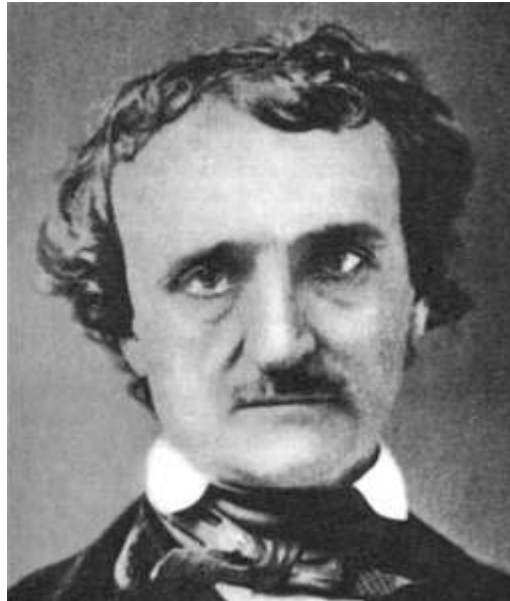


## ANALYSIS BY CHAPTER

*The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838)



Edgar Allan Poe

(1809-1849)

## INTRODUCTION

*Pym* is significant for the following reasons, in order of importance: (1) it influenced the greatest American novel, *Moby-Dick*, in which Melville contrasts his vision with Poe's; (2) it reveals more about Poe than any of his other works; (3) it expresses a unique vision in a complex literary form that mixes the journal of exploration with hoax, travel literature, science fiction, spiritual autobiography, psychological allegory, metaphysical theory, black humor and pathological racism.

Antarctica was the last unexplored territory on earth. It was not yet known whether the region was land or water. Travel literature was popular and Poe began *Pym* as a hoax to capitalize on popular interest in the South Pole. He based his tale upon limited accounts by explorers including Captain Cook and J. N. Reynolds, who believed in the theory of "holes at the poles" set forth by the science fiction writer John Symmes in *Symzonia: A Voyage of Discovery* (1820). At that time, Antarctica was as inspiring to the Romantic imagination as the moon.

## PARTS OF *PYM*

1. Night adventure in the *Ariel*
2. Pym's entombment as a stowaway in the hold of the *Grampus*
3. Mutiny and struggle for control of the ship
4. Sufferings of the survivors aboard the becalmed ship
5. Voyage of the *Jane Guy* into Antarctic waters
6. Exploration of Tsalal Island and treachery of blacks
7. Escape to the south by canoe
8. Vision at the hole in the South Pole

## Introductory Note

Poe's introductory note is a double ruse: Pym is Poe pretending to be Pym, who allows Poe to pretend to be Pym. This complication is Poe's clever joke and a means of investing his incredible science fiction with a pretense of authenticity. In calling attention to himself as the author and in his hoaxing artifice, Poe is a precursor of 20th-century metafictionists such as John Barth and Thomas Pynchon.

## Chapter 1

Arthur Gordon Pym is a name with the same rhythm, same number of syllables in the same order, and the same last initial as Edgar Allan Poe. He is connected to *Edgar-ton*, his first name is long for Art and he owns a sailboat called the Ariel, the name of the boat from which the Romantic poet Shelley had drowned in 1822. These details imply that this is Poe's spiritual autobiography, like some of Shelley's narrative poems. Pym's middle name is shared with the Romantic poet Lord (George Gordon) Byron, renown for physical feats.

The name of Pym's friend Augustus relates him to Augustus the first emperor of Rome and to St. Augustine the Christian saint. Hence he is identified with both the secular and the spiritual traditions of western civilization. Augustus represents the friendly established order. The first episode is a *synecdoche*, a part that signifies the whole, prefiguring what is to come: The two young men, Pym and Augustus, get intoxicated and foolishly go out sailing in the dark, are caught in a storm, almost drown, but are saved by the crew of the Penguin. This literal salvation prefigures Pym's rescue by Augustus in Chapter 3. Still later in the narrative, penguins in Antarctica are compared to men in formal dress, emphasizing their stiff conventionality. In this first episode, Pym calls upon God and attributes his rescue to "the special interference of Providence." By the end, however, Augustus is dead and Pym loses his faith and turns Gothic, with a mocking view of penguins and "Providence."

One night in his youth, Poe went sailing on Chesapeake Bay in the dark with his drunken brother-in-law. The first chapter ends with the two boys concealing their reckless adventure from their friends and families, introducing the themes of lost innocence, deception and pretense in society. Above all, Poe introduces the Gothic theme of *chance*, which becomes an insistent motif hereafter. This first adventure establishes a recurrent pattern in episodes to follow: (1) deception; (2) loss of control; (3) near death; (4) *chance* rescue; and (5) rejuvenation.

## 2

Having deceived his family about his drunken escapade, Pym deceives them again to satisfy his longing for "wild adventures." His mother opposes his inclinations with "hysterics" and his grandfather (tradition) threatens to cut him off. More than the familiar story of a young man rebelling against his family to become independent, more than mere adventure, this becomes an allegory of the quest for Truth. To free himself, he devises a "scheme of deception" not unlike Huck Finn faking his death. Conventional society and its illusions are represented by his family up North, whereas Pym ultimately discovers the Truth alone, down South at the opposite Pole. His coldness and ice-olation are evident when he enjoys rebuking his grandfather, almost "screaming with laughter."

Stowing away in the hold of the Grampus, he undergoes a spiritual death and rebirth. First his friend Augustus conducts him into "an iron-bound box" six feet long like a coffin, which proves to be the entry to a dark hiding place where he is buried alive. With some books. He selects the journals of Lewis and Clark, who explored the West, suggesting a parallel to Pym's exploration of the South. His civilized dissociation from his own deeper nature is evident when he does not recognize his loyal dog Tiger, who appears to him like a monster out of a nightmare: "The paws of some huge and real monster were pressing heavily upon my bosom." His dog is a metaphor of his animal self as he loses contact with civilization embodied in Augustus and he becomes increasingly wild, even monstrous.

## 3

His confinement in the depths of the ship, or his own psyche, involves an exploration “into the innermost recesses of my soul!” His watch, a traditional symbol of civilization, stops. His near fatal illness, delirium and recovery are characteristics of spiritual death/rebirth in the individuation process toward wholeness expressed in the transcendental mode of literature.

However, Poe does not believe in progress, the possibility of human improvement or psychological wholeness. He believes the human psyche is disintegrating like the universe and that the quest for ultimate Truth leads to polarization, madness and death. Pym is a helpless Gothic victim, trapped by circumstances and borne along by overwhelming currents. The TRAP is a thematic motif throughout Poe that anticipates the determinism of late 19th-century Naturalism, in which the trap is a defining metaphor of Life. Atavism, regression to an animal state, also became typical in later Naturalism.

The animal devours all his candles, making it impossible for Pym to read the note from Augustus, which might enlighten and save him. This is authentic symbolism worthy of Melville, but hereafter, Poe’s narrative becomes increasingly polarized into a reductive allegory of signs. The animal is driven mad by confinement and lack of water and attacks Pym in one of those “fits of perverseness” characteristic of men. This betrayal echoes his own attitude toward his family, prefigures the mutiny in the next chapter and dramatizes Poe’s Gothic vision of Nature as dangerous and terrifying, unlike Thoreau’s pond. Facing death, Pym screams for Augustus—civilization--who saves and feeds him.

4

No sooner is he saved than a mutiny overthrows all civilization and “the most horrible butchery ensued.” Black and white begin to polarize when the only black, the cook, is portrayed as a “perfect demon.” One of the mutineers is Dirk (knife) Peters (rock, contrasted to Saint Peter), the son of an Indian woman and a white fur trader connected with Indian trading posts along the Lewis River, again connecting the narrative with the exploration by Lewis and Clark. As a half-breed Dirk Peters is an outcast by birth, violating the taboo of miscegenation. He is a pagan alternative to Saint Peter and an ideal synthesis in Poe’s vision. Only half civilized and wilder than Cooper’s Natty Bumppo, he is Poe’s white hope--well, half white anyway.

Indians far out west are spiritual equals in the eyes of Poe, whereas all blacks are demonized in the person of the cook. Dirk Peters saves Pym “from the brutality of the cook”--by force. Peters, not the God of Saint Peter, is his savior: “his life was again preserved through the interference of Dirk Peters.” The word *interference* evokes the Christian doctrine of a “special interference of God’s Providence” and replaces God with a Dirk. Poe seems to have been terrified by the slave rebellion near his home in Virginia led by Nat Turner, just 7 years before he wrote *Pym*. At the end of the mutiny Augustus, representing white civilization, is put in handcuffs.

5

Augustus explains how and why he sent the note to Pym, revealing that it was only a matter of *chance* they were not murdered in the mutiny. Although he represents the only possible salvation in a Gothic world--sheer physical survival--Peters is far from being Christlike in character: He is in fact a drunken hedonist who includes the evil cook in his faction of mutineers and aspires only to live wild on a Pacific island and enjoy “the voluptuous beauty of the women.”

6

Despite Poe’s subversive implications, once again Pym gives “sincere thanks to God” for his safety--holding on to his conventional faith as he later clings to the overturned ship. Augustus is still alive. All along, in the midst of a dreamlike narrative that is at times hallucinatory, Poe adopts an empirical tone to make his science fiction seem plausible: “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 the range of human experience, and for this reason so far beyond the limits of human credulity, that I proceed in utter helplessness of obtaining credence for all that I shall tell, yet confidently trusting in time and progressing science to verify some of the most important and most improbable of my statements.” (Chapter 4)

Pym has another narrow escape when the cook almost finds him in hiding and he is saved only by *chance* due entirely to the rolling of the ship. He and his dog recover their strength. One of the common sailors on board is named Simms, close to the name of the science fiction writer John Symmes, who had written *Symzonia: Holes at the Poles*, advancing the theory Poe adopts in *Pym*. Simms belongs to the cook's faction, gets drunk, falls overboard and drowns, "no attempt being made to save him." Poe was perhaps expressing his opinion of Symmes as a writer and is proving he can do better.

7

The mutineers start poisoning each other and the black cook betrays Dirk Peters by joining the rival faction. Peters and Augustus take over the ship while everybody else is drunk and Pym emerges from his virtual tomb as a ghost: "I commenced disguising myself so as to represent the corpse of Rogers," one of those poisoned. The name is a communications term for assent, as in "Roger that." As the spirit of a dead man, a boy no longer, Pym assents to the bloody struggle led by Dirk Peters.

8-9

Peters kills the black cook during a fight to control the ship--the psyche of Pym. The ship begins to leak in a hurricane, then fills with water, another manifestation of hostile Nature. Augustus appeals to God for deliverance and once again Pym attributes their survival so far to "the mercy of God." Augustus is severely wounded, but still alive. They are dying of thirst and hunger. It is Peters who dives into the ship in a desperate search for provisions, while Pym and Augustus pray to God—"we implored his aid."

10

Their prayer seems to be answered by the appearance of a ship: "Our hearts leaped up wildly within us, and we poured out our whole souls in shouts and thanksgiving to God for the complete, unexpected, and glorious deliverance." Then they smell the corpses: "We had a full view of her decks...Twenty-five or thirty human bodies in the last and most loathsome state of putrefaction." A seagull is "gorging itself with the horrible flesh...and its white plumage splattered all over with blood." The image of red and white prefigures the strange white animal they see further south "with the scarlet teeth and claws." The bird drops a "horrid morsel" within their reach and they are tempted to cannibalism--but resist, for the time being. Augustus is still alive.

The bird has eaten the face off a female corpse, exposing the teeth in what appears to be a smile at their naïve hope of rescue. The image summarizes Poe's Gothic scorn for the conventional faith of Augustus and Pym. He mocks their prayer by answering it with a sickening death ship that may have floated into his head from the influential poem by Coleridge, "The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner" (1798). Our lives, he implies, are determined by *chance* and not by faith or by Providence. As to the cause of all the deaths, that, like the meaning of life, and like the final vision in this narrative, is beyond our horizon: "It is utterly useless to form conjectures where all is involved, and will, no doubt, remain forever involved, in the most appalling and unfathomable mystery."

11

Pym thanks God still again after they find a bottle of wine by chance and Augustus revives a little. By the next paragraph, however, after failing to find anything else to sustain them, Pym is again "in despair." Poe's theme of polarization is expressed in recurrent battles and in his manic-depressive plot: "There seemed now to be no longer any room for hope." What happened to his faith in God?

While he dives again, searching below, Peters and Augustus selfishly drink the last of the wine. Pym accuses them of "heartlessness" and "Augustus burst into tears." Dying of thirst and hunger, they continue "uttering the most absurd platitudes." Another ship appears, raising their hopes to heaven, until it sails away in the opposite direction. Parker, one of the four survivors, is so debilitated and starved that he proposes they resort to cannibalism.

Pym prays to God “for power to dissuade him.” Augustus is almost dead, but not quite. Finally they become so desperate they draw straws to determine who will be eaten. Again their fates are determined by *chance*. Parker loses and Dirk stabs him in the back with a dirk. After the mutiny back-stabbing is a motif. Only after they have eaten their shipmate does Pym remember the location of an axe: “I now thought it possible that, by getting at this axe, we might cut through the deck over the store-room, and readily supply ourselves with provisions.” *Now* he thinks of it!

They get the axe, chop through the deck and feast on a large ham with olives and a bottle of Madeira: “We returned fervent thanks to God for so seasonable [timely] a relief.” Not timely for poor Parker! This is a big joke--one of the first examples of black humor in American literature. These faithful Christians have just *devoured a man!* And they do not think about poor Parker again after they eat him--not even to lament God’s timing. They have become heartless cannibals, for “Augustus could not be saved.”

In a state of nature, as the philosopher Thomas Hobbes put it, “Life is nasty, brutish, and short.” Morality becomes relative—“so strictly comparative is either good or ill.” Yet as they drift further south toward the South Pole, the morality implicit in the narrative becomes increasingly polarized and absolute. Augustus dies and rots. By now, he is literally without legs to stand on, as one falls off. Civilized norms are cast overboard by Dirk, morality turns upsidedown and the ship--the psyche of Pym/Poe--rolls over upsidedown as well. Once again he is saved “by the timely assistance of Peters.”

When at last they are picked up by the passing ship the *Jane Guy*, Pym’s naive response is a suggestion from Poe that faith in God is a happy deception, that there is no mercy and no benevolent God: “By the mercy of God, we were destined to be most happily deceived.” Pym is as slow as the tortoise they eat, in contrast to the sharks they cannot catch.

Poe subverts Christianity again by having the *Jane Guy* anchor in Christmas Harbor on Desolation Island, populated by penguins whose “resemblance to a human figure is very striking, and would be apt to deceive the spectator.” The penguins recall Pym’s rescue by the Penguin in the first chapter: an image of stiff conventionality in a period when men in formal dress wore black broadcloth and white dickeys.

They leave Christmas Harbor and sail beyond an island called the Inaccessible. Poe establishes an historical context for his speculative fiction with a “brief account of the very few attempts at reaching the southern pole,” by Captain Cook and others. Geographical coordinates and other details add authenticity. The explorer J. N. Reynolds is commended for “getting set on foot a national expedition partly for the purpose of exploring these regions.” Poe/Pym gains authority by concurring with Reynolds in disagreement with the Royal Geographical Society about the geography of Antarctica: “My own experience will be found to testify most directly to the falsity of this conclusion arrived at by the society.” Eventual exploration proved that Reynolds and Poe were correct. From here on, at the literal level, Pym adopts geographical speculations of Reynolds that did *not* prove correct. No matter. Poe’s narrative, especially the ending, excites the imagination and vividly evokes his unique Gothic vision of life and death.

Poe uses the form of a ship’s log and geographical coordinates to sustain a convincing empirical tone. Throughout the narrative, on the whole, he is most effective in creating the illusion of reality by extending the duration of scenes and multiplying events and sensations, much as later Naturalists did so with abundant physical detail.

By January 10th Pym has sailed beyond the known world. His coordinates place him not on water but on the Filchner Ice Shelf. By January 14th his account is even more inconsistent with geographical facts discovered later. They encounter “a gigantic creature of the race of the Arctic bear, but far exceeding in size the largest of these animals.” For a radical Romantic, Poe was extremely rational. In his schizoid psyche, a polarization of head and sensibility intensified opposite extremes. When he called *Pym* a “silly book,” he may have been thinking of his invented animals as well as his risky speculations and visionary ending. His Antarctica is the equivalent of a different planet in later science fiction, but one he knew would soon be explored. When the huge white beast attacks the ship, Dirk jumps onto its back and kills it with his dirk. The monster is “perfectly white” with “blood red” eyes, linking it with the bloody seagull and, later, with the white creature with scarlet teeth and claws. Dirk’s feat is miraculous in icy water that would immobilize him in seconds.

Poe invents “Bennet’s Isle,” the coordinates of which are on mainland Antarctica. Pym feels gratified by his role in “opening to the eye of science one of the most intensely exciting secrets which has ever engrossed its attention.”

18

Using another technique to create the illusion of truth while squirming out from under the burden of it, Poe drops a footnote defining his terms and confessing that he does not really know what he is talking about—“deconstructing” his own narrative: “I cannot, in the first portion of what is here written, pretend to strict accuracy in respect to dates, or latitudes and longitudes, having kept no regular journal until after the period of which this first portion treats. In many instances, I have relied altogether upon memory.” If his latitudes and longitudes are not “strictly accurate,” then why did he not round them off or state them as approximate rather than pretending they are precise and then debunking himself? He has given 16 different sets of coordinates as well as variations in water temperature to exact digits he memorized by repeatedly running up into the wheelhouse of the ship to read the instruments while under attack by sea monsters.

They find the carcass of the “perfectly white” creature with scarlet teeth and claws. This motif of white and bloody red seems to be a metaphor of violent racist feelings. In the next paragraph, they encounter a primitive tribe of black people, some of whom board their ship. These are very black blacks—“jet black,” wearing the skins of a “black animal.” At this point in the narrative, black and “perfectly” white polarize and *Pym* becomes a racist allegory of signs.

The black chief, Too-Wit, has a tortoise in his canoe, a suggestion of slow thinking previously applied to Pym. To wit, Too-Wit is so ignorant of his ugliness that when he glimpses himself in a mirror he is terrified, as if he would react according to Poe’s white aesthetics. Apparently the chief had never noticed his reflection before in the water on and around his island. When the blacks come aboard their ignorance is identified with their race, whereas Pym is portrayed as learning from his experiences. “They had never before seen any of the white race--from whose complexion, indeed, they appeared to recoil.” They have an aversion to anything white--sails, eggs, flour, open books--objects connoting civilization. When the white cook splitting wood cuts into the deck, the witless Too-wit pushes the white man aside, whines and howls and sympathizes with “what he considered the sufferings of the schooner.” The white cook tolerates the affront, in contrast to the black cook demonized in the mutiny.

Invited by the friendly black chief, the whites visit his village. They cross a stream that is a metaphor of different races: The stream is “made up of a number of distinct veins, each of a distinct hue; that...did not commingle.” If a dirk [Dirk Peters] is passed between “two veins, a perfect separation was effected”—they segregated, like the American South.

19

Too-Wit’s village of Klock-klock has no clocks. No technology. The blacks live up in trees like monkeys, in caves, in holes in the ground and in “miserable” dwellings. Most are naked. Their teeth are black. Their animals include what resemble black sheep, a domesticated black albatross, black gannets and blackfish. Bird eggs have dark shells—“we noticed no light-colored substances of any kind upon the island.” Poe transcends his racism just a little bit in granting the women--as a racial group; he does not see individuals—“personal beauty” with “a grace and freedom of carriage not to be found in civilized society.”

To this extent only is he inclined to Rousseau's myth of the "noble savage." When he later idealized the dark lady Ligeia, he associates her darkness in large measure with her wildness and uninhibited sexuality, in contrast to the Victorian gentility of white culture. Poe's racist fear and resentment of blacks might have been complicated by attraction.

Pym and the other whites in his party of twelve question Chief Too-Wit about "the chief productions of the country, and whether any of them might be turned to profit." Perhaps they could establish a cotton plantation, if the blacks were not so opposed to whiteness for some reason. Instead they make an agreement to harvest local sea life.

20

The blacks treat them well, but "this apparent kindness of disposition was only the result of a deeply laid plan for our destruction... The islanders for whom we entertained such inordinate feelings of esteem [!], were among the most barbarous, subtle, and bloodthirsty wretches that ever contaminated the face of the globe." These blacks are "demons" like the black cook in the mutiny, as suggested by the name of their island: "*Tsalal* was given with a prolonged hissing sound." Poe's mythic place of human origin is no Garden of Eden, but Pym's fall on *Tsalal* is analogous to Adam's fall into knowledge.

21

By deception the blacks almost bury them alive. By *chance* Pym and Peters survive a *trap*--an engineered landslide that kills the other whites in their party (so the blacks are not as stupid as they think). Once again Pym is entombed and reborn more enlightened: "We alone had escaped from the tempest of that overwhelming destruction. We were the only living white men upon the island." The word "tempest" recalls the storm that almost killed him in Chapter I, another motif.

In the landslide, Dirk Peters gets buried up to his waist like a mythological Titan and calls to Pym for aid "in the name of God." The image suggests that God is an archetype in the human psyche, expressed in myths and religions. This is the eighth time a character invokes God. The nature of God is an insistent theme throughout the narrative and points to the mysterious figure at the end. Peters does not appeal to God, but to his companion in the *name* of God. Augustus is dead. Hence, according to the logic of Poe's allegory, Christianity and civilization are dead. Peters is referring to a different God, some transcendent power undefined until, perhaps, the climax of the narrative.

22

Thousands of blacks set out in canoes, swarm over the *Jane Guy* anchored offshore and tear the whites to pieces. They set the ship on fire. Then suddenly, with a tremendous explosion the ship *blows up*--killing and maiming thousands of blacks: "They had now, indeed, reaped the full and perfect fruits of their treachery." Poe may have read about the massacre of the crew of the *Tonquin* off Vancouver Island in 1811 by Salish Indians, hundreds of whom were blown up when a dying member of the crew ignited the ship's powder magazine. See *Salishan*, Chapter 2.

After the explosion the blacks come upon the carcass of the strange white creature with scarlet teeth and claws, blown off the ship. Terrified, they run away inland, screaming the strange words, "Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!" Poe's rendering of the explosion, in realistic details that prolong it like a slow motion film, is one of the most effective passages he ever wrote, for style and evocative power. The explosion is the *objective correlative* for revenge against the blacks, perhaps in response to Nat Turner's slave revolt in 1831. Given emphasis right after the explosion, the dead white creature with scarlet teeth and claws becomes more clearly a metaphor of white savagery in a state of nature--or race war. It is the whites who have weapons of mass destruction. Poe hopes blacks will be intimidated by vindictive white brutality.

23-24

Exploring the island of *Tsalal*, Pym descends a cliff and has a death wish--"my whole soul was pervaded with a *longing to fall*." This is an instance of the self-destructive perversity Poe sees in human

nature, as exemplified by his own attempted suicide. It is also significant that he becomes suicidal in a place where blacks rule. He passes out and falls into the arms of Peters, his savior once again.

They get ambushed by five blacks and Peters kills three, Pym one. White guys win. They drag the wounded black along with them to the beach, where they are met by a furious crowd of natives “howling like wild beasts... They appeared to be the most wicked, hypocritical, vindictive, bloodthirsty, and altogether fiendish race of men upon the face of the globe.” The white men escape by canoe toward the South Pole, toward a vision of pure whiteness, reality and Truth.

25

“Only one course seemed to be left open for hope. We resolved to steer boldly to the southward.” Forms of the word *south* recur now, stressing the theme of North versus South, the Civil War in the soul of Poe. According to his reductive allegory of signs, Truth is at the South Pole of opinion about blacks and justifies their enslavement. His vertical sign language expresses his vertical consciousness: the head (white civilization) must subjugate barbarians (blacks), just as the Superego represses the Id in Freudian psychology. Poe’s verticality and racism reduce the complex archetypal symbols of white and black to signs of Good and Evil (1838), in contrast to *Moby-Dick* (1851), in which blacks and whites are equal in a holistic vision transcending polarity. Likewise Ralph Ellison, also in rebuttal to Poe, renders the archetypal images of black and white with holistic complexity in *Invisible Man* (1952).

The white heroes “turned the bow full to the southward.” Their black hostage Nu-Nu (No-No) and the tribe on Tsalal are too ignorant to have made their canoe, which came from a different tribe, presumably of lighter skin. When Pym and Peters erect a white sail, it frightens Nu-Nu, who relates it to the white creature with scarlet teeth and claws. Later, when Pym’s white handkerchief flutters in his face, “he became violently affected with convulsions,” then murmurs “*Tekeli-li!*”

The water turns warm. They sail southward for about a week, “entering upon a region of novelty and wonder.” The water turns still warmer, and milky. “The polar winter appeared to be coming on—but coming without is terrors. I felt a *numbness* of body and mind—a dreaminess of sensation—but this was all.” When a strange white powder begins falling upon them from the sky, the terrified black Nu-Nu falls face down in the bottom of the boat. Then he dies, as ignorance dies from enlightenment. Dirk Peters the man of action has become quiet and apathetic. Pym, now the seeker, becomes more dreamy.

#### HOLE AT THE POLE

His final vision is a spectacle of awesome magnitude: “A limitless cataract, rolling silently into the sea from some immense and far-distant rampart in the heaven. The gigantic curtain ranged along the whole extent of the southern horizon.” This is how Poe imagines a literal hole at the Pole: “And now we rushed into the embraces of the cataract, where a chasm threw itself open to receive us.”

#### VISION OF GOD FIGURE

“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 of the perfect whiteness of the snow.” The qualification “but” leaves open the possibility that Pym and Peters might be saved from what seems like certain death.

Poe said elsewhere that “The unparticulated matter permeating and impelling all things is God.” At the end of *Pym*, as the current rushes toward the hole “with a hideous velocity,” the air is filled with ashy particulates as if configuring an apocalyptic revelation: The figure far larger than a man is a manifestation of God, whether projected or not. It means nothing beyond itself (Existentialism). It represents the ultimate Truth—Poe’s white whale—in the image of man because man is the highest manifestation of the divine, “shrouded” because a confrontation with ultimate Truth includes facing death. Whether an hallucination, an apparition or whatever, the import is the same: God is white.



## NOTE

As implied by the imagery and momentum of the final chapter, Pym died in the white hole at the Pole, with white birds overhead shrieking “the eternal *Tekeli-li!*”—Poe’s version of the rebel yell. Posing as editor of the NOTE, Poe claims that Edgar Allan Poe was approached to complete the narrative, but he declined because he doubted its accuracy and disbelieved in the ending! Walt Whitman wrote reviews praising his own work. Poe disarms hostile critics by pretending to be one. He demands factual accuracy, yet says he would have finished the narrative as *fiction*, if he had found it believable as *fact*.

It comes as a surprise to learn that somehow Peters survived. Posing as the editor, Poe laments the loss of the two or three final chapters entirely at the literal level, for lost scientific data. He condescends to himself about what “escaped the attention of Mr. Poe” and lectures Mr. Poe on the meaning of chasms on the island of Tsalal: “an Ethiopian verbal root,” which means “‘To be shady,’--whence all the inflections of shadow or darkness.” This redundantly repeats the racist sign language identifying “shady” black people--represented by Ethiopians--with primitive darkness, ignorance and treachery. The hoaxing artifice of this passage, with its pretense to profundity, detracts from the powerful vision that climaxed the narrative and trivializes it, much as, in the 20th century, the postmodernist Thomas Pynchon trivializes his vision with adolescent jokes.

Poe further interprets his own sign language by identifying an Arabic verbal root with whiteness and the North. In Africa, Arabs signify the North, blacks the South. The North is positive in being racially white but it is not enlightened. To learn the Truth, Poe implies, one must go South. He uses an Egyptian word meaning “the region of the south” to imply an analogy between America and Egypt, which developed a high civilization based upon slavery. As Peters interprets and Poe as editor concurs, the hieroglyphical chasms in the North represent a “human form” with “the arm outstretched toward the south.” The black chasms here conceal the Truth, like the white hole at the Pole, which also is called a “chasm.” The oversized “human form” on black Tsalal pointing to the South is analogous to the oversized “human form” at the white South Pole. That the analogous “human form” on black Tsalal is pointing to the white South implies that even blacks know deep down that the truth is white.

With redundant insistence, Poe concludes by calling attention to specific instances of his whiteness motif: “Nothing white was to be found at Tsalal, and nothing otherwise in the subsequent voyage to the region beyond.” And the “hissing” snakelike word *Tsalal* “may be found” to mean black. We get it, Edgar.

The strange repeated cry “*Tekeli-li!*” is reminiscent of the handwriting on the wall in the *Bible*, “Mene, tekel, upharsin.” Interpreted by Daniel: “God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it. Thou art weighed in the balance, and found wanting. Thy kingdom is divided...” Using a biblical tone, Poe answers the *Bible* with his own version of God’s Truth: “The kingdom of America is divided and Poe is pledging allegiance to the South, believing God is on his side. In the literary culture, Poe felt like Daniel in the lions’ den. His apocalyptic tone anticipates the Civil War. He recapitulates the images of whiteness that are metaphors of his most intense racist feelings: The savage white creature with scarlet teeth and claws is killed and can no longer express itself. Only the shrieking white birds “from beyond the veil” transcend the hole at Poe’s Pole.

The death of Pym is consistent with Poe’s belief that death is the price of a deep quest for Truth. The survival of Dirk Peters is consistent with his mythic role as exemplar--an alternative to Christ in a Gothic universe with no benevolent God. His “unbelievable” survival is analogous to the resurrection of Christ and the “milky” water near the entrance to mother earth is a hint of spiritual rebirth. The innocent young Pym is dead and Poe is reborn in his own mind as Dirk Peters.

## TRANSCENDENTAL CHARACTERISTICS OF ENDING

1. Quest into the wilderness
2. Need to save oneself
3. Christ-evoking figure as exemplar: Dirk Peters
4. Indian as spiritual guide: Peters is a half-breed

5. Confrontation with ultimate Truth: God figure at the end
6. Truth in the form of wild animal: white creature with scarlet teeth (Poe confronts his own feelings)
7. Spiritual death/rebirth several times, lastly as Peters; submission to greater power (ocean current)
8. Transcendence of time and space
9. Sense of mystery and intensity
10. Paradox: icy ocean turns warm and then hot near the South Pole
11. Ineffability
12. Numinous evocation
13. Inner light: “out the milky depths...a luminous glare arose”

#### CONTRARY CHARACTERISTICS

1. There is no atonement with Nature in a Gothic worldview: Nature is embodied in the “evil” blacks, as well as in the noble Dirk Peters
2. No synthesis of puritan with pastoral values
3. No pastoral values: even his dog attacks him
4. Polarization is the opposite of holistic
5. No harmonious vision: the Gothic world is chaotic and savage
6. Vertical and linear rather than circular imagery
7. Pym is helped by Peters to the end, never self-reliant
8. Terror instead of ecstasy
9. Sky is ominous rather than luminous
10. Movement in the end is to be downward rather than upward

#### COMPARE THE VISION OF RODERICK USHER

“If ever mortal painted an ideal, that mortal was Roderick Usher.... A small picture presented the interior of an immensely long and rectangular vault or tunnel...*white and...at an exceeding depth below the surface of the earth....* No torch or other artificial source of light was discernible; yet a flood of intense rays rolled throughout, and bathed the whole in a ghastly and inappropriate splendor.” (italics added)

#### STRUCTURE OF *Pym*

Poe has been criticized for being too mechanical. According to his explanations of his creative process, he constructed a fiction backwards, starting with the end in order to design the story for the best “single effect.” Hence his creative process was calculated rather than a quest for meaning, as is suggested by the scheme of thematic movements in *Pym*:

1. Backward from civilization to barbarism
2. Outward from provincial to universal
3. Forward from illusions to enlightenment
4. Downward from the naive North to the realistic South
5. Inward from objective reality to the verge of the deepest subjective self--the inner earth
6. Godward from cold facts to a vision of divine Truth

Michael Hollister (2014)