

# The Sublime World in “A Descent into the Maelström”

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## ABSTRACT

The shocking shipwreck discovery in “A Descent into the Maelström” elicits disparate responses from the public. The fisherman’s cohorts completely deny the incredible occurrence to mollify their consternation. In contrast, the fisherman witnesses the sublime spectacle and chooses to repeat the story to different audiences so that he might build a psychological mastery over the paralyzing event. In fact, their differing attitudes piece together an integrated picture of anthropocentrism: either to deny its existence to safeguard the cloistered anthropocentrism or to imagine a hallucinated mastery to gratify anthropocentric vanity. The general narrator goes beyond anthropocentrism and presents a posthumanist view of the issue. A descent from anthropocentrism into posthumanism enables human beings to have a panoramic view of their appropriate position in the world.

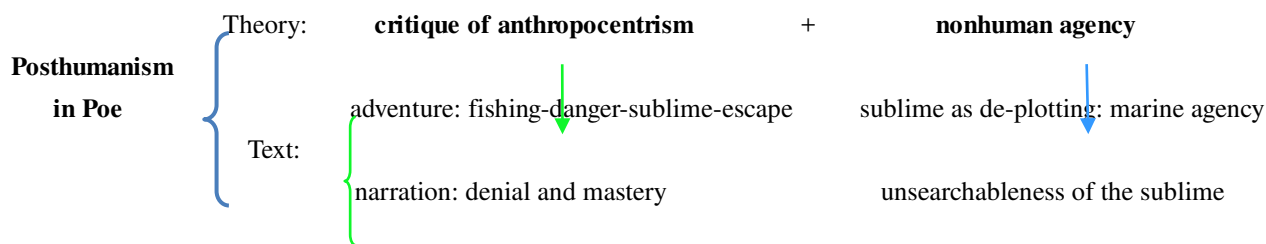
## Posthumanism and Its Critique of Anthropocentrism

Posthumanism, as a new paradigm of ideas, came into existence in the late 1990s. It consists of two primary aims: the critique of anthropocentrism and the advocacy of nonhuman agency. Posthumanism, according to Neil Badmington, often “take[s] the form of a critical practice that occurs *inside* humanism” and becomes “the working-through of anthropocentric discourse” (120). Therefore, to understand posthumanism, we need some preliminary knowledge of anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism emerged in the later eighteenth century and became a prevalent intellectual trend in the nineteenth century. Anthropocentrism glorifies human intelligence and human achievements, and claims the centrality of the human species on the earth. According to Paul Crutzen, anthropocentrism, derived from anthropocene, is closely associated with the rapid development of the Industrial Revolution. “The Anthropocene could be said to have started in the latter part of the eighteenth century, when analyses of air trapped in polar ice showed the beginning of growing global concentrations of carbon dioxide and methane. This date also happens to coincide with James Watt’s design of the steam engine in 1784” (23). Technological inventions during this historical period led to an increasing number of factories which revolutionized people’s way of life and left a significant impact on the environment. It is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, human beings felt proud of their intelligence and even arrogant about their escalating importance. On the other hand, it caused irreversible deteriorating pollution on the earth which could only be manifested in retrospection. Therefore, at the initial stage of anthropocentrism, people were confident in their intelligence. The ascendancy of anthropocentrism continued in the nineteenth century.

Edgar Allan Poe ruminated over these anthropocentric repercussions and speculated a posthumanist world in many of his tales. In addition to its critique of anthropocentrism, posthumanism also endeavors to advocate the agency of nonhuman species, especially animals, machines, and ecology. According to Rosi Braidotti, posthumanism consists of three major fields: “becoming-animal, becoming-earth and becoming-machine” (66). Despite their different critical foci, these branches all share some fundamental tenets: anthropocentric decentralization, species equality, and nonhuman agency. Posthumanism, Braidotti informs us, “contests the arrogance of anthropocentrism

and the ‘exceptionalism’ of the Human as a transcendental category” (66). Many of Poe’s tales contain the seed of posthumanism and “A Descent into the Maelström” exemplifies his speculative passage from anthropocentrism to posthumanism.

Poe’s short stories have eternal appeal to scholars. “A Descent into the Maelström” is such a tale that continues to attract increasing critical attention. Robert Seaman denies the factual occurrence of the adventure and there is “one of noncorrespondence, or nonidentity between the event and its narration” (202). Similarly, Micah Donohue interprets the story as an explication of the new modes of international American writing which “overflow national limits and plummet into the whirl—the world” (238). Apart from literary themes, the whirlpool also provokes insightful psychological analyses. It epitomizes the “void around which human subjectivity forms and all subsequent desires turn” (Kelly 116). Likewise, Richard Finholt also contends that the sailor’s irresistible attraction to death instinct “vibrate[s] to the tune of the Maelstrom” (363). To confront the awesome vortex, critics propose various approaches. Daniel Hoffman regards the Norwegian’s exercise of “the ratiocinative faculty” as the key to salvation (139). Gerard Sweeney prioritizes “aesthetic intuition” over science in the story (22), and Kent Ljungquist accentuates the fisherman’s final archiving as “a conception of the ideal, supersensible sublime” (77). Despite the diversity of critical voices, few scholars pay sufficient attention to the impact of the shipwreck discovery on the public. The responses from the fisherman and his fellow workers complement each other and present an integrated picture of anthropocentrism. This paper argues for a posthumanist world in “A Descent into the Maelström” after human descent from anthropocentrism. The following diagram outlines the content of the essay.



## Narrative Disruption of the Anthropocentric Plot

The fisherman skillfully architectures the adventure into four progressive segments: the rational calculation of waves, the panic encounter with the Maelstrom, the remarkable experience of the sublime, and the scientific escape. Human beings have explored the Maelstrom and exposed its undercurrent law. The waves are regulated by the flux and reflux “every six hours,” and the intervals of tranquility last “a quarter of an hour” (“Descent” 582). Armed with scientific knowledge of the vortex, the fisherman and his brothers went fishing at “about two o’clock P. M” and planned to return home “at seven o’clock” to avoid “the worst of the Ström at slack water, which [they] knew would be at eight” (585). During the past six years, they had made their “courage answer for capital” and profited a lot from their scientific calculations of exploiting these perilous waters. Science builds up human confidence to know the world, to explore its secret, and to capitalize on the world.

Their sophisticated calculations, however, are easily defeated by the capricious sea. A rampant hurricane hurled them into the inside of the notorious maelstrom and killed two brothers. The fisherman was drenched in horror and his “lids clenched themselves together as if in a spasm” (588). In the process of descending into the whirlpool, the fisherman witnessed the astonishing grandeur of the sublime ocean. Poe deliberately underscores the transforming process: the wise fisherman who succeeded in utilizing his knowledge of the currents a moment ago, now, becomes a sentient being merely registering the remarkable occurrences of a mysterious nature. The hulk, instead of descending into the whirlpool, was magically suspended “upon the interior surface of a funnel

vast in circumference,” and miraculously, the moonlight “streamed in a flood of golden glory along the black walls” (“Descent” 590). The sublime is the venture beyond the boundary of human beings into “the Edge zones of the maritime frontier,” and the transgression produces marvelous feelings which “delight us, transport us, carry us away” (Cohen 107-8). This beautifully delineates the fisherman’s amazing experience in the whirlpool. Over the bottom of the profound abyss, “there hung a magnificent rainbow, like that narrow and tottering bridge which Mussulmen say is the only pathway between Time and Eternity” (“Descent” 591). There, the fisherman transgressed the threshold and entered into a different “heterotopic site of the sea.” In this alien spatial-temporal existence, human beings descend from anthropocentrism, no longer occupying the center of the world. The decentering of human beings, or the passivity of the fisherman in this case, gives way to the ascent of nonhuman agency: the spectacular performance of the maritime whirlpool before an astonished fisherman.

However, this brief moment of posthumanist existence is soon erased, and the momentary disruption is reintegrated into anthropocentric coding. The fisherman gradually regained his “self-possession” and began to observe the numerous falling objects and “speculate upon [their] relative velocities” (“Descent” 591). His emerging comprehension of the law of falling objects and the decisive application of the law to tie himself “to the water cask” enabled his survival. David Herman skillfully summarizes this struggling process between anthropocentrism and posthumanism as “the emplotment, resistance to plotting, and re-emplotment” of nonhuman agents in human narration (Herman 432). In literature, a human narrator often uses some animal or the sea as metaphors to tell his story. Sometimes the animal or sea refuses to be an empty vehicle for human projection, and resists the development of “some anthropocentric plot,” then its agency will “emerge in the brief moment before, or perhaps during, anthropocentric recoding” (Malewitz 548). The resistance to human plotting is a posthumanist moment in which the suppressed agency of nonhuman species emerges. This emergence of nonhuman agency disrupts human narration and threatens human psychology so the narrator hurries to recode it into his narration and resume his control. Similarly, the fisherman, initially in control of waves, makes the ocean currents “answer for capital,” then becomes paralyzed before the performance of gyrating waves, therefore he is eager to regain his control (by applying scientific knowledge to his rescue). In short, the fisherman’s artistic orchestration of the four segments delineates the process from activity, passivity, and activity again, suggestive of his assumed anthropocentric triumph.

## **The Critique of Anthropocentric Responses: Denial and Mastery**

The shocking shipwreck discovery elicits disparate responses from the public. The fellow fishermen concretize the first category of the public’s attitude: the complete denial of the astonishing discovery. “I told them my story—they did not believe it” (593). The exploration is too enormous for people to comprehend, so they simply reject its existence. In other words, if the voyage’s adventures cannot be classified into the existing paradigms of human knowledge, they either become an annoying elusive other beyond the human grasp or an upheaval shattering the ontological frameworks of human beings. Therefore, turning their backs toward the overwhelming breakthrough helps men to cushion their shock and readjust themselves into their habitual comfort zone.

The fisherman himself epitomizes the second group of public opinion: psychological mastery. Unlike his skeptical cohorts, the fisherman witnesses the incredible spectacle in nature. However, the centrality of the adventure is his passivity before the sublime spectacle, and the approach to deal with the problem is to repeat his story to various audiences. “I told them my story—they did not believe it.” And “three years” later, “I now tell it to *you*—and I can scarcely expect you to put more faith in it” (593). The less credited the story is, the more eagerly he craves to retell it. Why does he frequently repeat his story? Sigmund Freud’s theory of “repetition compulsion” demystifies the phenomenon of human obsession. The abruptness of a traumatic event often paralyzes the patient’s

comprehension and precipitates him into a vulnerable position of being a passive witness. However, verbal repetitions introduce the possibility of building up a psychological “mastery” over the previous passivity, and enable him to take “an active part” in the event (285). Likewise, from his retellings of the remarkable occurrence, the fisherman gets himself unstuck from a state of paralysis, gradually develops some comprehension of the situation, and finally nurtures a psychological mastery of the scene. This psychological mastery is, by no means, equivalent with the actual command of the scene in reality. It is only a hallucinated control over the circumstance, and behind the imagined personal mastery is the swelling anthropocentrism.

In fact, the responses of the fisherman and his colleagues dovetail with each other and present an integrated picture of anthropocentrism. The drastic responses from the fisherman and his co-workers outline people’s defense of anthropocentrism from polarized ends. An astonishing shipwreck discovery overwhelms people and shakes their faith. To safeguard their anthropocentric vanity, they simply deny its existence. On the other hand, the fisherman admits the disturbing discovery, but he imagines a psychological command over the scene, with a similar aim to reestablish anthropocentric dominance. However, the general narrator goes beyond anthropocentrism and presents a posthumanist view on the issue.

## **Beyond Anthropocentrism: Posthumanism**

The narrator corroborates the validity of the fisherman’s story, but unlike the fisherman who imagines a psychological mastery over the overwhelming scene, the narrator frankly acknowledges the limitation of human understanding of the posthumanist world. The concrete delineation of the adventure site establishes a valid criterion. The “little cliff” for the fisherman, in fact, is a slippery “precipice” some sixteen hundred feet from the roaring sea. The fisherman carelessly sits on the perilous edge, but the narrator is terrified to crawl on the ground (578). The depiction of the hazardous setting, with the contrast between the fisherman’s serene attitude and the narrator’s panicked responses, adds weight to the narrative authority. After the validation of the story’s authenticity, the narrator honestly admits the deficiency of human understanding. “The vastness, profundity and unsearchableness” of the sublime world, the narrator quotes in the epigraph of the tale, are not “commensurate” to the myopic human models of cognition (“Descent” 577).

Behind the narrator’s frank confrontation with the ambit of human comprehension lies Poe’s posthumanist view of the world. Human beings are not the center of the earth, and instead, they are merely one of the members of the universe. This posthumanist idea becomes a unifying theme vibrating through many of Poe’s stories. We are mistaken “in believing man, in either his temporal or future destinies, to be of more moment in the universe” than other species (“Island of Fay” 601). Likewise, “The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion” also envisions a posthumanist community that features “the majesty of all things—of the unknown now known—of speculative Future” (456). In “The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket,” Poe’s posthumanist community becomes the idealized archipelago: “the Auroras, respecting whose existence a great diversity of opinion has existed” (314).

As far as the deficiency is concerned, this article only makes a limited investigation of posthumanism in Poe with its primary concentration on the critique of anthropocentrism. To be more specific, this essay goes beyond anthropocentric circumference and makes a brief analysis of marine agency in the sublime world, but fails to explore other important posthumanist themes, such as animals and machines, which also occupy a considerable proportion in Poe’s works. Despite its limitations, this posthumanist reading broaches a new perspective for readers to understand many of Poe’s protagonists who are obsessed with transgressing the boundary of human beings and establishing connections with non-human beings.

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