker or, more importantly, identify with Parker, he becomes nothing more than an animal, completely inhuman. This reading is supported when the text shows no evidence of Pym expressing sorrow or disgust. Rather, Pym treats eating Parker with the fewest lines possible, describing nothing more than the barest outline of the eating. This brevity plays into Poe’s goal of showing us the dilemma preceding the act but not the act itself so that, like Sanborn, we focus on the rationalities behind the act and not the actual act itself. Even focusing on the rationalities, if we approach humanity (that is, the identity of whiteness), from a Sanborn perspective, Pym and crew can only continue to identify as (non-raced or, in other terms, unpolluted) if they act with complete rationality for the duration of the democratic
process of choosing the sacrifice. The problem now is we know that Pym breached the rational democratic process with his *passion*: under Sanborn’s definition of white identity, we can now understand Pym to be raced, rationality having lost to animalistic wants.

A few days after the body is completely consumed, Pym and crew devise a new plan for obtaining food: hacking into a submerged food storeroom with an axe, an idea that seems like it would have come to mind before cannibalism. It now becomes relevant to reflect briefly on why or how the jump to cannibalism occurred without the actual exhaustion of all other venues of nourishment. The logical (and most probable) answer has a bit to do with the seagull in the earlier Dutch Brig scene – the seagull planted the idea of eating human flesh in the minds of the shipwrecked. Ideas are dangerous and possess a strange magnetic power: for example, if I say, “don’t think about flamingoes,” your mind is drawn to thoughts of flamingoes. The cannibalism idea, thus suggested, has grown and flowered in the minds of Pym and crew (113) and manifested as a substitute to the desire for survival. Survival means cannibalism and so cannibalism becomes desired and delicious. If blood means life, then Pym and crew are out for blood. Thus, they commit cannibalism and once Parker’s body is fully consumed, Pym and crew formulate a new plan, which, of course, succeeds. The crew has ample food to last until they are rescued by the *Jane-Guy*, which is on its way south.

At this point, Poe begins playing with color, speaking of penguins and albatrosses, one white and one mostly black, living symbiotically. Poe refers to their relationship in human terms, saying “Between this bird and the penguin the most singular friendship exists. Their nests are constructed with great uniformity, upon a plan concerted
between the two species — that of the albatross being placed in the centre of a little square formed by the nests of four penguins... [called] a rookery...every penguin is surrounded by four albatrosses, and each albatross by a like number of penguins" (140). Poe goes into extensive detail about the lives of these birds and their unique agreement. This interplay of black and white and their mutual relationship and living situation seem to naturally invite comparison with people’s arrangement with other people. The birds live in equality and harmony, but the different “species” of men cannot accomplish what simple animals can. With men, black and white are separated and subject to a hierarchy. The extensive description of the birds seems to criticize the inability of men to accomplish mutuality with other men, suggesting that black and white are equal and able to get along.

As the Jane-Guy sails through ice fields, the crew encounters a strange white beast: “a gigantic creature of the race of the Arctic bear, but far exceeding in size the largest of these animals. Being well armed, we made no scruple of attacking it once” (159) but the bear then attacks the crewmembers, and only Peters’ unnatural strength saves them from the creature’s vicious attack. Ignoring the fact that the crew attacked the Arctic bear for no reason other than because they could, the bear, unnaturally large and with red eyes, is taken aboard the vessel and the Jane-Guy continues on its journey. This passage seems to criticize colonialism, with the explorers as the colonizers (white) and the bear (animal) as the attacked colonist, killed for its resources. White begins to mean something more than non-race: white includes both the unknown creature and the terrible colonist. As they continue south, night and day become indistinguishable: the color of the sky is a constant milky white: “For a long time past, we had had no night at all, the
daylight being continual..." (165). This particular note furthers the collapse of the racial binary: night and day are negatively defined. That is, they are opposites along the same spectrum. White becomes a positive (begins to mean something) and stops being only a lack of race.

Soon, the crew comes upon an island (Tsalal) The Tsalal natives (the Tsali) meet the exploration teams in canoes. The inhabitants seem to characterize the ideal "savage" race: a mix between Native American and black, with "their complexion a jet black, with thick and long woolly hair. They were clothed in skins of an unknown black animal, shaggy and silky, and made to fit the body with some degree of skill... Their arms consisted principally of clubs, or a dark, and apparently very heavy wood" (164). They also carry rudimentary spears, slings, and black, egg-sized rocks, presumably for ammunition. They speak their own language and are allowed to board the Jane-Guy. The Tsali have apparently "never before seen any of the white race — from whose complexion, indeed, they appear to recoil" (165). The white men are not the only white that they seem to fear: the crew of the Jane Guy "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," (166) objects of which the only shared trait seems to be the color white. Indeed, we later learn that their entire island is black — animals with black fur, black trees, black rocks, black, black, black.

After the Tsali are permitted to board the Jane-Guy and explore, the Tsali return the gesture and take the crew of the Jane-Guy to their, for lack of better description, village. Their village is described as very rudimentary but also serves as a testament to the complex social structure of the Tsali. Those with power wear better clothing (black
fur), carry weapons, and live in better-quality huts. Those lower in the social hierarchy are naked, carry no weapons, and live in holes in the ground. The women are described, despite their title of “savage,” as “not altogether wanting in what might be termed personal beauty. They were straight, tall, and well-formed, with a grace and freedom of carriage not to be found in civilized society” (172). However, like Peters, the Tsali are more animalistic in appearance overall, “their lips...were thick and clumsy, so that, even when laughing, the teeth were never disclosed” (172). They are also described as having animal-like dietary palates: after the group arrives at the village, they are taken to the village leader’s hut, where:

he immediately ordered dinner. This was handed into the tent over the heads of the attendants, and consisted of the palpitating entrails of a species of unknown animal, probably one the slim-legged hogs which we had observed in our approach to the village. Seeing us at a loss of how to proceed, he began, by way of setting us an example, to devour yard after yard of the enticing food, until we could positively stand it no longer, and evinced such manifest symptoms of rebellion of stomach as inspired his majesty with a degree of astonishment only inferior to that brought about by the looking-glasses. We declined, however, partaking of the delicacies before us, and endeavored to make him understand that we had no appetite whatsoever, having just finished a hearty dejeuner. (174)

Pym is clearly disgusted and fighting nausea at the idea and spectacle of eating still undulating pig intestines, the parts of an animal that are not typically served as food in Western cultures and are instead considered “waste.” This choice to eat entrails marks the Tsali as “less civilized,” but this very obvious disgust towards ingesting entrails is curious, and ultimately contradictory, when pitted against the apathy Pym expressed when talking about eating his fellow man, Parker. Pym will not eat moving entrails, but he has no problem drinking warm human blood, probably still pumping from Parker’s body. Poe seems to suggest that we think about Pym’s hypocrisy and the tension between these two descriptions.
Following the meal, the Tsali and the crew of the Jane-Guy continue to have seemingly amiable relations. Thus, the crew of the Jane-Guy is taken by surprise when, while traveling along a narrow path against the side of a mountain, the Tsali manage to kill the entire crew in a staged rockslide. Only Peters and Pym escape by ducking into a fissure in the mountain wall, becoming “the only living white men upon the island” (188) or, in other words, the minority. It is interesting that Pym now uses the term “white man” to describe Peters. The word seems to apply either only because Peters has helped Pym enough that Pym considers him trustworthy and civilized or only because they are on an all black island. Peters is the closest to white that Pym can get in an ally. Peters is only white when reflected against black.

Peters and Pym manage to emerge from the fissure only to witness the Tsali blow up the Jane-Guy. When they blow the ship up, the huge arctic bear flies onto the beach. The Tsali, as with everything else white, are afraid of it and scream “Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!” (196). They drive stakes into the ground around it and then flee. After witnessing the destruction of the Jane-Guy, Pym and Peters search for a way down the mountain; the two find a chasm system, the walls of which have characters carved into them. The narrative contains reproductions of these hieroglyphic-like characters. Pym makes no sense of them, saying, “With a very slight exertion of the imagination [some of the] indentures might have been taken for the intentional, although rude, representation of a human figure standing erect with an outstretched arm. The rest of them bore also some little resemblance to alphabetical characters” (202). In the final installment of Pym, its author includes some notes on the text, among which is a note on the aforementioned characters. Although Pym did not attribute any meaning to the characters, we learn that
after analysis, the characters do have meaning, being Ethiopian, Arabic, and Egyptian, and translating, respectively, into “To be shady,” “To be white,” and “The region of the south” (220). Poe does not explain how these characters came to be, but the reader assumes they were carved by the Tsali, giving them the sophistication for, capacity for, and culture of *written* language, the implications of which are resonant (agriculture, for one). This Tsali’s having a written language is a huge revelation because writing was something attributed only to civilized, or white, cultures and thus a major tool in dividing the savage raced figure from the cultured white figure. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. writes in “Race.” *Writing and Difference*:

Hegel, echoing Hume and Kant, claimed that Africans had no history, because they had developed no systems of writing and had not mastered the art of writing in European languages. In judging civilizations, Hegel’s strictures with respect to the absence of written history presume a critical role for *memory*, a collective, cultural memory. Metaphors of the childlike nature of the slaves, of the masked, puppetlike personality of the black, all share this assumption about the absence of memory. Mary Langdon, in her novel *Ida May: A Story of Things Actual and Possible* (1854), writes that ‘they are mere children... You seldom hear them say much about anything that’s past, if they only get enough to eat and drink at the present moment.’ Without writing, no *repeatable* sign of the workings of reason, of mind, could exist. Without memory or mind, no history could exist. Without history, no humanity, as defined consistently from Vico to Hegel, could exist. (11)

If writing and memory are a large part of weighing civilization, then the Tsali’s, having both, must be considered “civilized,” and thus, identifiable as white, as long as white still means human. Not only do the Tsali possess language; they also understand the meaning of white and remember that it means something terrible (the reason they seem so afraid of white and run when they encounter it). Lack of written language and memory, then, is no longer reason to exclude the Tsalis from the human definition, despite their skin color and other physical attributes. At this point, black no longer operates in opposition to
white; instead, the basis for differentiating white and black seems to have become inconsequential, arbitrary, and useless.

After this discovery, Pyin and Peters reach a dead end. After several days, a few failures, and many root vegetables, they discover a cliff made of soft soapstone. Peters comes up with a way to climb down the cliff wall, a “means which [Pym] should never have conceived of...and for which we were indebted altogether to Peters’ ingenuity and resolution” (205). Poe, in giving us this detail, takes Peters from loyal, strong, and half-white to smart and determined, reflecting his promotion from “hybrid” to white man and casting the scale for determining humanity on abstract qualities rather than physical appearance. Peters climbs down first, paving the way for Pym. As Pym is climbing down the cliff wall, he is hit with a bout of vertigo:

For one moment my fingers clutched convulsively upon their hold... I let go at once my grasp upon the [wall], and, turning half round from the precipice, remained tottering for an instant against its naked face. But now there came a spinning of the brain; a shrill-sounding and phantom voice screamed within my ears; a husky, fiendish, and filmy figure stood immediately beneath me; and, sighing, I sunk down with a bursting heart, and plunged within its arms. I had swooned, and Peters had caught me as I fell. He had observed my proceedings from his station at the bottom of the cliff; and, perceiving my imminent danger, had endeavored to inspire me with courage by every suggestion he could devise; although my confusion of mind had been so great as to prevent my hearing what he said... On my recovery, my trepidation had entirely vanished; I felt a new being, and with some little further aid from my companion, [navigated] in safety. (206)

Because Peters is the only figure standing under Pym, the “husky, fiendish, and filmy figure [that] stood immediately beneath me” can only be describing the hybrid turned white man. However, because of his intelligence and his (as shown above) loyalty to, concern for, and caretaking of his companion, Pym, Peters seems to act in the same role that Augustus played before his death: friend. Poe’s confusion of Peters’ identity is never
more transparent than in this moment. Peters is a hybrid in more than one sense: he is Indian and white (though we now identify him as white), demon and savior.

After successfully scaling the cliff, Pym and Peters head towards the beach in hopes of escaping from Tsalal. On the way, they are seen and ambushed by a small group of Tsali, who raise the alarm, "howling like wild beasts" (209). Pym describes these Tsali as "wretches...the most wicked, hypocritical, vindictive, bloodthirsty, and altogether fiendish race of men upon the face of the globe. It is clear we should have had no mercy had we fallen into their hands" (210). The "savages" (209) give chase but Pym and Peters take off in the only viable one of their four canoes with a Tsalal captive aboard. It is curious that Poe chooses to describe the Tsali with the title "savage" and to call them the worst men in the world. Again, the text seems to contradict itself: let us tell the story from a different angle. The Tsali are living on Tsalal peacefully with their own social hierarchy, beautiful women, spoken and written language, food, shelter, weapons, and canoes, when the crew of the Jane-Guy arrives. The Tsali have never encountered white men. The only white creatures have been bad: the species of huge, white arctic bear lives in the region and maybe journeys to the island and attacks it every now and then. The white man then, through color association (the same kind people applied to black people in the 1830s), is evil to the Tsali. The Tsali possess the intelligence to trick the white men into trusting them and then kill them. The title "savage" does not seem to apply anymore: yes, they are mean to the white men, but perhaps with "reason." Pym just doesn't try to understand those reasons. He also describes the Tsali as a "race of men," to whom he attributes beauty, intelligence, cunning, spoken and written language, and the ability to
develop water vehicles, develop weaponry, and build shelter. The color black, in the face of all of this “human” evidence, loses its “natural” meaning.

The trio – Pym, Peters, and their Tsali captive – travel south in their stolen canoe. As they progress, white ash falls from the sky and the environment goes white, from which emerges what looks like a “limitless cataract” (216). (A cataract is an opaque white growth on the lens of the eye that causes blindness.) Everything is silent, and then, as the trio gets closer to the cataract:

Many gigantic and pallidly white birds flew continuously now from beyond the veil, and their scream was the eternal Tekeli-li! as they retreated from our vision... And now we rushed into the embraces of the cataract, where a chasm threw itself open to receive us. But there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was the perfect whiteness of snow. (217)

This description can only be described as a frightening, hellish vision, one that the Tsali have obviously encountered and fear. For the terror – the mystery and violence of the unknown – to manifest as white instead of black is more honest of Poe than expected at the beginning of the narrative.

Of course there are passages within the text that suggest Poe is still very much attempting to maintain a structure that separates white and black. However, the mere existence of inconsistencies and tensions within the text evidence the breakdown of that system of racial differentiation based on physicalities, calling back to and supporting Kilgour’s idea. Binaries pairs are structurally opposed yet fluid and utterly dependent upon one another: unwittingly or not, we are all cannibals, mentally consuming and being consumed by one another, eating and regurgitating meaning inflected actions until the end product is so confused that all meaning is lost. This fluidity, of course, reflects the very dangerous nature of judgment grounded upon racial attributes: confusion. Poe’s text
evidences the truth and inevitable end of all binary oppositions: because black and white are entirely codependent, this codependence eventually moves to manifest the “nostalgia for total insideness, for a fable of identity involving the total identification of opposites” (Kilgour 10). White and black, the primary racial matrix in *Pym*, begin the narrative at opposing ends of the spectrum of racial meaning, upholding the accepted beliefs of Poe’s time. However, as the narrative progresses, we witness the steady collapse of white identity attributes into black and black into white, to the point where the spectrum no longer exists, and identity itself becomes a fluid, artificial, and collapsible construct. That is, all binaries, by nature, are *produced* and eventually fail, collapsing into an indistinguishable singularity, each binary identifying completely with its twin and rendering meaning assignment and differentiation impossible, as exampled in Poe’s *Pym*. Solid definition of race identity (or identity at all) and complete separation of races and cultures take on mythical proportions, leaving us forever attempting to grapple with race identity assignment.


Sanborn, Geoffrey. "A Confused Beginning: The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, of


Works Consulted


