THE

Oswald Review

An International Journal
Of Undergraduate Research and Criticism
In the Discipline of English

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Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance* participates in the antebellum discourse on labor, the complicated discussion in America over the meaning of work in the middle of the nineteenth century. As Nicholas K. Bromell recognizes in his study *By the Sweat of the Brow: Literature and Labor in Antebellum America*, during that critical period, “the nature and the meaning of work were anxiously discussed and contested as new ideological
formations were developed to explain and justify new work practices” (1). These “new ideological formations” that were
designed to understand and manage the changing meaning of work as the Industrial Revolution progressed not only
impacted labor proper but also held deep ramifications for the labor of the mind and of creative production.
Antebellum writers such as Hawthorne were prompted “to revise accepted notions of creativity and to rethink both
the aims and means of their artistic practice” if they were to survive and flourish in the changing cultural landscape
of industrial America (15). In *The Blithedale Romance*, Hawthorne reveals his deep anxiety over both the “new
ideological formations” that attempted to reformulate the standards by which literary work operated and his own effort
to “revise accepted notions of creativity.” The contested relationship between aesthetic practice and labor ideology
can be seen in the conflicting relationship between Coverdale and Hollingsworth and their troubled relationship with the
Blithedale experiment.

Through Coverdale’s Blithedale adventure, Hawthorne investigates the crisis of the Romantic writer, with his romantic aesthetic of the sympathetic imagination, and his imminent collision with modernity, represented by Hollingsworth’s embrace of industrial morality. As Frank Christianson recognizes, “*The Blithedale Romance* . . . stages an aesthetic contest that takes the sympathetic imagination as that element of Romanticism which must be redefined in order to ensure a place for literature in the modern world” (247). To understand the relationship
between the “aesthetic contest” in Blithedale and the need to “ensure” a place for literature in “the modern world,” it is necessary to recognize Blithedale as a novel on the cusp of radical social transformation—as capturing the moment the antebellum era slides into the modern world and conceptions of American destiny such as an agrarian utopia envisaged by thinkers such as Thomas Jefferson fade away and assume the “inexpressibly dreary . . . dingy . . . atmosphere of city-smoke” that Coverdale eschews upon his departure for Blithedale from Boston (Hawthorne 45). Coverdale and Hawthorne share the fear of an encroaching modern world that subjugates meaningful artistic expression with cold industry, hence Blithedale’s obsession with exploring agents of resistance such as a pre-industrial mode of life and antebellum conceptions of sympathy.

In order to understand the sympathetic imagination, the capacity to imaginatively and creatively feel what another feels, as an antebellum construct influencing artistic practices of the day, it is essential to understand that for the antebellum era, sympathy was a distinct way of life, a certain way of looking at the world. Contrary to rationalism, sympathy elevated the human heart, trusted the emotions, and possessed an unshakable faith in the inherent goodness of human nature. Sympathy connected individuals to others through the heart, an emotional connectedness that creates a community of individuals who share intangible emotional bonds. Rather than viewing humanity as comprised of disparate, isolated individuals, each striving to conquer the other as Thomas Hobbes asserted, sympathy saw
emotion as the universal, underlying current that united all people in a positive, immutable bond, a positivism that gives rise to egalitarian aspirations such as empathy and equality as well as Coverdale’s creative modus operandi the sympathetic imagination. Moments of tears and pity, exemplified by Coverdale’s forgiving Hollingsworth at the end of Blithedale—“tears gushed into my eyes, and I forgave him” (166), symbolize the power of sympathetic connection and its ability to repair broken relationships and connect unlike people. Frank Christianson argues that sympathy was popular among reformers like Coverdale in the mid-nineteenth century because it provided an alternative sense of social connection to typical social relations, which were becoming more and more tinged by industrialism, expanding markets, and commercialism, precisely the things about “modern” society the Blithedalers hoped to reform by their flight to the wilderness (247).

Furthermore, sympathy provided the intellectual paradigm that allowed antebellum artists and reformers to transcend prejudice and look towards creating a more pluralistic society. At least in theory, by casting aside class privilege, reformers gained an emotional community, a family bond that transcended race, gender, and socio-economic status. Sympathy understands human relations as the holy union between peoples; by imagining a universal, “ubiquitous experience” that underlies all human action, sympathy makes possible an expansive sense of family united through emotional connections (Castiglia 200). Sympathy, as dramatized in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel
*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, allowed for white, middle-class women from the North to identify with Southern black slaves and their abjection; feeling the plight of slaves as similar to their own bondage to their families and homes, white women were incited to political action and social reform (Levine 225). Ideally, sympathetic identification imaginatively suspended the racial prejudices of the members of mainstream society and allowed them to establish an emotional bond with the marginalized “other” that held philanthropic and political underpinnings.

Blithedale represents many of these sentiments, especially the link between reformist aspirations, sympathetic emotions, and artistic creation. At one point in the novel, Zenobia thanks Coverdale for his “beautiful poetry,” to which he replies: “I hope now…to produce something that shall really deserve to be called poetry—true, strong, natural, and sweet, as in the life which we are about to lead” (12-13). In the furtherance of that goal, Coverdale soon finds his creative sympathies engaged by the “pitiableness” of Priscilla’s “depressed and sad…figure,” the result of her working in a factory. He desires to commit her “poetical” frailty to verse (21). Set against the surging tide of the Industrial Revolution, Blithedale, the communal farm, offers an alternative to the mode of life (and labor and creativity) that has been created by industrialism and market capitalism. Blithedale carves out a pre-industrial enclave in nature where reformers can step back in time and attempt to reverse, or at least critique and refine, the impact of industrialism on modern society. Blithedale’s liminal
occupation of a place and time between pre-industrial and industrial societies creates a kind of last bastion for the artist of the sympathetic imagination.

The aesthetic dimension of Coverdale’s sympathetic imagination is well illustrated in the scene in which Old Moodie visits Blithedale and inquires about Priscilla’s whereabouts and well-being, and here readers begin to see problematic aspects in Romanticism’s ideals. As Coverdale and Hollingsworth eat lunch after “hoeing potatoes, that forenoon,” Coverdale spots the degenerated form of an unexpected visitor, Old Moodie, “skulk[ing] along the edge of the field” (60). Coverdale instantly takes to describing Old Moodie’s dilapidated exterior: he is a “shabbily” dressed, “subdued, undemonstrative old man,” whose “red nose” indicates his penchant for consuming “a glass of liquor, now and then, and probably more than was good for him.” His “shy look about him, as if he were ashamed of his poverty,” causes Coverdale to recall his previous encounters with the unfortunate Old Moodie: “‘He haunts restaurants and such places, and has an odd way of lurking in corners . . . and holding out his hand, with some little article in it, which he wishes you to buy.’” Despite his poverty, Old Moodie remains a harmless person, and even a “tolerably honest one,” in Coverdale’s eyes. In the end, Old Moodie resembles a “furtive” rat, a harmless creature “without the mischief, the fierce eye, the teeth to bite with, or the desire to bite” (60).

Old Moodie’s pathetic figure is noteworthy because it arouses in Coverdale the powerful sympathetic emotions that inspire both his call to reform and his imaginative
leaps into the interior life of the subject. Old Moodie’s weakness ("a very forlorn old man") renders him vulnerable to Coverdale’s “custom” of “making . . . prey of people’s individualities,” or his sympathetic imagination: “I tried to identify my mind with the old fellow’s, and take his view of the world, as if looking through a smoke-blackened glass as the sun” (61). Coverdale then beholds the following “through old Moodie’s eyes”:

those pleasantly swelling slopes of our farm,
descending towards the wide meadows, through
which sluggishly circled the brimful tide of the
Charles, bathing the long sedges on its hither and
farther shores; the broad, sunny gleam over the
winding water . . . the sultry heat-vapor, which
rose everywhere like incense, and in which my
soul delighted, as indicating so rich a fervor in the
passionate day, and in the earth that was burning
with its love.” (61)

In his mind, Coverdale derives creative power not through his volition, imagination, or internal well of emotional wealth but by looking “through old Moodie’s eyes.” He takes the plight of Old Moodie, a victim of modernity, and turns forlornness into a beautiful vista. His encounter with Old Moodie shows that Coverdale’s sympathetic imagination creates powerful imagery, elegant prose, and unique insights into the human condition. This aesthetic program, however, subjugates the “other” and achieves creative bursts through the appropriation of Old Moodie’s abjection.

While Coverdale fears the changes wrought by
industrialism and uses Blithedale and the sympathetic imagination as a romantic escape into a pastoral way of life, Hollingsworth embraces modernity for the possibilities it creates for the reformation and subsequent perfection of man, as seen in his prison-reform project. With his constant attention to work and to his philanthropic dream, the construction of his “visionary edifice” dedicated to the “reform and mental culture of our criminal brethren” through “methods moral, intellectual, and industrial” (Hawthorne 41, 91 emphasis added), Hollingsworth is emblematic of what Paul Faler terms “industrial morality.” In his “Cultural Aspects of the Industrial Revolution: Lynn, Massachusetts, Shoemakers and Industrial Morality, 1826-1860,” Faler provides insight into how Hawthorne participates in the antebellum discourse on labor and how relevant the concept of industrial morality is to understanding Blithedale and Hawthorne’s need to reconsider his aesthetic conceptions. Taking Lynn, Massachusetts as a microcosm of the Industrial Revolution in mid-nineteenth century America, Faler explores the cultural and social changes that occurred in a New England town as a result of industrialism and the imposition of industrial morality. Industrial morality, simply put, was the cultural expression of the Industrial Revolution; it was, according to Faler, “a new morality based upon the paramount importance of work,” linking useful productivity with human worth (220). It enjoined the individual to take up strict inner discipline, “a tightening up of the moral code,” that sought to abolish, alter, or sublimate the culture of leisure or “those customs, traditions and practices that
interfered with productive labor” (220).

Bruce Laurie goes further to describe the proselytizing element of industrial morality, whose mission was to dismantle the culture of leisure, the “culture of sport, merrymaking, and drinking,” that characterized preindustrial labor (218). By regarding leisure, and preindustrial culture by extension, as “wasteful, frivolous and, above all, sinful,” industrialization based its new morality on regimentation, uniformity, and efficiency of production, a move that moralized economics and made the workplace the root of daily life and modern society (Laurie 219). Civil society played a crucial role in this process; philanthropists and reformers formed community groups that became the “cultural apparatus of ideas and institutions” that instilled the new values of industry (220). For example, in Lynn, reformers banded together in The Society for the Promotion of Industry, Frugality, and Temperance to promote the following values:

- self-discipline, emphasis on productive labor, and condemnation of wasteful habits. Industry, frugality and temperance, if conscientiously followed, would result in savings that would bring material reward to the wage earner and wellbeing to the community. (Faler 220)

Industrial morality attempted to replace the community of feeling, of sympathetic emotions and invisible bonds, with a community of materialism. Rather than resist the tide of industrialism as Blithedale attempts to do, civil society—reformers and philanthropists—in Lynn played an integral
role in the promulgation of industrialism.

In this way, Hawthorne’s reformer-philanthropist Hollingsworth resembles the moralists of Lynn more than Blithedale’s idealists. Industrial morality manifests itself in Hollingsworth’s inner character as the earnest, singular attention with which he attempts to consummate “his philanthropic dream” and in his recurring attempts to make converts to his cause. Coverdale hints at the duplicitous undertone and perhaps ulterior motive behind Hollingsworth’s presence on the first night at Blithedale: “his heart . . . was never really interested in our socialist scheme, but was forever busy with his strange and . . . impracticable plan for the reformation of criminals, through an appeal to their higher instincts” (27). Coverdale aptly perceives an aberration of character in Hollingsworth when he reflects that Hollingsworth had joined Blithedale “actuated by no real sympathy with our feelings and our hopes,” but because he had alienated himself “from the world” in his pursuit of his “lonely and exclusive object” (40). In Coverdale’s eyes, Hollingsworth’s alienation from the world, due to his pursuit, has rendered him as “not altogether human”:

There was something else in Hollingsworth, besides flesh and blood, and sympathies and affections, and celestial spirit. This is always true of those men who have surrendered themselves to an over-ruling purpose. It does not so much impel them from without, nor even operate as a motive power within…and finally converts them into little else save that one principle. (Hawthorne 51)
Undergirding the passion and zeal by which Hollingsworth submits to this “over-ruling purpose” and strives towards nothing else “save for that one principle” is his emphasis on industrial morality, “the earnest and constant attention to work” (Faler 220).

That reference to “something else in Hollingsworth” that is neither “flesh,” sympathy, or spirit alludes to a prior conversation between Coverdale and Hollingsworth where the latter proclaims, “I have always been in earnest . . . I have hammered thought out of iron, after heating the iron in my heart! Were I a slave, at the bottom of a mine, I should keep the same purpose, the same faith in its ultimate accomplishment, that I do now” (49). While asserting that Coverdale is not in earnest, “either as a poet or a laborer” (49), Hollingsworth characterizes himself as an earnest slave, Sisyphean in his interminable labor, trapped within the iron furnace of his own subsumed, industrial heart. Furthermore, like a machine, Hollingsworth will always press on in his mission, destroying those sympathetic individuals “who should be drawn into too intimate a connection with him” because he possesses, in Coverdale’s words, “no heart, no sympathy, no reason, no conscience” (51). Through “faith” in the earnest attention to “the same purpose,” Hollingsworth’s labor will come to fruition and his philanthropic vision will be realized. The passage is nothing less than Hollingsworth’s articulation of his own personal industrial morality—the means by which he will achieve his dream—and a condemnation of Coverdale’s frivolous ways.
The conflict between the aesthetics of sympathy and the ideology of labor industry culminates during Hollingsworth’s final attempt to convert Coverdale to his cause. In response to Coverdale’s revelry over the “romantic story” their labor at Blithedale will make for their progeny, Hollingsworth says, “Listen to me, Coverdale. Your fantastic anticipations make me discern . . . what a wretched, unsubstantial scheme is this. . . I ask you to be, at last, a man of sobriety and earnestness, and aid me in an enterprise which is worth all our strength, and the strength of a thousand mightier than we!” (91). The higher “purpose in life, worthy of the most extreme self-devotion,” that Hollingsworth offers to Coverdale reflects industrial morality’s proselytizing mission to replace the cultures, ethics, and ideologies it deems inferior and wasteful, such as Coverdale’s life of “aimless beauty,” his embrace of sympathy (93). Hollingsworth’s deep desire, bordering on religious destiny, to promulgate his morality is well alluded to in his comparison with the “venerable apostle Eliot,” a comparison that links his “Indian auditory” with Coverdale, Priscilla, Zenobia, and the criminals he hopes to correct and edify through “methods moral, intellectual, and industrial” (83, 91). While Coverdale is able to resist Hollingsworth’s Faustian bargain with an emphatic negative, his denial underscores Hollingsworth’s criticism that Coverdale is neither a poet nor laborer and that his call to poetry and to reform—sympathy—lacks inner conviction.

Hawthorne stages the contest between sympathy and industry to consider the validity of his own calling: how useful is the poet in industrial society? Would industrialists,
like Hollingsworth, who “never had the slightest appreciation of [Coverdale’s] poetry,” (49) regard poetry, if not art in general, as “frivolous” or even “sinful”? What are we to make of Coverdale’s abandonment of poetry at the end of the novel if not that it was a dying art, displaced by the machine? The antebellum discourse on labor and its cultural productions, such as industrial morality, posed a mortal threat to Hawthorne’s creative calling. As such, Blithedale grapples with the forces of change and their conflict with convention. Hawthorne’s desire to abstract himself out of his present situation through romantic invention belies his active engagement with the modern world. Hawthorne questions sympathy’s ability truly to understand the “other” while simultaneously trying to inhabit the lives of his characters. With its new standards of ascertaining value, *The Blithedale Romance* speaks to Hawthorne’s fear of industry’s iron hammer as the death knell for poetry. In the final analysis, rather than identify, as the novel’s treatment of sympathy would have us do, with Coverdale’s retired life of quiet complacency or Hollingsworth’s shattered heart, Hawthorne asks us to look beyond contemporary obstructions and to affirm art and poetry’s place in modern society.
Works Cited


It is no wonder that Henry Purcell and John Dryden came together for *King Arthur*. The baffling clutch of 60 notation manuscripts and the missing libretto mean that the origins and intricacies of the collaboration remain elusive (Winn 33), but it is clear from what we do possess that Purcell’s music and Dryden’s words synthesised with marked artistic cohesion. Indeed, the language of Dryden’s odes and satires is consistently inflected with a composer’s
sensitivity to orchestration, whereby sound and syntax weave together like instrumental timbres. Although some lucid comparisons between Dryden and composers contemporary to his time can be found in the wealth of criticism on his work, this essay deliberately merges technical musicianship and verse, providing a rare perspective on Dryden’s poetry.

Where better to begin any exploration of this topic than “An Ode, On The Death of Henry Purcell,” in which Dryden turns composer in imitation of his subject. The music of Dryden’s verse is the kind that emerges from finely tuned close reading that we come to by using our ears as much as our eyes. The first stanza is baroque chamber music incarnate, the details of which shall be laid out quickly for the sake of brevity, but with an attempt at accuracy and wholeness:

I

Mark how the Lark and Linnet Sing,
With rival Notes
They strain their warbling Throats,
To welcome in the Spring.

But in the close of Night,
When Philomel begins her Heav’nly lay,
They cease their mutual spite,
Drink in her Music with delight,
And list’ning and silent, and silent and list’ning,
And list’ning and silent obey.
We are tuned into the work with an imperative: “Mark.” This arresting tonic is then tied to “Lark,” which begins an ornithological strain carrying through alliteratively into “Linnet.” The verb “Sing” calls backwards—by virtue of also being a verb—to “Mark,” and before we know it, we have something that resembles a periodic, melodic subject, “in the key of birds,” perhaps. As is typical of baroque chamber music, evidenced in Corelli’s violin sonatas and Telemann’s Paris quartets, or perhaps more relevantly in Purcell’s viol fantasias, the subject is then meticulously unraveled outwards across the rest of the stanza, while being inflected with various twists of intonation; however, it strictly maintains itself as a conceptual development of the opening material (this was later taken to its farthest extreme in eighteenth-century piano sonatas, typified by Mozart). As these birds turn the verb “sing” into “strain” (phonologically close yet conceptually in friction), they locate themselves in “Spring” and lose their “Spite.” The ‘s’ sounds concatenate throughout the stanza and bring about a sonic unity between the birds, the season, and their mood. To accompany this, as a kind of counter-melody, ‘w’ sounds on “with,” “welcome,” and “when” synchronize alongside the main narrative ‘s’-sound arc and set up a kind of linguistic counterpoint, whereby ‘w’ and ‘s’ flit between one another to mimic the trilling melodies of the singing birds. As though the complex texture of musical imitation was not technical enough by now, the final two lines become transcendent of necessarily monophonic verse and branch into harmony: the retrograde
repetitions of “list’ning and silent” set up a pattern identical to a cycle of fifths—a little twist on the common chiasmus. This harmonic technique works by making dominant chords repeatedly jump to one another underneath the main melody, which not only creates a plangent, stable base from which the ornamentation can spring but also gives baroque music its color, its overall tonality. Silence and listening, of course, are integral to an ode in precisely the same way that the cycle of fifths is the harmonic bedrock of baroque counterpoint. The final swish, which links all of these intricacies together, is the plan of the stanza, whereby the ornamental trills and subjects occur at the top (opening lines), the developments and counter-melodies in the center, and the verbal cycle-of-fifths at the bottom, which directly replicates both the setup of sheet music and the roles each instrument would play on the page. It is a masterpiece of musical imitation, if one unpicks the initially deadening tones of lament.

It seems, then, that it is possible to read Dryden in this way. A deliberately experimental close reading, as above, where the intricacies of musical composition are sought in a Pindaric ode, seems to work. But the imitative delicacies of finely tuned language, as exhibited in the Purcell stanza, are everywhere in Dryden’s oeuvre, and potently draw out the life of his subject matter. As put by Earl Miner in Dryden’s Poetry, the musical quality of the verse is “rather an intellectual articulation of feeling than an emotional development of ideas” (231). This seems right, landing squarely on the way in which Dryden’s verse can feel both stale and enlivened at once, especially to
postmodern audiences unaccustomed to the formal rigor of Augustan verse. To this section of “An Evening’s Love,” in which the fuzziness of experience is figured through exquisite ambiguities of sound:

When, with a sigh, she accords me the blessing,
    And her eyes twinkle ‘twixt pleasure and pain,
Ah, what a joy ‘t is, beyond all expressing,
Ah what a joy to hear: “Shall we again?”

(13-16)

Of course, the ecstatic sensuousness of the repeated “ah” sound is prominent. Not only does this abstract syllable begin two adjacent lines, but it emerges from the end of innocuous words like “hear” and “pleasure” upon re-reading: the half-aspirated, half-growled openness of this syllable is both mimetic of mid-coital enthusiasm and post-coital release. Dryden is having some fun here. Once the “ah” is heard, it cannot be unheard in open-ended words like “hear” and “pleasure,” which take on a palpable sexual quality where it once existed in mere semantics. But this is not all: there is something strangely both sharp and blunt in the prefix “tw,” which quickly prods akimbo with “twinkle ‘twixt.” It stabs, but with a cork. It jabs but it doesn’t hurt. We are, as in the verse itself, “‘twixt pleasure and pain.” This kind of awkward paradox also exists in the repetition of “what a joy,” which questions itself by assertion one time too many. The repetition brings about a strange musical hook of monotony, of things being oddly familiar, of being
overly assertive and unable truly to give way to ecstatic lyricism. Dryden’s soundscape of sexual experience then neatly captures a kind of delusional optimism, where the constantly affirmative presentation of “joy” and “pleasure” is tarred with “pain” and plangent repetition. This is what Miner means by an “intellectual articulation of feeling”: this clamping of experience into highly wrought verse on the one hand deadens the vitality of lived experience, but on the other allows a patterned ekphrasis to occur from within this strict framework.

The heroic couplet, however, is occasionally broken to allow a more “emotional development of ideas.” Christopher Ricks draws our attention to Dryden’s triplets as being form-defying and of exceptional merit. The thesis of his article is that Dryden’s triplets are not only “little intended to,” but carry a wealth of meaning in their breaking of the heroic couplet—primarily by the virtue of being bond-breaking. His systematic working through of the seven triplets in “Absalom and Architeophel” (with occasional glance at “The Hind and The Panther”) leads him to the following conclusion: the triplet “resists or tempers the despotism of the couplet” and it has a “particular finality of emphasis.” Of course, Ricks’ way of reading Dryden’s triplets is pertinent and illuminating, but the musical essence of the triplet could be pushed a lot further. In chamber music, for example, one searches in vain through Purcell’s viol fantasias without a single authentic triplet. Similarly, in Corelli’s violin sonatas, they simply do not exist. The baroque composer seems to have considered compound time
to be the way into triplets, and their only rightful place. With no surprise, then, the search becomes abundantly successful when we turn to something like Corelli’s Trio Sonata in D Major, Op.3 no.2 (the Allegro), which by virtue of being in compound time (6/8) is a sea of triplets. But is there any crossover, as with the injection of triplets into “Absalom and Architophel”? Cue Purcell’s famous Abdelazer Overture, where triplets are whispering their influence in the main melody of the second subject. After the stately climb of the first subject, the second exhibits a falling sequence that bounces between crotchets and pairs of quavers:

![Musical notation]

Look at that first violin. Purcell employs triplet groups about as often as Dryden—that is, hardly ever—but when they do occur, they irreversibly change the essence of the music. In this section of the Abdelazer Rondeau, the string voices are consistently “iambic”: that is, straight-laced, only crotchets and quavers and the occasional minim. The regular denominations and groupings of notes bring about this stilted and corseted temperament, which create, like Dryden’s highly wrought heroic couplets, a system of intense formality from which the energy can emerge. When we enter the more whimsical second subject (pictured), however, the groups of crotchets and quavers find themselves triplet-ing
up and creating that gigue-like skip we know about from compound time. It is like a processing regiment of soldiers that suddenly decide to hop, skip, and jump: the illusion of triplets begins to lift the mood into something quirkily bright.

This precise technique, of superimposing compound-time triplets onto ostensibly common time, sounds-off the opening to Dryden’s “To the Memory of Mr. Oldham”:

Farewell, too little and too lately known,
Whom I began to think and call my own,
For sure our souls were near allied, and thine
Cast in the same poetic mould with mine.

In the first two lines, we have a tripartite configuration of “too,” where the third part is “to.” Just like a crotchet and two quavers, perhaps? Moreover, the alliteration on ‘s’ occurs three times with “sure,” “souls,” and “same,” which is also a crotchet and two quavers of ‘sh’ and ‘s’, ‘s.’ Further spread out, “farevell” (with the stress on ‘w’), “whom,” and “were” is another crotchet and two quavers of ‘h’ and ‘w’, ‘w.’ The essential beauty of these three (!) triplet configurations? They are almost entirely unstressed, with the exception of the “well” in “farewell,” which we suppose has to be stressed because it is the opening exclamation. Here Dryden presents a delicate and complex imitation of that identified Purcellian technique of slotting triplet groups into common time; in doing so on (almost) entirely unstressed syllables, he allows it to guide the meanderings of the
verse without taking over as the overbearing feature. The exceptionally rich detail of these first four lines, musically speaking, is in friction with the almost coyly simple conceit, in which Oldham is not quite a Dryden, but a lamentably worthy heir to the Dryden throne. The technical complexity continues: to assess the number three in this poem could be an endless spiral of observation. The three primary tenses are used to set up the lineage of great poetry; there is a real “Ricks-ian” triplet late on that imitates the idea of “generous fruits” and “maturing time” by transcending formality and expectation; and alliterating sounds seem always to be in a crotchet/two-quaver trinity, in some way or other (“poetic,” “cast,” “common”; “slippery,” “race,” “ripe”). But though this can go on (seemingly) forever, it is the sonic quality of the triplet that truly cements our impression of Dryden’s verse, which unifies the weft of the meter in a way that is manifestly life-giving. In which case, even though Ricks picked up on an endlessly fertile subject in Dryden’s triplets, he did not make quite the fullest of its musical implications that he could. When we look at a music composer’s use of triplets, as with Purcell’s famous Abdelazer Rondeau, we can see that the baroque conception of the tripartite microstructure was felt more deeply than just “three lines together,” more deeply than just “compound time.” It seems that the musicality of triples extends into being a unifying feature of melody and rhythm where the restrictions of the form should not strictly allow so. Dryden loved this.

Thus, a musical reading of Dryden reveals several nuances of his verse that evidence an eccentric but sensitive
poetic wit. Whether he is imitating the graphics of sheet music in the first stanza of the Purcell ode, complicating pure ekphrasis in “An Evening’s Love” and mimicking difficult emotional ambiguity, or having a distinctly Purcellian swing at fusing musical modes and phrasing, he is always in tune with how form and language can be instrumental as musical aids to his grander scheme of meaning. As a final blazon of musicality, consider the last line of the ode on Purcell, which is entirely built with monosyllabic, resonant, dark vowel sounds like a last chord on the organ, Purcell’s instrument and the site of his final resting place:

The gods are pleased alone with Purcell’s lays,

Nor know to mend their choice.
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One of the most significant contributions of structuralist linguistic theory to contemporary feminist literary theory has been the formulation of binary oppositions. First articulated by Ferdinand de Saussure in his posthumously published 1916 work *Course in General Linguistics*, binary oppositions are a part of the inherent structure of language which defines words by their opposites. In a binary system, dark is defined as not-light, black is defined as not-white, and bad is defined as not-good. These terms occupy a place of either privilege or disfavor based on their position within
the binary. In the previous example, light is privileged over dark, white is privileged over black, and good is privileged over bad. Later structuralist theorists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss applied Saussure’s definition of linguistic binaries to societies and systems of thought. Because all human thought is mediated by language, this same binary logic is one of the structures by which people understand the world. The fundamental binary of feminist theory is the binary between masculine and feminine. Implicit in each gender binary are secondary binaries: masculinity as rational, femininity as irrational; masculinity as non-emotional, femininity as over-emotional. In each of these gender binaries, the male, rational, and non-emotional are clearly privileged.

The disfavored status of the feminine as irrational and over-emotional in this gender binary leads to the conception of the feminine as hysterical. The root of the word “hysteria” comes from the Greek word “hystera,” meaning “uterus.” The Greeks believed that hysteria was an emotional condition peculiar to women, caused by menstrual cycles. In English usage, “hysteria” is a state of excess or uncontrollable emotion that has become part of the Western paradigmatic description of femininity. As it relates to femininity, hysteria not only casts the feminine as over-emotional but also renders women incapable of controlling emotion and therefore irrational.

James Joyce’s story “A Painful Case” from his 1914 short story collection *Dubliners* describes a friendship and potential romantic relationship between two characters—Mr. James Duffy and Mrs. Emily Sinico—that is abruptly ruined
by hysteria. Mr. Duffy, an ostensibly masculine bank teller, fears hysteria as a feminine emotional force that threatens to undermine his masculinity. As a result, when Mrs. Sinico attempts physical and emotional intimacy with Mr. Duffy by pressing his hand to her cheek, he interprets her behavior as hysterical and impulsively breaks off their relationship. However, upon reading the news of Mrs. Sinico’s tragic death four years later, Mr. Duffy reacts with extreme and uncontrollable emotional upheaval and irrationality. Through his compulsive fear of hysteria, Mr. Duffy ironically reveals himself to be emotionally hysterical, undermining his performance of masculinity and deconstructing the gendering of hysteria itself.

Mr. Duffy’s performance of masculinity depends on his ability not to exhibit hysteria. Instead, Mr. Duffy counters any emotional impulse that threatens to become hysterical by retreating to hyper-rationality. As a result, Mr. Duffy’s gendered identity is built around a negation: not-hysteria. Based upon Judith Butler’s claim that gender is not an essential identity but “an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (900, emphasis Butler’s), Mr. Duffy performs his gender through his rejecting hysteria. Mr. Duffy is able to perform not-hysteria by reversing each of its terms: if hysteria is overly emotional and irrational, not-hysteria must be non-emotional and hyper-rational. This performance of not-hysteria composes Mr. Duffy’s masculinity. Mr. Duffy’s gender identity becomes what Butler describes as “a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe
and to perform in the mode of belief” (901). Because Mr. Duffy believes in his own performance, he is not conscious of his own fear of hysteria.

Mr. Duffy reacts to his fear of hysteria with a compulsive need to emphasize his own rationality and masculinity. Joyce’s initial description of Mr. Duffy offers an insight into the character’s unsuccessful masculine performance and amorphously gendered nature. Mr. Duffy’s house is described as “somber,” his floors are “uncarpeted” and his walls are “free from pictures” (317). “Black” and “iron”—dual signifiers for masculinity—appear again and again in Mr. Duffy’s furnishings: “black iron bedstead,” “iron washstand,” “a fender and irons,” and “a black and scarlet rug” (317). Each black item in the room, however, is matched by an opposing white item, reflecting Mr. Duffy’s conflicting impulses. Mr. Duffy’s bookcase is made of “white wood,” his bed is covered in “white bedclothes,” and a “white-shaded lamp” is the “sole ornament of [his] mantelpiece” (317). Looking around the room at the furniture that “[h]e had himself bought” (317), Mr. Duffy’s outlook on life is literally black and white. He views life through the stark binary oppositions of rationality/irrationality and stoicism/hysteria. Anything that he classifies as “black“ becomes privileged as masculine—traditional bedstead, utilitarian washstand, practical fender and irons, and pointedly functional rug—while anything that he classifies as “white” becomes associated with femininity and dreaded hysteria—decorative bookcase shelves, soft bedclothes, and a condemningly ornamental lamp. However,
the presence of both black and white objects in the physical space of his room exposes Mr. Duffy’s flawed gender performance and reveals him to be equally rational and irrational, stoic and hysterical, and, by the extension of his gendered logic, both masculine and feminine. Mr. Duffy strives so hard to remove himself from emotion and the threat of hysteria that he even separates his rationality from his physicality, “liv[ing] at a little distance from his body” while simultaneously “regarding his own acts with doubtful side-glances” (318). His habit of composing sentences about himself in the third person and in the past tense reflects his separation of mind from body as well as the classical binary that privileges writing over speech (318). Because Mr. Duffy’s performance of masculinity depends on his ability to perform rationality, the threat of hysteria—that deadly combination of emotion and irrationality—is the threat to undermine his performance of masculinity. As a result, Mr. Duffy is particularly vulnerable to intrusive emotion because to risk performing hysteria is to completely dismantle his gendered identity.

Mr. Duffy exploits his relationship with Mrs. Sinico as an opportunity to prove his own performance of masculinity to himself. In this role, Mr. Duffy only views Mrs. Sinico as an audience or background for his own egocentric performances. Judith Butler uses the metaphor of theatre to explain the way gender is performed in her essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution.” She compares gender to a role that an actor plays rather than any essential quality of the actor (906). Expanding on this
metaphor, Mr. Duffy’s performance of masculinity cannot be real unless he has an audience. In his relationship to Emily Sinico, Mr. Duffy finds that audience. However, Mr. Duffy’s relationship to Mrs. Sinico is inherently dangerous: as a feminine audience she has the ability to affirm Mr. Duffy’s performance of masculinity but as a potentially hysterical woman she also has the ability to radically undermine that performance.

Mr. Duffy’s first meeting with Mrs. Sinico outlines his relationship with her as performative for the rest of the story. He consistently relates to her in an intellectualized, dispassionate way while she repeatedly attempts to relate to him in more intimate, personal ways. Consistent with Mr. Duffy’s emotional and relational detachment, Mrs. Sinico is the one who initiates their relationship. In the only instance of direct address in the story, Mrs. Sinico—at a concert that both she and Mr. Duffy happen to be attending—observes: “What a pity there is such a poor house tonight! It’s so hard on people to have to sing to empty benches” (319). Unfortunately, Emily Sinico has unknowingly predicted her own role within the story. Mr. Duffy, as a man defined by his furniture, is immediately associated with empty benches. This self-described “outcast from life’s feast” (325) is emotionally and relationally empty just like the benches and the furniture that he buys. Mrs. Sinico, in contrast, is immediately associated with the singer. Her love of music causes her to come into contact with Mr. Duffy and she continues to be connected to music—at least in Mr. Duffy’s mind—for the rest of the story. After Mr. Duffy ends his
relationship with Mrs. Sinico, he “[keeps] away from concerts lest he should meet her” (321), firmly linking her with musicality and the performance of music. Mr. Duffy’s initial “liking for Mozart’s music” which “brought him sometimes to an opera or a concert” (318) at the beginning of the story indicates emotional sympathies which Emily Sinico later comes to represent. Indeed, Mr. Duffy’s habit of attending concerts is described as “the only dissipations of his life” (318) and the only detail of his description which hints toward Mr. Duffy’s emotional vulnerabilities.

In contrast, Mr. Duffy first relates to Mrs. Sinico by analytically assessing her like a new furniture purchase. He appraises her based on the dual criterion of feminine beauty and sex appeal and masculine rationality—demanding that she perform both masculine and feminine gender roles at the same time. He finds Mrs. Sinico to possess a “temperament of great sensibility” and a face that exhibits “intelligence” (319). Mr. Duffy’s later pseudo-philosophical reflection that “[l]ove between man and man is impossible because there must not be sexual intercourse and friendship between man and woman is impossible because there must be sexual intercourse” (321) manifests his expectation that a true companion should be able to perform multiple genders at once. However, contradicting this expectation, he also evaluates her in explicitly sexual terms, confining her to the performance of femininity. He immediately deduces her age as “a year or so younger than himself”—making her a possible sexual partner—while imperiously deciding that her face “must have been handsome,” and casually
noting that her “bosom [is] of a certain fullness” (319). Mr. Duffy expects Mrs. Sinico to perform multiple genders simultaneously in order to balance his need for emotional validation with his fear of emotional hysteria and retreat into hyper-rationality.

Throughout the story, Mrs. Sinico successfully performs gender multiplicity and healthy relational capacities while Mr. Duffy performs gender stagnation and an anesthetized approach to relationships. Mrs. Sinico is successfully able to navigate both rationality and emotional competency while Mr. Duffy rejects all forms of emotional expression to protect his tenuously enacted performance of hyper-rational masculinity. Mr. Duffy is able to relate to Mrs. Sinico only through rationality: he “share[s] his intellectual life with her” through “books” and “ideas” (319). Emily Sinico, in contrast, attempts to cultivate a more personal relationship with Mr. Duffy. “In return for his theories” she gives him “some fact of her life” which he is unable to appreciate or reciprocate (319-320). All of the verbs used to describe Mr. Duffy’s relationship to Mrs. Sinico are active: he “entangle[s] his thoughts with hers,” lends books, provides ideas, and shares “intellectual life” (319). Mrs. Sinico is only able to relate to Mr. Duffy with a single passive verb construction: “She listened to all” (319). In her passive state, Mrs. Sinico becomes an audience for Mr. Duffy’s gender performance.

Mr. Duffy’s relationship with Mrs. Sinico ends abruptly, however, as soon as Mrs. Sinico reaches through the stage curtain to intrude upon Mr. Duffy’s performance
of masculinity. Mrs. Sinico’s moment of action in which she grasps Mr. Duffy’s hand “passionately” (320) and presses it to her cheek is a transgressive breach of the separation between performer and audience that Mr. Duffy has so carefully maintained. This act of passion is everything that threatens Mr. Duffy’s masculinity—it is spontaneous, uncontrolled, emotional, and irrational. Mr. Duffy’s immediate reaction is panicked and instinctive. He cuts off contact with Mrs. Sinico sharply, refusing to visit her for a week and becoming disillusioned with their relationship. In contrast to his earlier insistence that he visit her at her home instead of meeting her outside in parks—citing a “distaste for underhand ways” (310), Mr. Duffy’s final arrangements involve an outdoor rendezvous “in a little cake shop near the Parkgate” (320). Here they formally break off their relationship and Mr. Duffy rejects all human contact as “a bond to sorrow” (321). Upon their final parting, Mrs. Sinico has an emotional reaction that Mr. Duffy interprets as hysteria. Walking toward the tram to leave, Mrs. Sinico begins “to tremble so violently that, fearing another collapse on her part, [Mr. Duffy] bade her good-by quickly and left her” (321). Symptomatic of their relationship, Mr. Duffy’s first instinct is not concerned with Mrs. Sinico’s health but with his own tenuous gender construction. In order to protect his emotional detachment from the threat of hysteria (which he apparently believes is more contagious than a common cold) Mr. Duffy flees all contact with Emily Sinico to retreat once again into his realm of rationality.

By examining this reaction to hysteria and others,
it becomes clear that Mr. Duffy associates hysteria with sexuality. As a result, Mr. Duffy fears any and all sexual contact that may lead to hysteria. Mr. Duffy’s anxieties about sexual relationships and hysteria are reflected in Luce Irigaray’s categorization of women as Mother, Virgin, and Prostitute in her essay “Women on the Market.” Although Irigaray specifically defines these categories as relating to the value of women in the marketplace, they are usual divisions for understanding the way Mr. Duffy conceptualizes the roles of women. As a married woman and mother, Mrs. Sinico naturally falls into Irigaray’s category of Mother (809). For Irigaray, Mothers are excluded from exchange because they have already been claimed by their husbands (809). Irigaray’s Mother is both non-sexual and non-hysterical: “Their responsibility is to maintain the social order without intervening so as to change it” (807). As long as Mrs. Sinico remains in this limited role as Mother, her relationship to Mr. Duffy is non-threatening. However, as soon as Mrs. Sinico attempts to exercise sexuality outside of the bounds of marriage by catching Mr. Duffy’s hand to her cheek, Mr. Duffy automatically classifies her as a Prostitute and flees the threat of hysteria that a Prostitute represents. Irigaray’s Prostitute is characterized by “seductiveness” that exists “to arouse the consumer’s desire” (808). She is explicitly emotional and sexual: her role has been defined in such a way that she creates both emotional upheaval and sexual desire in men. Although sexuality is often associated with masculine gender roles, Mr. Duffy interprets sexuality as an inherent threat to his masculinity. Because Mr. Duffy’s
masculinity depends on rationality, the inherently emotional nature of sex makes it directly opposed to his masculinity.

Judith Butler describes gender performance as “a project which has cultural survival at its end” (903). Especially in the world of “A Painful Case,” gender is a performance with what Butler calls “clearly punitive consequences” (903). Read through Butler’s framework of gender performance as cultural survival, Mrs. Sinico’s death can be interpreted as a direct result of hysteria. Although she is technically killed when she is hit by a train while crossing the tracks as a railroad station, the newspaper article which reports her death lists the actual cause of death as “shock and a sudden failure of the heart’s action” (323). Based on centuries of faulty medical understanding that defined hysteria as a uniquely female medical complaint with symptoms including emotional shock and weakness of the heart, it is hard to read this description of death as anything other than hysterical. While specifically referring to a railroad track, the fact that Mrs. Sinico is killed while “attempting to cross the line” can be easily read as an attempt to cross gender lines (322). Mary Lowe-Evans observes that the details of Mrs. Sinico’s death “conjure an image of a diminished, Emma-like woman desperate to break through the boundaries (cross the lines) of a space (her own circumscribed life, perhaps)” (397). In this attempt Mrs. Sinico is struck down as punishment for attempting to perform gender qualities outside of her narrow role as Mother. It is this same act of “crossing the line” in her relationship with Mr. Duffy that causes him to label and
reject her as hysterical. Mrs. Sinico’s death by train is an indictment of her earlier injury caused by Mr. Duffy’s rebuff. Mr. Duffy and the Kingstown train play the same role in ending Emily Sinico’s life.

After reading the newspaper account detailing “The Painful Case” of Mrs. Sinico, Mr. Duffy has a hysterical reaction to the news of her death. Mirroring the emotional activity that Mr. Duffy interpreted as hysterical in Mrs. Sinico, Mr. Duffy spends the remainder of the story in a state of extreme emotional instability and irrationality. Mr. Duffy abandons his formerly restrained choice of words to unleash a flurry of exclamations and exaggerations: “What an end!” (323); “His soul’s companion!” (324); “Just God, what an end!” (324); “But that she could have sunk so low!” (324). His emotional state renders him completely unable to finish his dinner and he rushes home in order to compose himself (323). He then reacts vindictively against Emily Sinico, distorting and questioning his own supposedly rational memory of her to wonder if it could be possible that “he had deceived himself so utterly about her” (324). From this point, Mr. Duffy turns to alcohol to deal with his emotional disturbance. Unwittingly mirroring Mrs. Sinico’s reaction to the end of her relationship with Mr. Duffy four years earlier, Mr. Duffy goes to the nearest public-house and drinks whiskey punch alone. In the same park where he and Mrs. Sinico last saw each other, he imagines her presence in the darkness, feeling “her voice touch his ear” and “her hand touch his” (325). By the time Mr. Duffy is jealously bemoaning his fate in the silence of night, he has
succumbed to full emotional hysteria and has dismissed both his rationality and his performance of masculinity.

Mr. Duffy’s state of hysteria reveals his former performance of masculinity to be nothing other than a sham. This reading of the ending of “A Painful Case” reveals Mr. Duffy to be an essentially hysterical character who gives an unconvincing performance of hyper-rational masculinity. At the abrupt and emotional ending of his relationship with Mrs. Sinico, Mr. Duffy exhibits a hysterical reaction to the fear of hysteria. When confronted with any emotion that threatens to undermine his performance of masculinity, Mr. Duffy always chooses to flee. However, it is not emotional instability or his relationship with Mrs. Sinico that triggers hysteria in Mr. Duffy; it is his irrational fear of hysteria. Mr. Duffy’s insecurity about his performance of masculinity ironically prompts him to perform the hysteria he associates with femininity. Using deconstructive logic, the case of Mr. Duffy shows hysteria to be both unrelated to either masculinity or femininity and a false description of emotional stimulation itself.
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William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* serves as the culmination of all of the themes and narrative methods used within the writer’s previous works. The novel is also one of the primary examples of his transition from just a Southern author to a great American author. Indeed, while confronting moral issues concerning the history of the South and expanding them through cultural references and various characters’ subjective perspectives, Faulkner’s novel becomes universally applicable and forces readers
to question their own moral capacities. By presenting a multiplicity of individual perspectives as part of the saga of the American South, Faulkner’s novel emphasizes the tension between individual and collective morality and suggests that, by achieving the philosophical, sublime experience whose roots are in the Enlightenment, both the characters and the readers can reach a sense of universal, collective truth that is vital to their capacity for moral judgment.

By reinforcing a binary between the individual and the collective, Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* expresses the philosophical idea of the sublime as introduced by Immanuel Kant. In “Narrating the Sublime in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Unvanquished,*” Adam Jabbur explains that while there is no evidence that Faulkner ever read Kant’s theory of the sublime, these ideas were most likely passed down to him through modernist thought (9). Kant’s theory of the sublime (inspired by the revived eighteenth-century interest in the topic due to the discovery of Longinus’ ancient text on the sublime) asserts that within the two subliminal states, mathematical and dynamical, there is an awareness of the loftiness or grandness of an object within nature or artistic representation, which in turn leads us to feel a kind of inadequacy or fear from being overwhelmed by this object. However, we compensate for this inadequacy through our human faculties of reason and imagination, thus leading us to feel a sense of power and superiority as we reflect on our nature as moral beings. Jabbur explains that “the mind itself becomes sublime as the free play of reason and
imagination arouses our ‘supersensible’ faculty, allowing us to imagine something that does not exist in reality, and thus to show our superiority to it: the courage, morality, and freedom of the individual” (9). Applied to the debate over mimetic art, this concept of the sublime weaved its way into much of Romantic literature (for example, Coleridge’s reconciliation of opposites and Shelley’s claim about poetry’s moral function); and the concept of the sublime also had social implications because of its influence on political thought, specifically the social contract theorists, whose concepts framed the U.S. Constitution. As they reach mental sublimity, individuals enter the realm of the collective, reflecting on the moral capacity of all humankind. Thus, the social contract’s contending issues of individual freedom versus collective responsibility reflect Kant’s notion of the sublime.

The sublime and its related ideas in social contract theory are relevant to the novel. Henry Sutpen’s moral destruction, for example, is accompanied by his prioritizing personal ambition over the collective good, something Faulkner seems to suggest is present within the history of the South itself. And yet Faulkner also suggests something else within Absalom as he engages with both individuality and collectivity: through the reading of many perspectives comes a certain universal truth seen in all humankind. For example, Faulkner himself explained this tension in Absalom, claiming that “no one individual can look at truth” (qtd. in Jabbur 12). He further explained that “[i]t was, as you say, thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird.” But the truth comes out, that
when the reader has read all these thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird, the reader has his own fourteenth image of that blackbird, which I would like to think is the truth” (qtd. in Jabbur 13). This is also consistent with Kant’s notion that, while humans contain all the same cognitive abilities, when they exercise imagination and reason and come to use their “supersensible” faculty to arouse moral judgment, their sublime experience allows them to comprehend a universal rule common to all humanity. Furthermore, this universal is a “function of subjectivity,” thus making the “harmonious interplay” between individual freedom and communal agreement a necessary requirement for moral reasoning and, ultimately, the creation of meaning within life (Jabbur 12). In essence, one must experience the sublime to achieve a balance between these two contending forces, within both their understanding of artistic creations (in the novel’s case, narratives) and within their capacity to make moral determinations.

Indeed, this notion of the universal, sublime experience can help explain Sutpen’s moral destruction. For example, Faulkner describes the conditions surrounding Sutpen’s youth, saying that “where he lived the land belonged to anybody and everybody,” implying that before Sutpen’s transformation into an immoral, destructive individual, he lived in a happier community that exercised collective responsibility. However, all this changed when his father forces the family to move: as they travel on a road of “descent,” Faulkner writes about Sutpen’s uncertainty of time and the passing of seasons: “whether they overtook and
passed in slow succession the seasons as they descended or whether it was the descent itself that did it and they not progressing parallel in time but descending perpendicularly through temperature and climate” (182). By highlighting the notion of timelessness and repeating the word “descent,” Faulkner emphasizes the point at which Sutpen begins his moral destruction. Hence, whereas Sutpen’s youthful state where land belonged to “anybody and everybody” within a collective realm expresses the sublime condition of universal morality, his family’s “descent” after their relocation helps to illustrate the point at which Sutpen begins his individualization and descends into the state of immorality. His destructive prioritization of the individual over the collective is clearly evident later in the novel, as Sutpen arrives home after the Civil War and refuses to express emotional support for his family, thus sacrificing his daughter’s and other children’s needs in order to serve his own selfish interests. Interestingly enough, while Faulkner answered questions at a meeting of the English Club at the University of Virginia in 1957, he described the character of Sutpen: “He said, I’m going to be the one that lives in the big house, I’m going to establish a dynasty, I don’t care how, and he violated all the rules or decency and honor and pity and compassion, and the fates took revenge on him” (qtd. in Karl 549). In other words, Faulkner points out the consequences of Sutpen’s selfish individualism and disregard for the collective good of his immediate family and the surrounding community of Jefferson. In essence, Faulkner foregrounds Sutpen’s immorality in order to emphasize the tension
between individual interests and collective responsibility when it comes to human moral capacity.

While the priority of individual interest over collective good dooms both Sutpen and his family, this thematic trend allows the story to serve as an example of the South, thus elevating the novel through a sense of sublime, universal applicability. As Frederick Karl explains, Sutpen’s character seemed to be the product of Faulkner’s own attempt at healing his personal problems of the past, thus serving as an aesthetically sublime experience that allowed Faulkner to exercise both reason and imagination to form his own personal truth and meaning that might be shared with readers. Yet more importantly, Karl points out that “Faulkner is exalting pride and yet demonstrating how destructive it can be; and he is revealing how that aspect of the South—and, by implication, the country—is destructive” (549). In other words, the beneficial but destructive nature of individual pride must be carefully balanced with a sense of collective responsibility, an equilibrium that Faulkner suggests that the South failed to achieve. Furthermore, by illustrating that Sutpen’s selfish individualism is a destructive force, Faulkner is also revealing how the selfish nature of the South led to self-destruction instead of a greater, common good. In fact, Jabbur explains that the people of Yoknapatawpha “ostracize Sutpen in part because his difference from the community reminds them, ironically, of themselves” (12). Just as the destruction of Sutpen is the result of his disregard for the community around him, so is the destruction of the South a result of its violation of the
larger morality of the “human family.” By illustrating this moral tension and some of the destructive consequences, the novel itself achieves the sublime: it becomes a “fourteenth image,” a new “supersensible” faculty that unites both individual and collective interests in its universal, moral applicability.

In addition to his use of Sutpen to showcase the tension between individual interest and collective responsibility, Faulkner employs the characters of Quentin and Shreve to explore the sublime experience and the possibility of a universal morality. To begin with, according to Jabbur, Faulkner’s decision to exercise authority over the text by withholding facts (a notable characteristic in most of his work) teases the reader and deprives him or her from learning about the issues of race that lie central to the novel. However, by withholding information, Faulkner also encourages his readers to achieve their own sublime experience as they exercise their “supersensible” faculties and discover a “fourteenth image” of truth. In this regard, it is Shreve who ultimately achieves a sense of the sublime while Quentin fails. Throughout the last third of the novel, Shreve seems to exercise that same harmony between imagination and reason, particularly as he ultimately exercises the “supersensible” faculty to make a moral judgment concerning the issue of race. As Jabbur points out, however, it is Quentin who silences Shreve just as he is about to tackle the topic of miscegenation. “Wait, I tell you!” cries Quentin, suggesting that he “would rather not discuss the issue that lies at the moral center of the Civil War,” and
is instead stuck within his own self-experience of history and unable to think deeply about the collective faults of the South (Faulkner 222; Jabbur 25). Nevertheless, at the end of the last chapter, Shreve expresses his moral judgment by theorizing about the Jim Bonds who will one day come to spread throughout the world; Quentin, however, expresses his unwillingness to hear what Shreve has to say. Instead of acquiescing to Quentin’s request, Shreve responds, “Then I’ll tell you” (qtd. In Jabbur 27). While Shreve reaches a sense of moral judgment, imagining the future and climbing outside his own individual self to enter the collective realm, Quentin is stuck in the past.

Quentin’s inability to reach sublimity is further reflected in his repetition of certain familiar stories, while Rosa, on the other hand, reaches the sublime through her ability to finally show compassion. While Quentin has already heard the story of Sutpen many times, as well as even encountered Henry Sutpen himself, he still feels the need to relate the story to Shreve. His excessive narrative repetition of the past reflects Freudian theory: what led Freud to the notion of the thanatos instinct was “the curious tendency he noted on the part of those suffering from severe trauma to relive the traumatic moment and to do so in various forms: in analysis, in dreams, in unconscious habits” (Hutcheon 269). Freud observed that “traumatized patients exhibited a ‘compulsion to repeat’ that had a drive-like quality about it, giving the appearance of some ‘daemonic’ force at work” (qtd. in Hutcheon 269-70). This idea makes sense considering that Quentin later resorts to suicide.
Yet what Freud’s notion reveals is that Quentin considers
the Sutpen story and his experience seeing Henry to be a
traumatic part of his own essential self. Thus, compelled to
narrate and analyze the story of Sutpen over and over again,
he is so wrapped up in his own internal psyche that he is
unable to make any moral judgments that model a sense of
the collective, universal truth resonating in Kant’s notion
of the sublime. Contrary to Quentin, however, Rosa, while
compulsively trapped within her almost uncontrollable
rage and her hate for the Sutpen family, ultimately reaches
a sense of meaning and sublimity when she returns to the
home with an ambulance, intent on saving the dying Henry.
This even resonates within Mr. Compson’s letter, where he
imagines that she is finally able to realize that the “objects
of the outrage and of the commiseration also are no longer
ghosts but are actual people to be actual recipients of the
hatred and the pity” (Faulkner 302). Rosa is able to imagine
real humans where “ghosts” used to be, thus leading her to
have compassion, something that Faulkner believed was
one of the core attributes of humanity. However, Quentin
seems to remain within a world bordering between past and
present, light and dark, and, ultimately, his own ability to
find meaning through the sublime. As Jabbur explains,
“[w]hat Faulkner’s narrative presents is, indeed, the sublime:
or, more correctly, a medium for experiencing our own
sublimity even as Faulkner’s might-have-beens fail to
experience theirs” (18). As many of the characters fail to
reconcile “personal will and public responsibility” through
sublimity and moral judgment, or conceiving of what
“might-have-been,” (just as Shreve conceives of the future and Rosa possibly ignites her “supersensible” faculty to imagine humans instead of ghosts), Faulkner creates art that encourages readers to transcend their own individual selves and consider the collective good.

Although Quentin’s traumatic repetition of the central narrative indicates his inability to achieve the sublime, the novel reveals a few instances where Shreve and even Quentin achieve an almost sublime, collective morality through their shared aesthetic experience of storytelling. As they narrate the story in their cold, Harvard dormitory, there are times when both characters seem to unify into one, whether it is finishing one another’s sentences or actually becoming indistinguishable from the text itself; moreover, Shreve especially seems to lose sight of his own individual ambitions, becoming so caught up in his curiosity about the story. As touched on previously, Sutpen’s childhood, where the land belonged to “anybody and everybody,” was characterized by a similar sense of collective morality, a kind of sublime state of equality and oneness between humans and the natural world. The interactions between Quentin and Shreve mirror this sense of oneness.

However, despite the fact that the act of storytelling offers temporary escape from the confines of the individual self, Faulkner makes it quite clear that Quentin ultimately fails to achieve a sense of the sublime. As Shreve offers evidence of sublimity through his moral judgments of the South and his imaginative prediction of the future, Quentin struggles to transcend his internal psyche:
Quentin did not answer, staring at the window; then he could not tell if it was the actual window or the window’s pale rectangle upon his eyelids, though after a moment it began to emerge. It began to take shape in its same curious, light, gravity-defying attitude—the once-folded sheet out of the wisteria Mississippi summer, the cigar smell, the random blowing of the fireflies. . .It was becoming quite distinct; he would be able to decipher the words soon, in a moment; even almost now, now, now.

(Faulkner 301)

While it first offers a glimpse of hope, suggesting that Quentin enters a collective “oneness” with the world around him (through the window), seeing the world in a new light, the passage quickly illustrates his failure to transcend his individuality. As Quentin recognizes the familiar image of the window, he once again falls back into his internal world and becomes doomed to relive the traumatic past. Finally, after Shreve comments on how Southerners “outlive” themselves, Quentin tries hard to decipher the “words,” suggesting his attempt to achieve a harmony between reason and imagination. His repetition of the word “now” illustrates his attempt to bring meaning from the past into the present; and yet, as the novel’s ending reveals, he internalizes his thoughts once again by repeating that he doesn’t hate the South, further emphasizing his inner conflict between the individual and the collective, between the past and the present. Quentin is hopelessly trapped within his internal world, unable to let go of his past and imagine a “fourteenth image” of universal truth. Like Sutpen, he fails to achieve
the sublime. However, Quentin is far from the obsessively selfish, individuated Sutpen: Quentin at least tries, almost desperately, to experience the sublime, lingering between the two worlds within the twilight. More importantly, his struggle in Absalom, Absalom! reveals more heartbreaking insight into another one of Faulkner’s beloved novels: Quentin’s same failure to reconcile the individual and the collective, the past and the future becomes the motivational force behind his tragic suicide in The Sound and the Fury.

In his Nobel Speech, Faulkner ascribes sublimity to the work of the poet: “He must teach himself that the basest of all things is to be afraid; and, teaching himself that, forget it forever, leaving no room in his workshop for anything but the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed—love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice” (nobelprize.org). Just as individuals first confront the sublime with feelings of tremendous fear and inadequacy, they eventually move beyond that condition as they exercise the harmonious interplay of reason and imagination, laboring in their “workshop” to create the unimaginable through a heightened sense of human morality. As Faulkner himself seemed to point out, these “verities and truths of the heart” are what bring humans together in a universal, moral framework of both individual freedom and collective responsibility—the essence of the sublime experience. Similarly, through the aesthetic experience of literature, Faulkner encourages the reader to use both reason and imagination to achieve a “supersensible” faculty of universal, human truth.
Works Cited


Understanding Death in Brown and Poe: Backgrounds and Continuities

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“Thus early had that one guest—the only guest who is certain, at one time or another, to find his way into every human dwelling—thus early had Death stepped across the threshold of the House of the Seven Gables!” (Hawthorne 8)

In Chris Wedge’s animated film, Epic, death is a villainous figure, personified in the form of Mandrake, the King of Rot. This contemporary interpretation asserts that death is a force that must be overcome by the life of the forest,
embodied by Queen Tara and her army of green Leafmen. Death is not welcome in the forest; it seeks only to destroy life. Mandrake speaks in the film of the “borders” erected around his island of Rot by the Leafmen, all “in the name of balance.” “Well, I’m sick of balance,” he says (Wedge). The solution *Epic* offers to the problem of death is to fight it. When death rebels against the boundaries set by life, it must be eradicated.

While this response at first appears heroic, it presents a number of difficulties and complications regarding the presumed “defeat” of Death that are never resolved. For example, at the end of the film, the viewer never learns what happens to Mandrake’s island of Rot after he is absorbed into a tree. Is death truly eradicated? If so, will the denizens of the forest live forever? Will they retain their youth?

Though the film does not address these concerns, *Epic* engages with an essentially timeless problem that is treated in such early texts as Chaucer’s “Pardoner’s Tale” and emerges again in American gothic texts, such as Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland* and Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Black Cat.” All three offer a similar, alternative answer to Chris Wedge’s villainous characterization of death. Their answers acknowledge death as undesirable but also concede that it is a necessary function in the mechanics of the world. In Chaucer’s tale, for example, three rambunctious young men go out to seek Death in the hopes of killing him—“we wol sleen this false traitour Deeth” (PTI. 699)—but cannot avoid his grasp. Similarly, Brown and Poe reach back into the treasure trove of folklore and medieval narrative
to comment on the nature of a reality that is impossible to escape.

S.G.F. Brandon, in “The Personification of Death in Some Ancient Religions,” points to Paleolithic understandings of death, particularly in the burial rituals known to be a part of early cultures. Such “mortuary practice,” he suggests, “whatever its origin may be thought to have been…must presuppose some reflection about death, which would surely in turn have involved some speculation about the cause of death” (317). Even from such early stages of human history, death played a significant role in society and in cultivating attitudes toward life and the future in general. Brandon goes on to conclude that “Paleolithic peoples were likely to have inferred that death by disease must be due to the attack of some agent whom they could not see, but of whose activity they had such doleful proof” (318).

It is important to consider how attitudes and perspectives towards death have evolved over the ages and to examine the warnings implicit in texts such as Chaucer’s, Brown’s, and Poe’s in relation to the view of death as a sentient being, orchestrating and planning the end of life as Mandrake does.

In Chaucer’s tale, Death holds power over the rioters, despite their arrogant declaration that they will find and destroy it. This power is revealed especially in the youngest of the three. After the rioters embark on their quest to seek Death, they are informed by an Old Man they encounter upon the road that Death awaits them under a nearby tree. The Old Man himself seeks Death, although he cannot find it, claiming that “deeth, allas, ne wol not han
[his] lif” (PT l. 727); that he must walk “lik a restelees caitif [as longe time as it is Goddes wille]” (PT ll. 726-28). Here, Death is something desired, a conclusion for which the Old Man longs but which he cannot find. While a contemporary film such as Epic would celebrate the Old Man’s immunity from Death, “The Pardoner’s Tale” uses it to highlight the difficulties of immortality without eternal youth, showing the consequences of endless life that necessarily brings with it the unavoidable and debilitating complications of old age.

Yet, while the Old Man cannot find Death, Chaucer’s three rioters have no such trouble. Upon reaching the grove, they discover baskets of gold, Death embodied within the guise of greed. The youngest of the three is tasked with returning to town for food and drink while the other two remain with the gold until nightfall. Once the youngest leaves, the others plan to kill him when he returns so that the treasure might be divided among two rather than three (PT ll. 760-836). The youngest, enthralled by a similar selfish desire for the gold, says,

O Lord…if so were that I mighte  
Have al this tresor to myself allone,  
Ther is no man that liveth under the trone  
Of God that shoulde live so mirye as I!  
(PT ll. 840-4)

The subsequent three lines are particularly significant. Chaucer writes, “And atte laste the feend, oure enemy, / Putte in his thoght that he shoulde poison beye, / With which he mighte sleen his felawes tweye” (PT ll. 844-6). Notably, it is Death—“the fiend, our enemy”—that gives this rioter
the idea to buy poison and kill his companions. However, it is not an idea that materializes spontaneously. Instead, Death is able to manipulate the man’s already murderous thoughts, cultivating the seed planted there. The young rioter becomes Death’s agent, chosen not randomly or arbitrarily but rather because of his predisposition toward killing.

Another aspect of Chaucer’s commentary on death is its reality in the lives of mankind and a warning against any attempt to destroy Death as the rioters seek to do. Elizabeth Hatcher writes of Chaucer’s young men as follows:

idealistic simpletons, they intend to create a utopia of life without death in one ironically death-dealing stroke. When they have slain Death, no one will ever die again—and the world will therefore be perfect…. [T]his plan parodies Christ’s redemptive act:….his [death] overcame the death of the soul whereas theirs aims to overcome the death of the body; his preserved but transcended the natural mortality of the individual whereas theirs aims to subvert the state of nature. (247 emphasis added)

In attempting to create a perfect world in which no one dies, the rioters ignore the consequences that such an attempt will bring, creating a world in which people live endlessly—and at the same time, suffer forever the pains of old age.

Authors in the American gothic tradition also attempt to understand how death may be a necessary part of life, counteracting the prevailing sentiments of optimism, progress, clarity and order typical of the Age of Reason. They rekindle the emotions connected with death, and in
doing so, they attempt to discredit imprudent efforts to evade the Reaper’s call. This sentiment finds expression in the depiction of death, since it can strike anywhere at any time, often without cause or explanation. In the gothic tale, death acquires its own countenance, its own voice, and its own character that gives it a personality, a substance, and an agency. However, it is not an agency without purpose, as Gary Farnell, in “Gothic’s Death Drive,” reveals. Quoting Pope Pius VI, Farnell writes, “In all living beings the principle of life is no other than that of death: at the same time we receive the one we receive the other, we nourish both within us, side by side” (592). This juxtaposition of life and death offers a way of viewing death as essential to life, a concept manipulated and embraced by gothic writers.

In Wieland, death has a voice that ultimately convinces Theodore Wieland to become its agent. Chapter Nineteen begins with Wieland producing his defense against the charge of murdering his wife and children. He does not deny the act. In fact, he says, “You know that they are dead, and that they were killed by me. What more would you have?” It is as if his will is somehow being subverted or manipulated by an external force. In fact, while she is being attacked by Wieland, Catharine refers to his having been possessed by “a fury resistless and horrible” (ch. 19), suggesting that Wieland is, in fact, controlled by some other being. Wieland himself also indicates a lack of agency, claiming that “to rebel against [his] mandate was impossible” (ch. 19). Some power overcomes his free will, issuing a mandate that consumes him. That power is death itself.
Quoting a text from the Greco-Roman period, Brandon expands upon the notion of death’s calling:
“Everyone to whom [Death] calleth comes to him straightaway, their hearts being affrighted through fear of him… Yet he turns not his face towards [those who petition him], he comes not to him who implores him, he hearkens not when he is worshipped; he shows himself not, even though any manner of bribe be given him” (321). This echoes the plight of Chaucer’s Old Man and also provides a context in which to examine Brown’s text. In *Wieland*, Clara, the text’s narrator and Wieland’s sister, also at times seems to be calling for death, but it is a plea fueled by motives different from the Old Man’s. Through much of the story, Clara Wieland expresses a concern about her impending doom, especially a preoccupation about the uncertain time and nature by which it might take place. Clara proclaims, “Death must happen to all. Whether our felicity was to be subverted by it tomorrow, or whether it was ordained that we should lay down our heads full of years and of honor, was a question that no human being could solve” (ch. 6). Her concern appears to be centered on the seemingly arbitrary and capricious nature of death rather than the ailments and pains of the Old Man who desires Death as a release from the infirmities of advanced age. Clara provides an answer to the Old Man’s dilemma: “Men can deliberately untie the thread of life” (ch. 25), even admitting that she had “deemed herself capable [of it] (ch. 25). Suicide, then, appears as a solution to the uncertainty of when death will strike and a means by which one can find release. It responds to
the arbitrariness of a sentient Death who seems to assert complete control over the lives of men, deciding when and where they will pass from this life into the next.

But it is a problematic answer, a fallacy of self-empowerment that does not free one from the power of death. Clara, at one point, views her penknife as a method by which she can “baffle [her] assailant, and prevent the crime by destroying [herself]” (ch. 10). Clara’s fear of the unknown—of what Carwin might do to her—compels her to seek refuge in an equally uncertain course of action. The path that lies beyond death’s gate is as inscrutable as what might lie in wait behind Clara’s closet door. Yet, in contemplating suicide, Clara attempts to assert her own autonomy, leaving the choice of life and death not in her assailant’s hands (or death’s) but her own. Her self-agency is valued more than her life. But Clara’s desire for death is problematized further when one recognizes her age and condition. While the Old Man in the “Pardoner’s Tale” may have a valid reason for seeking Death, Clara is still in her prime, with the potential for a full life ahead of her. Though both Clara and the Old Man seek death, the latter demonstrates the folly of seeking physical immortality while the former highlights the folly of an undue fear of death—in fearing the power and inscrutability of death, Clara nearly submits to it, sooner than would have been, by nature, required of her.

To further press this fear of an arbitrary and capricious death, Brown writes that, when Theodore Wieland goes to his sister’s house to discover if any
ill-thing has happened to her, he [Wieland] encounters a vision, “luminous and glowing. It was the element of heaven that flowed around,” Wieland claims. “Nothing but a fiery stream was at first visible; but, anon, a shrill voice from behind called upon me to attend” (ch. 19). This voice subsequently convinces Wieland to kill his wife, coaxing him into murder just as Death encouraged Chaucer’s young rioter to do the same. However, in *Wieland*, death is not an image of darkness. It is not a “fiend, our enemy,” a Reaper shrouded and cloaked, as Chaucer presents it in the “Pardoner’s Tale,” or a heap of gold that embodies death in the sins of greed and gluttony. Instead, it is a depicted as light and is strangely reminiscent of God. Described by Wieland as “the element of heaven,” a “fiery stream” that engulfs him yet does not burn him as it did his father (ch. 19), this conflation of death and heaven may suggest that the two are interchangeable. Wieland tells Clara that “if a devil has deceived [him], he came in the habit of an angel” (ch. 25). But how can an angel demand death, unless it is the Angel of Death? Clara questions the events surrounding her father’s mysterious demise, wondering if it is “fresh proof that the Divine Ruler interferes in human affairs, meditates an end, selects, and commissions his agents, and enforces, by unequivocal sanctions, submission to his will” (ch. 2). Brown explores the source of death by questioning its character and suggests, through Clara, that perhaps the source of life is also the source of death, building upon Chaucer’s depiction while at the same time establishing a fresh perspective.
In traditional Hebrew philosophy regarding mortality, “God is regarded as ultimately responsible for [an] individual’s death…Consequently…the dominant view is that death is due to the action of God. However, the tendency to separate Yahweh from direct contact with human affairs seems to have produced the idea of ‘the angel of Yahweh’ as the agent of death” (Brandon 325). This correlation between death and the divine as apparent coadjutors hearkens back to the exclamation of Chaucer’s Old Man, “God yow se” (PT l. 715): “may God protect you,” even as he sends the rioters to their deaths. Thus Death does its work, perhaps under the mantle of God himself, with the giver of life and the taker of it operating in tandem. In Chapter Nineteen of Wieland, Wieland tells Catharine, “I was commissioned to kill thee, but not to torment thee with the foresight of thy death; not to multiply thy fears, and prolong thy agonies.” Death as a servant of heaven does not intend to “torment, multiply fears, or prolong agonies”; however, these aspects of death are often inescapable and may lead to the barriers that arise between contemplations of the horrors of death and meditations on the paradise of heaven.

This distinction, nevertheless, ignores the fact that in order to reach heaven one must first pass through death’s gate. Gary Farnell pushes the argument further, asserting that aspects of Freud’s own theory of the human “death drive” allude to “the interlinking of destruction and creation in an apparent drive within Nature towards death itself” (596). In Theodore Wieland’s case, it is true that he has brutally murdered his wife; but at the same time, he has, presumably,
pushed her through death’s door into the heavenly paradise, attainable only through the reality of human destruction. A world of physical immortality as sought after by Chaucer’s three rioters “would have no heavenly afterlife to inspire its inhabitants to charity,” as Elizabeth Hatcher explains (248). This paradox of death as the necessary precipitate for entry into paradise is embodied in the gothic, a genre that subverts the notion that, despite the sacrifices required for progress, a reasonable balance between happiness and sadness might be found, rejecting Enlightenment ideals that privilege happiness in this life and discount the necessity of death and its function in bringing one truly to eternal peace.

Thus, Theodore Wieland becomes a model for this system, killing not only his wife and children but also his emotions as a husband and father, suppressing the “raptures known only to the man whose parental and conjugal love is without limits” (ch. 19), reinterpreting the traditional happiness found in marriage and parenthood in order to achieve a higher form of happiness. Brown also replaces the customary darkness of morbidity with an environment “luminous and glowing” (ch. 19), vaulting death into a position of dominance and superiority while emphasizing a death that, although powerful and necessary, is also, at times, arbitrary. Wieland’s final role as death’s agent, then, is to take his own life (ch. 26), using the knife that Clara considered for her own destruction. Wieland reaffirms Clara’s earlier sentiments that death indeed has a “hand invisible and of preternatural strength” and that “all places were alike accessible to this foe” (ch. 9), even the hearts and
minds of his agents and victims.

In “Literature and the Impossibility of Death: Poe’s ‘Berenice,’” Arthur Brown draws from Poe’s perceptions of death to argue that, in dying, humans “leave behind not only the world but also death…ceasing to be man…ceasing to be mortal” (449), as if mankind’s inherent aversion toward death comes not from what it may bring or the unknown that may lie in wait behind death’s door but simply from the fact that once that door is passed through and the threshold is crossed, it can never be crossed again. The end of life marks the beginning of “undying death,” which is “real in its incarnation as writing” (Brown 449). Undying death is more than spiritual or physical immortality: it is the pain and torment of the Old Man, wasting away, lamenting, “Lo, how I vanisshe, flessh and blood and skin” (PT 1. 733), his sorrow preserved eternally in Chaucer’s language.

“Death is a mystery which fascinates and repels… It is sublime because it remains a terrifying mystery, not simply unknowable but linked with human desires that we wish to keep unknown,” writes David Morris (309). This paradox exists in Clara, in her fluctuating attraction to death and repulsion by it. She argues that “[t]he will is the tool of the understanding, which must fashion its conclusions on the notices of the sense” (ch. 4). If death remains a mystery, then a misunderstanding of it can lead to a corruption of the will, the greatest and most powerful means by which death can terrorize humanity. Death, as an unseen presence, is difficult to understand via the senses. The effects are discernible, but their cause—particularly until the advent of modern
science—remains inscrutable, as Theodore Wieland often asserts. Hence, a faulty understanding becomes the medium by which Wieland loses his agency and becomes death’s agent. The predominant fear in the text, and the point that the story seems to make, revolves around the arbitrariness of death and the lack of control available to humanity when faced with its call. This does not suggest that death is inherently evil. On the contrary, a misunderstanding of death seems to be the greater evil, and one by which Wieland’s will is corrupted.

In Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Black Cat,” death does not appear as a heavenly light but rather in the guise of the narrator’s first cat, appropriately named Pluto after the Greek god of the underworld. Of all the other pets supposedly loved by the narrator, this cat is the only one whose name is provided: “Pluto—this was the cat’s name” (79). To explore the ways in which the story attempts to reveal underlying truths about death through the figure of Pluto, it is important to examine several elements of the tale: Pluto’s death and apparent reincarnation in the appearance of the second cat; the narrator’s attitude toward Pluto and his successor; the event that leads to the murder of the narrator’s wife; and, finally, the circumstances surrounding the narrator’s capture and implied demise via the gallows.

When the narrator describes his desire to kill Pluto, despite his former love for the feline, he says:

And then came, as if to my final and irrevocable overthrow, the spirit of PERVERSENESS. Of this spirit, philosophy takes no account…Who has not,
a hundred times, found himself committing a vile or a silly action, for no other reason than because he knows he should not? Have we not a perpetual inclination...to violate that which is Law, merely because we understand it to be such? This spirit of perverseness, I say, came to my final overthrow. It was this unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself—to offer violence to its own nature—to do wrong for wrong’s sake only—that urged me to continue and finally to consummate the injury I had inflicted upon the unoffending brute. One morning, in cool blood, I slipped a noose about its neck and hung it to the limb of a tree. (80)

The first element of this passage that deserves attention is the narrator’s proclaimed “spirit of perverseness.” According to the Oxford English Dictionary, one who is perverse can be described as “going or disposed to go against what is reasonable, logical, expected, or required; contrary, fickle, irrational.” The word is derived from the Latin perversus, meaning “turned the wrong way, awry, unnatural, abnormal, wrong-headed, misguided, perverted.” If the narrator wants to kill Pluto—embodying an underlying desire to kill death—can the narrator’s actions and desires be defined as “perverse”? Is killing death illogical?

Indeed it is, since it contradicts the very nature of what death is. As the ruler of the dead, death itself cannot be killed, or else it must necessarily submit to its own rule, contradicting the essence of sovereignty. This paradox leads to the second element of the passage: the notion that the
narrator represents a desire to violate some “law” merely because it is such. The law of nature requires all living beings to submit, at one time or another, to the power of death. Any attempt to evade such power indefinitely is contrary to natural law—it is perverse.

And yet, Pluto—death—avoids the narrator prior to the atrocious act. Pluto “fled in extreme terror at [the narrator’s] approach” (80), an act which ultimately leads, according to the narrator, to the advent of the spirit of perverseness. Could the avoidance of death be what truly irritated the narrator? Knowing that death lurked behind closed doors, yet refused to reveal itself plainly? The narrator claims that a third element to this spirit of perverseness is the “longing of the soul to vex itself—to offer violence to its own nature” (80). If the violence the narrator will soon perpetrate is truly against his own soul—his own nature—then death must be a part of that nature. Pluto’s avoidance perturbs the narrator since it is a part of himself that flees at his approach. In Greek mythology, Pluto is not simply the god of the underworld but also “a god of the earth’s fertility” (Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia). This, at first, seems to be a contradiction. However, the processes of nature may provide an explanation. The world often requires death to invigorate new life: animals must die to feed carnivores; vegetation must die to feed herbivores; the cycle of life requires death to play a part, and any attempt to destroy or kill death must necessarily be an attempt to kill life as well. Joseph J. Moldenhauer describes Poe’s own cosmology as one “in which Beauty, Goodness, and
Truth are a Unity—with Death” (qtd. in Thompson 297). The application is relevant here, where “The Black Cat” links death with goodness; the narrator both loves and hates Pluto, and thus both loves and hates death. In truth, Pluto is something of a neutral character, acted upon by the narrator yet never displaying any overt aggression or evil of his own. This portrayal of death, as does Wieland’s, suggests that death is not inherently evil, but nor is it inherently good. It is simply a fact of life, an inevitable reality that remains hidden, unseen, oftentimes ignored, and almost universally avoided.

Thus, the reality of death is never truly unveiled until one’s time has come, perhaps not even then, as “there is none can see him, either of gods or men” (Brandon 321). The narrator is granted this special privilege of seeing death, though he scorns it. Pluto’s successor follows the narrator “with a pertinacity which it would be difficult to make the reader comprehend” (Poe 83). Yet, rather than accept the affections of the cat, the narrator “avoid[s] the creature” and “[flees] silently from its odious presence, as from the breath of a pestilence” (Poe 82). The narrator sees the cat/death as a dreadful creature, despite its intrinsic necessity. After he kills Pluto—a futile attempt to kill death itself—he soon understands that death has returned to haunt him. The unnamed new cat sports a white mark on its chest, a mark that “by slow degrees…assumed a rigorous distinctness of outline. It was now the representation of an object…, the image of a hideous—of a ghastly thing—of the
GALLOWS!—oh, mournful and terrible engine of Horror and of Crime—of Agony and of Death!” (Poe 83).

This nightmare of death surrounds the narrator, overwhelms him, and ultimately seduces him into becoming death’s agent because he cannot bring himself to accept death as a necessary condition of life. He attempts, as he did before, to kill the cat and rid himself of death, to evade it despite the fact that it is most certainly part of him, as it is part of everyone. He says, “Evil thoughts became my sole intimates” (Poe 83), and, “uplifting an axe…I aimed a blow at the animal which…would have proved instantly fatal had it descended as I wished” (84). Yet, it does not, and, enraged by his wife’s interference, the narrator “withdrew [his] arm from her grasp and buried the axe in her brain” (84). He is goaded not only by his wife’s interference but also by death’s provocation in the form of the gallows-branded cat, “which had been the cause of so much wretchedness” (85). Murder, therefore, becomes an “aesthetic act, for it is One with the design of the Universe as Poe describes it in *Eureka*” (Thompson 297). The narrator is absorbed by an obsession with death, one that is not entirely in conflict with the design of the universe, since all must die. However, the narrator’s aesthetic inclinations go awry when he perversely directs his death drive towards death itself.

Continuing in his rage, he experiences a fervent urge to kill his cat, “but it appeared that the crafty animal had been alarmed at the violence of [his] previous anger, and forbore to present itself in [his] present mood” (85). The
narrator fails to learn from his previous mistake, a hubristic one in which he attempts to place himself equal to God in having the ability to kill death. He laments that a cat could cause “for [him]—for [him] a man, fashioned in the image of the High God—so much of insufferable woe!” (83). But it is not for man to destroy death, since this is reserved only to God. In St. Paul’s writings, Death—Thanatos—is “the last enemy that will be destroyed,” being part of a “hierarchy of demonic beings evidently hostile to God, that the Messiah would ultimately subjugate” (Brandon 330-1). This necessarily precludes any human being from killing death, especially before the end-time, since this would assume a level of power equal to that of the Messiah. The narrator, in his hubris, attempts to assume this authority by killing Pluto, thereby upsetting the balance of life and death in the world.

Death’s final appearance in the story—its ultimate victory—comes when it secures the narrator’s discovery by the police, calling attention to the wall in which death itself is now entombed, with a “wailing shriek, half of horror and half of triumph, such as might have arisen only out of hell, conjointly from the throats of the damned in their agony and of the demons that exult in the damnation” (Poe 86). The mingling of diametrically opposed traits appears once more with a final relish: the cat juxtaposes horror and triumph, suffering and exultation. As G. R. Thompson argues, “one cannot claim for the fascinated vision of death and dissolution in Poe’s writings a totally ecstatic and beatific vision. To claim such would be as serious a misreading of Poe as that of those critics Moldenhauer wishes to correct”
Though death at first seems neutral, even benign, when threatened by the narrator with a perverse attempt at destruction, it returns with a vengeance, punishing those who seek to pervert the natural order and escape—or destroy—death.

In *Wieland* and “The Black Cat,” death interacts with the other characters, eliciting emotions, responses, and even dialogue. The character of death in these two texts offers new forms, new modes of viewing mortality, building upon medieval representations that fashion death as a fact of life. Though both of these gothic texts make this concession, they also highlight certain elements of death that generate concern and fear, namely its supposed arbitrariness and the lack of human control when death calls its victims. Despite new depictions of death as a luminous light or as an affectionate black cat, its basic character remains much the same, with slight modifications in each tale. In *Wieland*, Brown questions the nature of death; Wieland “was much conversant with the history of religious opinions, and took pains to ascertain their validity…to settle the relation between motives and actions, the criterion of merit, and the kinds and properties of evidence” (Ch. 3). He sees the “future, either as anterior, or subsequent to death, [as] a scene that required some preparation and provision to be made for it” and he had a “propensity to ruminate on these truths” (Ch. 3). Wieland ponders the reality and nature of death instead of enjoying life and living it to the fullest. He does not espouse an outright desire to slay death as do Chaucer’s medieval rioters or Poe’s narrator; however, his
curiosity about and investigation into the nature of death resemble the inquiry of the rioter who demanded of his knave, “Go bet…and axe redily / What cors is this, that passeth heer forby; / And looke that thow reporte his name wel” (PT ll. 667-9). Wieland worries about life’s changeable elements, resembling his father particularly in regard to his sense that “the vicissitudes of human life were accustomed to be viewed” (Ch. 3). Death, then, chooses as its victim one who obsesses over the nature of life after death rather than one who appreciates and relishes the life given him on earth.

“The Black Cat” highlights a similar injunction against fighting the reality of death. The narrator chooses to reject the natural order of the world—to “subvert the state of nature”—and in doing so escalates his own encounter with mortality. Had the narrator accepted Pluto/death in his life without the perverseness that prompted him to murder, then death would likely have coexisted with him for many more peaceful years to come. However, because the narrator could not accept death as a fact of life, the Reaper engages him as his agent, subverting his will and destroying his agency. The gothic genre suggests a subtle balance between life and death, a balance that *Epic* loudly rejects, attributing heroism, rather, to the one who destroys death. The gothic contends that while death is a necessary reality of life, it should not overwhelm or consume our lives. At the same time, it must also be acknowledged and given its due credit, for those who deny death also deny life, as those in Chaucer’s tale, Theodore Wieland, and the narrator of “The Black Cat” ultimately discover.
Works Cited


Wedge, Chris, dir. *Epic*. Twentieth Century Fox Animation, 2013. Film.
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