

# Beyond the Human: Nature, Uncanniness, and Gothic Atmosphere in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*

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## Abstract

This paper revisits *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* by considering it through the concept of the ecological uncanny. Although the previous criticism frequently developed a psychological manner to explain the uncanny after Freud brought forth the concepts of repression and recollection of the familiar, this paper contends that Poe finds uncanniness in the material world. In the novel, the sea is not just the place where the human fear is projected, but it is the overwhelming power that disturbs the human power, rational organization, and chronology. By reading considerately, it becomes clear that the novel presupposes the idea of vulnerability of bodies, disorientation of space, and boundaries of scientific knowledge, which demonstrate the weakness of human control in large ecological systems. When Poe is presented together with ecocritical and posthuman thought, the study suggests that the Gothic novel ambiance is a result of a troubled awareness of the fact that human beings are at a loss to acknowledge the presence of things that are beyond their understanding. It is here that the ecological uncanny as a restructuring of Poe can be introduced to take a new shape outside the psychological explanations of him.

**Keywords:** Ecological Uncanny, Ecocriticism, Posthumanism, Non-human, Gothic Fiction.

## Introduction

The idea of the uncanny has long had a prominent place in the discourse of Gothic literature and horror, as well as psychological disturbance, as it stirs up the foundations upon human certainty, identity and rational order. To distinguish it from fear provoked by immediate danger or by encounters with the completely unfamiliar, the uncanny draws its unsettling force from proximity rather than distance. It comes out of what seems to be familiar, intimate, or habitual, only to create a feeling of strangeness underneath, an unfamiliarity that smashes the subject's reckoning of security. In this respect, the uncanny breaks the experience of being 'at home' in the world, and reveals a frightening continuity between comfort and terror. The word comes from the German 'unheimlich', which is semantically unstable and lies at the centre of the phenomenon it names. While unheimlich is usually translated as 'unhomely' it's

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meaning can never be grasped apart from its apparent opposite, 'Heimlich'. As Sigmund Freud points out, 'Heimlich' describes not only what is familiar, domestic, and intimate, it also describes what is hidden, secret, or concealed (Freud 224). The uncanny therefore emerges when what was supposed to be hidden becomes visible, which changes the state of familiarity into that of unease. He goes on to define the uncanny as 'that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar' (Freud 220). Despite how lasting an impact Freud's account of the uncanny has had, however, it is constrained by its strong emphasis on psychological repression. By situating uncanny disturbance primarily within the human psyche, Freud's approach also reinforces an anthropocentric view of the world, in which the external environment functions mainly to prompt conflicts that arise within the mind.

With due course of time critical approaches shaped by ecocriticism and posthumanism have overcome this limitation by stressing the agency of non-human forces as well as material environments. It is from this angle that the uncanny can sometimes not be explained through psychological disturbance but could also appear through the non-human world asserting itself in ways that transcend human control or understanding. Ecocriticism, according to Greg Garrard, asks exactly these questions at those moments where nature disturbs human-centered narratives of meaning and mastery (Garrard 4). As familiar environments to subjects become threatening or unreadable, the uncanny arises as a result of the instability of the ecological environment rather than of a repressive blocking within the subject. While posthumanism wasn't a concept during Poe's time his stories contain elements that align with post human themes. Poe's works depicts nature as a force that influences human behavior, blur boundaries and challenges traditional narratives. Posthumanist discourse deploys further complications to the idea of the uncanny with the further questioning of the very coherence of the human subject, as well as its autonomy. By foregrounding relationality, embodiment and material entanglement, posthumanism reveals the illusion of human separateness which supports the traditional interpretations of the uncanny (Wolfe 8). Within this context, uncanny experiences express not only psychological disturbance, but the structural weakness of the human subject situated in interconnections to non-human forces. Consequently, the blurring of boundaries at the heart of the uncanny predicts posthuman criticisms of human exceptionalism, for boundaries between subject and object, between human and non-human, are fluid. When approached through a literary analytical lens, the uncanny therefore has to be understood to be a relational phenomenon which materializes at the intersection of human perception and material reality. In Gothic literature this instability is often expressed through the configurations of space. Familiar domestic interiors become oppressive instead of protective, mundane settings take dimming and menacing atmospheres, and objects that are everyday now cause alarm. Such transformations are disconcerting to the subject not because they go against natural law, but because they show the contingency of the assumptions in which the order, safety and belonging is constructed. Thus, uncanny reveals the weakness of the structures that enable humans to imagine themselves to be central, secure and in control of their surroundings.

Poe's fiction is one such example of this disturbing dynamic through sustained ambiguity and narrative indeterminacy. His tales often allow no definitive explanations for the disturbances

he depicts, and leave the reader unsure whether events are to be explained by psychological, material or ontological causes. Refusing to fix the balance between perception and reality, Poe creates fictional worlds in which human comprehension is still tentative and unreliable, thus anticipating later ecocritical and posthuman concerns for the limitations of human understanding (Kennedy 14). The uncanny exposes, moments of human-centered modes of understanding are cast off, to the elements of the subject's dependence on material, environmental, and non-human forces with which it has no rational control or interpretation. It is this recognition that gives the uncanny its power in Gothic literature, and sets it as an important conceptual basis for subsequent ecocritical and posthuman theoretical developments.

### **Discovering the non-human nature of Poe**

The literary work of Edgar Allan Poe has always been discussed in the context of inwardness, pre-occupation with psychology and interiority, the disintegration of rational consciousness. The frequent focus on madness, obsession, and unreliable narration has led many readers to see Poe's imaginative worlds mainly as inner landscapes, where external reality is shaped by personal perception. This overwhelming interpretive drive has contributed to the formation of a view of Poe as an author of the mind, as opposed to the environment, and in a symbolic or affective economy as opposed to material. Landscapes, seas, or space of buildings have been naturally interpreted as aesthetic tools to bring outside human psychological disruption and to be used by the human consciousness as a metaphor. However, this way of reading Poe has its limits because by treating human inner life as the main source of meaning, it reinforces an anthropocentric view in which the non-human environment appears only as a background for human emotion, rather than as an active force. When Poe's work is read through Ecocritical and Posthumanist perspectives, a different emphasis emerges as the non-human world disrupts human-centered meanings instead of confirming them. Poe's imagination is not confined to psychological symbolism but it repeatedly presents humans as materially entangled within forces that are indifferent, uncontrollable, and beyond understanding. This perspective aligns closely with what contemporary theory describes as the ecological uncanny.

The ecological uncanny is made very definite in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* written by Poe, where the sea is not an imaginary continuation of the human psychology, but rather, an immense, self-governing mechanism that constantly intervenes in the human action. The ocean in Poe, as opposed to traditional adventure stories where it provides a space in which people can be heroes or even defiant, is again and again not susceptible to anthropocentric perception. The ocean in Pym is not a passive environment nor does it embody a romanticized land of freedom it is an ecological system, which consumes, disrupts and in many cases, obliterates will. The ocean reveals vulnerability of human bodies, inadequateness of rational control, and illusion of distance between the human subject and the non-human world through its all-consuming presence. Since the beginning, Pym places its main character in a situation that is beyond control. The story is not built on human choice but sequence of happenings where agency is stolen away on numerous occasions by storms, currents, hunger, and violence. But though they are human activities, mutiny and betrayals

have their impacts and are intensified by the sea itself. Cargoes are lost at sea, where navigators lose control, and people lose their lives in the open air, and the survival of their lives now depends not on their logic but on circumstances that are difficult to address without calculators. The sea is then seen as an ecological system that determines the conditions of possibility of the human life instead of being subject to the human will.

This ecological framing disputes the long critical tradition of viewing the Poe's environments as the interior states projected. Even though it is a fact that psychological instability is particularly evident in *Pym*, it is not sufficient to explain the horrors caused by the sea world. What makes the fear that permeates through the story not about the effect of the hallucination or subjective warping but about the effects of constant exposure to a surrounding that function devoid of human meaning. The indifference of the sea, its unwillingness to respond to the suffering or intent of a human creates a kind of horror which is highly ecological. This immersion conforms quite closely to the point by Timothy Morton that ecological awareness is disturbing when human beings realize that they have always been previously within ecological systems and never above or outside of them. Morton argues that the myth of distance, the notion that human beings can objectively see or control nature breaks down when ecological entanglement is noted (Morton 5). *Pym* dramatizes this fall in a very consistent manner. The sea cannot be scenery or symbol since it constantly demands its corporeal presence, defining time, movement and survival. The failure of these technologies of navigation, utilizing instruments, rational planning, happens innumerable often, and highlighting the insufficiency of human systems of knowledge in the face of ecological complexity.

Ecological uncanny in *Pym* is also enhanced by the focus of the novel in the vulnerability of the body. Hunger, thirst, cold, pressure, drowning human bodies in the story are exposed to, which are prefiguring material dependency over interiority of the psyche. Bodies are turned into the organic matter subjected to the forces of nature which disintegrates the illusion of human exceptionalism. This focus is quite reminiscent of Posthumanism and ecocriticism, and especially of the idea of trans-corporeality defined by Stacy Alaimo as permeable materiality of human bodies and their environments. Alaimo believes that bodies are never closed but they are constantly influenced by their relations with non-human systems in the form of water, climate and biological processes (Alaimo 2). In *Pym*, the sea pervades all spheres of embodied life, and the process of survival depends on the ecological factors instead of the morality and intellectual excellence. Such exposure also reflects on how the narrative is always anxious of the ocean, and it can be effectively explained in combination with the notion of ecophobia by Simon Estok. According to Estok, the fear or contempt of nature based on the objection of its threat to human control and superiority over other forms of dominance is the production of ecophobia (Estok 208). In *Pym*, ecophobic reactions appear during the occasions that the sea is non-navigable, non-predictable, and even non-explicable. Storms come without notice, waves drive ships to uncharted territory and the ocean is inhospitable to cartography. These scenes do not provide nature as actively malicious but simply indifferent as it is. Their terror is caused by the understanding that the sea is not driven by human values or requirements.

Notably, Poe does not put this lack of concern into the context of a moral failure by nature. Instead, it is nature that is not moral that creates the uncanny effect. The sea does not punish evil and reward good but it merely exists. This apathy makes anthropocentric histories unstable that believe there is a significant match up to human action and environment reaction. Consequently, the horror of Pym is not caused by any paranormal intervention or even a mental disorder but rather by an ecological vision otherness the understanding that the human life is manifested within the structures, which do not recognize and do not support any human meaning. This ecological orientation is supported in the form of the structure of Pym. The story is not developed by a series of disruptions and disorientations. Every effort to restore the order is disrupted by nature forces that shift the plot course of the story. This instability is a reflection on what J. Gerald Kennedy defines as the general skepticism of Poe to narrative authority and coherence. According to Kennedy, fiction by Poe always discredits the narrative structures that are claimed to deliver a sense and command. Ecological uncertainty can never be separated of this narrative instability in Pym. The loss of the narrative unity correlates with the loss of human domination over the maritime world (Kennedy 25).

The temporal scale of the sea also helps to emphasize the autonomy of the sea as an autonomous system. The sufferings of humans take place in seconds; the mechanisms of the ocean do not have personal conditions, but giant and impersonal ones. This temporal difference adds to the ecological uncanny since it only helps to bring the triviality of human time in non-human process. The ocean existed the existence of human beings and will survive them, making the lives of individuals temporary and unstable. This temporal disjunction embraces Enlightenment ideas of progress and mastery, but works with Posthumanist explanations of human centrality. The association between knowledge and control is further complicated by the fact that Poe can use science to talk about Pym. Whereas the story has some allusions to navigation, geography and exploration, these sorts of knowledge never establish control over the environment. Shawn Rosenheim has pointed out that Poe was interested in the hypothetical boundaries of science, by focusing on his propensity towards revealing the frailty of scientific authority in *The Cryptographic Imagination*. Scientific rationality does not master the sea in Pym but gets digested and made tentative. This showing of epistemological limits strengthens the ecological uncanny in showing the vulnerability of human knowledge systems in face of complex ecological situations (Rosenheim 5). The overall result of these aspects is a story where non-human nature becomes a participant but not a symbolic background. The sea is influencing, dictating the survival, and corrupting meaning without anthropomorphizing. The agency is systemic and not intentional but works through currents, storms and material conditions which are beyond the understanding of human beings. This agency corresponds to a modern ecological perspective which focuses on process, relationship and emergence as opposed to intentionality. In *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, Poe expresses an ecological viewpoint of human life, in which a person is infected by nature rather than free-will. The ecological uncanny is the result of having been immersed in an ecological system that does not allow the human centrality. Fear is created not due to the strangeness of the sea but due to its unyielding presence- it cannot be escaped, does not care and is material in the extreme.

Poe prefigures central discoveries of ecocriticism and posthumanism with this anticipation of ecological vulnerability, which is a literary exploration of the crossroads of the environment that is all-too-relevant in a time of environmental uncertainty.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has suggested the ecological uncanny as a set of theory that enables the re-assessment of the non-human nature manifestation by Poe through the lens of anthropocentric, symbolic, or purely psychological paradigms. Instead of viewing environments as surfaces relative to which human interiority is projected, the analyses presented in this chapter have shown that the writing of Poe is all about putting forward the material agency of non-human dynamics in foreground. Space, landscapes, architectures, atmospheres, and spatial arrangements are active agents in the formation of narratives, human subjectivity, embodied, and perception. The ecological uncanny comes to light in this location where this material agency is made visible, disrupting the preference of the human subject and the non-human world. Theoretically, the ecological uncanny brings down major postulates of human exceptionalism because it exposes the subject as deeply embedded within its ecological systems and not standing above or outside it. The uncanny consequently moves out of a psychoanalytic zone, where estrangement is founded on repression or doubling, into an ecological one, where estrangement is brought about through relative closeness, magnitude and material continuity. What turns disturbing is not the unknown, but the realization of the known as the subject of non-human reasonings that are not concerned with human signification.

In terms of Posthumanism interpretation, this destabilization carries far reaching consequences to the interpretation of subjectivity. As it has been shown in the paper, Poe relentlessly disrupts the ideal of the independent, self-governed man. The finding of identity is not sovereign within, but mediated between the identity and the environment. Subjectivity is the creation of getting messed up with spaces, systems and material forces that cannot be controlled consciously (Braidotti 3). This observation is in line with Posthumanist observations who disregard the humanist dream of self-sufficiency, making relationality, vulnerability more important. It is the uncanny with which the subject faces the disintegration of the supposed autonomy and becomes aware of being a part of non-human assemblages. The expression of affection in these experiences has been theorized using the concept of 'ecophobia' that helps explain the side effects of nature that brings out anxiety whenever it does not allow people to control it. Ecophobic responses are shown in the writing of Poe as obsessive attempts to classify, dominate or avoid non-human powers. These are repeated strategies that fail and ecophobia is only a sign of epistemological insecurity (Estok 10). By showing that the non-human life cannot be fully translated into the anthropocentric paradigm and made understandable and manageable, the ecological uncanny reveals the boundaries of human knowledge. Fear, here, is used as a marker of epistemic disruption which is a method that human forms of knowledge have come to an end. Collectively, the theoretical interventions of this chapter place Poe as an author who was attracted to non-human nature with anticipation upon some of the major discoveries of present ecocriticism and Posthumanist theory. His narratives express a vision of the world where non-human life have

material agency, the human power is not absolute and the meaning is not predetermined. The ecological uncanny is a means of estrangement that displays the inseparability of human and non-human life and denies the soothing aspect of reconciliation or domination. It is finally evident that the ecological uncanny in Poe is not some artful fringe effect, but rather a frame that rearranges the relationship between environment, subject and fear into a new structure. By shifting the balance between mind and matter, human and non-human, control and exposure, the writing of Poe succeeds in the prolonged critique of the anthropocentric epistemology. It would be seen that the ecological uncanny is a device that can be used to analyze literature, but is also a way of conceptualizing how humans can reconsider human being in the ecological system. It prefigures vulnerability to dominance, entanglement to autonomy, persistence to meaning, with the need to reconsider the position of the human within the more than human world.

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