Landscapes and Mindscapes: Victorian Monsters and the Gothic Sublime

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Abstract

Early Romantic Gothic texts like Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* heavily feature the philosophical concept of the sublime. The sublime is most commonly known in the context of an awe-inspiring and terrible natural landscape, but in Gothic texts, is deployed in a markedly different manner, where the Gothic monster itself is an object of the sublime. This leads to the question, how exactly does the idea of the natural sublime interact with monstrosity, something entirely unnatural? By investigating Gothic works of the Victorian period like *Wuthering Heights*, *Dracula*, and *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, early philosophical treatises on the sublime, and contemporary literary theory, this project carries forward the conversation that theorists like Vijay Mishra begin in *The Gothic Sublime*, exploring the ways in which the familiar natural sublime is converted into a “monstrous” or Gothic sublime. By investigating how elements of physical and psychological monstrosity come together to create the affective “terror” necessary for the sublime, this project attempts to show how the classic monsters of Victorian fiction and poetry trigger this theoretical phenomenon in interesting ways, marking the shift from the overwhelming natural landscape to the “mindscape,” a place marked by monstrosity and the passions, but no less sublime.
About halfway through Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, the titular character travels into the Alps, seeking spiritual restoration from the sublime. The terrain is difficult and the scene entirely overwhelming, as sights of the sublime typically are. Frankenstein is entirely surrounded by the “glorious presence chamber of imperial nature,” with his awe at the sights only disturbed by “the brawling waves or the fall of some vast fragment, the thunder sound of the avalanche or the cracking...of the accumulated ice” (104). The scene is a perfect depiction of sublime nature. And yet, the picture becomes more complicated with the introduction of Frankenstein’s creature into view, as he runs across the dangerous terrain with superhuman speed and agility. The sight of the creature reflects the sublime landscape itself, a towering and overwhelming figure who inspires both terror and awe. Though we are initially drawn to the sublimity of the natural landscape, the introduction of the monster into the scene makes us consider the interesting idea, with its striking similarities, that there is a strong connection between sublimity, a seemingly natural philosophical phenomenon, and the monster, an entirely created entity.

Frankenstein’s monster is the sublime landscape personified and made Gothic through his monstrosity. Just as one feels terror and awe at the sublime in nature, Frankenstein’s creature inspires the same feelings in those he encounters, primarily due to his physical and psychological monstrosity. *Frankenstein*, though one of the first examples of this, the creation of a “Gothic sublime,” is not the only text in which we can see this connection. In fact, we can read many of the iconic and lesser-known monsters of 19th century Gothic fiction in this way,
viewing them as objects of the Gothic sublime. More importantly, though, there seems to be a change in these Gothic sublime monsters, where physical monstrosity that corresponds to the landscape transforms to a psychological “mindscape,” one ruled by the passions that nevertheless produce the affective elements of the Gothic sublime. This essay, guided by the shift from landscape to mindscape, will examine how the natural and built environment enhance and reflect objects of the Gothic sublime, the monsters of classic texts of Gothic fiction.

Traditional ideas of the sublime in literature and art of the late 18th and early 19th centuries typically occur in depictions of the natural landscape. Sublime nature is limitless and overwhelming, with the human element typically dwarfed by the natural. The primary philosophical treatment of the sublime is by Edmund Burke, in his influential treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. First, Burke defines the sublime by its affective element, primarily the production of terror in the viewer, the “strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (36). This terror brought on by the experience of encountering a sublime object is key in thinking about the “Gothic sublime” specifically. While terror is associated with the sublime in this case, it is also closely connected to the emotions caused by interactions with monsters and monstrosity, as foundational to the Gothic and horror genres. With this project, I hope to show that these two fonts of terror are not only similar, but also both derived from sublimity. However, this terror cannot be too close or personal, otherwise terror would be purely pain, and in Burke’s theory, the sublime also contains an element of pleasure, a positive state that is also somewhat indifference. This positive emotional element might help to explain the perverse pleasure that both fictional
characters and readers feel when encountering the typical terror and horror of the Gothic, helping to establish these Gothic monsters and landscapes as objects of the sublime. Burke articulates this affective response in other terms throughout the treatise, also as astonishment that brings about horror. Burke places other emphases on vastness, power, and magnitude as powerful causes of sublimity.

Immanuel Kant’s notion of “limitlessness” is also key in understanding the sublimity of Gothic monsters, and his affective element of the sublime fits well with Burke’s, involving pleasure and pain. Limitlessness in relation to the sublime is something that, when attempted to be understood, is an attempt to “imagine what it cannot, [and] has pain in the failure but pleasure in contemplating the immensity of the attempt” (346). In relation to Gothic monstrosity, this limitlessness helps explain superhuman and often changing forms that invoke the crossing of human boundaries, whether it be in physical size and strength, psychological cruelty and strength of will, or physical violence.

As evidenced by the introduction, Frankenstein is key in understanding the shift from the natural sublime through landscape. From Captain Walton’s first descriptions of the icy landscape, we are given a picture of formidable nature that overwhelms any who try to penetrate, or in more figurative terms, comprehend it. The reader understands that the sublime landscape is an important component of the text, especially with the power of nature in the face of those who attempt to control it. The motif of lightning throughout the novel seems to work with this idea. Frankenstein sees “lightning playing on the summit of Mont Blanc in the most beautiful figures” and in a later scene, watches the “pallid lightnings that played above Mont Blanc” (79, 103). The use of the verb “play” to describe the extraordinary forces of
nature, and the lightning’s connection to the Alps, helps us to understand Frankenstein’s eccentric obsession with the sublime, and why, in the face of his act of creation, he might find solace in it. Rather than being struck by terror and awe by the power of nature, Frankenstein sees playfulness, and a source of solemnity. In The Sublime: the New Critical Idiom, Philip Shaw writes that, in the Kantian mold, “what attracts Frankenstein to this sublime is the way in which it continually raises the spectre of the annihilation of the self” (111). This “annihilation,” Shaw explains, with Frankenstein’s eccentric views of nature, is a preferable alternative to the strictures of social life. This again seems to be another way in which Frankenstein the character represents a view alternative to traditional ideas of sublimity and the natural versus artificial or social.

In the scene described at the beginning of this essay, Shelley invokes the language of the sublime several times, describing the Alps as “awful and majestic,” “tremendous,” and imbued with “severity” (104-105). Nature here is “sublime and magnificent,” and fills Frankenstein with a “sublime ecstasy” (104-105). In this way, it seems impossible to deny the influence of the Burkean sublime on the novel. More difficult to pinpoint, but even more interesting, is the presence of the Gothic sublime: the interactions between monstrosity and the landscape. Frankenstein’s odd reaction to the natural sublime might key us into the idea that Shelley is not doing something entirely traditional with the sublime here, though. Like the wanderer in C.D. Friedrich’s “Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog,” Frankenstein, looking out at Montanvert and Mont Blanc, is not terrified by the sublime, but seems poised to take it on. It seems that just as Frankenstein relishes delving into obscure problems and texts in natural philosophy, he sees
nature itself with similar aims in mind — primarily to “solve” it, and in doing so, be comforted by it.

So where does the terror come from, since Frankenstein’s reaction to the sublime is completely out of the ordinary? Just as Frankenstein vocalizes his pleasure, he sees “the figure of a man, at some distance, advancing towards me with superhuman speed…bound[ing] over the crevices in the ice, among which I had walked with caution” (107). From this first description, we can see the monstrosity of Frankenstein’s creation, but described in a pointedly different way than before in the novel. Whereas previously the creature was referenced primarily in regard to its physical deformity and appearance as a combination of corpses, here the superhuman speed and size is emphasized.

Despite Burke’s seeming disinterest in it, it seems that the monstrous vitality of the monster helps to establish him as sublime. Where the corpses are disgusting, it is the fact that Frankenstein’s monster is composed of such elements and alive that is the true source of terror. However, what Burke does say about the vitality of the sublime is quite important. For example, “there are many animals, who though far from being large, are yet capable of raising ideas of the sublime, because they are considered as objects of terror, as serpents and poisonous animals of almost all kinds” (53). Thus, sublimity does not need to be extreme in size or physical manifestation. This image of the serpent or poisonous animal is extremely important for any discussion of the Gothic sublime, as it helps to bridge a gap between the traditional sublimity of the natural landscape and the monstrous sublime, which is more indefinite in form, and varies from text to text. In this way, Frankenstein’s monster is a 19th century literary example of living sublimity.
There are distinct parallels between descriptions of the Alps and those of Frankenstein’s creature. The vastness, power, and seeming limitlessness of Frankenstein’s monster is placed in opposition to the “human,” similar to encountering the sublime landscape. The affective element is also similar, with the reaction of the reader being one of terror at this monstrosity, but also pleasure in the ways in which it dwarfs or exceeds the human. Frankenstein himself is not terrified, but the affective emotion of the reader is terror. It is as if, knowing Frankenstein’s seeming immunity to the sublime, Shelley introduces to the scene something even more sublime, even more terrifying.

During the confrontation in the Alps, Frankenstein says to his own creation, “you have made me wretched beyond expression” (110). This incomprehensibility or inexpressibility, while a stronger element of the Kantian than Burkean sublime, is still key for the Gothic, where incomprehension, limitlessness, and excess of form are important components. Because of his monstrosity, Frankenstein’s monster inspires feelings that Mont Blanc might as well. The creature is a sight “tremendous and abhorred,” one of sublime terror, of astonishment and horror. In this way, Frankenstein’s monster, through affect and physical monstrosity, is an object of the Gothic sublime, reflecting and rejecting the sublime landscape of Mont Blanc. In his speech to Frankenstein, the creature even says, “the desert mountains and dreary glaciers are my refuge...the caves of ice, which I only do not fear, are a dwelling to me” (109). Through this, the monster reveals, in his own terms, that he is an extension of the sublime landscape, an object of terror that goes far beyond the human.

It should also be noted that at the end of the novel, Frankenstein’s monster returns to the sublime nature from whence he emerged. Walton writes that, after his confrontation with
the creature, Frankenstein’s monster “sprang from the cabin window as he said this, upon the ice raft which lay close to the vessel [and] was soon borne away by the waves and lost in darkness and distance” (249). This further cements the connection between the sublime landscape and Frankenstein’s creature as an object of Gothic sublimity. The creature, a personification of the Gothic sublime, emerges from the sublime landscape, carries out his cruel and violent acts, inspires terror, and flees back into the sublime landscape — the only place where he can survive.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” plays with the concept of the Gothic sublime and introduces a religious element to Gothic sublimity. Coleridge’s experience with philosophical works on the sublime are also key, as Coleridge himself was greatly influenced by Kant and German Idealism as a whole, and his own conception of the sublime often shifted between traditional idealist conceptions of the concept and Burke’s definitions (Shaw 98). The natural environment of the poem is quite similar to Frankenstein’s, with the Mariner emphasizing how the “ice was here, the ice was there, / the ice was all around” and how it “cracked and growled, and roared and howled / like noises in a swound” (58-62). The all-encompassing nature of the sublime landscape here is arresting, just as the ancient mariner himself is, with the crew’s only hope of escaping the terror of sublime nature being the appearance of the albatross, which itself is extinguished by the man who will become a Gothic figure, the mariner himself. Despite the mariner’s religious turnaround, he might still be considered an object of the Gothic sublime, inspiring terror in the Wedding-Guest, who cries out: “I fear thee, ancient Mariner...and thou art long, and lank, and brown, / as is the ribbed sea-sand” (224, 226-227). Here we see that even the Wedding-Guest notices the ancient
mariner himself reflects certain features of a landscape physically. More importantly, though, the ancient mariner has the same arresting qualities as a sublime landscape. Even as he unhands the Wedding-Guest, the mariner “holds him with his glittering eye,” and in doing so, “the Mariner hath his will” (13, 16). We might feel captured by an overwhelming landscape, feeling terror and some degree of pleasure because of its awe-inspiring qualities; so too is the Wedding-Guest held emotionally as the mariner tells his story.

While extremely different in tone, narrative, and form than both Frankenstein and “Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” Emily Brontë’s Wuthering Heights marks a shift in the comparison between landscapes and Gothic monstrosity that will last for the rest of this discussion, and generally seems to track with the shift from Romantic to Victorian fiction and 19th century cultural changes. While previously the sublime landscapes echoed the sublimity of Gothic monsters through their physical monstrosity — the towering and mountainous form of Frankenstein’s monster, for example — in the character of Heathcliff and Wuthering Heights’ setting, the moors, we see a shift to psychological monstrosity, informed by mid to late 19th century psychology and moral theory. Here, Burke’s image of the serpent or poisonous animal that, “though far from being large, are yet capable of raising ideas of the sublime, because they are considered as objects of terror” is important (53). As we will see, Heathcliff in Wuthering Heights is not large or physically terrifying, but seems to be a greater producer of terror than even Frankenstein’s monster.

First, the environment of Wuthering Heights is almost perfectly suited for the Gothic, and for the shift in the Gothic sublime. Set on the Yorkshire moors, the environment seems uniquely violent, with constant storms and snow that are almost supernaturally contained to
the area. The word “Wuthering” in the title of the estate even signals as much, “descriptive of the atmospheric tumult to which its station is exposed in stormy weather” (43). The “atmospheric tumult” might be what gives the physical location its sublime qualities most clearly, as the constantly dramatic and changing weather is a clear sign of the power of nature. It is a dangerous place that is difficult to traverse, and the descriptions are almost imbued with a disgust at the surrounding features. Night comes early at Wuthering Heights, and “sky and hills mingle in one bitter whirl of wind and suffocating snow” (54). Throughout the story, both Mr. Lockwood and Nelly, who we might consider the observers of the natural and Gothic sublime, are stricken with illness caused by the weather. This not only shows the power of nature that is so closely associated with the sublime, but also that those who interact with the sublime are subject to its “rage,” which soon becomes important when comparing the landscape to the character of Heathcliff.

Heathcliff is first described as “sullen” and “morose,” which may be the least drastic terms of description throughout the novel. Physically, as an object of the Gothic sublime, Heathcliff is nothing like Frankenstein’s creature, an imposing and grotesque figure. In fact, Heathcliff is even described as handsome in a peculiar way, in spite of his mysterious racial origin that the characters take every opportunity to point out, or what Mr. Lockwood refers to as being a “dark skinned-gypsy” (44). And physically, this is really the only “unusual” thing about Heathcliff, besides the ways in which his facial features and demeanor barely serve to conceal a “half-civilised ferocity lurk[ing] yet in the depressed brows and eyes full of black fire” (125). In another part of the novel, Nelly writes that Heathcliff, in his last weeks, “appeared to [her], not Mr. Heathcliff, but a goblin,” and left her in a state of terror (359). Despite this,
Heathcliff’s Gothic sublimity does not primarily come from physical monstrosity, but psychological. He is an extraordinarily violent and unpredictable character, devoting his life and almost all of his actions in the novel to causing harm, either out of revenge, spite, or pure enjoyment of inflicting pain on others. Even as a child, his violent behavior is glimpsed in his lashing out at Edgar Linton and, as he grows older, becomes more and more “possessed of something diabolical” and “notable for savage sullenness and ferocity” (98). His cruelty, especially in regard to domestic violence and psychological torture of Cathy and Linton, knows no bounds, and his transgressive acts even include digging up Catherine’s grave, causing him to be plagued with visions of the undead Catherine throughout the second half of the novel. The crossing of these lines, domestic violence against women and unearthing the dead, is particularly important in considering Heathcliff as an object of the Gothic sublime, as it emphasizes the seeming limitlessness of Heathcliff’s psychologically sublime “mindscape,” causing terror in both the characters whom Heathcliff torments and the reader.

There are clear parallels between the natural landscape and Heathcliff, the object of the Gothic sublime. Just as the weather around Wuthering Heights is violent and unpredictable, so too is Heathcliff. The actual home of Wuthering Heights is inhospitable, similar to Heathcliff’s mindscape. Brontë even notes this herself, writing of the contrast between Heathcliff and Edgar Linton as “exchanging a bleak, hilly, coal country for a beautiful valley” (102). Besides emphasizing the difference between the two men that Catherine loves, and the two almost opposite physical locations of Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange, we can see this statement as an explicit connection between the characters and the natural landscape, especially in reference to Heathcliff as a “bleak, hilly, coal country,” an object himself of Gothic
sublimity. So through Heathcliff, as was hinted at before, we see the shift from physical monstrosity causing the terror of sublimity to psychological monstrosity, drawing the connection between landscape and mindscape. Heathcliff’s death near the end of the novel also reflects the affective qualities of the sublime and the connection between landscape and monstrosity. He is so consumed and frenzied by visions of Catherine, by his own passions, that he does not eat and eventually dies. After Heathcliff’s death, it is implied that the estate of Wuthering Heights is finally in decline. Of course, we might think this is simply because Joseph is the only one able to take care of the property, but we might also see this as the end of Gothic sublimity for the story. Heathcliff, the object of the Gothic sublime, has returned to the sublime landscape of the moors, and the estate itself is rid of its sublime presence. This also emphasizes the difference between Thrushcross Grange and Wuthering Heights. While Heathcliff lives, the formidable and Gothic estate of Wuthering Heights is able to thrive and cause terror in those who interact with it, but with his death, is able to fade into relative obscurity.

With this in mind, we can see a new connection forming in considering the natural versus the domestic with regard to the Gothic sublime. While in Frankenstein most confrontations between Frankenstein and his creation occur in the natural world (the most important being the scene in the Alps described earlier), in Wuthering Heights we can see Gothic sublimity — and its most important aspect, monstrosity — bleeding into the domestic space. When Mr. Lockwood attempts to fall asleep in Catherine’s old room, he encounters the gruesome specter of Catherine attempting to enter the room with her “little, ice-cold hand” as she cries “let me in!” (63-64). Lockwood describes his reaction to this apparition as “the intense horror of nightmare,” and in attempting to rid himself of her, says that “the terror made [him]
cruel,” as he cut the ghostly hand back and forth against broken glass until blood ran everywhere (63-64). The use of “horror” and “terror” is the language of the sublime made explicit, causing the reader to think that Heathcliff may not be the only object of Gothic sublimity of the novel, as Catherine’s ghost inspires the same terror in Lockwood, and even in Heathcliff himself. It is interesting to consider this as almost a chain of Gothic sublimity, where the Gothic sublime object Catherine so haunts Heathcliff and his property that it only serves to increase his own sublimity. More importantly, though, we can see the sublime attempting to enter into the domestic space from the natural. Though Catherine occupied this space in life, she is confined to the natural world in death, but as an object of the monstrous sublime, desires to reenter the domestic. Heathcliff’s cruelty also primarily occurs in the domestic space, abusing those closest to him. There is also obviously a gendered aspect to this discussion of domestic and natural environments, as part of Heathcliff’s cruel nature and violence is to confine the female characters of the story to specific places inside, restricting their movements outside of the domestic sphere and landscape. In this way, Heathcliff, who psychologically resembles the uncontrollable weather and landscape of the moors, has gained control over the interior landscape.

The landscape/monstrosity connection is pushed even further when examining Robert Louis Stevenson’s 1886 novella *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Where in *Wuthering Heights* we first tracked the shift from physical to psychological monstrosity, in Stevenson’s novella we can observe a similar change from the natural to urban environment, which carries its own questions and interesting philosophical problems when considering the theory of the Gothic sublime, which seems to initially rely heavily on traditional and natural configurations of
sublimity. However, it does seem that the farther away we are carried from foundational texts like *Frankenstein*, the more interesting such discussions become.

In *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, the environment is nothing like in *Frankenstein* or *Wuthering Heights*. Rather than the Alps that Frankenstein finds solace in or the cruel and muddy moors, we are taken to the dirty and dark streets of 19th century London, the center of English urban activity. The novel, at least in its initial frame, even begins with an activity that could not happen anywhere else but the city: the act of wandering and talking around random streets. In this way, the setting is as any other city might be pictured — a hustle and bustle of activity. However, when the novella shifts to night, we are able to see some of the more Gothic elements of urbanity, described by its fragmented lights as a “great field of lamps of a nocturnal city” and the “wider labyrinths of [a] lamplighted city” (13). This fragmentation of the odd and scattered sources of light and of the city streets themselves seems important for a particular element of the Gothic sublime, fragmented subjectivity and narrative. Similarly drawn from Kantian foundations, and introduced by theorists like Vijay Mishra in his *The Gothic Sublime*, fragmentation is an important element of the sublime, and here even plays a role in discussion of the built environment that Mr. Utterson attempts to navigate the mysteries of, and that Mr. Hyde wreaks havoc and chaos upon.

Mr. Hyde himself is, like Heathcliff, an object of the Gothic sublime because of the terror that he inspires. However, in certain descriptions of the character, we might be reminded more of the ancient mariner because of his terror combined with purely arresting qualities. Again, we can think of Burke’s serpent or small animal that is still able to raise ideas of the sublime, even more so with Mr. Hyde, a figure specifically described as small. Physically, Mr. Hyde is even less
dominating than Heathcliff. He is described as “pale and dwarfish, [with] an impression of deformity without any nameable malformation,” having a “displeasing smile...[and a] murderous mixture of timidity and boldness” (16). Mr. Hyde even shirks away when others speak to him, so it is at first puzzling why one would be afraid of such a figure at all, with the qualities of one who might be discarded and outcast in Victorian society. However, like Heathcliff, it is the depths of Mr. Hyde’s violence and psychological monstrosity that make him more of an object of the Gothic sublime, as well as the almost perverse desire for other characters to glimpse him, a sublime magnetism. While the physical “idea” of deformity in Hyde makes it so that many characters are uneasily drawn to “something seizing” in his “revolting” features, it is the violent acts and cruelty that push Hyde into the sublime, into the depths and magnitude that are almost unfathomable by humans. Hyde physically abuses a young girl on the street and later beats another man to death. The psychologically Gothic “mindscape” of Hyde is similar to Heathcliff, with both being almost arbitrarily cruel and committing raw physical violence that serves as an obvious moral shock to Victorian and contemporary readers. There is an animality to both Hyde’s physical appearance and violent behavior, with Hyde “break[ing] out of all bounds [and]...with ape-like fury, he was trampling his victim under foot and hailing down a storm of blows” (22). The animal is used in this case to emphasize the monstrous, with Hyde being something in-human or barely human.

Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde’s hybridity or indeterminacy of form also contributes to him as an object of Gothic sublimity. While initially the change is controlled by the serum, it eventually goes beyond human control. The process itself is intense and violent, with “a grinding in the bones, deadly nausea, and a horror of the spirit that cannot be exceeded at the hour of birth or
The language of horror, of the sublime, is once again directly invoked, where the monstrous brings about the affective terror or horror that a sublime landscape might cause.

In returning to the monstrosity and landscape connection, it is clear that the urban landscape is not as it was before Hyde was on the loose. Mr. Utterson says that “the dismal quarter of Soho seen under these changing glimpses…and its lamps, which had never been extinguished or had been kindled afresh to combat this mournful reinvasion of darkness, seemed, in the lawyer’s eyes, like a district of some city in a nightmare” (23). Where previously the lamps showed the scattered sources of possibility that the city has to offer, now they are painfully inadequate in standing against the darker side of the urban environment. If the city was once one for leisurely walking, finding unexpected things, and going where the meandering streets led, it is not so anymore, but transformed into a nightmarish landscape (23). The streets are dangerous and shifting, just as the monstrous figure of Mr. Hyde is. The environment is also consistently described as being filled with fog, playing into the mystery of the story and the indeterminacy of form associated with Gothic sublimity.

If Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde represents the shifting form of the Gothic sublime and its connection to the urban environment, then Arthur Machen’s 1894 novella *The Great God Pan* increases this connection exponentially, and further complicates the shift from the natural to urban environment in considerations of Gothic sublimity. Aaron Worth’s Introduction to Machen’s work helps to introduce the topic, as it specifically notes that Machen makes sure to depict “London as a potent locus of wonder and terror…the text in large part the product of a young writer’s fascinated urban wanderings” (24). And as we will see, these urban wanderings, which we also saw in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, are transformed into something much more
sinister, a place of “dislocation, defamiliarization, and dread...of labyrinthine urban spaces, of uncanny repetition, of bounded infinities” (35). The language of “uncanny repetition” and “bounded infinities,” besides nodding to concepts like Freud’s uncanny that have strong connections to sublimity, can be included in a vocabulary of Gothic sublimity, each driving toward Gothic conceptions of limitlessness and fragmentation.

The language of the Gothic sublime is directly evoked in Machen’s story, as well. Where in the natural sublime we might be overwhelmed by the terror of a violent and raging sea, *The Great God Pan* conveys this experience through the language of “abyss.” In a letter from the character Clarke to his friend Villiers, he writes that, after encountering Helen in her monstrous form, “I am like a traveller who has peered over an abyss, and has drawn back in terror” and that “beyond my knowledge there are depths and horrors more frightful still, more incredible than any tale told of winter nights about the fire” (27). Besides the obvious mention of terror, this image of the abyss is comparable to the element of the sublime that is beyond human comprehension, and equally as terrible. The second part of the quote emphasizes the inhuman or superhuman element of Gothic sublimity, the limitlessness that exists past the human mind.

The shifting between the natural and urban by the object of the Gothic sublime in *The Great God Pan*, Helen Vaughan, is important in understanding how sublimity functions in the story. The first time we are introduced to Helen, she is a young orphan who has been adopted by a family in a small village. Like Heathcliff, she is described as having “a somewhat foreign character,” contributing to the mystery of her origin. However, Helen also has the peculiar habit of disappearing into the forest during the day. Though this presented as odd, it is essentially harmless, until a young boy enters the forest as well and purports to seeing Helen “playing on
the grass with a strange naked man, whom he seemed unable to describe further” but later identifies as having the grotesque head of a faun or satyr (82). The sight of Helen with the monstrous, contained within the wild natural environment, is itself a great source of terror for the boy, so much so that he falls ill and is traumatized by it. In a similar manner, one of Helen’s friends eventually laments to her mother, “ah, mother, mother, why did you let me go to the forest with Helen?” though we do not find out exactly what occurs. Besides setting up Helen as a figure of mystery in the story, we might also see this source of terror that is associated with Helen — one that cannot be described in direct terms and occurs in the natural landscape — as directly connected to the Gothic sublime. The pastoral forest is subverted, turned into a darker place where terror is produced by the sublime and unspeakable acts of sexual deviancy.

When next we hear of Helen, she has purportedly ruined the life of the main characters Clarke and Villers’ friend Herbert, having once “spoken of things which even now I [Herbert] would not dare whisper in blackest night,” somehow corrupting Herbert’s mind and eventually taking all of his money and possessions and fleeing. When we next see Helen physically, though, she is completely removed from the natural environment, and now in London going by the name of Mrs. Beaumont. Like several of the characters described previously, we see in the next portion of the story that violence and the “mindscape” echoes the landscape and plays an important role in establishing Helen as an object of the Gothic sublime, particularly the idea of uncontrollable passions. Throughout the story, a group of high-society London men all commit suicide after presumably sexual encounters with Helen. The toll of such an encounter, with the Gothic sublime personified, is drastic even before death, with one man’s form described as being full of “furious lust, and hate that was like fire, and the loss of all hope and horror that
seemed to shriek aloud to the night...and the utter blackness of despair” (38). Thus, the emotions of terror that are caused by Helen are also felt by the viewer, emphasizing the Gothic sublime’s affective aspect not only upon the reader, but those in the story who encounter it.

The final scene of the novella, Helen’s death, may help to cement the different connections between landscape and the object of Gothic sublimity. When confronted by the men with a noose, Helen’s death, a long and drawn-out process, begins. Before dying, she shifts genders and forms, turning from a woman into “the beasts whence it ascended,” and to “the abyss of all being” (46). This shifting of form, eventually into an entirely liquid state, returns to the fluidity and indeterminacy that the Gothic sublime leans on. We can also connect this sublime indeterminacy to the urban environment, with its sprawling, uncertain landscape that contains secrets similar to the internal abyss that Helen represents.

Finally, as with The Great God Pan, in Bram Stoker’s Dracula we see the return of explicit physical monstrosity alongside the psychological. Dracula combines many elements of the Gothic sublime previously discussed, and most importantly, the connection between the natural and urban landscapes and the Gothic sublime might be most clearly seen in Dracula, where the often-opposite settings of Transylvania and London serve similar roles in teasing out different aspects of sublimity. Transylvania — like the characters of Heathcliff, Helen, and as we will see, Dracula — is defined by its otherness. Jonathan Harker, one of the novel’s protagonists, writes in his journal that “the impression I had was that we were leaving the West and entering the East” (14). So here, for the first time, have we not only been taken from the wild natural landscape to the urban environment of London, but to an entirely different region of the world, one that comes with, for Dracula, imperial anxieties and a skewed Western
perspective. We might think of the terror that comes from mysterious Transylvania as not only coming from the dangerous unknown, but from an *Eastern* unknown.

Dracula himself reflects the strong sharp features of Transylvania, and particularly his castle. He is described as having a “very strong, aquiline” face, and a “fixed and rather cruel looking” mouth with “peculiarly sharp white teeth” (31). This first description on its own does not seem to draw a great amount of suspicion. However, Jonathan Harker’s affective reactions to meeting Dracula immediately clue us in to his monstrosity. As the Count leans over him and touches him on the shoulder, Jonathan “could not repress a shudder...[and] a horrible feeling of nausea came over [him]” (31). While not yet the terror of Gothic sublimity, we can see that under the surface, something about Dracula (his monstrosity) causes immediate adverse reactions.

It is fitting, then, that one of the first times we see Count Dracula’s monstrosity on full display is in the context of the imposing and vast landscape of his castle. Looking out the window, Jonathan feels a great “repulsion and terror when [he] sees the whole man slowly emerge from the window and begin to crawl down the castle wall over that dreadful abyss, *face down*, with his cloak spreading out around him like great wings” (48). This exhibition of physical monstrosity, superhuman ability similar to Frankenstein’s monster, causes Jonathan to feel “the dread of this horrible place overpowering [him]” and “fear — awful fear” (48). This reaction tracks entirely with the Gothic sublime. Count Dracula’s monstrosity, as an object of Gothic sublimity, inspires fear and terror in those who encounter him. Similarly, the fact that these feats of monstrosity rely on the physical landscape (his castle) is important, as it demonstrates how objects of the Gothic sublime both reflect and utilize their surroundings in the pursuit of
their evil and always monstrous aims. But like *Wuthering Heights*’ Heathcliff, Dracula’s sublimity is also a product of uncontrollable passions, psychological monstrosity, and a cruel “mindscape.” In a pivotal scene, Dracula reveals his motivations for terrorizing the protagonists of the story, saying “my revenge is just begun! I spread it over centuries, and time is on my side” (326). There are several comparisons to be made to the sublime here. Just as one might marvel at the magnitude and seeming limitlessness of a sublime landscape, we can see the almost limitless fury and hatred contained within Dracula, waiting for centuries to enact his horrible plans.

As a personification of the monstrous sublime, though, Dracula also changes based on the landscape. Where in his home of Transylvania Dracula is at the height of his powers, strong and furiously consumed by the passions, once described as having “eyes transformed with fury, white teeth champing with rage, and fair cheeks blazing with passion,” in London, the manifestation of the Count’s Gothic sublimity is different (52). This seems to mirror the indeterminacy and ambiguity of the urban landscape that we have previously discussed. Dracula, in traveling to London, changes ages, into a wolf, communicates psychically through a mental hospital patient, and even transforms into a mist. This might remind us of Helen Vaughan, who in her death scene rapidly changes forms and physical states. Also importantly, and bringing us back to the landscape, Dracula has a powerful and supernatural connection with the weather. Besides just being associated with harsh and powerful weather like Heathcliff, Dracula takes the sublime nature/Gothic sublime connection one step further, this time by controlling the weather itself. Signaling his arrival in London, Dracula is implied to have created “one of the greatest and suddenest storms on record...with results both strange and
unique” (91). Similarly, during the final confrontation between Dracula and the protagonists at the end of the novel, Mina describes that “the wind came now in fierce bursts, and the snow was driven with fury” (395). With this, we can see that even the weather of Transylvania not only personifies but is driven by Dracula’s passions that make him an object of Gothic sublimity.

One figure that we have not mentioned, but one that lurks in each text and serves as a valuable personification of discussions of the Gothic sublime, is that of Satan. When first we hear of Satan, it is in the context of Milton’s epic *Paradise Lost*. Frankenstein’s creature, after reading the poem, finds obvious parallels to Adam, but also “considered Satan as the fitter emblem of [his] condition” (147). Heathcliff is repeatedly referred to as a “devil” and “hellish villain” (173). “My devil had been long caged, he came out roaring,” and “the spirit of hell awoke in me,” writes Dr. Jekyll about turning into Hyde (64). After seeing Helen’s monstrous form in *The Great God Pan*, Herbert reveals that he is now “a haunted man, a man who has seen hell” (90). Jonathan Harker, fleeing from Dracula’s castle, laments his time in “this cursed land, where the devil and his children still walk with earthly feet” (67). In each case, the object of the Gothic sublime, the monstrous antagonist, is compared to Satan, or a demonic entity more generally. In the case of *Frankenstein*, we might think of Milton’s Satan being considered a Byronic hero during the Romantic period. However, it seems that more generally, the character of Satan in literary and cultural depictions from the 17th-19th centuries embodies some of the central tenets of Gothic sublimity that we have previously discussed.

First, Satan himself is a monstrous being. Though not as much in *Paradise Lost*, he is pictured sometimes as physically monstrous, a physical form corrupted by sin. More importantly though, depictions of Satan seem to anticipate the shift from physical to
psychological monstrosity. Satan is cruel beyond limit, a figure of superhuman ability who combines the seductive qualities of Gothic monsters with their violence and affective terror. In this way, Satan as a cultural and religious figure might even fit well into the paradigm of the Gothic sublime, especially in its “mindscape” variation. After all, in *Paradise Lost*, Satan says “which way shall I fly / Infinite wrath and infinite despair? / Which way I fly is hell; myself am hell” (*PL. IV. 74-76*). Satan’s uncontrollable passions and the admission that within him is a mental landscape that corresponds to the physical landscape of Hell serves as a vivid illustration of the Gothic sublime, with its focus on monstrosity and terror, shifting from physical to psychological.

While this essay has primarily focused on defining the process and features of Gothic sublimity and establishing the connections between landscape and sublime monstrosity in various Romantic and Victorian Gothic texts, there is still a great deal of work to be done on the topic. Specifically, the idea of psychological monstrosity and the sublime “mindscape” can be observed in different ways in a variety of lesser-known texts, ones that may both enhance and challenge the theory. Similarly, the theoretical lens of the Gothic sublime is much richer than was able to be discussed in this essay and has a great deal of philosophical implications for literary analysis. And finally, as has been hinted at previously, any discussion of the Gothic sublime must also be accompanied by more work on monstrosity as it relates to gender, sexuality, and Victorian moral, political, and religious culture. These avenues of inquiry, while seemingly in disparate areas, all return us to the theory of the Gothic sublime, which as we have seen, is a powerful and relevant framework for examining 19th century English literature.
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