

5-2019

Behind the Veil: Sin and the Sublime in Nathaniel Hawthorne's Twice-Told Tales

Jacob Tobias Buller

Behind the Veil: Sin and the Sublime in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*

An Honors College Project Thesis

Presented to

The Department of Language and Literature

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for

Honors Scholar

by

Jacob Tobias Buller

May 2019

Copyright © 2019 by Jacob Tobias Buller

No portion of this work may be reproduced in any form without the written permission of the author. All rights reserved.

This Project Thesis, directed and approved by the candidate's committee,
has been accepted by the Honors College of Abilene Christian University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the distinction

HONORS SCHOLAR

Dr. Jason Morris, Dean of the Honors College

Date

Advisory Committee

Dr. Jeremy Elliott, Committee Chair

Dr. Cole Bennett, Committee Member

Dr. John Boyles, Committee Member

Dr. Mikee Delony, Department Head

ABSTRACT

Since 1966, no significant scholarship has examined the connection between Nathaniel Hawthorne's work and the literary construct of the sublime. This thesis argues for a fresh understanding of Nathaniel Hawthorne and the sublime, positing that the sublime in Hawthorne is best understood as a subjective, transcendent experience oriented around human response. The sublime is thus not necessarily tied to natural imagery, as it is traditionally understood. To demonstrate this claim, the paper begins with a historical overview of the sublime and then summarizes the use of the sublime in Hawthorne's immediate context, particularly as understood by the Romantic and Gothic writers. Then, it examines the only article that has been published on this topic—Leo Levy's "Hawthorne and the Sublime"—and analyzes Levy's contribution to the issue, proposing a new theoretical lens (Immanuel Kant's aesthetics) to better understand Hawthorne's aims in writing. Finally, it provides a close reading of two representative stories from *Twice-Told Tales*, "The Great Carbuncle" and "The Minister's Black Veil," to study Hawthorne's traditional and nontraditional uses of sublime imagery. The thesis concludes with a discussion of potential application, possibilities for further scholarship, and relevance for the study of Hawthorne in particular and literature in general.

Introduction

As an American writer, Nathaniel Hawthorne often stands alone. Though he wrote concurrently with other American authors, many of whom were influenced by Romanticism and Transcendentalism, his concerns were unique: a consistent preoccupation with religion, sin, and art in the New World. This is particularly true of his short stories, many of which deal famously with vividly metaphorical and often macabre depictions of human sin, wrestling with the legacy of Puritan religion in North America.

Literary critics have made attempts to categorize Hawthorne; he has, for instance, been called a “Dark Romantic,” a nod to his Gothic tendencies and to his use of Romantic tropes. Yet the exploration of his influences has been limited in some areas, particularly because he wrote against the grain: in a Romantic environment that was increasingly concerned with the natural world, Hawthorne’s stories are more centered on human character than the literature of many of his contemporaries. For instance, the first volume of *Twice-Told Tales* was published in 1837, just one year after Ralph Waldo Emerson published *Nature*, his now-famous opus on Transcendentalism.

Perhaps Hawthorne’s distinction from his contemporaries is why his Romantic influences are often neglected. Yet, as an author in a historical context, Hawthorne’s indebtedness to his literary culture must be acknowledged. Though Hawthorne may not be entirely Romantic, Transcendentalist, or Gothic, he was nevertheless a writer deeply influenced by his time. Like all authors, Hawthorne communicates with a specific language, from a certain worldview, and from within a particular movement, even if he does it unconsciously. Thus, an examination of his literary context and the way that he

uses the conventions of his time is useful—indeed, *crucial*—for the interpretation of his work.

One of the most neglected themes in Hawthorne's writing is the sublime, which was a popular and pervasive convention in his time period and in Romanticism specifically. "In the study of Hawthorne's fiction," critic Leo Levy writes, "little attention has been given to the ways in which his work draws upon...the sublime" (391). Since Levy's article, "Hawthorne and the Sublime," was published in 1966, the silence has persisted. Even Leo Levy's article was more cursory than exhaustive, and in examining the surface features of Hawthorne's work, Levy often missed how the sublime connected to Hawthorne's broader themes.

Though a great deal of study has been devoted to Nathaniel Hawthorne's conception of evil and his religious roots, as well as the Gothic features of his work, the sublime remains unexplored territory. Yet Hawthorne's literary context is just as crucial for the study of Hawthorne as his religious opinions. A robust understanding of the sublime can help the reader understand *how* Hawthorne accomplishes his literary aims, which will then provide a means for a balanced interpretation. Thus, this paper will seek to chart a new course for the study of the sublime in Hawthorne, building on Leo Levy's scholarship while also acknowledging Hawthorne's broader themes at work in this effective literary tradition.

To explore the entire Hawthorne canon is beyond the scope of this paper; therefore, this study will be limited to an initial exploration of the sublime in *Twice-Told Tales* by analyzing two of Hawthorne's representative stories at length. With a close reading of "The Great Carbuncle" and "The Minister's Black Veil," this paper seeks to

demonstrate that Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* uses sublime imagery to explore the nature of humanity, centering the function of the sublime on human response. Even when Hawthorne uses traditionally sublime symbols, he uses the sublime to focus on anthropocentric issues, especially religion and morality. In a phrase, Hawthorne uses the sublime to provoke *human response* in his characters so that he can provoke a *moral response* from both his characters and his readers.

The Sublime in History and the Dark Romantics

The sublime is one of the oldest traditions in literary theory, dating back two thousand years to an anonymous source titled *On the Sublime*. It is often attributed to Longinus, though he is generally not considered the author ("Longinus"). In the text, Longinus' central claim is the superiority of the sublime in oratory and poetry, which he defines as a kind of "excellence of discourse" that produces, among other things, "ecstasy" as well as "wonder and astonishment" (138). He emphasizes the power of the sublime to communicate elevated thoughts as well as "strong and inspired emotion" (Longinus 140). It is this transcendent power and the emotion that comes with it that is seized upon by later theorists; the sublime is the wonder beyond conception that is created by something, usually something beautiful and vast. Though this superiority is objective in some ways, the subjective response of the one receiving the "excellence of discourse" is the primary characteristic of the sublime. Thus, the sublime as defined by Longinus "is essentially rhetorical," as Mary Arensberg notes (3).

While Longinus was specifically writing about poetry and oratory, the category is also frequently expanded by other writers to include a response of awe evoked by nature.

In later theory (especially as conceived by Edmund Burke), the sublime can also invoke negative emotion, what one might call “terror,” the fear of something other than oneself and often greater than oneself.

The dual understanding of the sublime (as transcendent emotion that contains both fear and wonder) as well as its subjective nature is pervasive in Hawthorne’s immediate context. Hawthorne is often classified among the “Dark Romantics,” who were a subgroup of the Romantic movement that focused on the “Gothic mode of terror and horror” to communicate their thought (Thompson 5). G. R. Thompson summarizes the main themes of the dark Romantics as humankind’s fallen nature and “evil moral choices,” their inability to “comprehend haunting reminders of another, supernatural realm,” and “a sense of nameless guilt combined with a suspicion that the external world was an elusive projection of the mind” (5). As Romantics, they used elevated language and deep emotional feeling to explore the darker aspects of human nature, searching for moral truth. Like other Romantics, they also draw on the sublime. However, they focus less on transcendent positive feeling and more on ambivalent or even negative feeling, drawing from the work of Edmund Burke. In Burke’s thought, the wildness of the natural and anthropological world “produced the effect of the ‘sublime’ through the evocation of a sense of supernatural mystery” (Thompson 4). The Dark Romantics applied this “mysterious sublime” to Gothic themes.

Because the Gothic is so closely tied to an exploration of evil, it can often have religious or moral overtones. Christine Colón, for instance, argues that the Gothic can “provide the sublime moments necessary to provoke strong emotion” and thus enact “moral sympathy” toward reform (141). In other words, the Gothic sublime can also have

a moral. This idea appears in the work of Nathaniel Hawthorne as well. “The Gothic,” Leo Levy writes, “becomes another version of the religious sublime” for Hawthorne (399). The Gothic or religious sublime, as something that provokes emotion and sympathy toward moral reform, partakes in the dual nature of the sublime as expressed by the Romantics.

In addition to the dual nature of the sublime, one of the most useful aspects of the sublime for the study of Hawthorne is that the sublime is *constructed*. The sublime, in other words, is a response on the part of a person or people and not the result of any inherent quality an object might possess. Mary Arensberg, drawing from the thought of Immanuel Kant, describes the sublime as a “psychic operation,” which “occurs within the mind of the subject without the direct participation of the object; the object merely exists to initiate the psychic response” (5). This distinction is crucial for literature; any symbol, providing it can provoke a sublime response, can function as the object that initiates the psychic response. Sublimity, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.

Hawthorne himself acknowledges the subjectivity of the aesthetic in his narrative “The Old Manse.” He writes that everything in nature is “distinctly imaged, and, however unsightly in reality, assumes ideal beauty in the reflection.... We will not, then, malign our river as gross and impure...or, if we remember its tawny hue and the muddiness of its bed, *let it be a symbol* that the earthliest human soul has an *infinite spiritual capacity*” (Hawthorne, *Mosses from an Old Manse*, 7-8, emphasis added). Christopher Leise notes that muddy rivers are “rarely evocative of the sublime,” and yet Hawthorne describes the water in those very terms (488). Beauty and sublimity, therefore, are attained in reflection, not as a result of any inherent aesthetic value—they are constructed by the one

looking into the waters. This appears to be an idea that Hawthorne himself held about the nature of aesthetics. Thus, Hawthorne's use of aesthetics, and therefore of the sublime, must be examined next.

Hawthorne and the Sublime: Primary Evidence and Leo Levy's Analysis

As a nineteenth-century American author, particularly as one that might be classified as a "Dark Romantic," Hawthorne undoubtedly drew from his context, even if unconsciously. Thus, it is not a stretch to suggest that Hawthorne also drew from some of the literary tropes and theoretical tools at his disposal. In "Sunday at Home," for instance, Hawthorne's first-person narration is reminiscent of the slow and evocative descriptions of the Romantic poets. "[T]he morning glory, in its descent from Heaven," Hawthorne intones, "comes down the stone steps, one by one" (11).¹ In fact, he writes amicably to his audience near the end of the essay: "This, dear reader, is merely a flight of poetry" (Hawthorne 16). Hawthorne, of course, uses these descriptions to serve his own purposes. Even this flight of fancy is intimately connected to humanity's handiwork and religious concerns: he is watching "sunrise stealing down a *steeple*," a human monument, which he notes "has a particular robe of brightness for the Sabbath" (11, emphasis added). This rhetorical move neatly summarizes Hawthorne's approach to the literary tools of his context: he will appropriate them to address his own ideas.

One of the tools of the Romantics, of course, was the sublime. If the sublime were summarized (at risk of being reductionist) as transcendent emotion responding to a constructed object, typically in the natural world, Hawthorne's short stories do not lack

¹Unless otherwise noted, citations simply labeled "Hawthorne" are quoted from *Twice-Told Tales*. All other references to Hawthorne's publications outside of that volume have been noted in-text.

suitable parallels. *Twice-Told Tales* is often punctuated by wonder, horror, and everything in between, and though the natural world is often sidelined, it is also regularly connected to the stories' characters; the rigid Puritans, for instance, exist in opposition to the wilderness (as in "The May-Pole of Merry Mount" and "The Gentle Boy"). The crape in "The Minister's Black Veil" is frequently connected to metaphors of light and darkness, and the earth is offered as a parallel to the veiled Reverend Hooper (cf. Hawthorne 30). Perhaps the most obvious literary nod to the sublime is in "The Great Carbuncle," which features a journey through the wilderness to obtain a symbol of divine light, the "awful blaze of the Great Carbuncle" (Hawthorne 123). Though each of these examples is far from a conventional portrayal of the sublime, they clearly connect to the tradition in a meaningful way.

Leo Levy's article, published in *American Literature* in 1966, marks the first and last attempt in mainstream scholarship to tackle the issue of the sublime in Hawthorne. He frames Hawthorne's use of the tradition in the terms of the picturesque, a convention that frames the natural world in finite, manageable descriptions, focusing on characteristics rather than the whole. Levy argues that Hawthorne "shrinks from the infinite, unless he can assimilate it to a framework of familiar ideas. In contrast to most votaries of the sublime, he does not enthusiastically embrace the awful and the immense; he is often circuitous and indirect, doubtful and skeptical, and sometimes defensively ironical" (392). Here Levy recognizes Hawthorne's divergent skepticism toward the sublime, and the diversity in how Hawthorne uses it. At times, Hawthorne portrays it positively (as in "The May-Pole of Merry Mount") or negatively ("The Great Carbuncle").

Levy goes on to explore several of Hawthorne's stories to show how Hawthorne moves from "rejection of the sublime toward assimilation and acceptance" (392). First, he examines "The Great Carbuncle," examining the blending of the picturesque and the sublime throughout the story. He eventually concludes that the sublime light of the carbuncle is evocative of "the specter of the terrors and rigors of Puritanism" (394). Levy then shows how the sublime is used positively in "The Great Stone Face" as a religious parable; Hawthorne, Levy suggests, separates the sublime from the natural world and fuses it with "Christian principle" (396). He goes on to argue that Hawthorne's conception of the sublime as a moral agent comes from Washington Allston, who distinguishes between a "moral" sublime and a "false" sublime (Levy 396). The moral sublime is awe of the "power of God"; the false sublime includes Gothic elements such as the "hideous" and "monstrous" (Levy 396). Based on this distinction, Levy believes that Hawthorne rarely demonstrates the moral sublime, because he lacks "an exalted sense of man's potentialities" (397). Instead, Hawthorne relies on the false sublime, expressed through his Gothic features; the Gothic "becomes another version of the religious sublime," highlighting the depravity of the human race (Levy 399).

While Levy's close readings of Hawthorne's work are illuminating, his work is not particularly holistic. Hawthorne's religious perspective, for instance, is an afterthought in his analysis of "The Great Carbuncle" and background in "The Great Stone Face," rather than a primary concern. While Levy rightly connects Puritanism and Hawthorne's moral preoccupations to the sublime, he fails to use the moral function of Hawthorne's sublime as an initial framework for interpretation. Furthermore, though connecting Hawthorne's work to the "false" sublime of Allston may be appropriate, it is

ultimately misleading. There is no dichotomy of sublimity in Hawthorne; the different forms of the sublime (positive or negative) serve the same moral function, which is to urge humanity to leave behind the darkness and enter the light. Levy writes that Hawthorne separates “moral sublimity from external circumstances,” which he perceives as a contradiction in Hawthorne’s thought (396). In reality, it can only be a contradiction if Hawthorne is intending to use moral sublimity in his work, in the sense that Allston uses the term. However, Hawthorne primarily, if not exclusively, uses the so-called “false” sublime—portrayal of the Gothic and often the grotesque—in order to nudge the reader toward morality.

In addition, the sublime is inherently anthropocentric in Hawthorne; it is by definition *constructed* by those who are reacting to the sublime element. Levy hints at this when he states that Hawthorne “separates the sublime from external nature” (395-396), but he never pursues it further, instead clarifying Allston’s theory of the sublime and concluding with Hawthorne’s writing on the sublimity of Niagara Falls—an incident of external nature. If one begins with the assumption, however, that the sublime originates in the human mind, that it is constructed, the study of the sublime in Hawthorne takes on a different light. No longer limited to mountains and waterfalls, the sublime can then be found in other symbols—ones that Levy has, perhaps, overlooked.

There is no question that the sublime in Hawthorne is both moral and anthropocentric; any theory of the sublime in Hawthorne must account for those two elements. Levy rightly therefore sought out clarification of the nature of the sublime but found it in the dichotomy of Allston; the work of another theorist may be more

appropriate to help account for the moral dimension of Hawthorne's sublime. A better option would be the aesthetics of Immanuel Kant.

Joshua Rayman describes Kant's approach to sublimity as "the first attempt to connect the sublime to a universal, rational system of morality" (51). Kant divides the sublime into two categories: the mathematical and the dynamical sublime. The mathematical sublime is the failure of the imagination to comprehend something infinite where the reason is capable of comprehending the abstract concept. The dynamical sublime is more concrete: it is a physical feeling of fear or awe. Hannah Ginsborg's interpretation of Kant's thought is worth quoting in full:

The feeling associated with the sublime is a feeling of pleasure in the superiority of our reason over nature [i.e. our minds comprehend what our senses cannot], but it also involves displeasure. In the case of the mathematically sublime, the displeasure comes from the awareness of the inadequacy of our imagination; in the dynamical case it comes from the awareness of our physical powerlessness in the face of nature's might. (Ginsborg)

For the Kantian sublime, then, there are essentially two senses: a sense of transcendence (imagination is inadequate) and a sense of powerlessness (and thus fear). It runs parallel to Burke and Allston, in asserting that the sublime contains in it a negative sense.

Where Kant differs from other theorists is the way he connects the sublime to morality. In Rayman's analysis of Kant, "sublimity does not merely provide a picture or simulated experience of morality; it exercises specific moral functions in exhibiting our moral powers and functions" (54). Kant himself provides a relatively succinct definition of the sublime: "what is to be called sublime is the mental attunement through a certain

representation employing reflective judgement, but not the object” (qtd. in Rayman 56). In other words, the sublime (as previously stated) is not inherent to the object; it is rather attunement through human reflection. He concludes that “the true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the judging person, not in the natural object the judging of which induces this attunement” (Kant, qtd. in Rayman 56). In this way, it is subjective. Its very subjectivity, Kant says, is what allows it to contextualize moral action: “[S]ublimity enables moral action as an emotion produced by overcoming its limits,” because moral action (defined by Kant’s categorical imperative as treating people as ends in themselves) is initially inhibited in humanity (Rayman 56). The sublime allows us to recognize our own “supersensible power” (Rayman 56) and thus recognize the supersensible nature of morality. It overcomes the inhibition of humanity to act rightly by sidestepping the senses and embracing the transcendent. In a very reductive sense, then, Kant’s sublime, through either a sense of transcendence or powerlessness, predisposes the person affected to moral action.

Kant’s framework, of course, does not encompass the totality of Hawthorne’s efforts; it does not account for the Gothic nature of Hawthorne’s sublime, the element that Allston would call “false.” In addition, there is little evidence that Hawthorne consciously used Kant, whereas it is conceivable that he used Allston. However, Kant’s theories were pervasive in the British Romantic movement that later influenced the American Romantics and Gothics. According to Mary Arensberg, the “two Kantian sublimes...inform and structure the British Romantic sublime” (8) and are therefore relevant to the study of American Romantics. Thomas Weiskel, in his book *The American Sublime*, concurs and takes the claim a step further: “Kant is as important for

any theory of the sublime as Aristotle is for the theory of tragedy” (38). Thus, the central tenet of Kant’s conception—that the sublime predisposes the person affected to moral action—is a valuable framework for the purposes of this study. Because Kant’s aesthetic theory was so pervasive in Romanticism, it is probable that Hawthorne was influenced by its foundational structures, and it is therefore worthwhile to use it as a contextual tool.

Two Distinctions for Hawthorne’s Sublime

The sublime is a moving target in the work of Nathaniel Hawthorne. As Levy noted in his analysis, Hawthorne can view it negatively (“The Great Carbuncle” is an example Levy uses), positively (“The Great Stone Face”), or subjectively (“My Visit to Niagara Falls”), and his perspective largely depends on which story is read. In fact, even the symbols vary from story to story; light can be used simply as a thematic device (“Sunday at Home” plays with sunlight as a medium for warm Sabbath feeling), or it can be used as a symbol of the sublime (as in “The Great Carbuncle”). There are other motifs in *Twice-Told Tales* as well, such as the wilderness and face coverings (whether that be a veil, shroud, or masque), which sometimes have sublime characteristics but often do not.

Because of this complexity and Hawthorne’s unique and anthropocentric approach, any discussion of the sublime in Hawthorne cannot entirely rely on traditionally sublime identifiers or characteristics, such as beauty and vast natural imagery. Rather, the rhetorical function of the sublime (as expressed by Longinus) should be front-and-center; *human response* must be the key identifier of the sublime in these short stories, typically expressed as some mix of awe and fear or terror. This

methodology draws primarily from the constructed nature of the sublime and broadens the possibilities of interpretation.

If this methodology is used, Hawthorne's approaches to the sublime can be summarized in two distinctive ways: his traditional use of the sublime and his nontraditional, anthropocentric use of the sublime. The two are not necessarily exclusive; for instance, in Hawthorne's more traditionally sublime stories, his perspective frequently focuses on the human condition. However, they are useful to help pin down how Hawthorne might be using the sublime in any given context.

Hawthorne's traditional use of the sublime is characterized by natural imagery and positive or mixed response (typically wonder and awe, often mixed with terror). For instance, in "Foot-prints on the Sea-shore," Hawthorne exults in the "unlooked-for and overpowering conception of the majesty and awfulness of the great deep" (355). "Majesty" is here coupled with "awfulness," together with the perennial subject of the chronicler of the sublime: the "broad, blue, sunny deep" of the ocean (Hawthorne 354). Hawthorne also lets the night carry the weight of sublimity, and even ties it to the sublime explicitly: "I plunge into the night.... [T]he last lamp struggles feebly with the darkness, like the farthest star that stands sentinel on the borders of uncreated space. It is strange what *sensations of sublimity* may spring from a very humble source" (337, emphasis added). In these cases, Hawthorne is consciously and explicitly tying natural imagery to a typical portrayal of the sublime. One representative example of this methodology is "The Great Carbuncle," which Leo Levy also identifies as an example of the sublime; this story will be analyzed at length below.

However, Hawthorne's use of the sublime is not always limited to its traditional connotations. Occasionally, he skillfully blends the Gothic and the sublime to evoke transcendent emotion (typically horror), which is often directly connected to humanity. For instance, Ibrahim in "The Gentle Boy" tells "monstrous" tales that feature "human tenderness...encountered in the midst of wild and unearthly scenery" (Hawthorne 67). The woman in "The White Old Maid" is a mysterious and "awful thing" (Hawthorne 295). Such characterization makes a "wilderness of men" (Hawthorne 93) and brings the emotions of the wild to bear on human character. While this human-oriented approach is unusual, it at times uses conventionally sublime elements, such as a close connection to the natural world.

Often Hawthorne has a human creation bear the weight of sublime horror, usually for a moral end; in "The Prophetic Pictures" and "Edward Randolph's Portrait," a painting provokes a reaction of fear and trembling. In the latter, the portrait serves the purpose of reminding a leader "of the awful weight of a People's curse"—the "moral" of the "fable," according to the brooding Alice Vane (Hawthorne 203). Another frequent motif for Hawthorne is that of a cover or veil. Edward Randolph's portrait is covered with a "black silk curtain" (Hawthorne 207); Lady Eleanore's mantle hides her "awful beauty" and is revealed to be the source of a terrible plague (Hawthorne 221); the White Old Maid, perhaps a sublime symbol herself, dresses in a "long, white garment, which the people called her shroud" (Hawthorne 290); and the ghostly bridegroom of "The Wedding-Knell" wears a shroud that causes the spectators to shudder "with irrepressible awe" (Hawthorne 22). Perhaps the strongest example of this, and of Hawthorne's use of

the Gothic sublime, is “The Minister’s Black Veil,” which will be discussed second and at a greater length.

In both of these cases, Hawthorne’s sublime is a convention that he uses to further his literary goals. While this varies from story to story, in “The Great Carbuncle” and “The Minister’s Black Veil,” Hawthorne uses the sublime for moral ends—to show the darkness of human motivations, to critique a religion of harsh rigidity, and to demonstrate what wisdom really looks like. It is this final feature of Hawthorne’s sublime that is the primary function of the sublime in “The Great Carbuncle.”

Questing for Sublimity in “The Great Carbuncle”

“The Great Carbuncle,” one of Hawthorne’s better-known stories from *Twice-Told Tales*, is perhaps the clearest use of the sublime in the anthology. It is also the most traditional. In the story, Hawthorne sets up his traditional use of the sublime with his carefully chosen language and strong emphasis on human response. Then, he subverts the tradition and robs the sublime of its characteristic power by resolving the story with his moral aims, identifying the sublime with religious fundamentalism.

The story begins with a group of “adventurers,” who are a group of “various and contrasted figures” (Hawthorne 113). The characterization of these figures relies heavily on caricature; though some have names (Doctor Cacaphodel and Master Ichabod Pignort), several characters (such as the Seeker and the Cynic) are known simply by their defining characteristic. Even those named personas are more cartoonish than dynamic, and such simplicity of character allows Hawthorne to draw clear allegorical lines. Though these characters are diverse, they are all seeking the same thing: the

beautiful and maddening blaze of the Great Carbuncle, a mythological jewel. The results of their questing are varying and appropriate to Hawthorne's allegorical purpose. The Cynic's fate fits his name: he is blinded by the very thing he doubted. The Seeker finds what he seeks and is struck dead. Others settle for a lesser version of the Carbuncle: the poet settles for a "great piece of ice" and Doctor Cacaphodel acquires a "prodigious fragment of granite" (Hawthorne 124). By the end of the story, only the rustic young couple, Matthew and Hannah, remain; each of the other adventurers either loses their path or meets their untimely fate along the way.

The Carbuncle is, of course, at the center of the story, and so any analysis of the sublime in Hawthorne's tale must begin there. Hawthorne clearly establishes the Great Carbuncle as a sublime symbol with traditional descriptions of overwhelming power and emotive response: it is a source of light "that overpowered the moon, and almost matched the sun" (115). Matthew and Hannah, the night before they find the Carbuncle, have "visions of unearthly radiance" (Hawthorne 119). The Cynic is blinded by "a single flash of so glorious a phenomenon"; it is an "awful blaze" (Hawthorne 123). These and other descriptions alone would be enough to characterize the Carbuncle as sublime; indeed, Levy notes that light (the primary feature of the mythological jewel) is "the oldest of the symbols of the sublime" (394). However, Hawthorne establishes the sublimity of the object in other ways.

First, Hawthorne evokes the sublime at the very beginning in his initial footnote: "The Indian tradition, on which this somewhat extravagant tale is founded, is both *too wild and too beautiful*, to be adequately wrought up, in prose" (Hawthorne 112, emphasis added). By making a note of the tradition, Hawthorne sets up the reader's anticipation of

a story characterized by the wild and the beautiful—indeed, a story that is *too* wild to be encompassed by the written word. Such language already anticipates the core element of the sublime.

In addition, Hawthorne begins the tale by setting the stage with natural imagery: “A vast extent of wilderness lay between them and the nearest settlement, while scant a mile above their heads, was that bleak verge” (112). The “vast” wilderness is a frequent motif for the sublime, especially in other American authors of this time, such as the Transcendentalists. Hawthorne continues with language that is even more explicit: “The roar of the Amonoosuck would have been *too awful* for endurance, if only a solitary man had listened, while the mountain stream talked with the wind” (112, emphasis added). Hawthorne’s use of the word “awful” is prominently featured in other stories that use the sublime—such as “The Minister’s Black Veil”—and is evocative here of the terror that often comes when the human encounters the perceived infinite.

Later on in the tale, Hawthorne continues to fill in the background with hints of the sublime that is to come. Matthew and Hannah, when they emerge from the forest to the upper reaches of the mountain, “gazed back at the obscure wilderness which they had traversed, and longed to be buried again in its depths, rather than trust themselves to so vast and visible a solitude” (120). In this instance, the wilderness does not carry the weight of the sublime; it is rather “obscure,” and the bare mountain onto which they have emerged is what provokes their response. It is a part of nature that is so vast that they shrink back “affrighted” (Hawthorne 120).

In addition to the hints of the sublime that Hawthorne alludes to in the natural world, he also makes the sublime nature of the Carbuncle clear with *human response*,

which is almost invariably a mix of admiration and fear. When Matthew and Hannah arrive, they “closed their eyes with a thrill of awful admiration, to exclude the fervid splendor that glowed from the brow of a cliff, impending over the enchanted lake” (Hawthorne 122). They “trembled at their own success” and their consciousness of fate “was fearful” (Hawthorne 122). Hannah is “convulsively grasping her husband’s arm,” and Matthew is “trembling violently” (Hawthorne 122). These responses function as flags for sublimity in this story.

Hannah and Matthew are not the only ones affected in this way. When the Cynic finally sees the Carbuncle, he is blinded with a “deep shuddering groan” (Hawthorne 123). “So long accustomed to view all objects through a medium that deprived them of every glimpse of brightness,” Hawthorne writes of the Cynic, “a single flash of so glorious a phenomenon, striking upon his naked vision, had blinded him forever” (123). The Cynic’s fate is not only indicative of the Carbuncle’s awful sublimity, it also clues in the reader to Hawthorne’s aim in using the sublime—to make a moral claim on the reader and give the sublime a moral and ethical function.

The moral function of Hawthorne’s sublime is expressed throughout the story in religious terms, which hint at Hawthorne’s faith-based aim in the parable. The seekers of the Carbuncle are referred to several times as “pilgrims” (Hawthorne 123), and the pure nature of the young couple’s quest seems to aid them in their pursuit of the Carbuncle. Their choice to turn back is called “wisdom” by the narrator, and that decision causes the Carbuncle to wane (Hawthorne 124). Wisdom is, of course, a moral and even religious claim on their actions. Indeed, some critics, such as W. R. Thompson, see the story as rife with biblical allusions, which “are integral to the meaning of the story” (3). Thompson

argues that Hannah is meant to parallel her biblical predecessor from 1 Samuel, a woman who was also on a quest with her husband—for a child, rather than a jewel. He views the climactic scene, in which their traveling companions each lose their way and the Cynic is blinded, as echoing Hannah's song in 1 Samuel—a reversal of fortune, an act of a God who “humbles...and exalts” (1 Samuel 2:7; Thompson 9).

Clearly, the young couple's decision is positively regarded by Hawthorne, but if the blazing Carbuncle does not represent some sort of religious revelation, what does it represent? Leo Levy claims that “Hawthorne is making the strange suggestion that the power of faith is at odds with religious illumination” (394). “Apparently,” he continues, “the carbuncle symbolizes not only the Deity but any spiritual principle that puts aside primary human considerations” (Levy 394). This claim is evidenced by the characters: with the primary characters excepted, each person desires the Carbuncle for selfish aims. “[L]ong ages after I am gone,” exults the poet, “the splendor of the Great Carbuncle will blaze around my name!” (Hawthorne 117). Only Matthew and Hannah seek it for contrary purposes; Matthew explains that they want it because “it will be such a pretty thing to show the neighbors” (Hawthorne 118). The Carbuncle's glory is therefore, for Matthew and Hannah, a splendor to be shared.

In a similar vein, Thompson sees the Carbuncle as symbolic of the Christian principle of the brotherhood of humankind, a light that is meant to be shared (reminiscent of Matthew 5:14-15). “All but the young initiates are obsessed,” Thompson writes, “and each is thwarted in his attempt to convert to private ends what had been designed for the contemplation and wonder of all men” (9). Yet Thompson's argument, while correctly picking up on Hawthorne's biblical allusions in other places, has one flaw: the young

couple, has “shown themselves so simply wise, as to *reject* a jewel which would have dimmed all earthly things” (Hawthorne 124, emphasis added). Though it is true that Matthew and Hannah had pure and admirable motives, the Carbuncle does not represent—at least in Hawthorne’s estimation—a good that must be shared. Rather, wisdom comes in *rejecting* the jewel. Levy correctly writes that the carbuncle “evokes the specter of the terrors and rigors of Puritanism. It is not farfetched to regard this tale as a parable of the faith of Hawthorne's ancestors” (394). For Hawthorne notes that the “splendor” of the Carbuncle “waned” after it was rejected by the young couple; and though there are various traditions as to the fate of the stone (and “some few” still search for it), the mainstream madness for the Carbuncle faded (124-125). This may very well be a direct parallel to the waning of Puritanism, which was rejected by Americans and gradually faded—except for the very few, Hawthorne included, who are “lured...to be the latest pilgrim” of the mythological jewel (125).

The sublime in “The Great Carbuncle,” then, is directly linked to religion and perhaps serves as a direct parallel to the awful holiness of the Puritans. Though it is not strictly moral in itself, the sublime in this story has a moral purpose: to be wise and reject those things, and perhaps those religions, that dim earthly concerns entirely and lead to death and blindness for those who seek them.

Sin and the Sublime in “The Minister’s Black Veil”

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s use of the sublime is not limited to bright lights in the wilderness, nor is his moral concern constrained to parable. Perhaps the most striking and unique use of the sublime in Hawthorne is in “The Minister’s Black Veil,” where an object—almost

entirely unconnected to traditionally sublime imagery—takes on immense symbolic significance and provokes a reaction of horror and moral reform from the other characters in the story. In the story, the veil of Reverend Hooper serves as a representation of sin nature and, in doing so, requires a moral response from the characters and from the readers.

The tale focuses on Mr. Hooper, a reverend who shows up to his church one day wearing a black veil. He gives no explanation, and his congregants are astonished and terrified. Other than one vain attempt by a “deputation” of the church, the people make no attempt to discover the secret behind the veil (Hawthorne 31). His fiancée leaves him and Hooper lives the rest of his life alienated from his congregation and the rest of the world because of their horrified reactions to his veil. On his deathbed, the reader glimpses a hint of the meaning of the veil; the minister describes it as meaningless except for “the mystery which it obscurely typifies” (Hawthorne 37). It is a symbol of secrecy, and one that is not exclusive to him; “I look around me,” Hooper cries with his last breath, “and, lo! On every visage a Black Veil!” (Hawthorne 37).

The precise nature of the secret and its relationship to sin, as well as the nature of the veil itself, has been the subject of much debate. Indeed, the critics have been deeply divided on the meaning of the story. William Freedman expresses the lack of consensus on whether Hawthorne sees Mr. Hooper as a positive or negative figure. In general, Hooper is “a heroic martyr, a virulent anti-Christ, or some hybrid form between” (353). Norman German has a negative reaction to Hooper, though not nearly as strong as some other critics. He suggests that Mr. Hooper has come through a dark night of the soul and sees “only one aspect of God’s nature,” the terrible face of holiness, which German

describes as a “Tyger,” referencing the Romantic Blake (47). Other scholars, such as N. S. Boone, read the veil as an allegory within the allegory. Boone describes J. Hillis Miller’s interpretation of the story as a claim “that the veil is ultimately impenetrable, and that the story is an allegory of the reading of the story itself wherein the reader can only come to the knowledge that full disclosure is an impossibility” (166). In other words, the allegory is one layer deeper than most might suppose; the reading of the story in itself is an allegory for the reader, in which the ambiguity of life is emphasized.

In a similar vein, William Freedman builds on the criticism of W. B. Carnochan, who believes that the story is less a moral tale about hidden sin and more a “tale about the nature of” artistic symbol (353). Freedman notes that the “chief significance” of the veil is not the meaning of the symbol, but in the “potent emotional effects it produces in those who behold it” (354). A “complex of emotional material is a symbol,” Freedman writes, and he quotes D. H. Lawrence: “the power of the symbol is to arouse the deep emotional self...beyond comprehension” (355). Boone’s eventual conclusion is comparable: “the veil,” he writes, “can be read as a symbol of the phenomenon of signification” (167). Freedman’s thoughts are, perhaps, more useful and fruitful than others for digging into the meaning of the story, because they recognize the power of the veil to evoke emotion.

However, even Freedman’s interpretation of the story is flawed. Each of these interpretations of the story, by focusing so much on either the character of Mr. Hooper or his veil, leave out one of the central themes of the text: the response of the people around Mr. Hooper to him and his veil. Elaine Barry notes this blind spot, arguing that “Hawthorne intended the moral scrutiny of his story to be directed as much toward the attitudes of the other characters as toward Mr. Hooper’s” (16). Understanding the veil as

a symbol of the sublime provides that the response of Hooper's congregants is central to the meaning of the parable. If Hooper's black veil is understood as a symbol of the sublime, the people's reactions emerge as front-and-center to interpretation; their response to the veil becomes the response of humanity to the sublime.

Hawthorne integrates the sublime in three moves. First, Hawthorne uses pervasive natural imagery to connect his narrative to the conventional understanding of the sublime, most notably by using natural metaphors. Then, once Hawthorne has established a clear sense of the sublime, he integrates it with a particular Gothic version of the sublime, which is the constructed horror of the people around him in their response to the sublime symbol of the black veil. Finally, he ties in his moral conception of the sublime, in which the sublime provokes a moral response.

First, Hawthorne connects "The Minister's Black Veil" to the conventional sublime through his numerous references to nature and his use of natural metaphors. Perhaps the most consistent metaphor in the story is that of a cloud. When Hooper goes to perform a wedding, Hawthorne writes that "a cloud seemed to have rolled duskily from beneath the black crape, and dimmed the light of the candles" (Hawthorne 30). The very next page, it is described in similar terms, as a "strange cloud that appeared to be settling round Mr. Hooper, every moment more darkly than before" (Hawthorne 31). Later, it is described again, as a consequence of his isolation: "there rolled a cloud into the sunshine, an ambiguity of sin or sorrow, which enveloped the poor minister" (Hawthorne 34). This metaphor appears in dialogue as well; when Hooper's fiancée, Elizabeth, speaks to him, she urges him to "let the sun shine from behind the cloud" and take off his veil (Hawthorne 32).

The latter motif, that of light and darkness, is also pervasive in “The Minister’s Black Veil.” The word “dark” occurs in some form fifteen times in the story, and the contrast between darkness and light is at the center of several substantial comparisons. Mr. Hooper’s “sad smile,” for instance, “always appeared like a faint glimmering of light, proceeding from the obscurity beneath the veil” (32). While Hooper is on his deathbed, the veil lays on his face “as if to deepen the gloom of his darksome chamber, and shade him from the sunshine of eternity” (Hawthorne 35)—suggesting, perhaps, that the veil separates him from divinity. “Light,” Levy notes, “is the oldest of the symbols of the sublime” (Levy 394).

Hawthorne uses other natural images as well. Hooper’s life is described by Hawthorne as “gazing through a medium that saddened the whole world. Even the lawless wind, it was believed, respected his dreadful secret, and never blew aside the veil” (34). In addition, the terror of the veil falls upon Elizabeth “like a sudden twilight in the air” (Hawthorne 33). There is even some suggestion of Hooper functioning the way a natural monument might, as the subject of visual scrutiny and little else. “Strangers came long distances to attend service at his church,” Hawthorne writes, “with the mere idle purpose of gazing at his figure” (34). This action seems a strange one for a community that fears the veil—unless they view the veil the same way they would view a monument of nature that evokes both fear and wonder, like the infinite depths of the ocean.

Perhaps Hawthorne’s most significant reference to nature—and the strongest argument for the connection between the veil and the sublime—is at the end of the wedding ceremony, as Hooper begins his toast. When Hooper sees himself in the looking-glass, “the black veil involved his own spirit in the horror with which it

overwhelmed all others. His frame shuddered, his lips grew white, he spilt the untasted wine upon the carpet, and rushed forth into the darkness. For the Earth, too, had on her Black Veil” (Hawthorne 30). Though there are dozens of interpretations and no end of articles on “The Minister’s Black Veil,” very few (if any) of them mention Hawthorne’s sudden reference to the earth. Perhaps it is because they do not know what to do with it. In a tidy explication focusing on the character of Mr. Hooper or the symbolism of the veil, the black veil of the *earth* has no place or explanation; it seems like a sudden deviation from an otherwise anthropological theme. As a reference to the sublime, however, it makes perfect sense. The natural world is a traditional symbol of the sublime; by saying that the earth has on a black veil, Hawthorne is drawing a close analogy between the veil and the natural world. Just as the world, shrouded in darkness, is a sublime symbol of fear and perhaps even sin, so the black veil of the minister is a symbol of that same sublimity.

Having established the sublime through natural imagery, Hawthorne proceeds to integrate it by emphasizing the reactions of fear and wonder from Hooper’s congregation and demonstrating the constructed nature of their fear. In fact, his references to the reactivity of the people are ubiquitous. When the minister’s parishioners first see Mr. Hooper in his black veil, they start and express, among other things, “wonder” and “amazement” and are described as being “wonderstruck” (Hawthorne 25, 26). They also react in negative terms; one old woman describes Mr. Hooper as “something awful,” and Goodman Gray says he has “gone mad” (Hawthorne 26). Notably, the black veil is referred to initially as “some unaccountable phenomenon,” to which the congregation—during the service—answers with a “prevailing wonder” (Hawthorne 26, 27). The

congregation is described “pale-faced” and “as fearful a sight to the minister, as his black veil to them” (Hawthorne 27). Hooper’s sermon provokes an even stronger reaction: “[T]here was something, either in the sentiment of the discourse itself, or in the imagination of the auditors, which made it greatly the most powerful effort that they had ever heard from their pastor’s lips. It was tinged, rather more darkly than usual, with the gentle gloom of Mr. Hooper’s temperament” (Hawthorne 27). “An unsought pathos” on the part of Hooper “came hand in hand with awe” (Hawthorne 27). Throughout the story, there is a feeling of “dread, neither plainly confessed nor carefully concealed” (Hawthorne 31). Even Hooper eventually comes to believe that “a preternatural horror was interwoven with the threads of the black crape” (Hawthorne 34); after fleeing the wedding, he is at least as affected as his congregants. Hooper avoids catching sight of himself in any way: his “own antipathy to the veil was known to be so great, that he never willingly passed before a mirror, nor stopped to drink at a still fountain, lest, in its peaceful bosom, he should be affrighted by himself” (Hawthorne 34). Such preoccupation with terror is what gives the Hawthorne’s sublime a Gothic connotation; the darkness of Hooper’s experience is described in the terms of the sublime with little of the relief of ecstasy or positive wonder that comes with other Romantic writers.

Fear is not, of course, the only reaction to the sublime. As with the sublime in nature, some people attempt to apply the scientific method. Some of Hooper’s congregants want to try and “penetrate the mystery,” while others “affirmed that there was no mystery at all” and attempt to give a natural explanation for the veil (Hawthorne 28). As his parishioners grow used to the veil, “persons who claimed a superiority to popular prejudice” conjecture that it was “merely an eccentric whim, such as often

mingles with the sober actions of men otherwise rational” (Hawthorne 33). Yet none of these “superior” people dares approach Hooper; “the gentle and timid would turn aside to avoid him, and that others would make it a point of hardihood to throw themselves in his way” (Hawthorne 33). Hooper is left utterly alone because of his veil.

Hawthorne is careful to demonstrate how ordinary the veil is by itself; it gains all of its emotional and psychological strength from the reactions of the people around Mr. Hooper, indicating that the symbol itself is a construct of the sublime. Hawthorne describes it as just “a simple piece of crape” (27) A physician remarks that “the strangest part of the affair is the effect of this vagary,” which, “though it covers only our pastor’s face, throws its influence over his whole person” (Hawthorne 28). “How strange,” says a woman, “that a simple black veil, such as any woman might wear on her bonnet should become such a terrible thing on Mr. Hooper’s face!” (Hawthorne 28). As a symbol, the meanings the veil carries “are dependent on the user, on the context, and on the inferred intentions of its use” (Freedman 356). It is, in other words, subjective and not inherent to the object. People like the physician are self-aware enough to realize that their reactions are not natural, which parallels the Kantian dynamical sublime. In the dynamical sublime, nature creates fear in a person, while reason demonstrates its superiority over nature through self-awareness, understanding that nature has no quantifiable effect on the mind. The physician, as an educated person, experiences that same fear and attempts to demonstrate the superiority of his intellect over nature by commenting on the effect of the veil.

The constructed nature of the veil is particularly emphasized when Elizabeth goes to visit Hooper. She sees the veil, “but could discern nothing of the dreadful gloom that

had so overawed the multitude: it was but a double fold of crape” (Hawthorne 31-32). To her, the veil is ordinary, merely a piece of cloth. She says to her fiancée directly: “[T]here is nothing terrible in this piece of crape, except that it hides a face which I am always glad to look upon” (Hawthorne 32). The effect of the veil is entirely in the minds of the people who behold it, which indicates that it is merely functioning as a symbol. Yet even Elizabeth eventually sees what everyone else does: “[A] new feeling took the place of sorrow: her eyes were fixed insensibly on the black veil, when...its terrors fell around her” (Hawthorne 33). She leaves him and covers her eyes as she goes; she too recognizes the terrible sublime in her fiancée’s veil.

The veil, then, functions as a symbol of the sublime, and as in many of his stories, Hawthorne’s aim is ethical in nature. The story is subtitled “A Parable,” which suggests that, like most parables, it has a moral (Hawthorne 25). Norman German suggests that Hawthorne was drawing from Scripture “as a thematic basis for his homiletical tale” (46), particularly Matthew 13:13: “This is why I speak to them in parables: ‘Though seeing, they do not see...’” (*New International Version*). This is where Kant’s conception of the sublime is most useful. Kant believes that the sublime predisposes a person to the moral. This connection is found also in Hawthorne; for Hawthorne, the dark sublime, in the form of the veil, has the effect of provoking moral action.

It is in the sermon that the reader receives the first hint as to the allegorical meaning of the veil; it “had reference to secret sin, and those sad mysteries which we hide from our nearest and dearest, and would fain conceal from our own consciousness, even forgetting that the Omniscient can detect them” (Hawthorne 27). Hawthorne later

describes the veil, in the view of Hooper's visitors, as "the symbol of a fearful secret between him and them" (31).

When questioned by his fiancée, Elizabeth, Hooper gives a partial explanation: "[T]his veil," he says, "is a type and a symbol, and I am bound to wear it ever, both in light and darkness, in solitude and before the gaze of multitudes, and as with strangers, so with my familiar friends" (Hawthorne 32). He concludes: "I, perhaps, like most other mortals, have sorrows dark enough to be typified by a black veil" (Hawthorne 32). The veil, then, represents secrecy, and possibly the secrecy of sin. But what is important is not necessarily what the veil represents, but what the veil *provokes*. In the case of Hooper, it produces a remarkable and uncanny efficacy in his preaching:

Among all its bad influences, the black veil had the one desirable effect, of making its wearer a very efficient clergyman. By aid of his mysterious emblem—for there was no other apparent cause—he became a man of awful power over souls that were in agony for sin. His converts always regarded him with a dread peculiar to themselves, affirming, though but figuratively that, before he brought them to celestial light, they had been with him behind the black veil. (Hawthorne 34)

This passage, more than any other section in "The Minister's Black Veil," demonstrates the moral power of the sublime. The veil horrifies, but it also convicts; it brings the sinner "behind the black veil" in order to awaken them to the "celestial light." Just as the Kantian sublime "enables moral action as an emotion produced by overcoming its limits" (Raymond 56), so Hawthorne's dark sublime overcomes the inhibition of sin through a peculiar dread; it becomes a means of salvation.

Even on his deathbed, Hooper continues to evangelize. “Why do you tremble at me alone?” cries Hooper in accusation on his deathbed. “Tremble also at each other! Have men avoided me, and women shown no pity, and children screamed and fled, only for my black veil?” (Hawthorne 37). It is here that the line between listener and reader blurs; Hooper’s words are meant, by the response of the reader to the sublime in the story itself, to draw them through the dark sublime to moral action. “When the friend shows his inmost heart to his friend,” Hooper says, “the lover to his best beloved; when man does not vainly shrink from the eye of his Creator, loathsomely treasuring up the secret of his sin, then deem me a monster” (Hawthorne 37). In his accusation, Hooper also presents an ideal for moral living, which values the vulnerability of showing the “inmost heart” to friends and lovers, calling the listener and reader alike to stand transparently and confessionally in the eye of the Creator. Hooper’s haunting final words follow the reader to the end of the story: “I look around me, and, lo! On every visage a Black Veil!” (Hawthorne 37). This claim of the universality of the black veil can also be read as an attempt to gather the world with him behind the veil, in order to bring it into the “celestial light.” The exemplar of this redemptive arc is Elizabeth, who shows “willingness to accept the minister now on his own terms” by sitting at his side as he is dying (Barry 20). However, the effect of the black veil does not cease when Hooper dies; on the contrary, “awful still is the thought” that Hooper’s face “mouldered beneath the Black Veil” (Hawthorne 37). Such is the power of the Gothic sublime that it transcends even death.

Unlike in “The Great Carbuncle,” the sublime object in “The Minister’s Black Veil” cannot be accepted or rejected; it merely exists, a symbol that takes on meaning only in the human mind. Yet in both stories, the sublime can be considered negative.

Though it provokes wonder and amazement, it represents the awful light of Puritan rigidity in one and the equally awful darkness of human sin in the other. Hawthorne, unlike his contemporaries, does not see the sublime as something to be embraced, even though it can serve an edifying function. Rather, because he sees the sublime as a human construction, it is imbued with all that entails—corruption, sin, and the elusive potential for good.

Conclusion

As demonstrated by the previous analysis of “The Great Carbuncle” and “The Minister’s Black Veil,” the sublime in Hawthorne is ripe for further study. Even with a detailed reading of two of Hawthorne’s representative short stories, the analysis is necessarily reductive and cannot engage with the vast repository of critical work on Hawthorne’s short stories. In addition, there are other stories in *Twice-Told Tales* that would be worth a closer examination, particularly the stories where Hawthorne himself appears to be the narrator. “Night Sketches,” for instance, not only references the “unfathomable void” of the sky (Hawthorne 334) but also the “sensations of sublimity” evoked by a single lamp in the darkness (Hawthorne 337) and can give insight into Hawthorne’s own authorial reflections into the nature of sublimity.

Furthermore, no study has been undertaken to examine how Hawthorne might be using the sublime in his novels. The wilderness in *The Scarlet Letter*, for example, has been the subject of critical work, but has not yet been connected explicitly to the sublime. Hawthorne’s nontraditional characterization of sublimity may also be present in his other

work, such as the Gothic *House of Seven Gables* and *The Blithedale Romance*, which features Hawthorne's veil motif prominently.

As demonstrated by this paper's initial examination of the history of the sublime and the critical thought on sublimity in Hawthorne's time, this study is, at the very least, historically necessary. The sublime as understood by Kant and Burke was pervasive in the creative and critical writing of the Romantics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and even though Hawthorne may not have drawn on those traditions explicitly, he was nevertheless deeply influenced by his context. In addition, using the sublime, especially as characterized by human response, can be a useful *tool* in the interpretation of Hawthorne. Though most critics will agree that Hawthorne's aims are often moral in nature, the sublime allows the critic to explain *how* Hawthorne accomplishes those aims. The sublime is sometimes the "language" that Hawthorne uses to convey his themes, and by understanding his language, the reader better understands his stories.

On a deeper level, the issue of Hawthorne and the sublime provokes the reader to ask the fundamental questions of literature, particularly about the ethical functions of story. Hawthorne wrestles with the vast Other, with the nature of human depravity, and with the capacity of religion to cross into puritanical harshness. Through these struggles, he also offers his reader a path forward; even the darkest of his stories, such as "The Minister's Black Veil," are still parables in search of a solution. Though Hawthorne does not always address these questions (it is hard to dredge up a metaphorical meaning from vignettes like "Sunday at Home"), the study of the sublime leads the reader to continue to ask them, to examine the text deeply in search of answers.

Through this study, Hawthorne's work vicariously portrays the blindness of religious rigidity and the power of dark metaphor to reveal human sin. He asks the reader whether they too might have a black veil or whether they might be blinded in the pursuit of a divine light. In doing so, Hawthorne balances narrative skill with moral function. He holds up a mirror to humanity and reveals the black veil on every face. But mirrors, as "The Old Manse" reminds us, also give the viewer the possibility of seeing ideal beauty in the reflection—for even the muddy river of humanity can bear the weight of the sublime.

Works Cited

- Arensberg, Mary. *The American Sublime*. State University of New York Press, 1986.
- Barry, Elaine. "Beyond the Veil: A Reading of Hawthorne's 'The Minister's Black Veil.'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, vol. 17, 1980, pp. 15–20. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=mzh&AN=1980110322&site=eds-live&scope=site&custid=s8479690.
- The Bible*. New International Version, Zondervan, 2011.
- Colón, Christine. "Joanna Baillie and the Christian Gothic: Reforming Society through the Sublime." *Through a Glass Darkly: Suffering, the Sacred, and the Sublime in Literature and Theory*, edited by Holly Faith Nelson, Lynn R. Szabo, and Jens Zimmermann, Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2010, pp. 129–42.
- Freedman, William. "The Artist's Symbol and Hawthorne's Veil: 'The Minister's Black Veil' Resartus." *Studies in Short Fiction*, vol. 29, no. 3, 1992, pp. 353–62.
- Ginsborg, Hannah. "Kant's Aesthetics and Teleology." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2014. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/kant-aesthetics/>.
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *Twice-Told Tales*. Modern Library, 2001.
- . *Mosses from an Old Manse*. Ohio State UP, 1974.
- Leise, Christopher. "The Eye-Ball and the Butterfly: Beauty and the Individual Soul in Emerson and Hawthorne." *Philological Quarterly*, vol. 92, no. 4, Fall 2013, pp. 471–97.
- Levy, Leo B. "Hawthorne and the Sublime." *American Literature*, vol. 37, no. 4, 1966, pp. 391–402.

Longinus. "On Sublimity." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B. Leitch, W. W. Norton & Company, 2001, pp. 138–54.

Rayman, Joshua. *Kant on Sublimity and Morality*. U of Wales P, 2012.

Thompson, Gary, editor. *The Gothic Imagination: Essays in Dark Romanticism*. Washington State UP, 1974.

Thompson, W. R. "Theme and Method in Hawthorne's 'The Great Carbuncle.'" *The South Central Bulletin*, vol. 21, no. 4, 1961, pp. 3–10. *JSTOR*, doi:10.2307/3188565.

Weiskel, Thomas. *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence*. The Johns Hopkins UP, 1976.

Zuckerman, Michael. "Pilgrims in the Wilderness: Community, Modernity, and the Maypole at Merry Mount." *The New England Quarterly*, vol. 50, no. 2, 1977, pp. 255–77. *JSTOR*, doi:10.2307/364172.