POSTMODERN APPLIANCES AND THE PRESCIENCE OF POE’S THE NARRATIVE OF ARTHUR GORDON PYM OF NANTUCKET

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ABSTRACT

Although written nearly one hundred years before the concept postmodernism makes its way into our culture, Edgar Allan Poe’s heavily criticized only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, can now be read as part of the postmodern canon, changing our value judgments associated with the supposedly failed work. This paper will demarcate the pastiche of characteristics which generate what theorists call postmodernism, then through a close theoretical reading of Poe’s novel, will show how his work fits within that description. The implications of this application of postmodernism to Poe’s work include a new way of reading Poe’s text which points out within the text a renegotiation of preconceived notions related to gender, sexuality, reality, trauma, and language. Further, the presence of postmodern motifs within Poe’s work suggests that postmodernism is, in fact, premodern, as it represents a reactionary way of thinking in unwieldy historical moments rather than merely a historical period bound by the limitations of time.
In 1838, twenty-nine years after his birth and eleven years before his death, Edgar Allan Poe had already experienced a series of personal and professional tragedies, rendering him and his work mere “detached tales and pieces” (qtd. in Kopley xv). The abandonment of his father and untimely deaths of his beloved mother and brother coupled with innumerable literary rejections left Poe feeling displaced as he moved from Massachusetts, to Virginia, to Maryland, and back again, searching for a place to belong. A product of his environment, the fragmented, struggling artist mirrored a divided country on the brink of Civil War, torn apart by opposing ideologies. Considering the turmoil of the historical moment, it comes as no surprise that nineteenth-century Americans, burdened by experiencing the symptoms of an unstable world, craved what publisher Wesley Harper described in his personal rejection letter to Poe on June 19, 1836 as “a single and connected story occup[ying] the whole volume” (qtd. in Kopley xiv). Since Poe’s disjointed, highly intellectual texts did not appeal to the general public, Harper suggested that he “lower himself a little to the ordinary comprehension of the generality of readers” (qtd. in Kopley xiv).

In an attempt to turn his luck around while working as a journalist in Virginia, Poe began to recognize that newspapers had become the most widely-read literature of the day, observing that Americans were fascinated with what they considered “real” stories that were often harrowing accounts of survival told by adventurous, weathered seamen. Like the sensational and melodramatic tabloid stories today, readers wanted to believe that awe-inspiring, eccentric events were happening somewhere in the world, rescuing them from the banality of their own repressed lives. Among these adventure stories,
Poe read a terrifying account of the shipwrecked *Ariel* as dictated by its survivors, realizing that the general public avidly consumed the supposed “verisimilitude” of harrowing near-death experiences with happy endings. Thinking he could upstage such narratives, Poe set out to write a “real,” fictional sea story, one that the “generality of readers” could understand and enjoy, and one which might successfully lead him down the publishing path.

Thus, Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* takes the reader on the privileged young protagonist’s coming-of-age adventure as he costumes himself, flees his New England home, and hides onboard the *Grampus* with Augustus Barnard, his liberated friend of lower social status. While at sea, Pym faces a number of situations, some meaning the difference in life or death, including a bloody coup d’etat, starvation and subsequent cannibalism, the forging of homosocial alliances, the hunting of bizarre and exotic sea creatures, and the meeting with barbarians through adventures on various islands. Pym recounts his tale in a fragmented narrative style, vacillating between prose, symbols, and his own journal entries. The novel’s ending reflects the seemingly senseless plot as it offers no resolution but merely presents readers with an image of Pym and his comrade sailing off into a sea of white “milky depths” and envisioning a “shrouded human figure” whose identity is never revealed (Poe 769).

Unfortunately, Poe’s attempt to pass fiction off as fact dissuaded and even angered readers and critics, since the “facts” or “evidence” of his nautical tale were often skewed and illogical. For this reason, Poe’s concomitant critics dismissed his only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, as a failure of imagination,
claiming that it was “an impudent attempt at humbugging the public” (qtd. in Kopley xvii). It seems that readers were uncomfortable with Poe’s blurring the boundaries of fiction and fact, and they could not conceive of the notion that serious writers could blend such separate genres for the sake of storytelling, undoubtedly as the survivors of the Ariel had done. Nonetheless, Poe’s fragmented, “factional” story, full of mysteries and ambiguities and highly unpopular in his time, can now be considered a predecessor to the postmodern works that have received critical acclaim, especially within our current cultural environment. The genre breaking narrative’s mystery, grotesque imagery, odd use of symbols, and eerily incomplete denouement, all seem better suited to our postmodern climate rather than the antebellum zeitgeist in which it was written. Indeed, we might not have Thomas Pynchon’s Oedipa Maas from The Crying of Lot 49 without Poe’s Pym.

This paper will demarcate the pastiche of characteristics which generate what theorists call postmodernism, then through a close theoretical reading of Poe’s novel, will show how his work fits within that description. The implications of this application of postmodernism to Poe’s work include a new way of reading Poe’s text which points out within the text a renegotiation of preconceived notions related to gender, sexuality, reality, trauma, and language. Further, the presence of postmodern motifs within Poe’s work suggests that postmodernism is, in fact, premodern, as it represents a reactionary way of thinking in unwieldy historical moments rather than merely a historical period bound by the limitations of time.

It is important that we first build a theoretical context, and then show how Poe’s work fits within those theoretical boundaries. Although Poe is writing over one-hundred
years before the concept *postmodernism* appears in our culture, his narrative and its language are symptomatic of postmodern characteristics. In *Beginning Postmodernism*, Tim Woods points out that “[postmodernism] is a cultural concept, a notion that pervades a whole swathe of subjects” (15). In a circular attempt to offer possible definitions of the concept, Woods notes that “many theorists argue that postmodernism is not a chronological period, but more of a way of thinking and doing” (8). Echoing postmodern philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard, Woods emphasizes that “postmodernity is an attitude, an ‘incredulity towards metanarratives.’ This means that ‘postmodernity’ need not necessarily come after modernity” (qtd. in Woods 23). In other words, the elusiveness of its definition reflects the postmodern skepticism of definitive origins, and Woods recognizes that postmodernism as a way of thinking likely “seems to appeal to societies in which the demise of their former economic, cultural, and political superiority has led to a responsiveness to nostalgia and frustration” (11).

To be sure, Poe’s own life and his unwieldy historical moment left both him and his readers frustrated with their lives, compelling them to indulge themselves in a temporary escape. Reading bizarre, “real” stories with near-death experiences that ended in triumph gave nineteenth-century Americans a false sense of nostalgia for a time and place in which all of life’s difficulties were ultimately solved. Although Poe has created a simulated shipwreck tale like the ones so popular at the time, he is unwilling to compromise the tale’s integrity by ending with epiphanic moments and conventional resolutions. Thus, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*’s fragmented plot and unresolved ending reveal a suspicion of the tidy notion that “humans possess[…] an undivided and coherent self which acts as the standard of rationality,” a false idea
about humanity that postmodernists find skeptical too (Woods 11). In other words, in his attempt to reach a large body of readers, Poe only halfheartedly took Wesley Harper’s advice: he did write a “single and connected story,” and yet he refused to give his audience a traditional, classic text (qtd. in Kopley xiv). Instead, Poe offers countless unsolvable mysteries, full of complex symbols, and poised for constant interpretation and reinterpretation.

Regardless of his fervor for the mysterious, Poe knew that he must find a thread of commonality in his readers, lest he end up rejected once again. Keeping his professional goals in mind, the author strikes a compromise with himself: he will write a single story full of disjointed images, inserting above all a multitude of sensational, grotesque images that the common reader loves. Scholar Richard Kopley points out:

> Working in the genre of the sea novel, Poe clearly emphasized its sensational elements. He understood that the expectations of his potential readership had been shaped by tales of the extraordinary that appeared in monthly magazines and accounts of the extraordinary that were regularly published in the penny press. […] He was appealing to readers’ desire for pleasurable fear, and perhaps too, to their longing for annihilation. (xv-xvi)

In *Pym*, this appeal to the “sensational elements” relies heavily on images of the body, and renegotiating preconceived notions regarding the body is one aspect of postmodern thought. Woods affirms that “the representation of the body and the emergence of new concepts of the human or self” contributes to “the postmodernist scaffolding” (16). At this point in his life, Poe had become eerily familiar with bodily deterioration, blood, bile, and decay; he had witnessed death firsthand, understanding the science of bodily
functions and seeing the visceral effects of diseases like alcoholism and tuberculosis on those around him. Indeed, his beloved brother Henry perished of complications from alcoholism, and tuberculosis had become the cancer of the day, causing its victims to choke and die on their own blood. Symptoms of this obsessive curiosity appear in nineteenth-century Americana. In addition to the gruesome stories circulating from slavery, war, and Westward expansion, popular literature from the time reflected this bodily fascination. For Poe, this obsession became a springboard for the unusual images of the body presented in his narrative, giving him the opportunity to both reflect the cultural fixation on the body and to renegotiate traditional representations of the body and the self.

Poe reflects the fine line between fascination with the body and the fear of its power to elude us in his narrative. By inserting body images and associative visceral sensations, he appeals to human curiosity, inciting the desire to fathom the unknown. Kopley writes:

Poe intensified the sensations of *Pym* by rendering them with what he termed “the infinity of arts which give verisimilitude to a narration.” […] Strengthening the verisimilitude of the novel was Pym’s earnest appeal to “progressing science.” Although Poe had critiqued science as an enemy of imagination, […] he came to hold a more positive view in subsequent years, seeing science as an effort that could satisfy the imagination. (xvii)

It is precisely this imagination that Poe wishes to titillate, and by using the body as a primary image in his tale, he ensures that readers will see glimpses of themselves, that anyone with a finite, mortal body will be able to identify with. By presenting his readers
with grotesque, sensational body images, Poe holds a mirror to his readership, allowing them a forbidden, provocative, and stimulating glimpse into their own corporeal mortality.

When considering the narrative and its historical moment, it comes as no surprise that Poe’s tale is ripe with postmodern motifs: like nineteenth-century Americans, our current cultural climate, with economic depression, cancer, technological advances, and war, leaves Americans feeling powerless as well, resulting in a countercultural literary movement which recognizes and reflects the uncontrollable world. As a predecessor to postmodern works of fiction, Poe’s novel represents a pastiche of postmodern characteristics. To begin, his repeated attempts to establish verisimilitude during Pym’s journey reinforce his simulation of the news stories perceived as “real” by his readership. Indeed, Poe begins his story with a qualifying “Introductory Note,” meant to be from Pym to the reader, in which he claims that “having kept no journal” he must recall his story “from mere memory” and hence publish the tale “under the garb of fiction” (661). This preface introduces Poe’s painstaking task of repeatedly qualifying his text “true.” In a reflection on simulation, postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard’s “Simulacra and Simulation” distinguishes between representation and simulation, positing that simulation is in fact more real than reality (or representations of reality), a phenomenon he calls “hyperreal” (631). With this hyperreality comes the inevitable flip-side of the coin, a subsequent assumption about the nature of reality. Baudrillard uses Disneyland as an example of this phenomenon, and there is no doubt that Poe’s Grampus works the same way: since Pym’s initial experience on the ship is one of concealment in the ship’s hold, (Pym attempts “to convey the idea of a person
covered up”), Poe suggests that the life at sea is “hyperreal,” or hidden from reality, leaving readers to reflect on the reality of their own lives (668). In other words, Baudrillard points out that, since Disneyland presents itself as a mock-reality, it supports the myth that Los Angeles (and the remaining world) is the “real” America, just as Poe’s bizarre sea story calls into question the reality of nineteenth-century American life. By marketing itself as an escape from reality, Disneyland materializes the phantasmagoric illusion of reality, thus becoming a postmodern commodity which allows its patrons to escape from the “reality” of everyday life.

The “escape” from the real world found at Disneyland can no doubt be found in Poe’s narrative, as Pym leaves his “real” life at home for his own illusory fantasies of the “wild adventures incident to the life of a navigator” at sea (668). What Pym finds, however, is that many of the same struggles he had back home go with him. He still encounters eccentricity, intimacy, curiosity, desire, and in the ship’s hold, even ennui, all feelings he relates to his life in New England in chapter one. Indeed, the novel itself is a form of hyperreality. Like the meaningless parking-lot outside Disneyland, the novel presents a stark contrast to the banal, mundane, “real” world via its exciting plots, interesting characters, and personalized experience fit for the repressed, bored reader. In nineteenth-century America, Poe’s readers open the pages of his novel and feed their desire for escape privately, living vicariously through the text as a means of experiencing temporary elation. Ironically, the text is full of disease, struggle, and conflict, all characteristics of their real lives from which they wish to escape.

According to Baudrillard, places such as Disneyland (or ships) are “neither true nor false,” and they merely “want to be childish in order to make us believe that the
adults are elsewhere, in the “real” world, and to conceal the fact that true childishness is everywhere” (636). Just the same, the novel suggests that it is the only medium for illusion, fostering the notion that reality, unlike the novel, makes sense. Poe’s novel both accepts and denies this concept, at once attempting to simulate “real” ship stories, and yet remaining unconventional in its approach, leaving concomitant readers dissatisfied with the plot’s fragments. It seems that Poe’s readers and critics found the postmodern notion that “no one knows anything outside of hyperreality” a hard pill to swallow.

In addition to simulacra, Poe’s narrative is filled with images of blended binaries, specifically the blending of gender in both character and symbol. For postmodernists, the gender binary represents a socially constructed way of thinking and performing that deserves skepticism. In his discussion of postmodernism, Tim Woods emphasizes that “postmodernism seeks local and provisional, rather than universal and absolute, forms of legitimation” (11). Building on Derrida’s “theories of deconstruction and grammatology which seek to disrupt the illusion of priority which tends to collect around one term in any binary opposite,” postmodernism rejects the idea of a unified identity and “pits reasons in the plural—fragmented and incommensurable—against the universality of modernism and the longstanding conception of the human self as a subject with a single, unified reason” (Woods 9). Rather than follow traditional prescriptions which privilege the patriarchal side of the male/female binary, Poe rewards the elements of the text which seem both male and female. In postmodern philosopher Helene Cixous’s “Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays,” Cixous uncovers the phallocentric foundations of Western civilization and culture, and she posits that a logocentric search for truth has supported such phallocentrism throughout philosophical, literary, and
cultural history. She begins her discussion of the privileged masculine center by offering a series of binaries, such as “Activity/passivity, Sun/Moon, Head/Heart, and Logos/Pathos” (583), and preempts these binaries by posing the question, “Where is she?” (583). Summoning Derrida’s theory of privileging, Cixous suggests that “she” is perhaps “passivity,” or unproductive, “moon,” or lunatic, “heart,” or weepy, and “pathos,” or illogical, thus placing “her” on the unprivileged side of a Western binary which privileges reason, stoicism, rationality, and productivity.

Cixous recognizes that the inferiority associated with women springs forth from “the fact that logocentrism subjects thoughts—all concepts, codes, and values—to a binary system, related to “the” couple, man/woman?” (583). Logocentrism itself, or the search for a central truth, promotes male privilege through cultural arenas such as religion, philosophy, and history. Cixous points out that “consulting the history of philosophy…one notices that it is marked by an absolute constant which orders values and which is precisely this opposition, activity/passivity” (584). She goes on to say that “woman is always associated with passivity in philosophy” (584). In the narrative, Poe’s language privileges both sides of the gender binary simultaneously, suggesting that the reductive, extreme sides of male/female dualism each lack what is inherent in the other. In keeping with its postmodern characteristics, Poe’s text exhibits a “deconstructive recognition of interpretative multiplicity, of the indeterminacy and heterogeneity of cultural meaning” thus “challeng[ing] essentialist gender identities” and radically embracing the queer, blended, “abnormal” images that are deemed “other,” thereby praising the socially unacceptable (Woods 38).
The blended male/female binary first appears in the plot’s rising action as Pym hides in the ship’s hold. Deviating from traditionally blissful images of the warm, safe, womb, Pym’s experience in the womb-like “iron bound box” in the hold of the ship is terrifying (Poe 670). Along with starvation and sickness, Pym experiences nightmares and extreme fatigue, leaving him to wonder whether or not he will be rescued. Poe writes:

My dreams were of the most terrific description. Every species of calamity and horror befell me. Among other miseries, I was smothered to death between huge pillows, by demons of the most ghastly and ferocious aspect. […] The scene changed and I stood naked and alone, […] at my feet lay crouched a fierce lion […]. With a convulsive bound he sprang to his feet, and laid bare his horrible teeth. (673)

The terrorizing womb foreshadows the theme of fear associated with extremity in the text; in this case, Pym fears the womb, and subsequently the biological center of femininity. In addition to images of femininity, Pym’s fear of the lion indicates his terror of the ultra-masculine, the lion symbolizing regality or the male dominion of the jungle, but it also introduces the teeth imagery in the text, harkening to the *vagina dentata*, or fear of the vagina. Once he ascends out of the ship’s womb, he discovers a coup d'état has occurred, leaving only three men alive. Out of the survivors, the strongest shipmate is Captain Dirk Peters (an androgynously gendered character whose phallic name literally means “dagger made of stone”). Pym describes his new shipmate, with ambisexual, or with both male and female, imagery, blurring Peters’ gender and subsequently his sexual identity. He observes:
Peters himself was one of the most ferocious-looking men I ever beheld. He was short in stature, not more than four feet eight inches high, but his limbs were of Herculean mould. [...] His head was equally deformed, being of immense size, with an indentation on the crown [...] and entirely bald. To conceal this latter deficiency [...] he usually wore a wig. [...] The mouth extended nearly from ear to ear, the lips were thin, and [...] the teeth were exceedingly long and protruding. (Poe 683-84)

While Peters' uber-masculine name, ferocity, and bald “crown” (connoting the corona, or head of the penis) indicate his male qualities, Pym goes on to comment on his short stature, vaginal mouth, and his use of a wig, thus complicating his gender and subsequently adding a ferocious femininity to him. In addition, Pym notices the darkness attracting him to Peters, admitting that “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 acknowledgment that [...] the merriment must be that of a demon” (Poe 684). This queer “merriment” attracts Pym to Peters, forging an intimate bond between them that outlasts Pym’s relationship with his beloved friend, Augustus, and leaving the reader to conclude that Poe privileges the ambiguous over the exclusively masculine. The relationship shared between Pym and Peters not only blends the boundaries of friendship, but it also associatively suggests that homosexuality, another socially unacceptable act, might too be privileged.

In keeping with typical postmodern motifs, a result of the narrative’s privileged ambiguities is the demarginalization of the socially oppressed. Rather than follow the oppressive “male/female” relationship template, Poe indicates through the language of
his narrative that “abnormal” relationships take precedence over “normal” ones. For example, in a moment of extreme hunger, Pym, Peters, and Augustus indulge in their shipmate Parker’s flesh. Pym writes in his journal:

Let it suffice to say that, 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, throwing them together with the entrails, into the sea, we devoured the rest of the body, piecemeal, during the four ever memorable days of the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth of the month. (Poe 719)

By portraying the socially taboo scene of “appease[ment]” with such graceful language, juxtaposed with the scientific, matter-of-fact language used in other parts of the tale, Poe reveals his allure to and potential advocacy for the beauty of queerness, and participates in the postmodern practice of demarginalizing the oppressed. A close-reading of the language indicates that the men pass the victim back and forth drinking his blood, partaking in a camaraderie of flesh exchange not unlike the “animal or vampire” feeding frenzies so often portrayed in literature and film. Gothic scholar Anne Williams comments in “The Horror, the Horror: Recent Studies in Gothic Fiction,” that the Gothic monsters (often representing social “otherness”) infused in such stories have been representing heterophobia for some time, noting that writers like Horace Walpole and Matthew Lewis, both representing their “position[s] outside the heterosexual social economy” in their stories, insert the “loathing of the maternal” among other themes in order to represent “[a] passion for [their] own sex” (Williams 794).
In addition to gothic representations of vampirism, the iconic, postmodern vampire (developed further by Anne Rice in recent popular culture), characterized by its erotic blood fetishism, appears quite frequently as the homoeroticized, deviant male (perhaps a stigma dating back to Vlad the Impaler). In his essay “Anne Rice and the Queering of Culture,” George Haggerty explores the theme of blood-sucking as associated with sexual deviance, noting that “the vampire moves with the suave invisibility of the prototypical gay man; [...] appearing silently and taking his pleasure ruthlessly; and suffering for his transgression by being shut out from the light and condemned to an eternity of darkness” (Haggerty 10). While vampires traditionally suck blood rather than eat flesh, Pym’s description of eating Parker notes a “raging thirst” overtook him first. He points out that the dismemberment and slow devouring of the flesh came second (Poe 719). His first urge, to suck the fluid from Parker’s body, homoeroticizes the cannibalistic act further. In addition, by collectively satisfying their own primal hunger, the shipmates bond over what Pym describes as a “memorable” experience.

An evolution from the repulsive Nos Feratu, postmodern vampirism, like the recently popular Twilight series, elevates the link between sexuality and vampires to an entirely new level, and Poe has renegotiated representations of the vampire nearly 200 years before. Twilight author Stephenie Myer's protagonist, Edward Cullen, as played by Rob Pattinson in the film version, has recently led young girls to beg Pattinson for a neck-bite in the street. While these recent renegotiations of vampirism are seeming more and more acceptable, the socially oppressive tendency to associate homosexuality with monsters or disease has long marginalized and demonized gays.
and lesbians, and yet postmodern works of fiction call into question these categories, suggesting that individuals have many identities, and that one’s sexuality is not fixed but is subject to change. Although homosexuality was not considered an *identity* in Poe’s historical moment, his language associatively suggests that, like eating, sex is a natural occurrence that individuals ought to share.

Considering the associative link between homosexuality and cannibalism, a close-reading of the text unveils that Pym and Peters are not punished for these “taboo” practices but are rewarded for them. Although Pym often expresses fear of Peters, noting that he survived only “as his clerk” and thus as Peters’ prisoner, he also points out that:

[Peters] proved the main instrument in preserving the life of Augustus, and […] I shall have frequent occasion to mention him hereafter in the course of my narrative—a narrative, let me here say, which, in its later portions, will be found to include incidents of a nature so entirely out of range of human experience. (684)

Indeed, Pym’s relationship with Peters falls outside of the heterosexual social boundaries, as Peters often rescues Pym from fatal situations. He even admits that Peters “treated [the shipmates] with some degree of kindness, and on one occasion saved [them] from the brutality of the cook,” further, that “[he] had never reason to doubt the sincerity of his friendship” (684). The notion of rewarding homosexuality is a postmodern one, remembering Cixous’ call to break down the gender binaries that have been socially oppressive for so long. In fact, “postmodernism does what modernism does, only in a celebratory rather than repentant way,” and as Tim Woods points out, it
is this view of the world, this celebratory “mood or attitude” that differentiates between modernism and postmodernism, reflecting that postmodernism is a socially inclusive theory of advocacy (8). To condemn cannibalism at once condemns the cannibal, a value-judgment which reflects oppressive, traditional mores that postmodernists are skeptical of. In his essay “Lovers of Human Flesh: Homosexuality and Cannibalism in Melville’s Novels,” critic Caleb Crain shows how nineteenth-century society forged a link between the cannibalism so frequent on ships and homosexuality, pointing out that the concomitant newsworthy stories of Poe’s historical moment often included grotesqueries that appealed to an audience both horrified and fascinated by such images. The same society that winced at cannibalism and grimaced at homosexuality, two socially unacceptable acts deemed equally disreputable, longed to read stories which included “sinful” acts. He notes that, while “male-male intimacy” of course existed during the nineteenth century in America, both homosexuality and cannibalism were still social taboos that frequently arrived during dinnertime discussions (Crain 27). He writes that “[…] in the early nineteenth century, cannibalism was available for discussion. Cannibalism at sea was often the news; […] There was cannibalism among the survivors of the *Nautilus* (1807), the *Essex* (1820), the *George* (1822),” and a short ten years prior to *The Narrative*’s publication, on the *Granicus* (1828), a news event from which Poe’s *Grampus* potentially sprung forth (Crain 27). Crain goes on to say that “in the nineteenth century, cannibalism and homosexuality shared a rhetorical form. Both were represented as “the unspeakable,” citing Pym’s reaction to eating his shipmate Parker as he realizes that “such things may be imagined, but words have no power to impress the mind with the exquisite horror of their reality” (qtd. in Crain 28). Like
cannibalism, the narrative’s representation of the dark, queer oddities of the journey appeals to the reader’s thirst for the unknown, the same magnetism at play as Pym abandons his simpleton life for a life at sea. Poe associatively allows readers to fulfill their desires for such taboo table discussion in private while reading his text, and yet he exceeds the “mere” contemporary needs of his readers, making new readings possible as social climates change. Like the repressed readers indulging in Poe’s work, the protagonist leaves his previous subject position as an oppressed, bourgeois adolescent living in New England in order to decenter himself metaphorically and geographically, freeing him from the oppressive social mores that he is subjected to (i.e. his being “fortunate in everything,” his grandfather’s “attach[ment] to [him]self,” his “inheritance” and its prescriptions, his reputation, and “mother” who “went into hysterics”) and reflecting the postmodern skepticism of oppressive, central truths (662,668).

When considering intimacy onboard the ship, before Pym meets Peters, he refers to Tiger, his dog, as his only real savior, noting that the dog had saved him from dire straits many times before. As his relationship with Peters grows, Peters replaces Tiger as Pym’s savior, blending the father-figure and romantic partner role. Alone on the ship, Pym and Peters join forces to protect one another from danger. Pym recounts:

My principal terror was now on account of the sharks, which I knew to be in my vicinity. In order to deter these, if possible, from approaching me, I splashed the water vigorously with both hands and feet as I swam towards the hulk, creating a body of foam. […] By great good fortune, however, I reached the side of the vessel in safety, although so utterly wakened by the violent exertion I had used that I should never have been able to get
upon it but for the timely assistance of Peters, who now, to my great joy, made his appearance. (725)

The ship’s exemption from the oppressive mores of the previous subject position allows Pym to explore his “great joy” in relation to his comrade, thus attempting to acknowledge and cure his own repression which he undoubtedly suffers from as he escapes the sharks, and further, the oppressive culture of his past. The unconventional relationship shared between Peters and Pym, one which does not end in disease or death, leaves the reader with an image of postmodern, liberated sexuality: a homosexual relationship not stricken with the “gay disease” or other oppressive social stigmas.

As the men continue to navigate the high seas, Poe’s language maintains the privileging of “both” rather than “one or the other” as it praises the ambiguous. Pym’s fear of the female, as revealed through his fear of the deep, unknown abyss, swells. His recognition of the “enormously large” sharks circling below, (appearing as he and Peters bathed), points out that they “were forced to use great caution, being afraid of sharks, several of which were seen swimming around the brig that day” (Poe 722). He continues, discovering “seven or eight large sharks, the clashing of whose horrible teeth, as their prey was torn to pieces among them, might have been heard at the distance of a mile” (Poe 724). As scholar Mark Boren points out in “What’s Eating Ahab,” eating or being eaten should be read as much more than mere physical satisfaction/torture. Pym’s fear of the shark here indicates his overwhelming fear of the vagina, a seminal attribute of the female anatomy. In a web study conducted by the University of Buffalo, students set out to explore the cultural obsession with both eating
and with being eaten. The study, titled “The Myth of the Vagina Dentata,” analyzes the folkloric vagina dentata in literature and film, exploring popular films such as Jaws and the contemporary film Teeth. The results show:

Sharks attack from below and behind, while our monkey ancestry has taught us to prepare for danger from ahead and above. Sharks strike while we are naked in the water. [...] The tropical ocean is a warm, saline environment where gentle waves mimic the mother’s heartbeat heard from inside the womb. The shark is a mobile vagina dentata cruising the amniotic seas, slinking up from the dark abyss to bite the swimmer in half and vigorously shake the bloody remains. (The Myth)

The vagina dentata, a phenomenon representing the fear of the vagina, symbolizes one side of the male/female binary. In opposition to the celebration of gender blending, Pym’s fear of being eaten by the voracious sharks mirrors his fear of the female, further praising the ambiguous over that which is exclusively one or the other. In addition, his most frequent encounters with the teethed-beasts occur while he is nude, bathing with his comrade, Dirk Peters. Further, other than its womb associations, the Narrative explicitly references women a mere two times: first, females appear on the Jane Guy, plagued and decomposing. Pym observes:

The vessel in sight was a large hermaphrodite brig [...] There came wafted over the ocean from the strange vessel [...] a smell, a stench, such the whole world has no name for—no conception of—hellish—utterly suffocating—insufferable, inconceivable. Shall I ever forget the horror
Twenty five or thirty human bodies, among [them] several females.

(Poe 710)

Poe again seems to punish the “either/or” sides of the binary: women are plague-stricken, and men are either eaten or butchered in the ship’s bloody coup d’etat, leaving Pym and the object of his affection, the ambiguous Dirk Peters, as sole survivors. For postmodernists, this rejection of socially prescribed gender boundaries is evident in the deconstruction of a singular identity, the inclusion of the other, and the skepticism of socially created metanarratives. Postmodern theorist Donna Haraway even proposes the idea of a “cyborg” which serves “as a metaphor for the ‘disassembled and reassembled , postmodern collective and personal self’ which floats free of time, space and gender restrictions” (qtd. in Woods 39). In addition to Haraway’s theories, Woods points out that postcolonialist Homi Bhabha calls for the embracing “both” rather than privileging “self” over “other” in a way that can enable us to “explore the hybridity […] of cultural experience” (qtd. in Woods 34), also reflecting the postmodern motif of inclusion.

While the first concrete image of women is one of plague, the second still follows the pattern of privileging the blended, hybrid characters in the story. Following the appearance of the Jane Guy, Pym encounters the man-lipped, Amazonian tribe. He notes that “they were straight, tall, and well formed. There lips, however, like those of the men, were thick and clumsy, so that […] the teeth were never disclosed” (Poe 746). The absence of visible teeth underneath the man-lipped women seems to suggest Pym’s lack of terror when encountering these hidden-toothed females, perhaps due to the ambisexual nature of their countenances. In this scene, the hybrid women are safe
since, though they presumably have teeth, they do not threaten Pym visually. Further, these nonthreatening women are characterized as masculine, indicating that their status as hybrids makes them acceptable as Pym befriends them. While Pym’s acceptance of the strange, hermaphroditic women seems shocking, Poe deliberately rewards the masculine females in the text due to their blended genders, an uncommon nod in the direction of images that have long been marginalized in American culture. To be sure, hermaphrodites still have their oppressive places in contemporary culture, given voice only in tabloids and on daytime talk shows as a way to put them on display.

Yet postmodern works of fiction, such as Jeffrey Eugenides’ Middlesex, recognize the existence of hermaphrodites and other marginalized individuals, giving them agency in a culture steeped in a traditionally oppressive past. In his Pulitzer Prize winning novel, Eugenides brings social stereotypes to light as he tells the story of a 5-alpha reductase deficient child who inherits a difficult destiny from a Greek family speckled with incest. By situating the plot during the chaotic mid-twentieth century in America, Eugenides outlines the cultural climate surrounding the Cal Stephanides, a hermaphrodite. Having lost his voice in the noise of the Detroit riots, the Vietnam War, and the psychedelic hippie movement, Calliope’s staged menstrual cycles and (seemingly) homosexual desires go unnoticed, causing him to shamefully hide his plight and consequently feel like a social outcast for the extent of his adolescent life. Like Pym, Middlesex overflows with social outcasts, monsters, and American images of the “freak,” reminding us that disgust for the “other” is as American as apple pie. Eugenides deconstructs the myth of “masculine” and “feminine,” portraying a genuine protagonist who also happens to have both a vagina and a penis. Like Haraway’s vision of the
cyborg, the hybrid symbols in Poe’s tale reject gender prescriptions which typically favor the simplistic, traditional characters rather than the complex, androgynous ones so often labeled repulsive.

In keeping with postmodern motifs, Poe celebrates the elements of the text which allow individuals to have multiple selves. Indeed, one of Pym’s first moments in the text includes his costuming himself in order to elude his grandfather and run away. Later on, he masquerades about the ship as the ghost of a dead shipmate, again exploring his own multiple identities. To think that the individual, or the unified identity, exists is to also believe in the subject’s unique capacity to improve his or her world through reason, a concept which postmodernists find oppressive. Woods recognizes that “‘individuus’ is the Latin for undivided” and that “postmodern theory is suspicious of the notion of humans possessing an undivided and coherent self” (9-10). In her book titled Goddresses and Monsters: Women, Myth, Power, and Popular Culture, Jane Caputi echoes this danger as she comments on the dangers of the male/female binary and the subsequent way of thinking associated with a unified self, positing:

A master consciousness splits the integrity of being […]. “Otherness,” the basis of oppression, is created when the self is split, and what is disowned, feared, and denied in the self is projected onto another being or group. The “other” is then stigmatized and warred against. […] The gynocentric imagination and […] those necessary aspects of the whole have been demonized and made into the “other.” (Caputi 14)

Caputi asserts that, because it is oppressive to think of ourselves as whole individuals, we must embrace both male and female aspects of our bodies and minds. Further, the
blurring of such gendering enables us to embrace all individuals without prejudice or judgment. In spite of such theories, social hatred for the “other” rages on, and Caputi coins the “Goddess/monster myth” to represent the villainization of women with supposedly “masculine” traits (14). She maintains that “the Goddess/monster myth potentially inspires a revalorization of what is defamed as soft/feminine in males and bitchy/butchy in females” (Caputi 14). She notes that the goddess/monster stigma causes social concerns because it represents “masculinity and femininity not as ontologically opposite traits, but as mutual and even mutable traits, variations on the primally female nature of creation” (Caputi 14). By deconstructing the “masculine” and “feminine” binaries, subsequently admitting that they are merely a chimera, we begin to understand that both masculine and feminine traits exist in us all, thus allowing humans to embrace their inherent animalistic natures, such as “intuition, instinct, sexuality, sensuality, and morality” (Caputi 14). Regardless of deconstructive theories, the social stigma that labels “ambiguous as monster” exists as Americans find difficulty in embracing those “other” than themselves, often using socially-prescribed, derogatory language (like monster or freak) to perpetuate and express such evil stereotypes. Poe’s acceptance of the androgynous tribal women, juxtaposed with his terror of the other exclusively feminine images in the text, places him among avant-garde postmodern theorists who question the oppressive social boundaries assigned based on an individual’s gender and sexuality.

At the end of the story, amidst famine, death, and plague, Poe keeps only Pym and the ambisexual, homosocial captain of the ship, Dirk Peters, alive; he and Pym are the only survivors. Poe seems to reward their unconventional relationship by keeping
them from harm as they sailing with “a numbness of body and mind—a dreaminess of sensation” among warm waters of a “milky hue” (768). The novel’s final mise-en-scene associatively connotes images of creation, or perhaps re-creation, as the men sail on semen-like seas and encounter a “shrouded human figure” which could symbolize a substitute-creator (769). In addition to characters and mise-en-scene in the novel, Poe’s lengthy devotion to the biche de mer, a gender-hybrid sea slug, reveals that the unconventional animal is a delicacy rather than an abomination. Poe writes:

> They have no shell, no legs, nor any prominent part, […] but by their elastic wings, like caterpillars or worms, they creep in shallow waters, in which, when low, can be seen by a kind of swallow. The mollusca is oblong, and of different sizes, from three to eighteen inches in length.

(749)

The biche de mer’s delicate “wings” and predisposition to victimization indicates its feminine qualities, and yet its anatomical size and the description of its shape indicate phallic qualities, making the slug a hybrid that is a known delicacy rather than an abomination. In keeping with its postmodern characteristics, the story celebrates the queer, marginalized elements while leaving the traditionally gendered characters behind.

As a result of Poe’s privileging the ambiguities in the text, the narrative lacks a central truth, replacing the traditional, linear plot structure with a circular, elusive, and confusing vision of Pym’s journey. The mixing of epistolary text, dialogue, narration, and symbols decenters the central concept of a structured plot which follows a “rising action, climax, denouement” template. According to Cixous, the tendency to place the male at
the center of Western civilization leads to a search for the central truth missing in Poe’s
text. She notes that “It all comes back to man—to his torment, his desire to be (at) the
origin…Subordination of the feminine to the masculine order…Logocentrism and
phallocentrism—bring[…] to light the fate dealt to woman, her burial” (585). Even our
means of communication values the direct, linear argument over the ovoid, circular
reasoning more associated with feminine style. Cixous’s own writing methodology
reflects a more elusive, multi-directional, postmodern approach to argument. Further,
she suggests that women exist in the margins of history, exiled by a masculine center;
nonetheless, she concludes by recognizing a movement toward change, noting that “we
are living in an age where the conceptual foundation of an ancient culture is in the
process of being undermined” (585). Cixous admits that postmodernity supports the
demarginalization of those previously labeled “Other,” including women and
homosexuals. This demarginalization coupled with a constant decentering of previously
accepted notions of centrality secure that a skeptical postmodern era will deconstruct
such oppressive, privileging binaries, offering a variety of possibilities which reflect the
growing diversity of the postmodern world; in other words, the postmodern skepticism of
metanarratives no doubt disengages previous phallocentric powers and thus give
women and men agency in their own lives, allowing them to determine the extent of
their own existences. By allowing Pym to flee his past and enter curiously into a world of
mystery and wonder, Poe gives his character the opportunity to escape without passing
judgment on him, as is evident not only within the plot as he keeps Pym alive but also in
the prose itself as he renders the language with inquisitive passion, revealing plot
details with an often graceful style.
Subsequent to the decentering of truth, a resulting postmodern motif present in the text is fragmentation. Both physically and psychologically, Pym takes apart his preconceived notions of life and replaces them with the fragmented survival onboard the Grampus, reflected in his incomplete food supply, companionship, language, and purpose. In Ihab Hassan’s essay “Toward a Concept of Postmodernism,” Hassan explains the postmodern theory of fragmentation. When considering its place among other historical movements, he states that postmodernism both accepts and rejects modern ideas, the term itself encompasses the “modern”, leading to its “ambiguity, discontinuity, heterodoxy, pluralism […]” (592). He discusses postmodernism in terms of “unmaking” (i.e. deconstruction), and he mentions in his introduction that “postmodernism may appear as a significant revision, if not an original episteme, of the twentieth-century Western societies” (586). He admits that he “wants to explore the impulse of self-unmaking which is part of the literary tradition of silence” (587). Although he never explicitly makes the connection, the idea of “re-vision,” or an altered view of the previous world, no doubt begins with the “unmaking” of the world and then a subsequent “remaking” of previously unchallenged notions. By acknowledging “pluralism” and shattering Descartes notion of singular identity, postmodernists suggest that individuals lay down the burden of searching for “oneself,” and rather accept that all individuals are mosaic, fragmented, and constantly changing.

In addition to the postmodern, fragmented identity, language, like the constantly revised self, is “unmade” then “remade.” As postmodernity began to take shape, the failure of language seemed to reflect a postmodern “unmaking” of the world as cultural movements following the modernists’ Dadaism crept into the trauma-saturated cultural
zeitgeist (588). Like Pym’s difficulty telling his story as he vacillates between prose which romanticizes his journey and a more scientific tone as he describes in detail the animals and landscape, trauma leaves individuals fragmented and unable to communicate their emotions. In *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Elaine Scarry asserts that this “unmaking” results from the human desire and inevitable failure for completion through language, calling the breakdown of human existence the “unmaking of the world,” and asserting that torture leads to this devolution. In addition to a thorough exploration of torture, Scarry notices that language fails humans as they attempt to describe their experiences to others in order to achieve unity. She suggests that:

While torture contains language, specific human words and sounds, it is itself a language, an objectification, an acting out. […] Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language. (27, 4)

Like Scarry, Ray Linn comments in *Teacher’s Introduction to Postmodernism* that the individual’s search for his or her own language is futile. He writes that “since language is a public creation, it follows that an individual’s thought is essentially public and social” (Linn 25). He goes on the note that “as Wittgenstein put it, the thinking human being is a ‘fly [trapped inside the] fly-bottle’ always buzzing around within the limits of human language” (qtd. in Linn 26). In other words, as he attempts to seize the objects of his desire, Pym finds that language fails to describe his pain and the pain of his comrades. His attempt to describe his situation is futile since he has suffered the inexpressible in his prison and yet endeavors to communicate with a language which the reader does
not speak, a language trapped inside the world of the novel. Through attempting to find language and failing, Pym subsequently “unmakes” his world by neither confirming nor denying his pain or the pain of others. In part, this failure of language is expressed in Pym’s initial isolation, then later as he encounters the tribes and their incomprehensible language. Since he “can never break out of the fly-bottle, [he can never know [what is true]” and subsequently his insecurity within an unstable, “unmade” universe gives neither Pym nor the reader a feasible solution to his obstacles (qtd. in Linn 26).

The failures of language, as Hassan points out, seem to limit any conceptual definition of the term “postmodernism;” and yet at the same time, these failures represent the very essence of the concept. While Hassan posits that postmodernism has a “fanatic will to unmaking,” he does admit that “it also contains the need to discover a ‘unitary sensibility’ (Sontag), […] to attain an immanence of discourse” (590). As an attempted remedy, Hassan moves for a “literature of silence” which he likens to “Sade” and “Beckett” (590). The invocation of silence among a discussion of language seems to be symptomatic of language’s failures (Burke’s “terministic screen), and in an attempt to “unmake” this failed enterprise, Hassan calls for silence (an idea which completely wipes out language). However, if postmodernism encompasses both the failed language and the attempt to rewrite it, silence itself would only be a temporary solution for an unsolvable puzzle. In other words, in a world of constant change, referring to postmodernism as a “symbol” or as “the movement formerly known as postmodernism” will too inevitably need to evolve, serving the new social and cultural needs.
Silence as a symptom of fragmentary, failed language appears in Poe’s text. In addition to the difficulty Pym has in expressing his feelings or desires, his first several weeks onboard the ship isolate him in the ship’s hold, leaving him unable to communicate his agony with anyone else. In the ship’s hold, Pym notes that “throughout the whole of the next twenty-four hours no person came to my relief,” leaving him to suffer fever, fatigue, and extreme hunger in silence and without communication (672). The only living being accompanying him is Tiger, his dog, who clearly cannot reciprocate his desire for verbal communication. Later on, as Pym and Dirk Peters explore the islands, the “barbarians” are limited to a few unintelligible phrases including: “Anamoo-moo” and “Lama-Lama,” neither of which are ever translated for either Pym or for the reader (Poe 742). The impossibility of communication between Pym, Peters, and the islanders represents postmodern ideas regarding language. The complication of meaning in regards to language gives way to postmodern concepts of decentering truth, fragmented identity, and social oppression.

In “Richard Rorty’s Postmodern Synthesis,” Rorty asserts that “the problem is that it is impossible to determine if a belief or description accurately represents the world as it exists independent of thought” (qtd. in Linn 31). Rorty goes on to echo Wittgenstein, pointing out that, since we are all prisoners of our own fly-bottles, we cannot definitively establish “truth” since the definition will inevitably be a product of our own preconceived notions, value-judgments, surroundings, and current moment. In order to come to “truth” (i.e. the color of the sky), Rorty explains that “[we] would have to slip outside [our] mind[s] and language and confront the objective sky directly, and since there is no way to do this, [we] have no way of finding out whether the description is
true” (qtd. in Linn 31-32). Rorty extends this notion of truth to the myth of our one true “self,” and liberates us from the task of being “true” to ourselves, noting that “our fly-bottles change over time, [and] so do our interpretations of a text’s meaning” (qtd. in Linn 33).

Just the same, our interpretations of our lives evolve over time. Not only does Pym have difficulty describing his journey to the reader, but he also has difficulty describing himself as he changes onboard the ship. His journal entries are often understated and fragmented, and his incomplete sentences suggest his inability to articulate his situation. Often, his journal entries do not add to the actual plot, but merely recount the weather in a sentence or two. Although Poe attempts to establish verisimilitude by including these seemingly pointless entries, their inclusion also suggests that things have happened which Pym cannot articulate and which remain buried underneath the language. When considering cannibalism, Pym tells the reader that “[he] had, for some time past, dwelt upon the prospect of [his] being reduced to this last horrible extremity,” and yet he never mentions cannibalism. By not naming the act, Pym reveals his inability to articulate his feelings surrounding the topic. The postmodern theory of multiple identities applies to Pym as he tries to remain “true” to “himself,” and yet he lacks the ability to articulate his internal conflicts, his pain, and his desires with the reader, the islanders, and with Peters. In postmodern author Tim O’Brien’s set of short stories The Things They Carried, the author addresses the notion of “truth” as he recalls his own visionary interpretation of his stint in Vietnam. O’Brien’s blurring of “fiction” and “reality” mimics not only the postmodern skepticism of metanarratives (Lyotard), but it also licenses him to what Rorty claims is every human’s
right: to interpret his own life differently a his “fly-bottle change[s]” (qtd. in Linn 33). This human right eludes Poe since his social climate does not allow for such personal freedom, leading to his obsession with verisimilitude. If a centralized “truth” cannot exist, then whether or not Poe’s literature classifies as “fact” or “fiction” is irrelevant; the important notion is that the author will interpret his own life differently as he evolves, and the reader will understand its relevance differently as he or she evolves. In other words, like human beings, the text itself is subject to change based on its historical moment. Since the text, the author, and the reader are constantly evolving, the relationship between the three becomes alive, and like our human relationships, the trinity of text, author, and reader will undergo endless revision. O’Brien mirrors this theory in his final story as he likens the text to a living being through Linda, his dead childhood girlfriend. Linda claims, “I’m not dead. But when I am, it’s like…I don’t know, I guess it’s like being inside a book that nobody’s reading…an old one. It’s up on a library shelf, so you’re safe and everything, but the book hasn’t been checked out for a long, long time” (O’Brien 245). In other words, as Linda sits on the shelf waiting to be read, the author, reader, and current world are evolving. Each time the author retells the story, and each time the reader encounters the story, it has been revised. Through Linda’s character, O’Brien exhibits his approval of this process by presenting it as a means of immortality.

In addition to his blurring fact and fiction, O’Brien discusses the difference in “story-truth” and “happening-truth” (177). He writes that “story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth…What stories can do, I guess, is make things present” (177-178). He also reveals that “in war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it’s safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever
absolutely true” (82). Like the war, postmodernity causes us to question our 
preconceived notions, to be skeptical, to fear the chance of what is next, and to lose our 
“center” (i.e. religious metanarratives). In the war of postmodern culture, like O’Brien, 
we too fill in the gaps of our own stories as we evolve, making the difference between 
“story-truth” and “happening-truth” hard to discern and irrelevant. Like Rorty’s notion of 
“truth,” we can only identify what is present at the moment, understanding that our 
perception is subject to our position in the universe, in time, and in our own minds. 
Considering its elusive, circular structure that seems skeptical of the metanarrative, 
Poe’s tale, then, should be read as a book of ideas rather than a cohesive, linear plot. 
Within the plot, if language is always subject to the social climate, then limited to the 
individual’s own horizons of expectation, then the signified is almost never the same for 
each person. The failures of language become problematic when one attempts to 
describe oneself, to situate oneself among peers, or to communicate with one another. 
As for Pym, language will always fall short, leaving him trapped inside his fragmented, 
multiple identities with no real means of communication.

In keeping with Elaine Scarry’s notion of trauma, the postmodern motif of 
working through trauma is also evident in Poe’s work. In postmodern author Art 
Spiegelman’s Maus and Kurt Vonnegut’s Slaughterhouse-Five, the protagonists attempt 
to work through trauma as they are forced to carry the weight of their grief while living 
“normal” lives, adhering to socially prescribed roles. In Maus Vladek (a parent and 
holocaust survivor) has remarkable difficulty as he brings his post-holocaust value-
judgments with him into the “real” world. His son, Artie, suffers the post-traumatic 
symptoms as well, living in the shadow of his dead brother Richieu and coping with his
mother’s messy suicide. Vonnegut’s Billy Pilgrim has lived through the bombing at Dresden (among other traumas), and in order to cope with this mind-blowing ordeal, he takes himself out of time, claiming that he travels to the planet Tralfamadore and carouses with aliens. The “simple” task of being a father and husband exhausts him, leaving him to daydream and remain distant from his daughter and from the reality of his pain.

Both Vladek and Pilgrim have suffered the unrepresentable, harkening to Jean-Francoise Lyotard’s theory of the “small narrative,” and telling the untold stories of sublime, overwhelming experience that fail to make the cut in traditional history books. In Maus, Spiegelman utilizes the graphic novel, a genre which allows him to remain emotionally distant from the subject matter. In this regard, Spiegelman assigns animals to his characters in order to insert distance between his own trauma and the trauma of his father. The graphic novel also allows Spiegelman to cast a childlike shadow over the story, reducing the unspeakable grief to terms easy to understand.

Vonnegut’s Slaughterhouse-Five begins with a disclaimer, noting that it will not be a traditional “war story,” complete with false glory and hope. Instead, Vonnegut opens and closes the novel with a bird’s song, “Poo-tee-weet,” indicating that the trauma has been so severe, that no language sufficiently conveys the difficult subject-matter at hand. Like Spiegelman’s use of the graphic novel, Vonnegut uses the supernatural in order to separate himself from his pain (thus attempting to work through). Pilgrim’s time travel is symptomatic of his grief, implying that the “reality” of his trauma is so great, he must live supernaturally, embracing a phantasmagoric lifestyle in order to escape the trauma of his daily, “real” life. Vonnegut also uses the supernatural
in order to convey Pilgrim’s sublimely twisted view of his life, exhibiting the constant questioning and skepticism that results from his traumatic life. Billy Pilgrim’s crusade through time is full of haunting images, and Vonnegut captures all of the dark, wilted, and traumatized moments as a means of mimicking the traumatized brain, taking Pilgrim to a dark place, then subsequently sending him to another planet in order to recover.

Like Vonnegut and Spiegelman, Poe portrays characters who are working through their own traumas, from fighting the unruly seas, carrying the burden of staying alive, and crossing the threshold of the unknown. Like both authors, Poe uses his protagonist in order to work through his own trauma as well. His troubled childhood as an orphan, his forbidden, socially taboo love affair with his underage cousin, the tumultuous social climate on the brink of Civil War, and numerous literary rejections appear associatively in the text through Pym’s journey. Pym’s unhappiness with his young adult life leads him to conceal himself from his grandfather and sneakily run away from home with Augustus. On the ship, his intimate relationship with Peters, his savior, renegotiates the traditional, socially acceptable male-male relationship in nineteenth-century culture. All three authors use Vladek, Pilgrim, and Pym as emblems meant to work through their own grief, and yet none of the books end with a redemptive truth. Poe, Vonnegut and Spiegelman, through the sublimity of their fiction, convey the lack of a center, the futile search for truth, and the fragmented identities symptomatic of a postmodern era, and each character calls into question the preconceived notions about the holocaust (i.e. that the trauma ended with Hitler’s death), the bombing of Dresden (i.e. that all bombings are necessary to extinguish “evil”), and the “glorious” life at sea.
Like most postmodern works of fiction, Poe’s novel also seems to indicate his own skepticism of the conventional metanarrative, as he rewrites the traditionally resolved conclusion and replaces it with symbols, incomprehensible language, and continual transformation. The ending, in which Poe pits his characters against a dark background, complicated with gray falling ash and a milky sea, rewrites traditional notions of the “ending” in which a resolution usually occurs. Instead, Poe introduces yet another mystery with the “shrouded human figure” that is “larger in its proportions than any dweller among men” (769). While the figure is clearly “white,” indicating perhaps a purity that is missing for much of the novel, Poe is explicitly not gendering the figure, not giving it a name, or explaining its presence, its purpose, or its meaning, all tropes that postmodernists are skeptical of (769). This elusive ending is actually not so surprising, since much of the text itself reflects postmodern elements, thus compelling contemporary readers to place value-judgments aside and take a second look at the novel and its nuanced passages. As previously mentioned, the failures of language, fragmentation, the futile attempt at completion, and the blending of binary oppositions along with other postmodern motifs suggest that the text should be read as a book of ideas, not for a completed, conventional plot. Considering Pym’s enigmatic, illusive ending, the text suggests that Pym’s search for completion has failed: rather than recover his supposed adolescent “innocence”, making complete what has at once been fragmented, Pym finds no resolution, no redemption, for the frightening tale he has told, and thus he offers no such “truth” to his readers. Just as the decayed bodies in the text will not resurrect, so does Pym’s fantastic story refuse to give the “generality of readers” what the popular culture both then and now so often does: a positive, captivating story.
that ends if not with “happily ever after,” then at the very least, with a resolution, a *denouement*, a moral, or an epiphany.

In an attempt to assign concrete meaning to an otherwise indeterminate text, a few key critics have applied their own interpretations to Poe’s tale. In ““Poe, Pym, and Primitivism,” Evelyn Hinz and John Teunisson explore Pym’s amoral behavior while onboard the *Grampus*, attributing his deviance (as he becomes a savage criminal) to a loss of religious conviction. They explore Pym’s transition to the dark side as a means of understanding his early deceptive behavior. Further, they posit that Pym’s deception as he costumes himself, lies to his grandfather, and escapes hidden in the ship’s hold foreshadows a moral loss that eventually liberates him from physical restraint, allowing him to seek satiety in the primitive pleasures of the flesh. As a result of this assertion, they conclude that his amoral primitivism results from religious devolution, thus diagnosing such primitive behavior as a symptom curable by refined, religious principles (Hinz and Teunisson 16). Although Hinz and Teunisson recognize the changes in social perceptions of Pym’s morality, they fail to acknowledge Pym’s new subject position, onboard a desolate ship. Both scholars continue to situate Pym and his actions within an oppressive social dynamic, reading his newfound freedom as abnormal and even deviant. Although Pym must have heard tales of cannibalism and male-male intimacy associated with seamen life, the possibility of these events occurring on the *Grampus* is augmented by the fact that his oppressive, “civilized” social behavior remains behind in New England as he sails closer to the poles; the land that once governed his actions has shrunk into the distance and its previous religious mores no longer dictate his actions. In spite of reading Pym’s behavior as a means of understanding religious
didacticism, Hinz and Teunisson do, however, point out the deconstruction of binaries as Pym leaves behind the “real world” and crosses over to a life at sea, maintaining that “through his metaphoric confusion of the spiritual and material, Pym reveals himself to be a cannibal long before the survivors are reduced to making the body of one of them their main course” (15).

Offering what is arguably a better reason for Pym’s behavior, postmodern theorist Richard Rorty explores the idea of context in relation to our actions, and Ray Linn makes sense of Rorty’s assertion, explaining:

The logical space from which our moral reasoning begins is created by our traditional descriptions of the world. It is these descriptions that typically block moral progress. For example, if “sodomy” is described as a “bestial act,” we of course will reason that we should prosecute human beings who practice it. If we define it as “another act of love that some human beings go in for,” then we will start thinking that sodomy laws violate the right to private sexual freedom. (qtd. in Linn 39)

Linn asserts that “this idea that moral reasoning never occurs in a vacuum, that it is always based on a particular description of reality which shapes its conclusions, is one of Rorty’s strongest arguments” (39). In other words, Pym’s “confusion” leads to cannibalism, a choice which is symptomatic of his imprisonment in a new place (the sinking ship); the symptoms of his new world cannot be cured by reason or religion (qtd. in Linn 26). Like postmodern ideas about language, Pym’s actions are symptomatic of his new environment in which food is scarce and man’s law is suspended.
Considering the Wittgensteinian theory of cultural imprisonment, Pym’s imprisonment onboard the wanton ship leads to his starvation, leaving him to consider the unthinkable: whether or not to eat another human being. Like the postmodern breakdown of metanarratives, Pym realizes that the consistent, unquestioned presence of food, of companionship, and of safety do not exist in his new world, leading to his own insecurity. Ray Linn relates the breakdown of metanarratives to insecurity, remarking that “there is the insecurity of realizing that we have nothing certain to hang on to, and this involves the painful thought that we don’t know each other or even ourselves” (99). In other words, as the ship’s prison begins to torture Pym, his preconceived notions about life become fractured, a byproduct of having one’s own beliefs about the world’s “truths” challenged, complicated, or even proven false. The decentering of truth, and subsequent revelation of its nonexistence recurs as a motif in postmodern works of fiction. Often following this revelation are futile attempts to reposition truth as a central concept, and as philosopher Michel Foucault suggests, “we punish, but in this way of saying that we wish to obtain a cure” (22). As Pym has transformed from punished to torturer, he has attempted with futility to piece together the fragmentation of body and soul he has suffered.

Rather than project moral judgment onto Pym’s apparent “flaws,” one should consider his transition from the mores of traditional New England to the vicious, primordial sea, noting that Pym’s role as torturer and subsequent “unmaker” of his world paradoxically reflects an attempt to become whole, healing his own fragmentation as he spirals into the dark, unknown abyss. Pym’s desire for human flesh, both through homoeroticism and cannibalism, seems to the traditional American reader to be fueled
by religiously amoral motivations that drive him to follow his devious impulses. However, in an environment that parallels our own postmodern moment, Poe’s celebration of the breakdown of binaries should perhaps be recognized as an attempt to represent the unrepresentable, a literary move that contests oppressive power structures and their value-judgments. By breaking down gender binaries, Pym’s celebration of the queer, or non-normative, aspects of his journey seem to deconstruct social stereotypes, valuing the “other” and reminding readers that circumstances such as starvation at sea allow for certain behaviors to deserve exemption from moral judgments, or that context creates character. Considering the vagina dentata, primitivism, cannibalism, and other cultural taboos, Pym’s supposed amoral universe deserves a second look, recognizing that even metanarratives like religion lack the power to cure what has at once been ruined by torture or trauma.

In short, Poe’s only novel does not lend itself one unified construct; in keeping with its postmodern characteristics, its plot refuses to offer its readers a definitive answer to their many questions. Postmodern art critic Hal Foster asserts that one possible function of postmodernism is to “disrupt the structures of intelligibility that provide both individual and collective identities for persons and communities, as well as the assumptions of social order within which people are defined and confined” (qtd. in Woods 254). By exercising his own skepticism of oppressive metanarratives in his “failed” novel, Poe reveals to us that, as long as man has toiled underneath the burden of finding his own identity, postmodern concepts have followed close behind as a means of breaking free. His tale, deemed worthless in his own time, uncovers “the desperate need for authenticity or sincerity in the face of wholesale simulation, [which]
has permeated the very fabric of everyday consciousness” (257). Through a close theoretical reading of the text, Poe’s novel indicates that, not only does it fall within the boundaries of what is defined *postmodern*, but it also reveals to us that postmodernism as a way of thinking is in fact *premodern*, having existed as a way of thinking long before it was given legitimacy in our culture.
Works Consulted


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