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The Notion of Race in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*

The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, Poe's only novel, is a representative of a Gothic American novel, a sea adventure and a quest narrative. Published in 1838, it reflects the spirit of the time and, in particular, of Poe's Southern region: the problems of race and racism, colonization, imperialism and slavery. While many critics label Poe as a racist, pointing to his upbringing in the American South, which is traditionally perceived as racist due to historical circumstances, this paper will focus instead on explaining the way Poe represents and understands the idea of race in *Pym*. The main strategies he uses throughout the novel are character profiling, gothic atmosphere and color symbolism, which will be tracked and analyzed here.

The main character, Pym, lives in Nantucket and longs for adventure at sea. He sneaks on board of *the Grampus* where he hides and eventually takes part in helping his friend Augustus and Dirk Peters, a Native American, successfully overthrow the mutiny on the ship. What follows is a storm that leaves the ship in pieces, and after weeks of floating in the ocean, Pym and Peters are saved by a ship named *Jane Guy*. The ship's mission is to explore the uncharted South. Eventually, they come across the island of Tsalal, where they establish trade with the black natives. In the end, the



natives try to kill all white men, so Pym, Peters, and NuNu, a native they take as a hostage, flee the island drifting off into an unclear ending wrapped in white.

The notion of race is first introduced in the mutiny at the beginning. There we see the description of the black cook and of Dirk Peters. Apart from the dominant race, there is the opposing, inferior race, which includes both black and red skin. The black cook is presented as a demonic figure, while Peters is similarly described as

one of the most ferocious-looking men I ever beheld . . . His hands, especially, were so enormously thick and broad as hardly to retain a human shape . . . 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 . . . the teeth were exceedingly long and protruding, and never even partially covered . . . if such an expression were indicative of merriment, the merriment must be that of a demon. (Poe 236)

This sort of racial profiling, through phrenological descriptions, reduces the characters to the level of animals. However, later on, Peters is transformed from a savage Indian to what Pym in the end calls a white man, like himself, when he says on Tsalal: “[w]e were the only living white men upon the island” (347). If Peters was turned into a white man even though he is biologically red-skinned, it shows that for Poe race is something more than just the color of the skin. The notion of race then obviously incorporates behavioral and ideological aspects as well, since Peters was recognized as a white man after he proved to be a hero and a savior several times throughout the novel. Here, again, the whiteness is connected to positive characteristics. It could also mean that Peters was labelled white because he was opposed to the savages on Tsalal, who were the enemy, the evil black force. Yet, Peters was never entirely 'accepted' as equal, which can be observed in the fact that

his voice in the narrative is never heard, not even when he is the only remaining witness of the mysterious events at the end of the voyage.

Color imagery is the central motif of Poe's novel, and the contrast between black and white is what forms the crux of the entire novel. These contrasts are of a binary structure—one is defined through opposition to the other. Toni Morrison argued that blackness was for the whites the “projection of the not-me” (quoted in Goddu 74). However, for Poe, this is more complex than simply saying one is good and the other one is bad. These two concepts are fluctuating—just like when Pym disguises himself in a corpse performing a form of reversed black minstrelsy, or when Augustus's dying white limbs become black, as do the decomposing bodies of once white Dutch sailors who died on the ship; finally, there is Peters, who eventually becomes 'white', just like the increasingly warm white sea that they are sailing on does at the very end. This color dynamics serves as a proof of Teresa Goddu's theory that *Pym* represents Poe's monogenetic understanding of the question of race, i.e. the belief that all races have the same origin, and that physical differences such as the skin color are caused by environmental factors. As an example, Goddu mentions the scene where the survivors lost at sea resort to cannibalism (84), something which would not be expected of their race in their usual environment. Another example is the already mentioned transformation of Dirk Peters. All of these examples point to the fact that Poe sees race as something complex, fluctuating and definitely not fixed.

I associated the problem of Poe's interpretation of race with three reoccurring colors, interpreting them as symbols for the black, white and red race. Apart from the obvious racial contrast between black and white, the omnipresent notions of colors as such not only help Poe explore the topic of race, but also help achieve the gothic effect. Most of his gothic images and scenes include the already mentioned three

central colors: black, white and red. Together with black and white, the color red occurs throughout the novel, eventually culminating in the final scene in the boat. To begin with, the color symbolism is evident in the note which Pym receives from Augustus and which was written "apparently in red ink" (Poe 228), which later proved to be Augustus's blood. Here the red color emphasizes the fact that it was a matter of life or death for Pym to stay hidden after he secretly got on board *the Grampus* at the beginning, so it is somewhat appropriate that Augustus wrote it in his own blood. Poe even mystifies this, at first calling it red ink. That mystic, gothic atmosphere is visible in the entire scene: Pym is almost buried alive, starving and suffocating in his dark shelter and barely able to see anything in the dark, even though he manages to discern the red color on the note.

Next, the scene in which Pym disguises himself as the corpse of a dead crew member in order to scare the mutineers and eventually overpower them, is the ultimate gothic grotesque. After putting on the dead man's clothes and creating a bloated stomach with some rags, he puts on white woolen mittens and has Peters arrange his face, "first rubbing it well over with white chalk, and afterward blotching it with blood, which he took from a cut in his finger. The streak across the eye was not forgotten and presented a most shocking appearance" (Poe 260). By performing this horrifying gothic trick using white and red colors, Pym plays with black minstrelsy, which was very common at the time. This 'negative', reversed version of blackface, however, was most likely shocking for the audience of that time. Goddu explains that this shows how race is like makeup, "fluid and not fixed" and that "whiteness is as much a construct as blackness" (86), and brings us back to monogenetic interpretation of racial identity. Race is only a representation for Poe, almost like a performance of minstrelsy or a reflection in the mirror, much like the distorted

reflection in a mirror on *the Grampus*, in which Pym sees himself in his reversed blackface costume and which he himself is shocked by.

Moreover, we encounter the same gothic color mix in the part of the novel where the black Dutch brig carries corpses. Poe's description of the corpses as living beings is both ingenious and disturbing, almost as if it showed the author's twisted, dark sense of humor: the bodies seem to be looking at them "with great curiosity", "nodding in a cheerful although rather odd way, and smiling constantly, so as to display a set of the most brilliantly white teeth" (Poe 277). The culmination of the grotesque occurs with the realization of what the sailors actually are, mixed with the perception of the awful stench and desperation of the hopeless people stuck in the middle of the ocean. Again, the gothic atmosphere is accompanied by the color symbolism: black bodies, white teeth, white ominous birds with beaks smeared with red blood. It is repeated again in a similar vein, when during their voyage South, *Jane Guy* encounters an eerie animal with scarlet red claws and teeth, and perfectly white fur.

Furthermore, the gradation of this notion of colors takes us to the island of Tsalal, the heart of blackness. The natives there are completely black, to the point of exaggeration and even racial stereotyping: their teeth are black, they wear black fur and are covered in black hair. Even everything else on the island is black, like the eggs of the birds. The natives' excessive fear of everything white, their surprise at the simplest things, their 'jibberish' language and their innocuous hospitality add to their image of an unintelligent, ignorant and primitive race, which evokes the image that the blacks had in Poe's time in America. Their island, full of natural resources, is seen as the source of profit for the *Jane Guy* crew, who assume the role of greedy colonizers taking advantage of the innocent natives. However, as Poe sees racial

identity as a mask, we realize that the natives are not what they appear to be. After gaining the trust of the *Jane Guy* crew and then killing them all, Pym states that the natives are “the most wicked, hypocritical, vindictive, bloodthirsty, and altogether fiendish race of men upon the face of the globe” (365). Even their chief's name, Too-wit, alludes to their 'wit'. However, the whites are no innocents either. In his essay, J. Gerald Kennedy states that, in these chapters,

the contradictions of Pym's account allow us to see that although the whites “evince” trust and good faith, in reality they possess none, for they have come to Tsalal bearing the same assumptions of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority that for almost two centuries sustained the African slave trade, and they cannot set aside the arms that alone ensure their domination over the black people. (250)

Evidently, these chapters reflect the problem of imperialism, colonization and the oppression of 'inferior' races, the main issues of Poe's country at that time.

Finally, the color gradation culminates in what is the complete opposite of the island of blackness: the absolute whiteness that Pym, Peters and NuNu come across moving further south. They find themselves in the very heart of whiteness, surrounded by the increasingly warm milky water and white substance resembling ashes falling over them. It is another extremity of color, and again it is connected with death: the white color 'suffocates' them to such extent that NuNu dies of terror and Peters remains completely silent. The story abruptly ends with a sublime, magnificent, yet terrifying human-like creature appearing with its “perfect whiteness of the snow” (Poe 371). This ending offers no explanation, no conclusion—we cannot decipher the notion of the whiteness nor can we understand the true meaning of the race that we were expecting to find out. In her article, Marilynne Robinson says: “Poe uses whiteness as a highly ambiguous symbol, by no means to be interpreted as purity or

holiness or by association with any other positive value" (n.p.), which is why the white creature is more terrifying than glorious.

In the final note, 'the editor' intervenes to add that Pym died and the end of the story is lost, which means that the secret of the race and the black-white contrast may never be unveiled. Yet, he gives us some clues by explaining that the signs Pym found in the caves of Tsalal mean "to be shady", "to be white" and finally, "the region of the south" (Poe 373). He is making the question of race into something mysterious, exotic and unreachable by indicating that the secret is hidden precisely in the South. In the 19th century, it was believed that the Earth was hollow and had openings at each pole where one could enter the Earth's core—which would possibly fit the depiction of the final scene in the novel. We could say that Pym, NuNu and Peters entered the core of the Earth, which is where the 'shady' and 'white' races originated from, as the signs in caves announced back on Tsalal. In other words, the South is for Poe the core, the place of origin of races, which again speaks in favor of the monogenetic theory.

However, I would argue that the ultimate solution to Poe's racial riddle might instead be connected to the ubiquitous color combination of black, white and red that I was focusing on in my analysis. Kennedy argues that the final scene, with Pym as a white man in the same boat as a black savage and a red-skinned Indian, represents the unavoidable "multicultural nature of social experience," or that "the destiny of Pym, the white man, cannot be dissociated from that of the black and the red" (252). However, this is obviously not an idyllic image of multiculturalism. The hierarchy in the boat should be taken into consideration: the black (NuNu) is dead and the red (Peters) is completely silent, and the readers are following only the white point of view (Pym). The white setting and the looming white creature in the end

suggest the dominance of the white race, which takes the right to speak from other races.

To conclude, the division between the black and the white race is definitely not a black-and-white issue for Poe, but a much more complex one. He sees race as an appearance—a performance of some sort—that is relative, i.e. depending on the circumstances, and can be transformed. The races for him have the same origin, which implies the monogenetic point of view. He also sees race as something mythic and inexplicable, hiding behind the color symbolism. He plays with red, black and white uniting them to show the imposed multiculturalism brought about by colonization. In the end, however, Poe ends the story in a suffocating image of the white—the color of what was at the time the oppressing race. Therefore, multiculturalism is here a union of contrasting races that cannot function together without destructive consequences, such as the exploitation and conflicts brought about by colonization, and the persisting racial hierarchy dominated, of course, by the color white.

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