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Lucy Turner

University at Albany, State University of New York, leturner@albany.edu

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LIFE AS CONTAGION: SHEPPARD LEE AND ARTHUR GORDON PYM'S VIRAL TRAVEL LOGS

by

Lucy Turner

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Abstract:

This research looks at Robert Montgomery Bird’s novel Sheppard Lee, Written by Himself and Edgar Allan Poe’s only work of long fiction, The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket. Posing the narrators as viral agents within their respective plots, the research draws from contemporary antebellum sources as well as earlier, and more modern ones, ranging from Descartes to Agamben and Esposito. Following the viral model, the role of the protagonists is mapped in an effort to expose how their infectious actions lead to greater implications such as how they function as the virus, how they infect those around them, the attempts that are made to contain them, their ability to objectify the human body through a separation of the corporeal from the psychological, race metaphors(including a reflection of the antebellum culture that they were published in) and finally the culmination of all of these topics into the question of sovereignty.
Introduction

Both protagonists of Robert Montgomery Bird’s *Sheppard Lee* and Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, can be identified as viral agents within the plots of their novels. These characters resist containment and, when they succeed in escaping it, consume those around them. While their levels of awareness of this process differ, the same viral tropes can be used as a method for analysis of these works. Adaptation and transformation as a means of survival becomes the model of the viral character. Objectification and commodification of the body, race as signifier and sovereignty are concepts that we have seen before in literature, however they may be all integrated within the viral model. Sheppard Lee and Pym as viral agents exercise containment and quarantine, and at the same time practice contagion as a survival tactic. This reading will expose similarities between the two characters, but will also expose differences which still fit into the viral paradigm. The dual role of narrator and protagonist is revealing in both novels and leads us to issues of personhood and property as exemplified within several models, which may be subsumed by the viral paradigm. This approach helps to synthesize various critical approaches including the exploration of race, the role of the narrator, historical approach, and biopolitics.

Identifying the protagonist as a virus is important because it enables the work to be analyzed within a larger paradigm. It both incorporates and changes other rhetorical concepts. For example, by seeking sovereignty as a means of survival, the protagonist as viral agent causes us to identify conflicts within the novel as a fight for characters’ basic identities. Objectification of the body becomes the primary motivation of the protagonist, rather than a method of reaching other goals. Indeed, the protagonists of
these particular works are completely objectified themselves as they experience breaks between psyche and body through both separation from the original corporeal form and a schism exemplified through narrative form. The body becomes something less than human and thus a consuming and consumable entity. Bodies can be bought, exchanged and used, but specifically through the medical paradigm of a viral infection. Racial conflict, particularly relevant in these American antebellum works, is then placed in a new arena of parasitic competition. As the significance of personhood is removed, all that remains is physicality. Race then, becomes one of the only human markers recognized by the infectious agent.

The role of protagonist as virus puts him in the role of parasite as he seeks to thrive off others. Thus other characters are objectified as that which is useful to the viral agent. Objectification of the body leads to issues of sovereignty, in that in order to objectify another, one character must have the power to do so. Sovereignty and objectification are strongly linked to commodification. The issue of commodification is explored within the subject of race in both novels, and it is this subject which ends them. My goal is examine both novels concurrently in sections examining the protagonists as a virus, their contagious capabilities, attempts to quarantine these viral agents, the more specific commodification of the body, racial implications of the viral model, and finally a look at the role of sovereignty as shaped by this paradigm.

**Protagonist as Virus**

Written in 1836, Robert Montgomery Bird’s *Sheppard Lee* is the first person narration of a man who is accidentally given the power to possess and reanimate dead
bodies. Through this supernatural capability, the eponymous narrator travels through antebellum American society. In this process, he becomes a rich man plagued with bout, a poor dandy equally plagued with bills, a rich, old miser, an ill-fated philanthropist, a temporarily happy slave and a rich young gentleman with a crippling case of hypochondria. The protagonist’s adventures in each body acts as a satire of sorts of Bird’s society while exposing the problematic nature of possession. With this, Bird helps set the stage for a type of literature that was gaining in popularity as Curtis Dahl points out in his biography of the author, “Sheppard Lee follows the tradition of novels of psychology and pseudo-science introduced into America by Charles Brockden Brown, carried to its height in the works of Poe, and later used by Hawthorne,” (106). As a trained and practicing (for a very short period of time) physician, Bird formulates his novel around a quasi-medical satire of American society.

As Dahl suggests, Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, written two years later in 1838, follows a similar pattern in the alleged first-hand account of Pym’s extreme adventures at sea. We follow the protagonist through his journey from schoolboy, to a stow away aboard a ship where mutiny makes chaos, to a cannibalistic survivor and finally to an explorer of the South Seas. Where Sheppard Lee travels through American society, Pym implies a similar pattern through metaphors and allusions created in the process of his travel from one calamity to the next.

Bird’s novel of metempsychosis takes his reader on a journey of body snatching, impersonation and objectification that can be analyzed by a consideration of the protagonist as an agent of contagion. Using a contagious virus as a model, the eponymous *Sheppard Lee* offers a narration of a series of infections of bodies around
him, which have complicated economic, political, and metaphorical implications. As the
virus, Sheppard Lee is both independent from the bodies whom he inhabits, and
connected with them through his control over them, in a relationship that raises questions
of body sovereignty and mental stability. Bird’s writing combines medical issues with
metaphorical complications in a manner that allows for the objectification of the body
into a commoditized currency that can be traded for potential happiness. The body is no
longer the defining characteristic of existence, instead it functions as a form of
containment for the virus that is Sheppard Lee, and as a vessel for the spread of his
infection.

In Poe’s only piece of long fiction, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of
Nantucket* we see another example of a narrator mirroring the natural model of a virus
including issues of containment, infection and race. Much like Sheppard Lee, the
protagonist has an uncanny ability to constantly transform in order to survive through the
many difficulties that he faces. The seemingly inexplicable manner through which Pym
manages to overcome the many obstacles that hinder his progress seems to stem from the
infectious qualities of his being. Pym should not survive the situations that he is placed
in, but somehow he is able to persist to the great white ending of his narrative through a
series of infections and subsequent destructions of those who stand in the way of his
survival. As the virus, Sheppard Lee and Pym both adapt and transform as a means of
survival, which establishes the model of the ‘viral’ character that is traceable throughout
the entirety of both works.

In order to understand this differentiation of Sheppard Lee from the world around
him, his origin is an interesting place to begin; where does this virus originate? He
comes from a classical American family, one that is built on land and hard work, but what is interesting about his family is the manner in which they are produced and quickly destroyed. The rapid rate of child production that occurs in the Lee family mirrors the quick creation of copies of a virus within an infected body, “…for the only obstacle to a speedy accumulation of riches was a disproportionate increase in the agents of consumption,—his [Sheppard Lee’s father] children multiplying on his hands almost as fast as his acres, until he could count eleven in all,” (Bird 9). The description parallels the rapid mutation and production of a virus within a body. The negative consequences associated with the uncontrolled reproduction suggest that Sheppard Lee’s origin lies in haphazard and economically harmful reproduction. This begins to set the foundation for the identification of Sheppard Lee as a viral agent.

What is more interesting about the manner in which Sheppard Lee’s family initially grows, is the peculiar manner in which it fails. Sheppard Lee’s siblings perish in a series of odd pairings that suggest that, not only were they weaker versions of the viral strain that is the Lee family, but also that they were morbidly infectious to one another. The majority of his siblings die in groups, such as the three, “falling victims to an epidemic and were buried in the same grave,” (9). This may seem like a literal example, since they die from a kind of infection, but there are more correlations: three more children die of drowning related deaths, one in the bay and two in the same pond, and perhaps most interesting is the way in which the final two expire. As Sheppard Lee describes, “Another, who was the wag of the family, was killed by attempting to ride a pig, which, running in great alarm through a broken fence into the orchard, dashed his brains out,” (9) which seems tragic, yet accidental enough in its own respect. But this is
deeply complicated by the infectious element of this sibling’s death. Not only does the youngest son die, but his death then causes the symptoms that lead to the death of his brother, “the ninth died of a sort of hysterical affection, caused by this unlucky exploit of his brother; for he could not cease laughing at it,” (9-10). Through witnessing the death of a sibling, Sheppard Lee’s brother dies from his reaction to the event. Even their mother falls victim to the infectious child-viruses, for she “died several years before this last catastrophe, her mind having been affected, and indeed distracted by so many mournful losses…She fell into a deep melancholy, and died insane,” (10). Unfortunately, in the Lee family it appears as though one either infects and survives, or is infected and dies as a result of contact with his or her siblings. This follows the viral model. The initial goal of the virus is to reproduce, however, reproduction potentially results in the death of the host, just as overproduction of children may lead to an economic death. This is the first of a series of links between viral survival and wealth. The correlations of their deaths set up the possible paradigm of a morbidly contagious family.

To continue the metaphor of the siblings, and Sheppard Lee as a virus, it is interesting to look at several of the ways in which he is described as something parasitic, dirty and potentially dangerous. His initial decision to “take the world easily” (11) begins a series of relationships in which Sheppard Lee uses other characters as a means of survival, only to always be placed in a worse situation. This is first evident in his immediate hiring of a manager to oversee his property for him, which starting a pattern, fails miserably. His attempts to lie dormant in his business, wishing to gain as much as possible from as little work as he can muster. Ironically his first attempt at infection fails as Mr. Jones, systematically takes Sheppard Lee’s property and leaves him limited in
space on what used to be his own vast plot of land, “I had the satisfaction, everyday when I took a walk…to find myself stopped, which way soever I directed my steps, by the possessions of Mr. Aikin Jones, my old friend and overseer, whom I often saw roll by in his carriage, while I was trudging through the mud,” (17). The progress of Sheppard Lee as a character can be read as his progress in learning how properly to survive as a virus that can inhabit and use a host’s body, without failing to maintain control.

Arthur Gordon Pym also shows a progression in his success as an agent of infection. Initially he is a dangerous entity, contact with which produces horrific effects. In the opening narration, in which Augustus and Pym decide to embark on a naval mini-adventure inspired by the stories that the older boy tells Pym, it is possible to see the infectious effect that Pym has on his friend. After attending a party the two boys chose to share a bed and Augustus is quickly struck with a call to the sea; “he suddenly started up, and swore with a terrible oath that he would not go to sleep” (Poe 57). The combination of Pym’s presence, the fictional naval tales Augustus has proclaimed as truths to his friend, and a healthy dose of alcohol produce the first manic bout. This will be the first time contact with Pym will cause harm, setting up the viral model. The first-person narration supports the view of Pym as infector. Because of this ever-present narrator, it is possible to make the claim that it is his role that is the common factor that leads to the disastrous ends for almost all with whom he comes into contact.

On the voyage, Augustus fails as a host. The moment of realization for Pym, presents Augustus’ symptoms as a physical reaction to a prolonged exposure to the viral Pym, for, “Turning my eyes upon him, I perceived at once that, in spite of his assumed nonchalance, he was greatly agitated. I could see him distinctly by the light of the moon-
his face was paler than any marble, and his hand shook so excessively that he scarcely retain hold of the tiller,” (58). There is a literal allusion to the sickness that Augustus seems to suffer from in this moment of near ship-wreck for Pym literally asks Augustus, “‘For God’s sake, Augustus,’ I screamed, now heartily frightened, ‘what ails you?--what is the matter--what are you going to do?’” (58). With this, Augustus’ affliction can be read in a somewhat medical manner, suggesting that for Pym, whatever is wrong with his friend appears to be something that is more than simple intoxication; it appears as a form of madness. Pym is puzzled by his friend’s illness, which displays that he is unconscious of his role as the contagious agent in this situation. He is the agent that inspires Augustus to go to sea, yet he is shocked when his friend loses any sense of comprehension as a result of prolonged exposure to the germ that is Pym. This is the first of a series of co-infections between the ersatz brothers, which will ultimately lead to the death of one of the siblings, echoing the sibling morbidity in Sheppard Lee.

We can look at the reasons that Augustus and Pym use to justify their need to be on the sea as a way to exemplify the infectious role of the latter. Augustus’ momentary impulse is inspired by a “glorious a breeze from the southwest” (57) which, as previously mentioned, is partially attributed to Pym’s constant contact with him. Pym’s interest in the sea, as we find out later in the opening chapters is colored in a much darker hue. Pym is attracted to the morbid adventures of the sea that Augustus tells him about,

It is strange, too, that he most strongly enlisted my feelings in behalf of the life of a seaman, when he depicted his more terrible moments of suffering and despair. For the bright side of the painting, I have limited sympathy. My visions were of shipwreck and famine; of death or captivity among barbarian hordes; of a lifetime dragged out in sorrow and tears. (66)

Pym is attracted to the very horrors that ironically become his reality, in an unfortunate
twist that reiterates his role as the unconscious virus in his own narration and also points to an instance of co-infection similar to the siblings of Sheppard Lee. Augustus is drawn to the beauty of sailing, while Pym is attracted to the death that comes perilously paired with the sea. As his “conversations with Augustus grew daily more frequent,” he comes to the conclusion that “It is probable, indeed that our intimate communion had resulted in a partial interchange of character,” (66-7). The more time that the two boys spend together, the more Pym becomes obsessed with the potential horrors of the sea which he ironically makes come true through is role as the infectious agent who spreads calamity throughout the rest of the novel. As is appropriate for the narrator, Pym is unaware of his role as the infectious agent, yet it is his attraction to disaster which initiates his need to embark on a journey that would allow him to literally enact the fictional stories into reality.

The relationship between Pym and Augustus is not the only instance of contagion that we have in the opening of the novel. Much like Sheppard Lee, Pym lives off the generosity of his family, especially his Grandfather, who “was more attached to myself, I believe than to any other person in the world, and I expected to inherit the most of his property after his death,” (55). So we see him already attaching himself to the wealth of another person taking advantage of the close bond between the two family members. When Pym decides that he wishes to sail on the Grampus, his father is somewhat ambivalent, his mother is hysterical and “more than all, my grandfather, from whom I expected much, vowed to cut me off with a shilling if I should ever broach the subject again,” (68) creating a schism between the parasite and his host. In this moment, Pym has to make an active choice to sever his ties with the best economic host he has in order
to embark on the adventure of which he wishes to partake. He becomes, momentarily, an active virus when he chooses (under the guise of a sailor) to fool his grandfather in a scene that once again exemplifies the physical effect that the contagious character has on those around him. Upon seeing Pym sneaking to the Grampus, his grandfather stops him, only to be met with Pym’s first impersonation of a sailor in the novel. This event effects his grandfather in a manner that presents as physical symptoms, “He started back two or three steps, turned first pale, and then excessively red, threw up his spectacles, then, putting them down, ran full tilt at me with his umbrella uplifted, he stopped short,” and leaves Pym to carry on with his business 70). We witness the host recognize his infection, physically react to it, try to destroy it, and then run away from it in hopes of escaping it. The irony of this moment is once again that in the act of infecting, Pym is ironically destroying his connection with the host, his version of contagion often borders on the parasitically suicidal.

For both Sheppard Lee and Pym, the ability to infect and therefore control those around them in some aspects, places them in a position of power that leads to many different metaphorical expansions of existence. As infectious agents, and first-person narrators, Sheppard Lee and Pym will manipulate their environments both consciously and unconsciously through their contagious qualities, the ways that they break free from containments and their redefinition of both the body and the self. How our two authors carry out the viral trope will be our literary lens in this thesis.

**Contagion**

If Sheppard Lee and Pym function within the boundaries of a viral model, how do
they interact with the world around them? They have to follow the same patterns as actual viruses to legitimately be labeled as such, so how exactly do they each function as a virus?

Contagion does not simply apply to the characters in a literal sense, one in which they infect a body physically, instead, it is also a process of competition which allows them to act in specific ways. As suggested by Michel Serres in The Parasite, we can view how these characters interact with the world around them in an unbalanced and selfish manner that mirrors the idea of competition for survival. This evolution of the virus into a parasite of sorts is a natural move, for a virus lies in a body in order to use it as shelter and for a place to reproduce. Thus, Serres defines the parasite, as something that,

...enters the body and infests it. Its infectious power is measured by its capability to adapt itself to one or several hosts. This capability fluctuates, and its virulence varies along with its production of toxic substances. They lie dormant, rise up, lose wind, and are lost for a long time (190)

As viruses, Sheppard Lee and Pym need to utilize the bodies around them, although not necessarily in the same way for their own survival.

This evolves into the idea of natural competition if we extend Serres’ definition to include the natural consequences of such an infectious role. There is an inherent need for any given parasite, or more specifically virus, to be the top of the food chain within its host that, as Serres suggests, sparks competition: “A given parasite seeks to eject the parasite in the level immediately superior to his own” (4). In this model, it is then possible to read the subsequent destruction of the characters, bodies and environments around Sheppard Lee and Pym as the victims of the natural order in which survival of the fittest holds true. As Serres points out, “In short, the parasite has but one enemy: the one
who can replace him in his position of parasite,” (4) so the constant body snatching, destruction of other characters and general chaos within the two novels can be traced back to the idea that as the virus, Sheppard Lee and Pym have to destroy those who threaten their role as the virus.

This idea leads to further complications in each novel, such as economic and racial issues, as will be discussed later in this paper, but it is advantageous to look at some specific moments within the texts that this need to infect to compete is necessary. Understanding how the two characters spread their disease offers some insight about their roles as infectious agents. There is an interesting contrast between the two characters; Sheppard Lee literally infects the physical bodies of his hosts, while Pym functions in a much more subtle fashion through which he somehow is always just out of the reach of the dangers that prove to be fatal for many of those who are unfortunate enough to be near him. Sheppard Lee jumps into the bodies of those whom he infects, while Pym’s infection is more circumstantial. Although from the reader’s point of view it is possible to see Sheppard Lee and Pym destroy those who threaten them, they do seem to differ from Serres’ definition in one major manner: this competition is mostly unintentional on their behalf.

Sheppard Lee is an opportunistic invader; he takes over the bodies he wants, but only after their previous pilots have died. If he killed them to take their place, he would better fit Serres initial idea, but instead he just complicates it. The manner in which Sheppard Lee enters the bodies of his hosts reasserts his role as a contagious disease that is transmitted from body to body. Although this first invasion of a physical body can be seen as accidental, it offers insight into how Sheppard Lee spreads his disease throughout
the plot of the novel; he is a germ that is inhaled and immediately takes possession of the body. This is exemplified in the following description: “I felt myself vanishing, as it were, into the dead man’s nostrils, into which I—that is to say, my spirit—rushed like a breeze of air…” (52). Here, he enters the body in the form of infected air that spreads its disease through the airways. In this moment, Sheppard Lee’s viral contamination of Higginson’s body allows him to take on the new physical and arguably psychological form of the rich man: “I was no longer Sheppard Lee, the poor and discontented,—no longer a disembodied spirit…but John Hazelwood Higginson Esq., solid and substantial in purse and flesh…” (53). Like an airborne pathogen, Sheppard Lee travels through the setting and finally settles in the body of a host whom he finds suitable (because of his financial standing).

Sheppard Lee disperses his essence like an airborne pathogen, which is actually an uncannily accurate version of contagion considering the date of Bird’s writing. Stanton B. Garner Jr. describes in his article, “Artaud, Germ Theory, and the Theatre of Contagion,” how this theory of bad air functions in what are called miasma theories, which, “held that disease was produced by environmental causes in particular, the contamination of air by emanations from organic decomposition and other sources,” (Garner 4). This is a traceable theme in many works from the nineteenth century. Poisoned or tainted air was considered one of the major cases of disease until the concept of the germ theory came to volition with Louis Pasteur’s famous discovery. As Garner continues, the germ theory revolutionized how the spread of disease was understood, as well as the greater implications of the concept of disease offering, “a more radically totalizing view of the economy of disease. Disease was no longer seen largely as an
individual disorder, the manifestation of an organism out of harmony with itself and its immediate environment,”; instead, “disease was seen as the result of organisms acting on each other, crossing the boundaries previously held to differentiate self from other, human from nonhuman, microcosm from macrocosm. The very notion of society was subject to revision,” (Garner 5). The individualized characteristics of disease have been set aside to allow for the concept to expand literally into something that spreads from organism to organism and metaphorically into a model similar to politics or economics. Although the germ theory may seem anachronistic in relation to Bird and Poe’s writing, for it is a more modern concept, using the viral trope it is possible to see how Sheppard Lee and Pym act as predecessors of this theory. Despite Sheppard Lee’s infection through the use of tainted air, he follows the model outlined by the germ theory as does Pym through his ability to infect through contact. The environment is not the infectious agents in these two works, it is solely the role of the narrator to infect and therefore we need to follow the form of the germ theory to best understand the function of the protagonists.

Now is possible to look at the process of successive possessions in which Sheppard Lee partakes as a part of his incessant need to better himself, whether it be for economic or psychological reasons. What is important is that he constantly aspires to improve his position in life through the infection and subsequent abandonment of bodies. This is a parasitic cycle that is rather obvious for the reader to witness, but it is still necessary to note that it is occurring. While Sheppard Lee inhabits each body as a method to improve his lot, Pym functions in a manner that is closer to Serres’ definition of the parasite, as best exemplified in the infamous cannibalistic scene in Poe’s novel. As
the man who is made responsible for arranging the straws that will determine who lives and who dies so the others can live, Pym takes his time trying to carry out the gruesome task in hopes of resolving the issue in the best way possible for him. In the moment we can easily view the four men clinging to the ravaged body of the *Grampus* as parasites who have sapped the ship of her resources and need to find a new host. With this in mind Pym’s process can be read as his active engagement in an attempt to make sure that it is one of the other men on the ship who has to die and not him,

Even then I could not bring myself to arrange the splinters upon the spot, but thought over every species of finesse by which I could trick some one of my fellow sufferers to draw the short straw, as it had been agreed that whoever drew the shortest of four splinters from my hand was to die for the preservation of the rest. Before any one condemn me for this apparent heartlessness, let him be placed in a situation similar to my own. (Poe 154)

In this moment, all of the men take on a dual role of both selfish parasite and potentially selfless host. The reversal of function is clearly a horrific thought for the parasite, his sacrifice would not only kill him, but also allow another parasite to better himself above him. It is undeniable that this moment can be read as a definite and specific effort on Pym’s part to destroy a fellow parasite, but as Pym pleads, this is done as an act of complete and utter desperation. He tries to cling to the assertion that he is an unconscious killer whose infectious role is not known to him, which reasserts the idea that as narrator, he is naturally going to be the common denominator of disaster, yet he is unable to grasp the correlation between his presence and everyone else’s destruction.

Sheppard Lee removes his competition through becoming the body of those who happen to be in a better circumstance than him, while Pym does not actively appear to do any physical infecting. Instead, Pym is more like an environmental parasite whose mere presence is enough to sign the death warrants of those around him. Serres alludes to
something of this nature in the assertion that, “we parasite each other and live amidst parasites. Which is more or less a way of saying that they constitute our environment,” (10). This can be read in two different ways. Firstly, Sheppard Lee and Pym constitute their environments for the reader, because they are the ones telling the story, thus acting as both the frame and the picture of their narratives. Second, it is the interactions that Sheppard Lee and Pym have with the world around them that creates the settings that they inhabit. Their ability to feed off the others around them is what enables them to survive. The threat of a reciprocal parasitism is the source of conflict within the two works.

Reading the novels through a viral model raises not only questions of identity, humanity and immunity but also the boundaries between them. Using the viral trope in a modern manner, Mayer investigates how the virus metaphor is applicable to many topics from literature to politics and with this metaphor comes an interesting breaking down of dichotomies: “What seems to be at stake in this revision is the very conceptualization of the border, since the idea of a clear-cut boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ ‘self’ and ‘other,’ ‘here’ and ‘there’ is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain,” (Mayer 1). Although Mayer is writing in a politically based format here, it is easy to apply this break down of definite classifications to include the manner in which Sheppard Lee and Pym as viruses break down the boundaries between the body and the self. As Mayer continues on to say, “This particular protean character of the virus, its capacity to invade a foreign ‘body’ on the sly and use the host’s metabolism to self-replicate, allows for its spread into many fields of cultural expression and exchange that have nothing to do with immunology or virology proper,” (Mayer 1) the virus model is both common and
adequately applicable to many different situations. In the case of Sheppard Lee and Pym, their abilities to invade the people and environments around them follows the modes of virus discourse and makes their movements explainable through the natural process of a viral invasion.

The manner in which Sheppard Lee and Pym interact as viral agents with the worlds around them, for it reinvents how interaction between characters can be read. The two plots, as fantastical as they are, are stories of interactions told through the narration of the protagonists. Using this we can then expand this idea into using the infectious cycle of a virus to better understand how these interactions have greater implications as Mayer suggests.

It is, after all, not their relevance for scientific discourse I find remarkable but their role within a currently emerging discourse on communication, contact, and contamination that deviates to a considerable extent from the earlier patterns of conceiving and enacting these concepts. (2)

In this style, interaction is synonymous with infection, invasion and contamination, which allows for a totally new reading of the contacts Sheppard Lee and Pym make with those around them. Sheppard Lee does not simply interact with the people around him, instead he literally invades their dead bodies and uses them as vessels until he finds a better, more exciting host. Pym functions in a much more subtle manner in that he is at first glance just an innocent bystander of multiple calamities, but as the virus model presents, Pym can actually be read as the common denominator of these disasters and be traced to the source of them. Interaction is infection; there is no benign contact within the two works, contact means contamination.

**Containment and Quarantine**
Within this paradigm of interaction as infection we may examine the issue of how the virus is contained and subsequently how the virus tests those boundaries. Both Sheppard Lee and Pym encounter a series of containments, or in a more virally apt manner, quarantines, but in each case they always outgrow these restrictions and the range of their contamination spreads. Mayer presents this failure to permanently contain as a political issue, but the concept holds true when applied to the novels.

Even if not all of these scenarios of death, destruction, and disease are organized around viruses, the (trope of) the virus takes center stage in them. Most importantly, current scenarios of threat increasingly revolve around the suspicion that containment no longer works, or rather, that measures of containment need to be updated and refined. (4)

In both Sheppard Lee and Pym, we witness a series of attempts to contain the viral protagonists, through both literal and metaphorical barriers, which can all be read as attempts to quarantine them from those they threaten. Sheppard Lee’s containment is focused within the boundaries of the human corpses that he takes over while Pym’s lies more in the spaces that he is forced to maneuver. With containment comes the immediate threat of the virus breaking free from that restriction; this creates the conflicts that the two characters face with the people and spaces around them.

Sheppard Lee travels through a series of different containments that are almost entirely within the constrictions of his appropriated human bodies. Quarantine is not simply a spatial concept, instead, in this case it can be read as any kind of restricting force that denies the virus access to the outside world. With this interpretation, it is possible to look at the limiting factors of each of the bodies Sheppard Lee inhabits as forms of containment, and each body certainly has its limitations. Because of his failure to successfully infect a host, Sheppard Lee is bound by his poverty, which he amends
through the accidental possession of Higginson’s body, but then he faces a new form of containment: illness. It is ironic that a virus should be unable to do as it wishes because it’s body is ill, but that is exactly the case when he suffers from the horrific bout of gout Higginson experiences. In an attempt to escape the restricting pain of his disease and the incessant nagging of his wife, Sheppard Lee once again invades the body of another man, I.D. Dawkins who is providentially provided for his infection. The young dandy seems like the perfect host initially, until the harsh truths of his extreme poverty once again cripple the virus’s ability to negotiate the world in the manner in which he wishes. To escape this poverty, he willfully takes over the dying body of Abraham Skinner only once again to be plagued by restrictions; this time it is his own greed and even worse, his family. The misery that limits Skinner makes Sheppard Lee’s assumption of Longstraw’s body seem like a welcoming concept, and it is initially, until his overabundant generosity leads to a series of unfortunate incidents, including his kidnapping to be lynched as a famous abolitionist. He then finds true happiness in the form of Tom the slave, only slowly to be tainted by the escalating resentment on the plantation about plight of the slaves under their master. Despite his initial happiness, the virus a remnant of Sheppard Lee’s literacy, aids in the rebellion by reading the pamphlets that create the catastrophic discontent of the slaves at being owned by another person. Subsequently, from this containment as a slave, Sheppard Lee once again finds himself limited by the illnesses of the body he takes over in the form of Arthur Megrim, living under the close watch of his doctor and sister. The misery he experiences stems from limited travel, diet and therefore happiness. No matter who Sheppard Lee becomes, he is always limited and contained within the bodies until another body becomes available.
The moment in which Sheppard Lee reclaims his original body breaks down the literal examples of barriers and reconfirms the prevailing motifs within the novel. He literally breaks the barriers surrounding his mummified remains, “I struck my foot against the glass case with a fury that shivered it to atoms-- or, at least the portion of it serving as a door, which, being dislodged by the violence of the blow, fell upon the floor and was dashed to pieces,” (Bird 406-7) and reinvades the body that had so long been free of his pathogenic presence. Once again, Sheppard Lee trades one body for another, as evident in his re-entering his original body, “I had scarce breathed the wish before I found myself in that very body, descending from the box which had been so long its prison, and stepping over the mortal frame of Mr. Arthur Megrim, now lying dead on the floor,” (407). The virus reenters the body and reanimates it, actually stepping over the currency that he used to purchase it, Megrim’s corpse. In this moment the quarantine of his mummified body (which is virtually indestructible) is broken down, making it once again susceptible to the disease that is Sheppard Lee.

Like Sheppard Lee, Pym undergoes a series of escalating forms of containment that credit him as a threatening presence in the plot of his own narrative. Although Pym is not literally a germ that infects the people around him, it is undeniable that his narrative follows the pattern of an infectious agent. The interactions of Pym and his surrounding characters, spaces, animals and elements mirror the spread of an epidemic of sorts that undergoes a process similar to that of a body slowly succumbing to the attack of a malignant entity. Viewing Pym through this lens, the series of containments that he experiences strengthen the theory of his existence as threatening to the outside world. Pym is contained – or in a more medically inclined style, quarantined – in many diverse
manners, but mainly through allusions to live burial.

Augustus acts as a host in a multitude of ways. In one of the first actions following the viral model, Pym is secreted into the hull of the *Grampus*, a ship captained by Augustus’ father, with his friend’s’ assistance. Everything about the beginning of their adventure suggests methods of concealment, from the dark cloak Pym uses as a disguise to the secret apartment Augustus furnishes for him on the ship. Once they have entered the ship, the true role that Augustus plays in supporting the virus is initiated. He makes a nest of sorts for Pym that is hidden beneath the decks of the ship in a way that both conceals and temporarily contains Pym from interacting with the rest of the crew, “I afterward found that Augustus had purposely arranged the stowage in this hold with a view to affording me a thorough concealment,” (72). In an effort to hide Pym, Augustus unwittingly provides a safe refuge for the contagious agent that will ultimately lead to his ruin. The predominant feature of the containment of Pym lies in the perpetual darkness in which he finds himself enveloped, which is both a literal absence of light and a more psychological grappling with consciousness.

Time passes quickly in the moments of containment that Pym first experiences; he lies dormant in the hull of the ship for days and is only conscious for a small part of that time. Slipping in and out of consciousness Pym is able to exist within his environment without necessarily affecting it in any great manner, just as a disease may lay in a body for long periods of time waiting for the opportune moment to attack. The claustrophobic atmosphere of the hull as Pym slips in and out of awareness parallels the feeling of being buried alive, that both contains and conceals the narrator.

The close atmosphere of the hold might have had something to do with this. And might, in the end, be productive of the most serious results. My
head ached excessively; I fancied that I drew every breath with difficulty; and in short, I was oppressed with a multitude of gloomy feelings. (75)

Thus begins a series of containments in the form of live burial that serve the dual purposes of concealing and containing Pym. What is interesting about this first moment of quarantine is that although Pym is not directly affecting what is happening on the ship, it is possible to read his mere presence on the ship as a catalyst for the misfortune that the crew encounters. As the narrator, the one constant presence in the novel, Pym is the common denominator of catastrophe in the plot. What Pym and the reader do not immediately know is that during this incubation period a mutiny has occurred on the decks of the ship. Despite not consciously acting, Pym’s presence is correlative attached to the mishaps on the ship.

Following the pattern that this initial form of containment presents, it is interesting to look at the colorful language that Pym uses to describe his horrific accommodations; Pym is both kept safe and trapped within the walls of his confinement. The apartment that Augustus so cleverly creates for Pym keeps his presence a secret from the rest of the men on the ship, which has two distinct consequences. Firstly, Pym is placed in a covert position that is so secret that he cannot be saved even when threatened by the suffocating atmosphere of his hiding place, and second, Pym is hidden from the crew until he is ready to engage in a surprise attack on them, thus leading to their destruction. Following the true model of a virus that lies dormant in a body, Pym situates himself in a safe place of hiding that allows him to wait for the opportune moment to launch an attack on the weakened body. This form of incubation allows for the narrator to engage in forms of deception that prove to be deadly to those whom he comes into sudden contact. These moments of containment are not enjoyable for Pym, which
suggests that he does not act as a conscious version of an infectious agent, compared to how it is possible to read a much more intentional character such as Sheppard Lee. The suffocating atmosphere and horror inducing air provokes terror in the viral narrator himself, “My dreams were of the most terrific description. Every species of calamity and horror befell me,” (76). This is an interesting way for Pym to experience his quarantining under the decks of the ship, for it oddly parallels the turmoil on the decks and the later moments of infection that arguably occur because of his presence in later scenes of the novel.

The manner in which Pym moves through the inner workings of the *Grampus* alludes to a kind of pathogen working its way through a body; he is constantly struggling through claustrophobic spaces and darkness in search of a way out of his contained position. In his nearly starved and suffocated condition Pym engages in a struggle to make his way to the trap door that had previously been his doorway to the parts of the ship above the hull. He begins his journey to find a way out of his imprisonment crawling and clawing his way through the obstacles placed before him, a result of the shifting of cargo as the ship(body), “Still I struggled forward by slow degrees, dreading every moment that I should swoon amid the narrow and intricate windings of the lumber, in which event I had nothing but death to expect as the result,”(79). Pym is becoming a more and more desperate character who borders on panic in his attempts to free himself from under the decks of the ship. The allusions to live burial evoked in this struggle spark a common motif; upon being unable to open the trap door when he finally struggle his way to it, Pym,

could summon up no connected chain of reflection, and, sinking on the floor, gave way, unresistingly, to the most gloomy imaginings, in which
the dreadful deaths of thirst, famine, suffocation, and premature interment crowded upon me as the prominent disasters to be encountered. (80)

He is now trapped and thus forced yet again to take on the task of trying to poke around in the black hull to find some kind of escape. The ever-present darkness of the hull blinds Pym from his surroundings and leaves him in a perpetual state of live burial in which he is alive and functioning, yet unable to freely move. He is limited by the environment, in a way that suggests that the shifting of the cargo and the suffocating air of the hold are the ship’s physical defensives against the viral intruder.

Although both protagonists experience escalating forms of containment, the different ways in which they are contained mark the process of Bird and Poe’s writing. Sheppard Lee chooses his containments to a certain extent, through his ability to actively infect the bodies that he desires. Pym on the other hand, is contained more spatially through the constrictions of the hold, to the shattered remains of the Grampus to the live burial on the Tsalal Islands. Where Sheppard Lee is the master of sorts of his own containment, Pym is the victim of it. Bird’s approach allows for the protagonist to function as a more independent agent of contagion in a manner that makes personhood ambulatory, Sheppard Lee can understand the world around him through the many different forms he impersonates. Poe’s series of containments of Pym function in a manner that limits personhood to the confines of Pym’s constricted world, his limited view of what surrounds him reflects his inability to step outside of his own existence.

**Objectification and Commodification**

Robert Montgomery Bird’s somewhat comical novel complicates the relationship between the body and the self, through a purposeful separating of the two while forcing
them to act together in the same limited space. Although both seem important in the
definition of existence, the many bodies that Sheppard Lee inhabits provides evidence for
a different kind of relationship, one in which the essence of being is ambulatory and the
body is simply the shell in which it exists. Through the actions of trading, selling and
disposing of bodies, Sheppard Lee removes the life of a body and instead emphasizes its
worth as something that can be easily upgraded through a shift of corporeality. As an
infectious agent, Sheppard Lee dismantles identity to the point of bordering on
meaninglessness, thus bringing what is the essence of humanity into question. Poe does
something similar with *Pym*; through a series of disasters, Pym is forced to see the human
body as a tool for survival rather than a signifier of humanity. With this the men around
him become resources that can be used to assist him, rather than living entities. This
separation of the self and the body is a common practice following the Enlightenment as
Margaret Lock describes in her article “Cultivating the Body: Anthropology and
Epistemologies of Bodily Practice and Knowledge.”

Comparative research on the cultural construction of concepts of mind,
body, self, and emotions has contributed to a questioning of the
autonomous, rational, disembodied self as a gold standard for successful
personhood, and has at the same time renewed anthropological interest in
the body. (138)

As the character is removed from his body, we are able to examine him as a separate
entity and the body becomes something objectified and thus commodified. It also
functions as a metaphor as host to the parasitic consciousness.

This topic of metempsychosis, meaning the passing of a soul from one body to
another, points to one of the main distinctions between the two authors. Bird has
Sheppard Lee change slightly as a narrator (and possibly an identity) with each body that
he inhabits, he picks up characteristics of each character and temporarily becomes each man. It is arguable that this process is how we can mark any sense of growth in Sheppard Lee as a character, for his happiness at the conclusion of the novel is marked by a new kind of appreciation of his original life through his painful struggles as other men. Poe has Pym remain a constant throughout his entire narrative. Although he may change slightly to adapt to the world around him a bit, he remains Pym corporeally and mentally, from the start to the finish of his novel. Poe himself discussed this in his review of Bird’s novel in 1836. As Christopher Looby points out in his introduction to the 2008 republication of Bird’s novel,

Poe would have preferred an essentially constant narrative focus, a consciousness continually and consistently present to itself (and to Bird’s readers), from whose stable perspective the wide variety of social circumstances and events depicted in the novel would be perceived--circumstances and events that, it might be, would slowly have an impact upon consciousness. (xvi)

Poe clearly shows his version of a constant consciousness through his development of Pym, while Sheppard Lee is molded by each body he inhabits, to a certain extent becoming that character, Pym is always the same man. This perhaps suggests that Sheppard Lee undergoes a form of reciprocal infection with his hosts, while Pym’s role is purely to infect.

In the case of both Sheppard Lee and Pym, the body becomes a mere vessel within which the virus is empowered. As the host, the human form is simply a shell that is used as fuel and transportation for the process of the virus. As the virus carries out its function, be it infecting, finding its next host or duplicating itself, the body is slowly deteriorated to something that is more an object than a person. Stephen Dougherty discusses this premise in the more modern genre of the killer virus novel, which may be
applied to these two works. For Dougherty, as the body falls victim to the destructive processes of the viral infection, it undergoes a transformation from the form of a human being to the destroyed remnants of what once was a body “As we discover, the body is subjected to so much violation in contemporary killer virus novels that it ceases to be a body, strictly speaking. Rather, it is what is left over from itself after the virus has had its way, the irreducible residue of its own organic functioning,” (Dougherty 7). The body is no longer an independent entity on its own; instead it is the leftover pieces of the viral process, a waste product of the natural process of the viral interaction with its environment. The human body loses any premise of an identity and only exists as a wrecked shell that once contained the virus.

Because of this, the identity of the characters within their respective works is divided into a dichotomy of the physical and the metaphysical. The body undergoes an interesting transformation during the process of a viral invasion, as Dougherty states,

We are in classic Gothic terrain here: the place of the undead, where the reign of the who is suspended-- the reign of the liberal, autonomous subject, the counterpart of the organic self-- and the what threatens to take over. The what is not exactly the virus itself, but that which the virus embodies. (9)

Identity as a person, or in the literary sense, a character, seems to fade away as the virus enters the body and becomes the identifying subject of the entity. Sheppard Lee experiences this as the memory of his original self seems to fade with each new body that he acquires. Pym’s version of this is more marked in the transformation that his character seems to undergo – from subject, to object, to racially marked outsider. Although Poe’s novel begins with Pym as a person, we see his character become less of a human presence and more of a metaphorical threat that is identifiable by his race (which
is virally implemented). This process exemplifies what Dougherty describes in the statement that, “The infectious scenario is one wherein the body is besieged by a glut of information that threatens not only to overwhelm the immune system, but at the same time to transform the nature of what it means to be human,” (Dougherty 10). In both cases the characters undergo a separation of the body from identity.

This then leads to the problematic relationship between the concept of self and corporeal existence. In the case of Sheppard Lee, he is constantly a conscious entity, as performed through his narration of the novel, yet this version of self is one that functions independently of any particular human body. Following classic Cartesian lines, the ability of the narrator to consciously describe his thoughts and feelings would be the defining characteristics of his existence as established with the famous, “I think therefore I am,” (Descartes 18). As the active narrators of their tales, we can then place the center of Sheppard Lee and Pym’s existence within the context that, as the active narrators of their respective tales, we can then place the center of their presence within the boundaries of the thinking part of their characters. Further complications then arise from this situation. As Elizabeth Loeb discusses in her article, “Cutting it Off: Bodily Integrity, Identity Disorders, and the Sovereign Stakes of Corporeal Desire in U,S. Law,” the ability to treat the thinking self and the physical self is complicated. With Descartes as a foundation, Loeb points out the ease with which the body can become a thing in the moment in which the philosopher describes his ability to continue to maintain his existence in the hypothetical process of losing parts of his body.

The “thinking” aspect aside, I am struck by the ease with which Descartes elides into reification, into a thing rather than subject “I” with which he began. For Descartes, the assertion and imagining of agency that allows him to become an individuated subject also allows him to throw it all
away, to become not a subject but a thing. (45)

The body becomes an object and can then be treated as such through the destruction of a direct connection between the body and the thinking self.

The relationship between Sheppard Lee and the many bodies he inhabits throughout the plot of the novel. There are multiple factors that go into each transformation, but a common theme for Sheppard Lee is his desire to trade bodies in hope of a gain, be it financial, psychological or physical. His use of the human body as currency initiates an interesting scenario in which the body is objectified to the point that it can be traded, used, sold, or even disposed of in order to better one’s position in life. What is interesting is the fact that when Sheppard Lee takes over a body, there is an uncanny separation of the “self” that is Sheppard Lee as narrator and the body. The two seemingly operate on different levels, which implicates complex concepts of humanity, quarantine, and contagion. While in the bodies of his hosts, Sheppard Lee is caught in a limbo of sorts, for in some ways he controls the body, while in others he is oddly caught in a series of automatic actions and physical realities that are established by whomever the body was before his infection.

There is then a sort of reciprocal infection going on within these transformations, one in which the infectious virus is infected by the traits of the bodies that he takes over. In viral terms, it is arguable that Sheppard Lee is mutated by each body he takes over, and it is through this series of mutations that we can see any growth in him as a character. Sheppard Lee first addresses this issue: “although I had acquired along with his body all the peculiarities of feeling, propensity, conversation, and conduct of Squire Higginson, I had not entirely lost those that belonged to Sheppard Lee”(59). There is a mixing
together of the two men, in which the body and mind hold separate positions, yet act in accordance with one another. This duality of character is mentioned as Sheppard Lee continues on with this subject, “In fact, I may be said to have possessed, at that time, two different characters, one of which now governed me, and now the other; though the squire’s, it must be confessed, was greatly predominant,” (59). In this relationship, it is then possible to view the struggle between an invader and the invaded for power, which is completely contained within the shell of one human body. As magical as Sheppard Lee’s powers appear to be, he is constantly limited by the number of bodies that can function as suitable hosts. This occurs for two different reasons, the scarcity of dead bodies, and the literal boundaries of a human body in which the virus acts. Although Sheppard Lee does take on the habits of his hosts, he is almost never completely lost. He can adopt the body and mutate to its operations, but the retrospective first person narration of the novel suggests that the viral strain of his existence is never lost.

The ambiguity of identity is further complicated by the growing of both reader and narrator in understanding that Sheppard Lee is simply a temporary invader of the body, until his host dies or he finds a better option. This is an interesting situation, for the first-person narration almost always suggests a strain of Sheppard Lee throughout the entire novel, yet sometimes he is referred to by characters outside of his narrative voice. Specifically, the moment in which Higginson and his doctor discuss his ailment, gout, in a manner that parallels Sheppard Lee’s role as the infectious invader of the body. “‘Don’t talk to me of easy quarters,’” says Higginson and the doctor responds, “‘I am talking,’ said Dr. Boneset, ‘not of you, but of the disease; and what I meant to say was, that when it once finds itself at home, in a good wholesome corporation of a man, there
may expect to find it a tenant for life,” (79). While the text may suggest that they are simply discussing the gout from which Higginson suffers, this is also the role of Sheppard Lee in Higginson’s body. The corporeal man is simply a shell that the protagonist can exist within and Sheppard Lee only exists in the bodies as long as the body lasts, then as the plot dictates, Sheppard Lee moves on to his next host.

Pym undergoes a similar process to a less severe degree. One result of his (mis)adventure in the beginning of the novel is the creation of an interesting dynamic between the narrator and his own body. Typically, it is assumed that the two are one and the same, but Pym narrates some of the events as something that happened to a body that just so happens to be his own. There is a definite and purposeful removal of the self from the body as first exemplified in Pym’s description of his being saved from the destruction of the *Ariel*.

The body of a man was seen to be affixed in the most singular manner to the smooth and shining bottom (the Penguin was coppered and copper-fastened), and beating violently against it with every movement of the hull. After several ineffectual efforts, made during the lurches of the ship, and at imminent risk of swamping the boat I was finally disengaged from my perilous situation and taken on board—for the body proved to be my own. (63)

The disconnect between the self and the physical body of the character allows for the body to then function more as a vessel for the self rather than the defining aspect of the narrator. Pym is more clearly defined as the narrating voice of the novel than an actual physical entity. This leads to further complications, for the only definite physical feature that can actually be assigned to Pym is then that he is a white man, which sets the foundation for the racially based context of his role as an infectious agent. Here is how the two protagonists differ the most, where Sheppard Lee’s disassociation with his
physical body can be read as a commodification of the body, Pym’s is a focusing of identity in the color of his skin as a marker of his role as a contagious agent that differentiates him from the rest of the characters whom he infects and turns dark. Sheppard Lee’s style of narration is much more mutable because of his ability to separate the metaphysical from the physical in the process of body exchange, while Pym’s stagnant position within the shell of Arthur Gordon Pym makes his narrative process more static.

Despite the fact that commodification of the body is the stage that Sheppard Lee seems to star on, Pym’s objectification of the body does evolve further than simply a few passing moments of disassociated narration. Instead we see him literally become another character in a manner close to Sheppard Lee’s version of identity theft, and we see him becomes open to the idea of the human body as simply a means to an end. The first case of this escalating trend occurs in the moment in which Pym takes on the personality and appearance of the deceased sailor Rogers as part of a plot to escape from the imminent danger of the mutineers. In this moment, Pym has to assume the role of the dead man in order to engage in a sneak attack for survival, donning “a kind of smock, which the deceased wore over his other clothing,” and stuffing his clothes to resemble the deformed body of the alleged victim of poisoning (121). Pym manages to become the character Rogers so well that his own reflection becomes foreign to him,

As I viewed myself in a fragment of looking-glass which hung up in he cabin, and by the dim of the light of a kind of battle lantern, I was so impressed with a sense of vague awe at my appearance, and at the recollection of the terrific reality which I was thus representing, that I was seized with a violent tremour, and could scarcely summon the resolution to go on with my part” (122).

In this moment, Pym’s own body becomes unrecognizable and objectified into a weapon
to be used against the other crew members. Pym is disturbed by this assumption of corporeal form, where Sheppard Lee never is. This perhaps echoes Poe’s own discomfort with such a lack of character continuation.

This disassociation of human consciousness from the human body does not end in this moment, for later as the men are lying on the shattered remains of the *Grampus*, they witness a moment of eerie and horrific objectification of people in the haunting scene of the death ship that passes them. Upon seeing the ship on the horizon the men immediately hope for rescue supported by the appearance of men on the decks, “Two of these were lying on some old sails near the forecastle, and the third, who appeared to be looking at us with great curiosity, was leaning over the starboard bow near the bowsprit,” (139). The crew of the ship becomes the resource for escape that Pym has desperately hoped for, so in this case the human form is another version of an escape plan. Within this scene, the dehumanization and thus objectification expands as we learn that the man waiving to them is in fact a puppet being maneuvered by a hungry seagull, “The body from which it had been taken, resting as it did upon the rope, had been easily swayed to and fro by the exertion of the carnivorous bird, and it was this motion, which has first impressed is with the belief of its being alive,” (142). Like the rest of the bodies piled up on the decks of the ship, the waiving man turns out to just another victim of some mass outbreak of contagious disease on board the ship. In a parallel to the process of infection that Pym partakes in, it is the effects of contact with this ship that then lead to the drastic cannibalism in the following scenes. The dead body’s animation tragically fails to offer Pym any solace; instead it removes his hope of survival as the ship sails away, “With her and with her terrible crew went all our gay visions of deliverance and joy,” (142). The
concern here is not that the man is dead, but instead that what his body symbolized has been taken away from the survivors on the Grampus; the tool of the human body failed to be useful.

With this, the desperation of the men on the Grampus leads to the most significant objectification of the human body within the novel. Left with no other options for survival, the men have to turn to cannibalism, a process in which the human form is turned into a consumable product. In this moment, the human body is meat. As discussed earlier, this is not an easy process, but it is necessary if survival is paramount, which virally it is, for starvation is their only other alternative. After the infamous drawing of the splinters, Parker is the man who loses and the process of objectifying him into a source of food begins with a swift knife to the back by Peters. Immediately his body becomes the food that appeases the sufferings of the three remaining survivors, “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 the entrails, into the sea, we devoured the rest of the body…” (154-5). It is important to note that they had to dehumanize the corpse before they could bring themselves to eat Parker, through the removal of parts of his body. Through this process Parker becomes a piece of edible meat and not a human being anymore; they can eat him in parts, just as a virus attacks sections of the body not the whole.

Both narrators, Sheppard Lee and Pym, change in their perception of the separate, yet symbiotic functions of self and corporeality. Roberto Esposito addresses this very issue in Bios. Using Locke as a foundation, Esposito raises the point that, “Life and property, being and having, person and thing are pressed up together in a mutual relation
that makes one both the content and the container of the other,” (64). This sense of duality, where two things have to function together to make a whole, resolves Sheppard Lee’s difficulty in differentiating his essence from the bodies that he inhabits, because it makes it unnecessary to separate the two. This then makes it even less clear who is in control of what the characters are doing. Perhaps, then it is arguable that a differentiation should not be the ultimate goal, for as Esposito continues later, “On the one hand, the subject dominates the thing in the specific sense that he places it within his domain. But, on the other hand, the thing in turn dominates the subject to the degree in which it constitutes the necessary objective of his acquisitive desire,” (67). Neither the body, nor Sheppard Lee can realistically live without the other, so although questions of control can still be raised, the independence of the two becomes less important; they have to function together or they cannot function at all, once again echoing a viral model.

This usage of the body by the self it usually a monogamous relationship. One character is one body. Acquisition of more bodies is usually not practical, however in this model, it may be desirable. Using Michel Foucault’s collection of lectures, *Security, Territory, Population*, it is then possible to see this commodification of the human body as a symptom of human greed. The viral model of Sheppard Lee can be read as a satire of American society, for he is constantly chasing the dream of a “get rich quick scheme,” with very little effort. In his discussion of scarcity, Foucault states that, “men’s greed--their need to earn, their desire to earn more, their egoism--causes the phenomena of hoarding, monopolization, and withholding merchandise,” (Foucault 31), this is descriptive of Sheppard Lee’s constant attempts to find an easy way of bettering himself through invading/infecting the bodies of other men who have what he desires. His ability
to use the human body as a form of currency suggests that he concedes his morality to his aspiration to be like the men whom he envies. What starts out as a yearning for money, slowly evolves into a series of transformations that are made in an attempt to find happiness. Where Sheppard Lee begins his story of body shifting with a failed hunt for treasure, he ends it being happy working his own small plot of land and living in a less than extravagant fashion.

The objectification of the body is marked by the travel of the viral protagonist from body to body and is exemplified clearly in the treatment of Sheppard Lee’s original body. In the process in which Sheppard Lee as Longstraw is dragged down to the south for his lynching, the fate of his original body is seemingly discovered,

subjected to the knife of an anatomist, his bones scraped, boiled, bleached, hung together on wires, and set up in a museum, while his spirit was wondering about from body to body, enduring more afflictions in each than it had ever mourned even in that original dwelling it was so glad to leave! (317)

Without Sheppard Lee (the narrator) in the body, it has been subjected to countless experiments and is literally objectified in to what he suspects is now some kind of museum display. With this alleged loss of his original body, Sheppard Lee is then able to turn his attention to the fact that his role as Longstraw is just another moment in the series of commodifications of his body. The men who take him down south to be lynched present him as a famous abolitionist (although he points out that he has not done anything to earn that title) and from this, he becomes more valuable as a sacrificial figure, “I should be made famous enough before I got there, and they thus enjoy the advantage of advertising their commodity without paying a cent to the printer,” (318-9). The living breathing body of Longstraw is irrelevant; it is the symbolic meaning that he possesses
that is important, and it is this symbolism that makes him a marketable product for the men who kidnap him.

Lesley A. Sharp discusses the problematic objectification of the human body in the article, “The Commodification of the Body and its Parts,” using a multifaceted approach encompassing medicine, slavery, sorcery, and endocannibalism. The assertion that, “commodification insists upon objectification in some form, transforming persons and their bodies from a human category into objects of economic desire,” (293), supports/echoes Sheppard Lee’s appreciation of the human body as strictly material. He trades bodies in hopes of a selfish advancement in society, often in economic ways and treats the human body as nothing more than a shell that he can infect. The problematic scarcity of human bodies that Sheppard Lee encounters – “But men’s bodies are not like the dry-goods dealers’ boxes in Market-street, to be stumbled into at any moment” (Bird 127) – fits into part of Sharp’s argument, that in actual medical history, human bodies have been a scarce resource or both logistical and moral reasons. This then further complicates into the issue of ownership as Sharp discusses in the section of the article involving Kant who, “also raised questions of body ownership, asking whether we own our bodies, or if we are simply stewards of them” (298). Sheppard Lee grapples with the same issues, for he is caught in the inability to clearly determine if he is in control of the bodies which he inhabits, or if they in fact control him.

To further the scenario, the peculiar case of Arthur Megrim’s hypochondria, points out some of the objectified implications of the metamorphosis of Sheppard Lee’s body in a series of commodified exchanges. The symbolism of Megrim’s changing (or believing that he is changing) into inanimate objects points to parallels between this
affliction and the virally induced commodification of Sheppard Lee’s acquired bodies. The intriguing ailment that Megrim suffers from is a series of suspected transformations into objects. Although he fails to literally become the objects, it is an interesting mirror of the process that Sheppard Lee experiences. What is important is that he believes that his body really becomes the objects, “Getting up one morning, I found, to my horror, that I had been, in my sleep, converted into a coffee-pot; a transformation which I had thought so much more extraordinary than any other I had ever undergone,” (392). He becomes a wide array of objects, “being now a chicken, now a loaded cannon, now a clock, now a hamper of crockery-ware, and thousand things besides,” (394), constantly reasserting the potential for the human body to be transformed into something less abstract.

In her article, “Hypochondria and Racial Interiority,” Justine S. Murison looks at this bout of hypochondria as a reflection of the process that Sheppard Lee undergoes specifically in his transformation into the slave Tom. One major point that has to be taken into account when trying to understand this bizarre objectification of the body on a broader sense, for it does not only happen in the case of Megrim and Tom, is as Murison’s points out, “Hypochondria is a disease precisely because it causes the patient to confuse the relationship between person and thing and to identify with those outside of his or her station,”(16), and can easily be applied to the belief not only that one has become an object, but also that he has become another man. It is too easy to claim that Sheppard Lee’s entire narrative is simply a result of delirium, as Murison suggests the novel proposes, but the foundations of her claim hold true. The link between the physical and the psychological that Murison discusses lends itself to Sheppard Lee’s ability to be separate from the body he inhabits, yet conscious of its functions, “In the antebellum
medical world, the body and mind were considered mutually constitutive; many of the
diseases of the mind, like hypochondria, originally arose in the stomach,” (17). As a
conscious, yet air-borne contagion, Sheppard Lee invades the bodies he uses through a
two-pronged approach: he is both a physical and psychological infection.

While Sheppard Lee/ Megrim experience this transformation consciously, it is
consistent that Pym should be objectified in a similar manner, but is not overtly aware of
his state. For a short period of time, Pym literally is packed into the hold of the
_grampus_ as a piece of property that is being transported. This role as cargo marks a
definite allusion to the objectification of the human body as a movable merchandise.
Pym becomes an object in this section of the narrative and is then appropriately contained
as such. This takes his earlier disassociation from his body to another level; just as
Sheppard Lee becomes objects through Arthur Megrim’s fits of hypochondria, Pym
becomes part of the cargo that has to be shipped in perfect balance under the decks of the
ship, “A proper stowage cannot be accomplished in a careless manner, and many most
disastrous accidents, even within the limits of my experience have arisen from neglect or
ignorance in this particular,” (Poe 107). His breaking free from the organized stowage
creates an imbalance that reflects the complete and utter breakdown of order on board the
ship, as Pym alludes, “The great point is to allow no possibility of the cargo or ballast
shifting position even in the most violent rollings of the vessel,” (108). Pym’s near
obsessive reportage about the necessity of balance in the cargo would suggest that
perhaps subconsciously he sees it as his, albeit temporary, environment. He both reports
on and is part of the cargo.

Returning to the example of Sheppard Lee’s original body, it is interesting to
examine the final product that his body becomes and the subsequent consumption of that product. His body is not a museum grade skeleton as Sheppard Leesuspects, but instead an even more bizarre commodified form. As the mummy in Feurtuefel’s display, the corpse becomes a static object that is viewed for monetary purposes. In this moment, the body is not only objectified but also quarantined from the outside environment and through the process of mummification, the body is “indestructible, unless, indeed, by fire and strong acids” (400), so it can be considered immune to the dangers of the outside environment. This is doubly ensured by the layers of protection that cover it, and finally, since we know Sheppard Lee is not present within the body, it is a human shell empty of personhood. The mummy is encased in glass, contained from the people viewing it. “The German doctor suddenly stepped to a great round box […] and unlocking the folding leaves of which it was composed, swung them round with a jerk, exhibiting an inner case, evidently of glass, but entirely covered over with a thick curtain,”; the object within, which we know to be Sheppard Lee’s body, is carefully concealed behind multiple layers of containment. As the layers are removed from the mummy – “by tugging at a string which hoisted it to the ceiling; and as it ascended there was disclosed to the eyes if the wondering spectators a human figure within the case” (405) – the human form is both revealed, and contained behind a layer of glass. The crowd reacts with appropriate noises of fright and delight, which is only fitting when the paradoxical circumstance of the body before them is considered. In this moment, Sheppard Lee’s body is many different things: object, human, immune, and diseased.

Despite his reunion with his own body, Sheppard Lee cannot escape the objectification of the human form. As he runs away, the dreaded doctor chases after his
investment and science experiment, yelling, “‘Stop my mummy! mine gott! which has
cost me so much expense!--stop my mummy!’” (408), designating Sheppard Lee as an
object and not a human being. So even as he returns to what appears to be normal he
reaches a paranormal level of existence as the mummy who has suddenly been
reanimated removes him from the status of normal human being;, he is still a living entity
in the form of a human, but the doctor can only see him as an object. Ironically at this
moment towards the conclusion of the novel, Sheppard Lee’s ability to commoditize the
body has left an irreparable break between the body and the self that still holds true in his
reunion with his original physical form. This is feasible as the virus metaphor still holds
true, for Sheppard Lee is only reunited with his body through a re-infection of his
original corporeal host.

The commodification of the human body into something objectified is the
predominant consequence of Sheppard Lee’s role as the viral agent within his novel. As
pointed out above, Pym certainly displays characteristics of this model, but his infection
lies in a different reinterpretation of the human body. Race is the ultimate foundation of
Pym’s infection. Sheppard Lee does exhibit some form of this style of infection, but this
is where the two characters split once again in their contagious style.

**Racism**

Sheppard Lee’s transformation into Tom the slave is the most literal
objectification of the human body within the plot of his narration, however race – and,
more importantly, color – issues rise from the start of Pym’s journey and continue to
create conflict between the protagonist and the other characters. The infection of Pym is
approached through an understanding of race and color in the novel. It is a pivotal plot motif that Pym’s infection is racial. This situates whiteness as the form of the virus and places blackness as the identifier of those who can fall victim to the infectious Pym and the subsequent symptoms of that disease. In this reading, whiteness is threatening to others, and from this perspective the plot provides multiple instances in which it is clearly evident that the white Pym is attacked by outsiders in hopes of suppressing the infection before it can contaminate the other characters.

The dichotomies of light and dark are presented in an unusual format within the novel, for the traditionally positive connotations of light are dismissed through the white defining characteristic of the viral agent, Pym. Light becomes dangerous to the other characters, yet it is safety for Pym. Pym may be read as a character who comes into conflict with his environment, for he is constantly surrounded by darkness and searching for light. It is only the “white” characters who are allowed to survive at the end. This raises questions of race as the characters negotiate through a series of transformations that alter which side of the dichotomy on which they stand. As the white germ, Pym is trapped in the darkness of the Grampus’ hull, but it is through light that he able to escape. First he lights up the classically gothic letter written in blood (a traditional viral pathway) from Augustus with the remnants of his phosphorous matches and is eventually met with Augustus, who “brought with him a light in a dark lantern, and the grateful rays afforded me scarcely less comfort than the food and drink,” (90). Pym feels safe in the presence of light, for his character, light is a good thing, but for his fellows, it is a threat that emanates from him, as is made increasingly more obvious as the novel continues.

The interest in color leads to a variety of racial implications in the novel, in which
it can be read that the infectious agent, Pym, functions as a metaphorical place holder for one of the most controversial topics of Poe’s day. In this situation the roles of black and white are confused, mixed and questioned to the point at which race becomes relative. Pym is white and his interactions with the other characters have an interesting effect where they seem to be infected by his presence and slowly become more dark compared to him, with one exception: Dirk Peters. The conversation of race is initiated with the mutiny that Augustus describes to Pym after rescuing him from the hull of the Grampus. The most violent leader of the mutiny is, “…the cook, a negro,” (92) who attacks the crew of men who are directly under the control of Augustus’ white father. This scene would have been something that would have really hit home with Poe’s audience, the issue of slavery was a hot topic in America in that time. The fear of a revolt of slaves was an ever-present threat, that is easily traced in history and literature, but in the framework of this novel, where the white Pym is a contagious agent who infects those around him, it is readable as the black cook attempting to destroy a similar threat, Captain Barnard. The cook murders a massive number of seamen, “striking each victim on the head as he was forced over the side of the vessel by the other mutineers” (93), and leaves only a small number of men alive on the ship. This massacre places the black cook in a position of power over the other men and can be read as his attempt to remove the threatening white characters from the decks of the ship, performing the all –too- real fears of America at that time.

There is an inherent conflict between Pym and the other characters in the novel, which can arguably be traced through the color symbolism that places them at odds with one another. Perhaps the most obvious instance of this lies in the time that Pym and the
crew of the ill-fated Jane Guy spend on the island of Tsalal. Everything on the island, from the people to the huts they live in and even the water, is dark to the point of blackness. As the ship approaches the island, the water turns, “an extraordinarily dark color” (195), and then the men who sail out to meet the white sailors appear in a matching hue, “Their complexion a jet black, with thick and long wooly hair. They were clothed in skins of an unknown black animal…” (196). Everything about the men is black, and immediately a conflict with the color white is apparent in their demeanor when sighting Captain Guy’s attempt to show that his crew means no harm, “Captain Guy now held up a white handkerchief on the blade of an oar, when the strangers made a full stop, and commenced a loud jabbering all at once, intermingled with the occasional shouts…” (195). This moment is interesting because it is possible to see the potential for a threat on both sides of the situation; the white men fear the black natives, while conversely they are feared by the islanders for introducing the hated white color to their island. Each side suspects the other, marking the color of their skin as the source of that suspicion.

Although the crew of the Jane Guy and the islanders do appear to function amicably, the fear of foul play never ceases to bother Pym, which makes sense if he is respected as the infectious white character who proposes the most traceable threat to the black natives of the island. Through Pym’s narration, the reader is subtly alerted to a form of mistrust on the protagonist’s side, for he notices some forms of possible deception that heighten his suspicion. In describing the initial contact with the Tsalal natives Pym marks, “This was a degree of ignorance for which we were not prepared, and for my part I could not help thinking some of it affected,” (197). Deception is in the air, and the conflict stems from the apparent dislike that the islanders have for anything that
is white. Through the narration of Pym, it is possible to read his presence as the white virus (and the voice of the white crew) as the threatening force that the islanders suspect. Just as the black cook had to remove the captain from his position of power over him because of the threat that he posed, we can once again see the necessity to remove the white sailors form the island in order to remove the infectious threat that is racially inscribed in their being. Pym later literally raises his alarm to Captain Guy, “There appeared so much of a system in this that I could not help feeling distrust, and I spoke to Captain Guy of my apprehensions,” yet they basically carry on as normal. Once again we see the virus trapped in a sort of quarantine and containment that moves from the metaphorical to the literal as time continues.

The worry that Pym displays about the behavior of the islanders proves to be correct, as exemplified by the savage mass burial that the islanders initiate on the last day of the crew being on the island. The black islanders take the white crew and bury them alive in order to contain the dangerous entities. Once again, live burial is used to suppress the infectious whiteness of Pym, “As soon as I could render my scattered senses, I found myself nearly suffocated, and groveling in utter darkness among a quantity of loose earth, which was also falling upon me heavily in every direction, threatening to bury me entirely,” (213). Thus the infectious white agent is contained again, as a cause of race.

Although the symptoms of Sheppard Lee’s infection is not race so much as commodification, there is a moment within his narration which exemplifies the dangerous and infectious influence of whiteness on black characters. As previously stated, Sheppard Lee invades the body of the slave Tom in a moment that simultaneously
allows him to become an human object and to play the role of an infectious white agent. Initially, Sheppard Lee is the happiest that he ever is in the novel when in the body of Tom, for in this brief period of time, he is free from the haunting memories of his past selves, “I had ceased to remember all my previous states of existences. I could not have been an African had I troubled myself with thoughts of anything but the present,” (Bird 341). Unfortunately for Tom, one part of Sheppard Lee does creep into his consciousness and this is most apparent it the scenes in which he realizes that he is literate, “nevertheless, I had a feeling in me as if I could read; and taking the book from the parson, I succeeded in deciphering the legend--’THE FATE OF THE SLAVE’” (350). This lingering feeling that he can read is the moment of re-infection that not only allows the forgotten white characteristics of Sheppard Lee to seep through but also creates disharmony for the plantation, “The reading of this sentence seemed, I know not why, to have cast a sudden damper on the spirits of all present,” (350). It takes the skills of the previous slave owner Sheppard Lee to inadvertently ruin the happiness of the slaves and to infect them with the discontent that leads to horrific rebellion.

Using historical events to found his argument, John Carlos Rowe starts his essay “Poe, Antebellum Slavery and Modern Criticism” suggesting right away that Poe’s works have to be read with respect to the fact that he is in fact a pro-slavery southerner, which dramatically shapes how we are to interpret his works. This argument leans towards a limited reading of Pym, where the relationships between Pym and his racial counterparts, meaning the non-white characters of are broken down into the form of a master/slave dichotomy. Using a historical approach pointing to the problematic social issues of slavery and race of Poe’s time and the years to follow for Pym was, “written twenty-four
years before the American Civil War,” yet it deals with “all the fear that the Southerner would feel in the turbulent years leading to the necessity of battle,” (Rowe 126). Knowing that just a few years previous to the publication of Pym, Nat Turner lead a major slave rebellion that was both bloody and deadly, fear of slave revolts and their subsequent violence was a major topic of discussion for Poe’s contemporary society. With this, the conversation of race becomes both a historical and metaphorical marker within the plot of the novel, especially when we look at the relationship between Pym and the non-white characters who surround him.

Here the dynamics of the relationship between Pym and the “black” characters come into play; Rowe argues that Pym is constantly placed in the position of master over those around him, the characters such as the half-breed Dirk Peters are then placed in a subservient position compared to him. Returning to the social foundations of Rowe’s essay he explains the relationship between Pym and Peters as something “Like the black slaves who would serve their masters faithfully and often to the death during the Civil War, Dirk Peters is Poe’s fantasy of the faithful and grateful servant,” (130). This is certainly an arguable concept, for Peters does in many cases seem to serve Pym, saving him from multiple calamities at the risk of his own life and surviving the entirety of Pym’s adventure with him. Peters’ role as a non-white is removed from the other black characters who Pym comes into conflict with for, “Peters’ savagery is of a fundamentally different character than the Black Cook’s, because it enacts what has already been conceptualized by Pym, who is from this moment on Peters’ white master,” (Rowe 131). The relationship of Pym and Peters as master and slave is one that certainly reflects the society that Poe lives in, but it fails to hold true if we really look at how Poe regards his
fellow man on the island of Tsasal. Where Rowe argues that Pym is Peters’ master, I suggest that this is an unfair way to interpret their interaction, for Peters’ race is a much more complicated version of Pym’s disease than the other black characters.

Using Joan Dayan’s article, “Poe, Persons and Property,” we can see an investigation of the objectification of the human body through the institution of slavery in American law in the nineteenth century and how it complicates Rowe’s argument. Dayan argues that the topic of slavery has greater implications than the obvious commodification of the human body. Poe broadens the topic of slavery into something more symbolic,

For Poe's ability to complicate the issues of human servitude lies not in any narrow delineation of slavery, which was broad and variously applied in the nineteenth century, but in his portrayal of the slippage between degrees of color, gradations of personhood, and the bounds of civility and savagery. (Dayan 407)

In order to look at the way in which Poe expands the topic of slavery in many different directions we can first look at the way that human beings were defined in the letter of the law based on their race. In Poe’s society race was literally the defining characteristic of humanity, the bodies of slaves, “became a new kind of property in law. In law a slave had no legitimate will of her own and belonged bodily to her owner. As property, a slave could be bought and sold. As animated property, she could be forced to work like a domestic animal, but one needing special restraints and care” (Dayan 408). Here the human body plays two dual roles, one is that of an object and the other is that of a living animal that has needs.

A new version of existence is at play here then, the slave is both an object and a living entity, “The law could, when necessary, create a person out of a thing, or more
precisely, give extra-added value and uniqueness to the property item (Dayan 409). The
law could literally humanize the objectified slave to the point of heightening her position
as an object while conflictingly refusing to grant her personhood. Pym interacts with the
characters around him a fashion that “blackens” them and this makes them objects that
are easily disposed. This mirrors Sheppard Lee’s process of commodification in some
ways, while complicating it through the fact that as one becomes objectified in Pym’s
narrative they die as a symptom of this racial infection. Returning to Rowe’s argument,
Dirk Peters is an interesting case here, for instead of becoming more objectified through
his role as a half-breed, he ironically becomes more white through is constant contact
with Pym. This is best exemplified in the moments following the attack of the Tsalalian
islanders on the white crew of Jane Guy, which leaves Pym and Peters, “the only living
white men upon the island,” (Poe 217). This moment discredits Rowe’s argument that
Pym is Peters masters, for Pym literally states that Peters is his racial equal and therefore
he cannot be his servant in the relationship as Rowe presents it. Peters is the only
character who is able to spend extended periods of time with Pym without ever being
fatally infected by the virus. Perhaps his immunity stems from his hybridity; he is dark
enough to display signs of some kind of infection from Pym, yet white enough to take
this infection as a vaccine of sorts that makes him safe from the viral Pym.

Sovereignty and Immunity

As I have shown, this shifting from body to body raises issues such as, how the
body can be used, what is identity and where does the division between the mind and
body exist? The circumstances of Bird’s novel make these issues especially problematic
because of the difficulty in discerning the character Sheppard Lee from the bodies that he infects. He often pauses on this, wavering back and forth between the determination that he is the one controlling the body, and the opposite mindset, that the body is acting without his control. It is possible that the physical body dictates the characterization of each man he inhabits, but the fact that as a narrator Sheppard Lee is able to describe himself retrospectively as separate from the men he “becomes,” it is then arguable that the entity in charge throughout most of the novel is the viral Sheppard Lee and the bodies act more as agents under his control. This raises the idea of Sheppard Lee as a sovereign of sorts, because despite his taking part in the literal bodies of the characters he inhabits, he is ultimately separate from the corporeal form and determines when that body lives or dies. In the moments of transformation, Sheppard Lee literally grants life to a previously deceased body, he reanimates the inanimate, and at the same time ends the life of the body from which he departs.

Returning to Michel Foucault’s collection of lectures, *Security, Territory, Population*, Sheppard Lee and Pym may be defined as sovereigns of sorts within the microcosm of their novels, for they both take an active role in the circulation of people. As Foucault points out, a sovereign is not simply someone who monitors physical boundaries and limits; instead he can also be,

the regulator of a milieu, which involved not so much establishing limits and frontiers, or fixing locations, as above all and essentially, making possible, guaranteeing, and ensuring circulations: the circulation of people, merchandise, and air, etcetera. (29)

It is interesting to look at how Sheppard Lee and Pym play roles as they travel through in a wide variety of forms and how they circulate human bodies. Sheppard Lee’s recycling of bodies and actual movement of them mirrors the motion of society; his ability to
transform into many different forms allows him to both engage with society, while remaining uniquely separate. Pym’s travels mark the movement of people from the safety of the shores of American to the dangerous unknown of the South Seas while straddling the thin line that is present between humanity and objectification.

The concept of the viral subject as one who is unique from the other characters is something that mirrors the issue of community versus individuality, or sovereignty. As the powerful contagious agent in his novel, it is arguable that Sheppard Lee is dangerous because of his individualized position as the one who gives and takes life from multiple bodies. On a more literal and basic level, Sheppard Lee’s introduction to his life in the first lines of the novel offer some preliminary insight into how he establishes this differentiation between the individual and the group. As he points out, “The importance of any single individual in society, especially one so isolated as myself, is so little, that it can scarcely be supposed that the community at large can be affected by his fortunes, either good or evil, or interested in any way in his fate,” (Bird 7), but being as the novel is a narrative about one man and his own story, there has to be an alternative to this community-only view. Sheppard Lee then clarifies that perhaps, an individual can be independent from the collective society through, “circumstances [that] conspire to elevate the humblest person from obscurity,” (7). It is through his role as the contagious giver and taker of death that Sheppard Lee is able to become sovereign from those around him. His abnormal status as an infectious agent who can live in previously dead hosts is empowering; he is supernatural in that he supersedes the common limitations of human beings.

In the prologue to Pym, there is a similar assertion made about the need to tell his
story, an “urging upon me, as a duty, to give my narrative to the public” (Poe 51). As the narrator of his story, Pym is placed as the epicenter for the disease within his plot. He is witness to every scene described and through this narration he gains a will of sorts to grant life or death through his willingness to share his tale. When he agrees to publish, he grants life to the story and all of the characters within it; had he refused, in essence his silence would have been the death of those who shared in his adventures. Sheppard Lee and Pym are separated from the general mass of Americans through the extraordinary role that they play as narrators, depending on their story telling, characters are allowed to exist in print when they are remembered and vanish when their part in the plot is used up. They are individualized because of the stories that they have to share and then the infectious qualities they possess within the narrations again give them the power to function as sovereigns.

With this individuation comes the need to define humanity. For Bird, there is a definite schism between the human body and the essence that pilots it, and Poe’s interesting use of color suggests a breakdown of humanity into something that places the human body in an odd place; race becomes the defining characteristic and not necessarily the essence. This coming together of different parts into one form is something that Gilbert Simondon discusses in “The Genesis of the Individual” where the body is a culmination of many different parts into one being, “Thus, the individual is to be understood as having a relative reality, occupying only a certain phase of the whole being in question,” (300). With this we find that the individual becomes a being of circumstance and is mutable to an extreme extent, which explains the ease of which Sheppard Lee shifts from one body to the next and Pym tends to adapt to each
environment that he encounters rapidly. Identity becomes relative, and the body therefore becomes somewhat disposable in the process of acclimating to the needs of the narrator.

In this case, the individual becomes a product of his environment, which is clearly evident for both Sheppard Lee and Pym. Bird’s protagonist changes characters each time he deems it necessary to shift to a new body. He becomes the body that he inhabits, but only to a certain extent. Pym also goes through a series of mutations through his role as the infectious virus. He begins as an eager schoolboy and finishes his journey as a cutthroat adventurer sailing into the unknown. “In other words, the relation to both the world outside and to the collective is in fact a dimension of the individuation to which the individual participates due to its connection with the preindividual reality that undergoes gradual individuation,” (309) this process described by Simondon mirrors that model of a virus, in that the individual is forced to mutate in order to conform to the outside pressures of his environment. Survival is based entirely on the ability to be flexible enough to adapt, which suggests that the disunity of Sheppard Lee and Pym with their bodies is actually what allows them to change enough to survive,

a being does not possess a unity in its identity, which is that of the stable state within which no transformation is possible; rather, a being has a transductive unity, that is, it can pass out of phase with itself, it can-- in any area-- break its own bounds in relation to its center. (311)

This mutable form of existence is what allows Sheppard Lee and Pym to exist within the complicated forms that they embody and the environments that they inhabit.

Death, the threat of or escape from may create sovereignty, and the ability to kill without crime is the classic defining characteristic of this role. As Giorgio Agamben defines in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, “The sovereign sphere is the
sphere in which it is permitted to kill without committing homicide and without celebrating a sacrifice,” (83). The ability to kill without direct consequence creates an dynamic manner in death is dealt with in the two novels. For the role of the contagious virus is to infect those around him, yet in both cases the protagonists appear to do so in a somewhat unconscious manner, thus creating a paradoxical relationship in which they are associated with death yet not consciously or purposely aware that they are the cause. Although Sheppard Lee does not actively kill any of the bodies that he inhabits, there is still an interesting correlation between those who seem to be in a better place than him, and their imminent death. To an even further extent, when he chooses to abandon one body for another, he decides to (re)kill that character in exchange for another body. Sheppard Lee chooses which bodies will live, which a reworking of this definition. Pym also suffers from this unfortunate killing by association that borders on a biopolitic reading of a sovereign, for he does not purposely kill most of the characters who die around him, yet somehow he is constantly set as the sole survivor of catastrophic events. In this case, it is possible to use Achille Mbembe’s observation that “the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and capacity to dictate who may live and who must die,” (11), may be used to initiate an examination of the sovereignty that is awarded to Sheppard Lee and Pym for their ability to administer a kind of death to those around them. Mbembe investigates how this ability to decide who lives or dies can actually function within a system as a description of Foucault’s concept of biopower. There is an unintentional biopolitical sovereignty that occurs in both works through the roles of Sheppard Lee and Pym as viral entities. Although the two characters do drift a bit from Mbembe’s exact description, their roles as the infectious agents who
arguably correlate with the deaths of many other characters, places them within the boundaries of this version of sovereignty.

Mbembe expands the concept of sovereignty past the typical definition of one having power over many and suggests a complicated role “My concern is those figures of sovereignty whose central project is not the struggle for autonomy but the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and population,” (14). With this, we are left with a version of sovereignty that is less concerned with a separation from the mass and more concerned with manifestations of humans into something other than traditional definitions of humanity. In this case, the human body becomes something more like a product to be moved round and used to best advantage, rather than some kind of identifier for existence. This is clearly evident in the objectification of both Sheppard Lee and Pym, as their bodies become goods that are moved, traded and discarded. In this sense, sovereignty is based on the ability to decide who lives and dies, as well as the ability to somehow separate the important essence of humanity from the physical. Mbembe then argues that with this separation comes a kind of sovereignty that is based on the politics of death; what defines the ability to overcome the limitations of the human body in order to actually achieve a separation from the mass is the manipulation and perception of death.

Here begins a serious complication in the relationship that Sheppard Lee and Pym have with their own bodies. They hold a kind of dual existence, for although they are the virus within the context of their plots, they are subsequently immune because of this role. This is most evident in the inability for either character to die within the plot of the novels; Sheppard Lee cannot die because his spirit just shifts from one body to the next
and Pym faces countless seemingly inescapable situations only to survive against all odds. It is no mere coincidence that this happens, with the role of the virus comes a position of safety from the disease that infects those around them. This borders on Elana Gomel’s concept of the apocalyptic body in her article, “The Plague of Utopias: Pestilence and the Apocalyptic Body “in which this form of existence lies in “a body whose mortal sickness is a precondition of ultimate health” (405). With this in mind, it is interesting to look at how the disease driven bodies of Sheppard Lee and Pym are ironically the vessels of safety that allow them to survive the circumstances of their plots. Sovereignty comes as immunity to the death which, as viral agents, they create.

Ultimately the result of this condition is a return to some sense of normalcy, which is apparent in the conclusions of both works. Sheppard Lee returns to his plot of land, a little bit wiser and slightly more water proof, and the prologue of Pym tells us that he somehow returns to the United States and is placed in the position to publish his tale for public consumption. Gomel presents this as part of the natural pattern of the apocalyptic body: “The pattern comprises panic, dissolution of socioeconomic structures, and despair, succeeded by a makeshift return to normality once the disease has run its course” (408) “makeshift” is an interesting qualifier and does help to explain the somewhat anticlimactic conclusions of the novels. Despite the amazing adventures that Sheppard Lee and Pym embark on, in the end, they once again find themselves back in mundane American society. This is not to discredit the hardships that they undergo as the virus, for they both certainly face many conflicts, but the end result of both novels places the literary structure as one of modest beginnings, violent and exciting adventure and then a return to the status quo. Although Poe’s “Note” offers some finality to Pym’s
tale, the actual conclusion of Pym’s narration offers no such clear cut ending. Similarly, Sheppard Lee returns to his beginnings on his farm where there is a hint of history repeated as he reaps the benefit of his brother-in-law’s industry. As Gomel observes, “a contagious disease may theoretically continue indefinitely,” so although sequels were not offered by Bird and Poe the conclusions of their tales may simply be a return to dormancy until a better opportunity comes along (409).

**Conclusion**

Sheppard Lee and Pym can clearly be seen as viral agents, and yet they are still protagonists. Yes they are infectors, but the question still remains, how successful are they as central and sustainable characters? As Mayer states, “…viruses are not easily romanticized…But on the other hand, the figure of the virus does not lend itself easy to demonization either: the virus is, after all, a manipulative force rather than the good or bad guy; it is a way of functioning, an agency, confusing and variegated,” the virus is left in a kind of limbo between the good and the bad, the danger it presents is a symptom of its function and not necessarily purposeful action (8). As viruses, they circumvent the usual role of protagonist because their constant existence precludes resolution. When the modern method/idea of viral agency is applied to literature written in the nineteenth century it demonstrates that these two novels had very modern protagonists whose goals are not to resolve conflict, but to perpetuate their existence forever. If then, this model is not time specific, but rather may be applied universally, might all conflict then be viewed as viral infection?
Works Cited


