

Autonomy, Sublimity and Ornament in Mary Shelley

by

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ABSTRACT

An inquiry into Mary Shelley's critique of the sublime and its implications for the unitary mind in literary and film texts. Using Kantian notions of the sublime, the beautiful and the imagination alongside careful investigation into alterity and the limitations of aesthetics, this thesis intends to examine the ways in which texts meant for ornament become valuable social and moral commentaries.

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## INTRODUCTION

I was originally drawn to the work of Mary Shelley, as I'm sure many before me have, after a stage viewing of Frankenstein. Shortly thereafter, I encountered her spouse in a Romanticism course. When a tutor recommended that I read Shelley's biography, I became closely interested in the elopement between the poet and his wife. Mary Shelley's own literary authority, and her understanding of her husband's poems as divided into "two classes, one purely imaginary, the other comprising those that emanated from the heart" became a framework from which I began to see a dialogue between morality and social critique in women's writing.<sup>1</sup> Shortly after, I enrolled in my first aesthetics course. Although it focused on the relationship between the postmodern and religion, I was drawn to the Kantian sublime. Rooted in gendered terms and pivotal to moral knowledge, the concept quickly began to dictate the topics of my coursework papers. The dichotomy between beauty and sublimity seemed too dual in nature. Where the sublime was horrible, beauty was a welcomed experience. Therefore, the role of beauty as a way to give "sensible form to moral ideas" sparked my interest. Judgments based upon sublimity became a way to connect image, imagination and morality, but became problematic when I began to consider the role of the other and the disconnect between those who exist as others and their understanding of philosophical terms and ideas.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Betty T. Bennett "Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley: An Introduction" 110.

<sup>2</sup> Hannah Ginsborg, "Kant's Aesthetics and Teleology," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Edward N. Zalta, 2014), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/kant-aesthetics/>.

### A. AESTHETIC TERMS

The terms used throughout this paper are defined in this section in order to narrow the scope of my discussion. Each term is briefly accompanied by the context it will be used in throughout this work. The terms I define are as follows: alterity, the beautiful, the sublime, the other, imagination, art and ornament.

Alterity will be used to address those who fall in a state of being that is different and inaccessible to the elite. Specifically, I will address alterity as it appears in the relationship between reader and author, but also between art and viewer. Specifically, I will address the ways in which the gap between being and other can be filled by relationships in Mary Shelley's work.

The other is simply defined as "something other than ourselves".<sup>3</sup> In the context of this essay, the other will be applied to women writers and those outside the elite. In contrast, the term being will be used to refer to any individual, regardless of class, gender, sexuality or social position. By using the term being, I imply that individuals have essential qualities that distinguish them from each other. By this, I imply that individuals have minds that are distinct entities. This is a pivotal assumption, because my thesis argues that morality is a shared concept as a result of relationships and materiality.

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<sup>3</sup> Hannah Ginsborg, "Kant's Aesthetics and Teleology"

The beautiful is defined as a judgment of taste.<sup>4</sup> For example, a painting or a poem could be beautiful. The beautiful is traditionally categorized as feminine, and although beauty often accompanies art it traditionally does not allow the mind to arrive at moral judgments.

The sublime is defined as a confrontation with excess that confirms the status of the unitary self.<sup>5</sup> I will use the Kantian sublime and Zizek's interpretation of the sublime throughout the course of this paper. In the scope of this essay, the other will also manifest itself in beings who confront the sublime that do not experience Kant's promise of goading "the self into activity" through the transcendental properties of the categorical imperative, which will be explained further on in this introduction.<sup>6</sup>

This paper uses the term imagination as the forming of new ideas or concepts regarding objects, through faculties of mind. In effect, imagination is used to create things that are not physical, but instead created from man's own capacity for thought. This paper utilizes elements of the Kantian imagination, as further discussed throughout this introduction.

Art is defined by something created by means of imagination that is valued in taste. I argue that high conceptions of art are exclusionary and that Shelley's work reimagines art for others.

Ornament is defined as objects created not for museums, but for pretty accessory. Ornament can be kitsch or commodified, and occupies a 'lower' artistic space.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Steven Vine, *Reinventing the Sublime* (Chicago: Sussex Academic Press, 2013), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology, Phronesis*, 2010, 5  
doi:10.1177/1350508405051189.

## B. OTHERS ENCOUNTERING THE SUBLIME

This investigation relies on Bohls' definition of modern aesthetics as outlined in her *Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics, 1716-1718*. In this text, Bohls described the three founding assumptions behind aesthetics. The first, being that the perceiver is generic. The second being that this individual engages with disinterested contemplation. The third being that the autonomy of the aesthetic domain comes from moral, political or utilitarian concerns and activities.<sup>7</sup> Based on Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, these assumptions place the study of aesthetics, especially in the 19th century, as something exclusive and academic. The study itself bears a name that appears in academic discourse, and the assumptions behind the study exclude those without access to the 'high' arts. Building upon the Kantian sublime, Bohl's assumptions provide a means to investigate the ways in which Shelley subverts and navigates an exclusive territory by reclaiming meaning through relationship, the—albeit seemingly contradictory—material sublime and in the ironic relationship between autonomy and memory.

Aesthetics is problematic in terms of women's writing and British Romanticism. Although social mobility and discourse elevated the self into something "secular, self-making, dynamic, conflictive and open-ended", I would argue that the free will implied in these terms is critiqued and reimaged by Shelley in her works.<sup>8</sup> To do so, I will define the judgments of beauty, sublimity, and imagination as they will be presented and challenged throughout the course of this project.

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<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Bohls, *Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics, 1716-1818* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Steven Vine, *Reinventing the Sublime*, 4.



Throughout this essay, I document and analyze the ways in which Mary Shelley challenges the sublime. Romantic texts are defined by their ability to construct meaning based on the individual's experiences and confrontations with the inexplicable. Within this cultural movement, the self becomes something that can be used to generate meaning and confirm that one's mind, soul, and individuality is a unitary thing. Often this is accompanied by the sublime, or "confrontations with excess" that proves the power of a unitary self and mind.<sup>9</sup> The sublime often manifests itself alongside scenes of a struggle between dual forces such as "expansion and reduction" or "jubilation and loss", but always in some relation to the self of the "self's relationship to power or magnitude".<sup>10</sup> A force of nature characterized by the individualism of the Romantic period, sublimity becomes a force that represents terror, self-loss and the unimaginable. In the scope of this essay, the other will also manifest itself in beings who confront the sublime that do not experience Kant's promise of goading "the self into activity" through the transcendental properties of the categorical imperative, which will be explained further on in this introduction.<sup>11</sup>

Additionally, I will examine Mary Shelley's departure from Mary Wollstonecraft's religious devotion to materiality and relationships. This change argues for a dependent morality that arises from the experience of beings deemed 'other,' their relationships and, more broadly, materiality. Although I first encountered the sublime, as many do, in the work of Coleridge and Wordsworth, its role in aesthetics seemed to combine my interests into a tangible area of study. As I read the work of Shelley's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft the relationship between

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid,. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Hannah Ginsborg, "Kant's Aesthetics and Teleology"

<sup>11</sup> Ibid,.

imagination and theology held my interest. I was most attracted to Mary Wollstonecraft's philosophy and theistic framework. A female philosopher whose arguments were rooted in "unwavering faith in divine purpose that, suffusing her radicalism, turned anticipations of 'world perfected' into confident political stance" seemed an apt space to examine a critique of the sublime.<sup>12</sup> Wollstonecraft adds a perspective of an outside 'other' to aesthetic discourse.

Although the primary focus of this text will be Mary Shelley, Wollstonecraft's echoes of theology and divinity provide a space I wish to explore alongside and in opposition to the secular romantic self that defines Shelley's characters throughout her body of work.

Wollstonecraft is of interest in combination with Mary Shelley's participation in the annuals because the format was "originally intended as an example of propriety and beauty, clothed in the garb of a moral instructor" to a woman who purchased the works for their loved ones.<sup>13</sup>

Annuals are not commonly thought of as art, but rather as ornament. They are books meant for parlors, and often bound in silk. Annuals remain objects of both beauty and ornament, but ones not upheld as art in the traditional sense.

Mary Shelley's novels, travel writing and short stories occupy a space between Romantic and Gothic literature. In Shelley's investigation of materiality and matter, she explores a realm of 'beauty' unlike the male Romantics, and offers conclusions that reflect the position of the 'other'

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<sup>12</sup> Taylor, Barbara. *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 87.

<sup>13</sup> Harris, Katherine D. "Feminizing the Textual Body: Female Readers Consuming the Literary Annual," 584.

and perceptions of beauty and meaning for those existing on the cusp of the social elite. Unlike the work of Percy Shelley, Mary Shelley's work is rousing and reassuring in its investigation of the sublime and the beautiful, but subversive in that it uses the sublime to unsettle priorities of readers and offer a challenge to Kantian notion of sublimity. Although her texts offer the reader an understanding of relationships as a generator of meaning, they also possess an understanding of transcendence, beauty, and sublimity that establish them as texts and worthy of aesthetic evaluation.

Study of Mary Shelley is critical to understanding the relationship between mid-century aesthetics and exclusion of the female, despite the stress of political mobility and autonomy in philosophical discourse. Exclusivity and alterity are obviously inseparable from Romanticism. Specifically, aesthetics poses a problematic area of study to people existing outside the British elite in the 19th century. Using Elizabeth Bohls understanding of aesthetics as both an area of academic study and a term in need of definition, I hope to narrow to scope of this study to use aesthetics, so commonly used in a discourse of exclusivity, as something reclaimed by those afflicted with the burden of 'otherness', to include both writers and literary texts.

I hope to broaden the scope of Kantian taste to encompass art created by women, for women and about morality shared between minds rather than generated by mind alone. I will define taste in the Kantian terms, as having two necessary conditions, subjectivity, and universality. By this, subjectivity refers to is that a judgment of taste, and therefore whether a thing is a thing of Beauty or not, is based on a feeling of pleasure or displeasure, or rather, desire and repulsion. By universality, judgments are based on personal responses of individuals but have universal validity. Individuals can make judgments of beauty that people disagree with, but

that can still be true claims, ie: a sculpture can be an object of Beauty in taste, but a different individual can hold the opinion that it might not be beautiful. This differing opinion does not disprove the first individual's conclusion. Other conceptions of taste, such as those presented by Burke in his opposing examination of sublimity and beauty, claim that taste is still universal and "the same in all human creatures".<sup>14</sup>

This is defended with the claim that if a judgment of taste could not be shared universally, there would be no sufficient hold to maintain the ordinary correspondence of daily life. Furthermore, Burke's understanding of taste is less subjective. Truth and falsehood, are 'things' that are fixed, they lack the ability to change. Although the universality is similar, the Kantian definition of taste will be employed alongside Shelley's critique of the sublime and the mind of the individual. Burke's empirical approach to aesthetics has utility in that it clarifies the gendered aspects of beauty and sublimity, for "the rules of art are based on experience and on observation of what is common among men", but that which is common for these beings stands in binary opposition towards the shared commonalities between individuals so often thought of as 'nothings' or too delicate of mind.<sup>15</sup> In terms of judging beauty and art, I will rely on Kant's Critique of Judgment and in terms of judging what constitutes art in argument and conversation, I will briefly rely on theories of art and rhetoric as outlined in Cicero's *De Oratore* in combination with Mary Shelley's travel writing.

Kant's Critique of Judgment outlines judgment as having two aspects: determining and reflecting. For the sake of this text, I will pay more attention to the reflective role of judgment as

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<sup>14</sup> Burke, 11.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, xxvii.

seen in various texts. The determining role of judgment will be used in this text as a correspondence to the activity of an individual's imagination in its dividing and organizing of concepts. This is distinguished in its governance by understanding while the reflective is distinguished in its ability to find something universal and regard nature as an empirical and dictated by laws. The text goes on to state that judgments of Beauty exist in four 'moments'. I have attempted to simplify and summarize them as follows: the first moment being a disinterested pleasure, the second of indeterminate concepts with universal validity, the third being without presupposition and the last being the presumed necessity about said judgment and the idea that all out to agree with a judgment of beauty. Thus, judgments of beauty can be understood as having a basis in feelings.

Imagination, in contrast, is defined as something in possession of "free play" and "free harmony".<sup>16</sup> It is not the imagination defined and governed by understanding as the "synthesizing the manifold of intuition" within Kant's Critique of Pure Reason, but rather something that is harmonious with man's understanding. To clarify, imagination forms a relationship with understanding that acts as a harmonious union of free of constraints on the thinking individual's imagination. This is accomplished through the disinterested state of mind, an assumption in aesthetic study, that rooted in a feeling of pleasure completely removed from the faculty of desire. Disinterest occurs when the viewer remains at a distance from a thing. This distance is not physical, but rather a contemplative distance that allows to viewer to notice work for its physical properties and judge it based on impersonal observations rather than subjective ones.

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<sup>16</sup> Hannah Ginsborg, "Kant's Aesthetics and Teleology"

Judgments of the sublime radically differ from judgments of beauty in that the understanding derived from such experiences relies on the mind's capacity for reason. Where judgments of beautiful objects can claim universality, judgments of the sublime rest on "the universal validity of moral feeling" thus elevating them to a position that combines reason and imagination, rather than solely relying on cognition in the way that judgments of beauty do. In order to understand this, the Kantian sublime must be distinguished from the beautiful. Where beauty is a stabilizing source for the self, it only offers reassurance about one's place in the world. It is surely pleasurable, but is assumed to lend little knowledge about man's being or morality. Rather, beauty offers reassurance. This poses no conflictive force to the self. Reassurance, although attractive, provides no means for the mind to generate meaning from experience or feeling. The sublime does not appear in common texts, but rather in confrontations with nature so large they cannot be apprehended by memory or image alone. The sublime is the "story of a human subject in process and in crisis", but to individuals not granted autonomy due to social and physical constraints, it would appear that crisis is never ending and that understanding is delivered through devotion to relationships and material, rather than through enhancement of personal identity.<sup>17</sup>

Kant offers the mind as a powerful means to recognize and actualize the autonomous self in the face of the sublime. In fact, it is confrontations with the limitless and unknowable that teaches man the power of his own mind, and thus allows him to arrive at the conclusion that he is an autonomous being, able to make decisions and maintain his humanity in the face of incredible forces of nature. The limitations of image and art are such that the infinite cannot be represented

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<sup>17</sup> Steven Vine, "Reinventing the Sublime," 13.

through finite means. Faculties of mind allow man to confront the unknown and infinite without grave consequence, but instead confront them and leave more individual and authentic than ever before.

This inability to apprehend on the basis of an image is encountered in Kant in very specific ways: the immensity of the natural world or this immensity's representation. Furthermore, the experience of the sublime "goads the self into activity, sundering it from stasis and complacency, wedding it to aspiration".<sup>18</sup> By this, the sublime offers the self a way to realize limitlessness through confrontation with terror, but in a physical space of guaranteed safety. An encounter with the sublime is defined—in Kantian terms—as a dynamic encounter without dominion over man, but with a demonstrative display of power that leaves man aware of his powerlessness, but independent of nature and superior to it. Although man is forced to submit to power in a confrontation with the sublime, humanity itself cannot be demeaned by nature's power. In effect, this evokes in man a feeling of superiority of reason to nature, but is accompanied by a displeasure that the imagination alone cannot fathom such great displays of terror.

The sublime manifests itself in experiences of boundlessness and limitlessness, in both nature and in art. When confronted with such experiences, the mind's capacity for both imagination and reason grasps limitlessness as a total thing, unable to qualify infinity in terms of rationality and the judgments arrived to force the mind to regard the sublime object as "contrapurposive".<sup>19</sup> By this, the judgment itself is purposive rather than the object being judged

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<sup>18</sup> Steven Vine, "Reinventing the Sublime," 13.

<sup>19</sup> Ginsborg, Hannah, "Kant's Aesthetics and Teleology".

and said judgment is also represented for reason rather than imagination and in effect consumes the "whole vocation of the mind".<sup>20</sup> In effect, this forces that with no bounds into totality, a result of the mind having no image of infinity to associate experiences of impressive scale, terror and unquantifiable size with. This lack of image allows the mind to generate an understanding rather than synthesize imagination and understanding to arrive at a conclusion or judgment about an image. Sublimity "is not contained in anything in nature, but only in our mind" in so far as the mind is needed to qualify an experience as sublime.<sup>21</sup>

Although Kant's sublime is valuable, and an enchanting means of creating meaning, it is also problematic and deeply inaccessible for those categorized as 'others' or beings in binary opposition to the educated elite whose ventures and encounters with limitlessness are not stipulated by idealized traits, such as femininity. This is excused matter of taste, female gender is equaled to aesthetic beauty by both Kant and Burke, whereas the masculine is attributed to sublimity. There is an illusion of control that accompanies beautiful things. This controlled element is equally reflected in literary texts written for woman, ones meant to train "young women in conduct instead of educating them".<sup>22</sup>

The experienced sublime is a critical component of Romantic aesthetics. Although its presence in 19th mid-century women's writing is less apparent and used to a subversive effect, it is also used in a way that readily challenges the notions of the Kantian sublime and man's

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<sup>20</sup>Harris, Katherine D. "Feminizing the Textual Body: Female Readers Consuming the Literary Annual.", 259.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 264.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 574.



capacity for reason and imagination with neo-platonic imagery in texts often regarded as 'lower' art, such as travel writing and works such as *The Keepsake*, which were published for monetary means rather than artistic pursuits.

The "hyper-masculine, large, dark, powerful" sublime is deeply interconnected with power and those in possession of authority.<sup>23</sup> When one is confronted by the masculine sublime, they are 'reduced' to a position of physical delicacy and weakness, in effect, they are rendered with the ideal qualities of the feminine. Momentarily, beings that are subjugated cross the being-other binary, if only for an experiment to push the limits of faculties of mind. This is all accomplished by the male viewer's aesthetic distance, a luxury not afforded to females.<sup>24</sup> This distance gives room to confront limits, to reason and to develop an individuality in the face of terror. Sublimity does not treat the female in the same way.

Kept in the depths of obscurity, 19th-century women face the sublime to different ways. The concept is no stranger to the outsider. There is a similar limitless drawn between being deprived of power by society and an individual confrontation with giant mountains, tumultuous oceans, and cosmic voyage. All incidents take away power, but for female writers, power was not an attribute regularly found. The sublime becomes a problem for female writers, because it represents a power structure dominated by beings with no ability to face their other counterparts. Power becomes too individual and the role of the categorical imperative facing the sublime too lonesome and masculine to empower.

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<sup>23</sup> Vine, Steven. "Reinventing the Sublime," 4

<sup>24</sup> Bohls, "Women Travel Writers," 219.

Instead, I propose that the categorical imperative allows women and those rendered 'other' by societal paradigms to arrive at knowledge through the sublime in a different way, as exhibited in the texts of Mary Shelley. Through a complete rejection and critique of sublime experience, Shelley utilizes the faculty of mind to find meaning in materiality and the natural world. More importantly, her texts examine the categorical imperative as a means of human connection, in so revealing that morality is something shared, not something that exists across a binary of being and other or good and evil. Rather, aesthetic emotions of love and awe come from experiences and devotion to other beings, rather than experiences of isolation and lonesome contemplation. These are the emotions that deliver meaning and an understanding of morality that is inclusive of the forgotten nothings.

## CHAPTER ONE: DEVOTION AND SUBLIMITY

### ON RELIGION AND THE SUBLIME

Although the sublime is usually linked to reason, the sublime also manifests itself in religious experience. Religious experiences rely on faculties of mind to help individuals arrive at theological knowledge, and often involve similar confrontations with sublime excess. Women writers prior to Mary Shelley investigated the sublime, but often in context of religious devotion. In this framework, the vastness of the cosmos could be investigated alongside the religious significance of both Earthly and cosmic creation. One example of a female writer who investigates this is Anna Laetitia Barbauld. Barbauld's devotion stands in contrast to Mary Shelley's secular devotion to relationships. She presents a positive image of the sublime, but confronts the sublime in a religious manner.

Therefore, before examining Shelley, I will examine Anna Laetitia Barbauld. Barbauld's "A summer Evening's Meditation" is a positive confrontation with the sublime and the divine. Both the positive and divine aspects of this poem stand in contrast to Shelley's own body of work. Barbauld's poem is a cosmic voyage, unique in its speaker's femininity and its characterization of the natural world and the universe as feminine as well. The conceptual frame that cosmic exploration grants Barbauld's speaker was one hardly chartered by female poets, reserved for the likes of Milton. Although poets such as Elizabeth Walker explored the cosmos through verse, none did so in a way that honored the faculties and utility of imagination and fancy and allowed the divine of the universe to be recognized within the feminine self. Although

the speaker “seeks again the known accustomed spot”, Barbauld’s departure from nature and into the cosmos signals an interest in imagination.<sup>25</sup>

Although the poem seems to test the limits of devotion, it also features a woman writer encountering the sublime in the cosmos and voluntarily returning to Earth, weary from her “flight so daring” and encounters with splendors. Such celestial territory is claimed by Barbauld through language. The natural and celestial world is certainly divine, the sun a “sultry tyrant” reminiscent of Milton, but is pushed away by an impatient and feminine moon who allows “shadows [to] spread apace”. Through using understood phenomena, such as the waxing and waning of the moon to signal deities of significance, the poet communicates that the divine and the cosmic exist in unity, while the realm of the material is governed and connected to their laws, but must be discovered to lend themselves to any sort of knowledge about the divine. The moon gives her permission and in effect, the personified Contemplation “moves forward” into a journey marked by “dancing lustres” and “ten thousand trembling fires”.<sup>26</sup> Just as the moon was regarded as having the “power to draw the marrow of the bones of animals”, the moon playfully draws contemplation from her material attachments and into a landscape where contemplation is the only tool of exploration.<sup>27</sup> She is granted permission to voyage and chart the stars and the heavens. Gendered language convinces us that the cosmos, although holding the possibility to

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<sup>25</sup> Barbauld, Anna Laetitia. “A Summer Evening’s Meditation,” 1773.  
<https://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/contemps/barbauld/poems1773/meditation.html>.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>27</sup> Ridgely, Beverly S. 1963. “The Cosmic Voyage in French Sixteenth-century Learned Poetry”. *Studies in the Renaissance* 10. [University of Chicago Press, Renaissance Society of America]: 141. doi:10.2307/2857053.

great terror, are safe and that the speaker is worthy of fanciful thought. Once she is encouraged, the speaker's imagination leads her through a terribly beautiful journey, one marked by invitation and linear path. In her encounters of the great cosmos, she is met with silence but her "self-collected soul / Turns inward" and she is able to recognize her divinity as akin to a spark of God's divine fire.

Sailing on the wing's of fancy and imagination, the speaker utilizes the same capacities that mark the Romantic's pursuit of individuality and self-realization, of meaning constructed through personal experience. Yet, this speaker refuses to recognize boundaries as stagnant as she launches "into the trackless depth of space" with an ironic trajectory as she encounters what the reader can presume are the heavens. Yet, despite her refusal to recognize boundaries she must stop. She supposes that there is a beyond—one that features an 'eternal night' reminiscent of St. John of the Cross (Citation here) and thus, spiritual doubt. Although she has the faculties of mind to encounter more of uncharted creation, she voluntarily returns to a very human place. Perhaps this is a recognition of emotion or an exercise of autonomy, or an attest to the limitations of divine devotion. I would like to argue, that the poem functions as an early investigation of the masculine and aspirational sublime, one that exists in conceptual framework that is abandoned for the material world of the known and ordered. Imagination lends the speaker knowledge of the sublime and she obviously has the capacity for reason to deliver her from experience to knowledge of her autonomy, but voluntary chooses to leave and return to the natural world:

*"sun, and shade, and laws, and streams*

*A mansion fair and spacious for its guest,*

*And full replete with wonders”*

To reside in a physical home filled with wonder with knowledge of the cosmos is peculiar. The contemplating speaker makes the conscious choice to return from her journey, despite her knowledge of the cosmos gained from imagination. For she has the knowledge that “mind could not be cleft from body” entirely.<sup>28</sup> She goes as deep as her imagination will allow, only to return. She engages with cosmic struggle and turns away from it, instead devoting herself to the wonders in the natural world despite her knowledge that something far greater and—perhaps—incomprehensible exists. She need not be consumed by sublimity, but can instead argue that mind must be tied to matter to create a hierarchy of meaning. In questioning the cosmos that make up the night sky, Barbauld asserts that the female mind is equally capable of meditating on the cosmos and the divine itself. Equally as important, the return home signifies that this return is not a defeat, but rather a way to make meaning through a union of sense and mind, rather than faculties of mind alone.

Devotion and cosmic voyage at once seem deeply intertwined. Exploratory flight and astronomy act simultaneously, in effect producing a work with knowledge of material subjects—such as science—and faculties of the mind, such as contemplation. By allowing a woman’s disembodied spirit to rise with religious devotion Barbauld subverts a territory commonly reversed for the masculine with her use of imagery and personal autonomy. there is a pattern of linear journey and return in this poem, one that closely parallels other works of devotion in the Renaissance and Romantic periods. To act on a common dream—of leaving the material world

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<sup>28</sup> Steven Vine, *Reimagining the Sublime*, 40.

and discover—Barbauld voluntarily returns home in effect questioning the role of devotion and divinity in the material world. It would seem unnecessary to return home when one's faculties of fancy and imagination could act as a means to transport man into cosmic flight without the use of manmade contraption or the hand of God. In fact, Barbauld's ascent seems to subvert her devotion from physical manifestations of the divine to the material world. In this action of return, morality seems to shift from the divine fire to the fair and spacious world. The speaker does not need to fear the—perhaps sublime—terrors of the divine nor devote herself to these awe-inspiring feats. Rather, she can depart with knowledge of these events with her humanity preserved. In returning to the Earth, Barbauld rejects any desire for ultimate knowledge of the divine or the supralunary universe. Although the contemplator remains devoted to chaos throughout her travels, she ultimately devotes herself to that which she can achieve some unity in knowledge with: the natural and material world. Although her knowledge that her being is one with the divine's as if sparks of a flame, she dares not further her voyage less she be entrenched in some sort of dark night of religious devotion, or a complete abandonment of fate in the face of the sublime and even further, the godhead.

Devotion and the physical space one's body and mind occupy are obvious concerns of Barbauld's text; however, these relationships are seemingly solipsistic. There is a tendency on the self to construct meaning and relate themselves to their observations and contemplations. Instead, triumphant knowledge of the cosmos is abandoned for the relationships fostered on Earth.

Understanding Barbauld's voyage in the context of the feminine sublime is important as it justifies the female speaker's exploration of transcendence, when so often confined to "beauty, the sense, the body, sexuality, pleasure and passivity".<sup>29</sup> Although Kant writes that women are capable of as much understanding of men, he asserts that it is an understanding confined to beauty whereas understanding from the mind of men is an expression that "signifies identity with the sublime".<sup>30</sup> Barbauld's speaker is capable of navigating the sublime, but ultimately abandons it for the material whose world holds more utility for someone branded an other.

Transitioning from a religious model to a secular one, I point to Mary Shelley's work in children's literature. Shelley's Maurice, or the Fisher's Cot, presents a secular model of devotion through familial relationships. Shelley presents an alternative to Barbauld's reliance on materiality as place of safety, and the religious sublime as a way to gain knowledge. Mary Shelley's children's book proposes that devotion in relationships is a positive alternative to religious devotion.

Although the text does not present an encounter with the sublime in nature, it introduces a child's meditation on death and loss that exceeds knowledge delivered by the senses. The story begins with a traveler who encounters a beautiful youth troubled by the funeral of a fisherman called Barnet. The boy, an orphan, worked on a farm but was told to leave due to his delicate physicality. His sincerity and kindness resulted in employment with the fisherman Barnet, and a bond of familial love that transcended death. On the verge of losing his home—the cottage he

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 39.

<sup>30</sup> Steven Vine, *Reimagining the Sublime*, 39.



shared with Barnet—the father invites Henry to his home, only to find that this beautiful youth is the grown version of his kidnapped baby from a family vacation long ago.

Filled with descriptions of beauty in the natural world, the story lacks the terror that so often characterizes the sublime. However, the story deals with familial loss that sense cannot fathom and that mind is forced to preoccupy itself with. In that regard, the story does not investigate the sublime but instead tries to figure the unknowable death through the beauty of the natural world and devotion to other beings.

Although not a feat of the natural world, Shelley manipulates these seemingly impossible and unfathomable events—kidnapping, abuse and the loss of a loved one—through the combined faculties of mind and sense. The loss of father-figure Barnet by Henry and the loss of Henry by his original father leads to half-imaginings and cries of loss. For example, following Barnet's death, Henry "cried for the loss...then watched the sun set in the blue sea; and half imagined that perhaps Barnet was not dead".<sup>31</sup> By mourning and contemplating the limits of death and being, Henry's devotion to his father figure supplies the reader with the knowledge that relationships lend themselves to discovering moral truths. By devoting himself to the deceased fisherman in actions of cleaning the cottage, mourning and acting with integrity, Henry experiences loss but does not stray from his devotion to his relationships. Rather, in the face of loss and mourning, Henry becomes a moral exemplar, offering what little he has to a stranger.

Furthermore, when Maurice is reunited with his real father without the knowledge that they are related, the two discuss the world's various wonders: "why the water of the river always

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<sup>31</sup> Mary Shelley, *Maurice, or The Fisher's Cot: A Tale*, (New York: Random House, 1998), 90.

ran and never became less; how the sun was governed as it passed along the sky, and why the moon changed".<sup>32</sup> Here, relationships between characters are used to make sense of melancholy or incomprehensible situations, such as death, abuse or search for meaning. The tangibility of relationships, and the materiality of the settings in which they are introduced, is used thematically across M. Shelley's body of work, often in the wake of disaster and the shortly following moments of mourning.

Yet, compassion in relationships is what delivers both Henry and his father to meaning and knowledge that they are linked by familial love, rather than a chance encounter in a seaside town. It is Henry's devotion to the fisherman that attracts his real father, and it is the father's devotion to his long lost child that allows him to reunite with Henry. This familial devotion provides a basis through which Shelley's use of relationships can be understood as an alternative to the religious and empirical sublime.

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 101.

## CHAPTER TWO: CRITIQUING THE SUBLIME

Mary Shelley's work in the *The Keepsake* annual is an anomaly across her body of work. Written for a female audience, these pieces of travel writing, stories of deceit and poems of mourning take a quiet place amongst her long novels. Yet, they investigate similar notions of materiality and reject the sublime in a subversive and accessible manner and function as communal books, and more importantly, communal art.

*The Keepsake* and the annuals similar to it promised its female audience an immediacy and poems tailored directly to them, but often problematically so by male editors and female writers stuck in a tension between creating an instruction manual on femininity and claiming work meant for an audience in possession of 'less' aesthetic taste than poems written for the socially elite or art intended for purchase or gallery. In fact, these poems and pieces of prose can be understood as commemorative souvenirs rather than individual pieces of art, or were deemed to be. The poems and works of literature presented in the keepsakes in effect became embodiments not of an author's art, but of the album owner—the consumer's—esthetic taste, or that of the friend who gifted it to the owner. Texts then become marks of moment and memory, symbolizing the relationship between the purchaser, the intended recipient, the author and all those who had a hand in the annual's creation, rather than solely belonging and relating to the self as creator and relator of meaning and text.

In a sense, *The Keepsakes* are equivalent to modern kitsch, but still deserving of some aesthetic evaluation, especially when prose and poems found in their binding appeared in the bodies of work of the likes of Byron, Wordsworth, Percy Shelley and Mary Shelley, whom this text will give the majority of

consideration. They promised immediacy to their subscribers, and induced a sort of sickness and obsession in their consumers<sup>33</sup>

Annuals as texts were defined by nine criteria: purpose, publication time frame, continual evolution, authorship, originality, engravings, useful information, and finally exterior format<sup>34</sup>. The role of the annual as gift and as a commodity of femininity link material ‘things’ to real individuals and their most private place of consumption: the home, the living room, the study or even one’s bedroom. They were, in the simplest terms, leather bound volumes designed to be “re-read, memorized, memorialized and treasured for its internal and external beauty”.<sup>35</sup> By this, one can conclude that these annuals were certainly literature meant to be read more than once, but also functioned as ornate decoration and a symbol of an affectionate relationship. Having a foundation of consumer geared marketing—the annuals were originally edited by men for women—and classified as gifts, the annuals lacked the solitude of books written for scholastic purposes, but rather had a connotation of relationships and subsequently, heartfelt association.

One central question of this research is whether Mary Shelley’s prose in *The Keepsakes* can be considered in taste to be deemed ‘art’. Annuals were often posed as a disease, and by extension their editors made effort to present exaggerated and representations of family, woman and the domestic in their pages. Disregarded as objects with fleeting meaning, annuals contained prose, poetry and engravings—elements classically deemed as art—but faced ridicule for their intended audience, gaudy coverings and ornamental status. In short, they fell out of the 19<sup>th</sup> century scope of taste.

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<sup>33</sup> Harris, Katherine D. “Feminizing the Textual Body: Female Readers Consuming the Literary Annual,” 581.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 581.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 580.

In regards to taste, *The Keepsake* poses an ambiguous problem. Annuals can be considered as a multitude of things: consumer product, literature and gifted parlor ornament. Although *The Keepsake* is bolstered by authors whose body of work is acclaimed in academic circles, the content of the books deal mostly with marriage, death and occupations commonly deemed as lesser than concerns of morality, meaning and mind. However, as these texts were intended for young women, and often penned by women as well, these texts offer unparalleled insight into the projected preoccupations of women and their actual concern, as opposed to what publishing companies thought were their concerns. Granted, this may be ambiguous at times given the role of the editor in the creation of the book. I am concerned with *The Keepsake* as object of memory and as commodity, but above all, as having the potential to be considered a work of art. Certainly if the engravings hold aesthetic value, the prose and poetry is of some worth.

In order to examine the worth of these annuals, I will briefly address their differences and history. *The Keepsake*, edited by Charles Heath and Frederic Mansel Reynolds was worthy of a quality—and stereotypically feminine—label. A base reading of this action would indicate that only the appearance of the annual was valued, and although that could be equated to a woman's worth, the money spent on writers for *The Keepsake* distinguished it in its effort to create a microcosm of an art community for females.

Unashamedly, literary annuals were initially guided by the format of “an eighteenth-century conduct manual”, such as those written by Mary Wollstonecraft.<sup>36</sup> Offering moral guidance, they advocated an artificial woman. Wollstonecraft's participation in the conduct discourse was both critical of

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<sup>36</sup> Harris, Katherine D. “Feminizing the Textual Body: Female Readers Consuming the Literary Annual,” 584.

the ways in which male writing of female conduct unrealistic ideal of femininity, one constructed on a false education system. Rather, Wollstonecraft's outlined conduct advocated for a high-class woman educated enough to fulfill her duties, while having enough classical training to contemplate meaning and morality. Although a champion of the rights of women, the departure of Mary Shelley away from her mother is readily exhibited in both *The Keepsakes* and Shelley's other works.

Gone is the disinterested viewer assumed to be an integral part of an artistic piece, and replaced is a book with which serves as a means to enhance a relationship and endear two individuals to one another. Although at first glance they lack the scholastic depth of Shelley's long novels or Byron's poems, the prose and poetry written in *The Keepsake* by Mary Shelley offers an elaboration on shared memory and begs the reader to consider morality as something shared rather than something generated by the mind on an individual level. Devotion, not to the divine, but to the nexus of a relationship thus becomes a generator of meaning, one that offers a feminine critique of artistic values and the sublime as a means to use faculties of mind to find meaning in terrible incomprehensible feats.

In their ability to connote memory, these annuals were not empty of significance but rather accessible, although sometimes problematic texts, still worthy of aesthetic evaluation, but in a way that challenged past and present understandings of taste and beauty. Deeply intertwined with romantic values, such as authenticity and creation and self-determination, the annuals are more complex than collections simply designed to woo women and commodify the ideal female. These texts are both highly problematic, but offer insight into Mary Shelley's disfigured writing and the distance between both her role as author and the superficial preoccupations of her society, despite existing and operating in those realms to make ends meet, and even producing work of pride to be exhibited in *The Keepsake*.

Mary Shelley's participation in *The Keepsake* is neither apathetic nor purely aesthetic, but rather a primary result of financial benefit. Her journals express no objection to the aesthetic cultivated in *The Keepsake*, but Shelley remains at distance from the text's entirety.

M. Shelley's contributions to *The Keepsake*, edited by Frederic Mansel Reynolds are often disregarded as a means to assure an income following the death of Percy Shelley and a life spent within a midst of mourning, longing and learning.

Although these texts do not bare the same literary depth or interest of 'taste' as Shelley's long novels, they are still worthy of attention in their ability to understand the melancholy surrounding midcentury 'art' created for young women. A primarily female audience creates and adds to art's gendered discourse: that which is ornamental, disposable and feminine belonging to beauty and therefore women, while that which was lasting, created for academic study, preservation and contemplation deemed worthy of the masculine. Yet, this is highly problematic. Although M. Shelley's *Keepsake* stories are at times simple, they are not disposable nor are they unworthy of contemplation. It would seem that in aesthetics, art has always been placed on a hierarchical ladder. Perhaps this is why art is still problematic and exclusive in the present, but that is outside the scope of my research. When valued as an object worthy of contemplation, the writings of the *Keepsakes* become stories worthy of contemplation and depict philosophical notions in an inclusive manner free of the elevated rhetoric of academic discourse. Rather, they present and comment upon the value and merit of relationships, image and art to a forgotten audience, all while introducing an aesthetic of mourning echoing M. Shelley's own insights and attempts to reimagine power and imagination in an inclusive manner, but with the voice of an outsider.

*The Keepsakes*, although critically devoid of classical value, offer a subversive understanding of beauty and gender roles that challenge assumptions about the gendered sublime. Furthermore, this challenge provides the basis to reexamine Shelley's greater works as attempts to both match Shelley's own experiential knowledge of psychology and relationships to image and text.

*The Keepsake* first sparked my interest as it placed M. Shelley within the center of polite society, an occupation that was not charted territory so to speak, due to her young elopement and society blaming her for Harriet Westbrook's untimely death. In such a discourse, her work was presented in the same breath as Coleridge and Wordsworth. Yet, she wrote for young women and in doing so, presents an anomaly in a tradition so often revered for the strength of its male poets. Although one could argue Romanticism ended in 1930, and for M. Shelley ended in 1829, one can also examine M. Shelley's lesser works to hold aesthetic value of some sort. Although seemingly paradoxical, given the text's status as a consumerist object and feminine creation, the text is still worthy of aesthetic evaluation, even to just understand the implication of ornament both to M. Shelley's worldview and the effects of alterity on narrative and aesthetic experience.

The *Keepsakes* can be seen creations intended for children and young women. Constituting and serving somewhat of an imagined community of young women, *The Keepsake* catered and delivered stories meant for domestic ornament. In Shelley's keepsake short stories, there is a reflexive understanding of loss and mourning, one that reflects both the loss of art dedicated for coffee tables and parlor discussion and mourning for the lives of those for whom the text is intended.



## TRANSFORMATION

In an Epigraph citing Coleridge, Mary Shelley's "Transformation" acts as if an adage to melancholy. The story confronts the sublime, but finds no moral use for it. By prefacing *Transformation* with a question as to what manner of man one is, the story announces that it is a moral commentary. Specifically, it is moral commentary intended for women consumers. The lines that precede the epigraph pose the question:

*"I bid thee say—*

*What manner of man art thou?" (176-177)*

Morality is at the front of this piece, but is not a concern of the story's protagonist. The intertextuality of Shelley's *Transformation*, despite its appearance in the commercial Keepsake, provides some grounds for the text to be evaluated as something of value—perhaps not as much value as her Frankenstein masterpiece, but of value nonetheless. Shelley places herself within the lineage of Coleridge and by doing so, prepares her text to be evaluated alongside the landmark texts of Romanticism. For the purposes of this chapter, I seek to analyze Shelley's conception of self alongside the imagination, in preparation to assess the significance of the sublime to both belief and the female self within Shelley's texts.

In Shelley's texts, the distance between author and narrator seems to appear as something of significance, both in the irony it creates and the commentary it offers. This distance, embodied in

Shelley's works creates a concealment of desires. There is value in Mary Shelley's less discussed writings, in both understanding her growth and ideas about sociopolitical change and the unstable belief in imagination, egalitarianism and social order based on love rather than power that is found through an ideology created through a masterful exploration of the self and faith within her lesser studied texts. This faith, remarkable in light of Shelley's personal experiences and her father's experiences in grief.

"Transformation" occurs in Genoa, Italy and focuses on a male protagonist, Guido. He leaves Italy for travel in France and Paris, effectively governing his life with self-serving desire. Guido's extravagant hypermasculinity is characteristic of the Byronic hero. He was born with "the most imperious, haughty timeless spirit, with which ever mortal was gifted".<sup>37</sup> Guido questions "who could control me" throughout his time in Paris.<sup>38</sup> In "My Hideous Progeny: Mary Shelley and the Feminization of Romanticism" scholar Mary Poovey addresses Shelley's critique of romantic imagination and the ways in which the antisocial dimension of imagination is something that inhibits the liberation of the "imagination from the more egotistical, less defensible act of public self assertion".<sup>39</sup> In the context of "Transformation", Guido's self has access to the "free scope [of] the imagination" but only uses it for his own short-term means<sup>40</sup>. Although this work primarily focuses on Frankenstein, Poovey's argument can be understood in context of Guido's identity formation and the way in which his soul is made and changed in "Transformation".

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<sup>37</sup>. Mary Shelley, "Transformation," in *The Mary Shelley Reader*, ed. Betty T. Bennett and Charles E. Robinson (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc, 1990), 286.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 286.

<sup>39</sup> Mary Poovey, "My Hideous Progeny: Mary Shelley and the Feminization of Romanticism," *PMLA* 95, NO. 3 (1980): 332-347, accessed February 28, 2016, doi: 10.2307/461877

<sup>40</sup> Mary Shelley, "Transformation", 286.

One finds Guido traveling in Paris prior to his encounter with the sublime. In his travels, Guido does not utilize imagination as a vehicle for escaping his “free, independent” and undeniably masculine self.<sup>41</sup> He has no reason to escape his ego through faculties of imagination and his experiences are marked by his “presumption and arrogance”.<sup>42</sup> In an effort to feed only his desires, Guido sells his possessions. He spends his inheritance on self-serving desire. In the absence of social regulation Guido’s identity formation “is primarily influenced by the imagination’s longing to deny fundamental human limitations—in particular, the body’s determinate bondage to nature and to death”.<sup>43</sup> Guido’s limitations are found in his finances, and he solves them by selling his estate. He is hardly troubled by governmental affairs, except for when they threaten his pursuit of pleasure. For example, when the Duke of Orleans is murdered and city life comes to a standstill, Guido is unsatisfied and looks to the past for comfort. He cannot imagine something better than the past, and resorts to childhood dreams: “I would still go there [Genoa], claim my bride, and rebuild my fortunes”.<sup>44</sup> He only knows how to mimic his childhood aspirations to supply his being with meaning. He uses imagination as a medium of personal power, rather than a means to arrive at a sense of morality. Shortly thereafter, Guido returns home to Genoa. In doing so, he effectively arrives at the place of his fondest memories and looks to reconstruct them. Guido’s soul-making and identify formation is based off of desire and the actions he takes to pursue it in his attempts at reconstructing his boyhood.

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 287.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 288.

<sup>43</sup> Mary Poovey, “My Hideous Progeny: Mary Shelley and the Feminization of Romanticism”

<sup>44</sup> Mary Shelley, “Transformation,” 288.

What is remarkable about Guido prior to his encounter to the sublime is his reliance on imitation—mimesis—to react to unfavorable situations. As a child, he encounters Juliet. Although she is later objectified as the story's object and Guido's possession, she is also the character through which Guido's inability to equip reason and thought unbound to desire manifests itself around. Although Guido appears fond of the freedom and independence he boasts of, he is bound to the actions of others. In effect, Guido is forced to mimic the actions of others until he encounters the immediacy and certainty of death later in "Transformation".

For example, when trusted and raised with his father's childhood friend's daughter, Juliet the speaker's tone changes. Juliet becomes "a rock of refuge" (287). When she is pursued by a much older cousin, who remarks that Juliet is "his bride, and asked her to marry him" eventually drawing the young girl near<sup>45</sup>. Guido reacts with the "emotions of a maniac" and hurts the other boy.<sup>46</sup>

In the aftermath of the childhood fight, Guido mimics the cousin's declaration of love. He leads Juliet to the family chapel: "I made her touch the sacred relics—I harrowed her child's heart, and profaned her child's lips with an oath, that she would be mine, and mine only." This promise of marriage, between an eleven-year-old Guido and an eight-year-old Juliet, is dictated by imitation of the cousin rather than Guido's free and independent spirit. He is incapable of seeing the cousin's action as anything but an infringement upon Guido's own desires. He knows only how to practice mimicry. There is little love, instead Guido's remarks are possessive, rendering Juliet an object of his desire rather than an autonomous being. These actions of desire and possessiveness seem to stem from imagined fears, and imagined blows

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<sup>45</sup> Transformation 287.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid 287.

to Guido's childish ego. Juliet's beauty is for Guido alone. In effect, Juliet's Her autonomy removed in an effort to preserve the Beauty that the narrator finds in the safety her presence promises.

As an adult, Guido falls prey to imitation again. Torella, Juliet's father, refuses to give Juliet to Guido in marriage. Guido crafts a plan to kidnap Juliet with the help of his friends, and in effect wounds two of Torella's servants. Guido is enslaved "to the violent tyranny of [his] temper" and plots to kidnap both Torella and Juliet.<sup>47</sup> His plan is thwarted and Guido is banished, indebted and friendless. This action is an imitation of Guido's childhood battle with his cousin. Those who refuse to grant Guido's desires are dealt with in a way that parallels a script: senseless violence to deliver Guido to the object of his desire. Guido faces the people who challenge him without sense of his own morality or their otherness, he renders individuals such as Torella and Juliet as objects won or lost.

After attempting to kidnap his bride and her father, Guido finds himself on "the blue waves of the Mediterranean Sea" as he did in boyhood.<sup>48</sup> He is banished and possessed by the same rebel heart that marked his boyhood. Yet, this time the sea is different. Faced with the loss of his material possessions and his future with Juliet, Guido's desolation and agony amplifies. As he wanders a rocky shore, Guido encounters the sublime:

As if on the the waving of a wizard's wand, a murky web of clouds, blotting the late azure sky, and darkening and disturbing the till now placid deep [arose]. The clouds had strange fantastic shapes; and they changed, and mingled, and seemed to be driven about by a mighty spell... Round this cape suddenly came, driven by the wind, a vessel. In vain

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<sup>47</sup> Mary Shelley, "Transformation," 291.

<sup>48</sup> Mary Shelley, "Transformation," 286.

the mariners tried to force a path for her to the open sea – the gale drove her on the rocks.

It will perish!... And to my young heart the idea of death came for the first time blended with that of joy.<sup>49</sup>

No longer can the overtly masculine Guido deny his human limitations. He is forced to contemplate the terror of fate in a state of helpless isolation. In effect, Guido encounters the horrors of death without experiencing it directly through the sublime. Through watching the “dark breakers threw hither and thither the fragments of the wreck” in the sea, Guido encounters an incomprehensible idea. The shipwreck assumes the role of an object through which Guido “can experience this very impossibility, this permanent failure of representation” of nature’s power over man that still delivers Guido to knowledge of his destiny.<sup>50</sup> Poovey describes death as “the initial and obsessive focus of the imagination” and for Guido to encounter it for the first time as an effect of the sublime illustrates that he had previously lived with minimal use of the faculty, or used only to further the fulfillment of his desires.<sup>51</sup> The event is characteristic of an experience of pleasure completely removed from faculties of desire, an experience unknown to Guido prior to his walk. He contemplates in safety, but his circumstance quickly changes when a disfigured dwarf emerges from the wreckage.

This horrible enchantment with the sublime occurs to a man whose masculinity is an exaggeration of the stereotypical Romantic hero. Although Guido obviously encounters the sublime in the turmoil of the doomed ship, he does not arrive at a universal moral feeling. Rather, the warmth Guido feels when he

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<sup>49</sup> Mary Shelley, “Transformation,” 292.

<sup>50</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, (London: Verso, 1989), 203.

<sup>51</sup> Mary Poovey, “My Hideous Progeny: Mary Shelley and the Feminization of Romanticism

spots a survivor “so snatched from a watery tomb” freezes at the sight of a disfigured being.<sup>52</sup> Guido eventually engages with the man, who advises that Guido take revenge on Juliet by switching bodies for three days time and the dwarf’s treasure. Tempted by the possibility of taking revenge and the monster’s treasure, Guido is tricked. Through making a pact with the dwarf, Guido’s material desires are quelled by the thought of his relationship with Juliet, rather than Juliet as an object. Eventually, Guido slays the dwarf, returning to his body, his lover and Torella’s riches. Guido affirms that “no one better knows than I the value of his own body; no one, probably, except myself, ever having had it stolen from him”.<sup>53</sup> This return to “bodliness or materiality that Kantian sublimity represses” represents Shelley’s use of sublimity as a means of grounding workings of mind into the material world.<sup>54</sup> Although Guido functions both as a critique of the Romantic Hero, he also exemplifies a model of Shelley’s manipulation of sublimity.

In studying Guido, one arrives at the conclusion that man is chained to the material world by both emotion and relationships. Free will, when removed from materiality, appears to be a viable truth. However, Shelley’s manipulation of sublimity argues against a Kantian understanding of free will. Within the context of *The Keepsake*, Shelley’s subversion of sublimity in front of a female audience accomplishes a subversion that illustrates the complete opposite of Guido’s understanding bodily affirmation. Shelley critiques the Byronic hero through Guido, the irony of his affirmation “no one, probably, except myself, ever having had it stolen from him” being that physical beauty dictates the worth of *The Keepsake*’s body as merchandise, the worth of artistic objects and when understood in the context of aesthetics founding assumptions, dictates the worth of that categorized as female, be it object, being or

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<sup>52</sup> Mary Shelley, “Transformation,” 292.

<sup>53</sup> Mary Shelley, “Transformation,” 300.

<sup>54</sup> Steven Vine, *Reinventing the Sublime: Post-Romantic Literature and Theory*, (Chicago: Sussex Academic Press, 2013), 40.

being discussed as object. In her use of irony, Shelley effectively illustrates that those whose bodies have been stolen and whose lives have been dictated by parameters and customs of society have no ability to choose and create meaning from free will. Rather, like Henry of Maurice, or The Fisher's Cot, are resigned to relationships and materiality as their mode of meaning creation.

### THE VALUE OF THE ORNAMENTAL KEEPSAKE

#### TRAVEL WRITING AND MEANING MAKING

*When we visit Italy, we become what the Italians were censured for being, -- enjoyers of the beauties of nature, the elegance of art, the delights of climate, the recollections of the past, and the pleasures of society, without a thought beyond. (Preface to Rambles in Germany and Italy, in 1840, 1842, and 1843 – Page 386)*

Shelley's travel writing are texts intended for audiences of others, similar to her texts for the annuals. Travel literature reflects upon the natural world, but Shelley's work does not remark on the meaning derived from beautiful or sublime experience. Instead, her travel literature confirms a shared model of morality. It does not affirm that the unitary mind is responsible for meaning making, but rather emphasizes the role of relationships and encounters. There are elements of art in travel literature, such as mimetic imitation of the natural world through prose and an attempt at capturing beauty through memory. It is well-documented in Mary Shelley's journals that she was well read in Cicero, and for that reason I will compare her evaluation of Italy in travel writing with *De Oratore's* conception of mimesis and



rhetoric in oratory. The rhetoric of her travel writing relies on the same principles of of mimetic reproduction of a scene through prose, with the only—undocumented--use of imagination presumed to appear in her personal memory, which is openly critiqued within the dialogue. In the same manner that *De Oratore* draws on rhetoric as an unconventional form of art that leads to truth, Shelley draws on magazine writing to accomplish a similar task. They both dwell in the mimetic reproduction of memory in argument and memory in prose.

The mimesis that appears in Shelley's travel writing is different than that of Guido's in *The Keepsake*. Memory serves travel writing as a place of inspiration and reflection, whereas imitation in *The Keepsake* is a substitution for autonomous thought and action. By imitating nature, Shelley offers her readers a glimpse at beauty. For Guido, imitation acts as an illusion of choice. Instead, he is condemned to reliving and remodeling experiences, incapable of creating new ones due to his selfish character.

In understanding travel writing as art, one must distance themselves from art held in 'high' taste, art certainly consists "in things thoroughly examined and clearly apprehended... and within the grasp of exact knowledge" as claimed in *De Oratore* (Cicero 304). This sentiment seems to be shared in Shelley's text, as exact knowledge derived from experience and relationships contributes more meaning and human truth to travel than fleeting impressions altered by fancy and imagination. Differing from Shelley's prose which appeared in the annual, *Recollections of Italy (1824)* functions similar to the text of a dialogue, in so far as using conversation and company as a mode of contemplation. The audience is left with the eloquence and talent of the writer, wedded to companionship without the virtue of devotion to refined art such as sculpture, painting, or ceramics (Cicero 304).

In a sense, Shelley's travel writing anticipates *De Oratore's* sarcastic critique of perfection: "For who can attain to that sublime and universal perfection which you demand" (Cicero 307). In a sense, the gift texts of the annuals, Shelley's writing for children and her travel writing beg her audience to grasp that same question. In imitating the natural world through travel writing rhetoric and eloquent prose, Shelley begs her reader to consider the relationship between memory and style in an effort to communicate that meaning exists more in momentary exchanges and relationships than lonesome encounters with the terrifying, the incredible and ultimately challenges the nature of the sublime in and of itself. Where the sublime agitates and provokes, beauty "calms and comforts" but for a life spent on the outskirts of society and as a victim of alterity and great suffering, perhaps more meaning lies in "the sentiment provoked when the suprasensible Idea appears in the material" due to the lonesome inharmonious, and although confrontable, impermanent nature of sublime encounters (Zizek 202).

The souvenir and memory motif that appears deeply intertwined with the keepsakes themselves also appear in Mary Shelley's travel writing *Recollections of Italy* (1824). Recounting beauty in the natural world on days "too rare not to be seized upon with avidity" creates a space where both speakers occupy a place of disinterestedness with art, instead consumed by the nature world and each other.<sup>55</sup> Enchanted by gentle beauty of "ambient air" and river banks "shaded by beechwood", the speaker wanders and eventually mistakes "a sign of rapture" for a sigh of sorrow. This sigh is emitted from Edmund Malville, a man who in reality, was counted as Percy Shelley's close friend. In response, the speaker is unable to understand the possibility of melancholy in the English park she has found herself in.

<sup>56</sup> Melville is invited to join her and they speak. As Melville talks, his insignificance transforms into "an

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<sup>55</sup> Collected works of Mary Shelley --- 255 "Recollections of Italy" reprinted from *Tales and Stories*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*

ethereal substance” and the pair erupt into a discourse elevated by familiarity and the beauty encountered on a temperate day.<sup>57</sup>

Beauty, here, is a social thing. The otherworldliness of the speaker’s exchange with Melville is not divine, but certainly delivers insight similar to the kind delivered in devotional poetry, such as Barbauld’s “Summer Evening’s Meditation”. The speaker does not need to separate mind from body in order to find some sort of divinity in the conversation that takes place within “Voyage to Italy”. Instead, the material world and companionship offer her similar reflections of truth and devotion as Barbauld, but rather than devote herself to a God the speaker can devote herself to beauty in the natural world and above all, in relationships between individuals.

In recalling travel, one can compare the differences between the cosmic voyage and the pedestrian’s voyage on Earth. As examined in Barbauld’s “Summer Evening’s Meditation”, imagination proves to be a pivotal component of cosmic voyage, as it is entirely dependent on the mind. Although travel to Italy involves no cosmic journey or encounters with the divine, but employs the same sort of “spirit of love and life” when recounted.<sup>58</sup> Such spirit can be presumed to be a combination of memory and imagination. What is remarkable here is that instead of returning to Earth, or deriving spiritual truth from a beautiful memory of a journey, the pair of friends instead reveal an observation about interconnectedness: that “all these objects form the links of a chain that bound up our thoughts in silence”.<sup>59</sup> Silence, it seems, becomes a place of contemplation just as it did in Barbauld’s poem, but is not a suffocating silence. Rather, the silence here can be equated with a stillness that occupies the space

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<sup>57</sup> 256

<sup>58</sup> Zizek, “*Sublime Object*,” 256.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 256.

between the speaker and her companion. There is no negation of sound, but rather an emptiness of it. The tall grass continues to tremble while conversation is brought to a stop, and contemplation occurs.

This prose is a memory of Beauty in the Kantian sense: “the sentiment provoked when the suprasensible Idea appears in the material, sensuous medium, in its harmonious formation”.<sup>60</sup> Žizek’s observations and memories are not a result of observations on art in its purest form, but rather of relationships and visiting different places—of lasting impressions of cities’ architecture and natural surroundings. Such enjoyable sentiment is an elementary feature of Kant’s judgments that supposes that pleasure-producing things are the locus of moral activity. Beyond this feature, “what remains hidden in Kant is the way this renunciation itself produces a certain surplus-enjoyment”.<sup>61</sup> Such surplus enjoyment is certainly exhibited and critiqued in Shelley’s travel writing as the imagination exaggerates claims and observations of beauty and contentment during Italy experiences. Imagination can, in effect, “paint objects of little worth in gaudy colour, and then become enamored of its own work” in so exaggerating experiences into surplus.<sup>62</sup> By, this statement, Shelley effectively critiques imagination and its role in arriving at transcendental understanding.

Rather than conceive of that which exists outside the field of representation—by this, I mean experience, memory, art, or that which is experientially apprehendable—Shelley’s texts point to relationships as that which to devote oneself to. Relationships are brought into further consideration as the pair recount people met in Italy. The speaker reflects on the ‘nothings’, the servants who occupied dwellings in Italy. Although she assumes her companion will regard them as lacking any capacity to

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 208.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 87.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 258.

make them worthy of companionship or consideration, the speaker knows otherwise. Instead, she emphasizes their role in her pleasure, in fact, the ‘nothings’ “conducted more to [her] pleasure than other events usually accounted of more moment” (250). Although this appears in travel writing, this statement can be applied to other realms that Shelley’s work occupies, particularly that of *The Keepsake*. Shelley gives voice to “those normally objectified by aesthetic discourse” here in a subversive manner.<sup>63</sup> These servants are not nothings, but Shelley utilizes a rhetoric that addresses their commonly perceived contributions to society—they do nothing as servants, after all—and attributes her personal pleasure to their actions.

These ‘nothings’ play a small role in Shelley’s travel writing, but her inclusion of the ‘other’ in an almost purely aesthetic piece is fascinating. It is this other who adds value to the beautiful nature of Italy and who leaves the fondest impression in Shelley’s memory. It is not imagination delighting in the beauty of a poem or the curves of a sculpture that define an experience as good and worthy of memory, but rather, an engagement with one of society’s forgotten and voiceless. This exchange constitutes the ‘real’ pleasure within the moment, even when other experiences—such as nature walks and great meals—are awarded more voice in common discourse. Here, beauty’s social character is elevated through multiple means: recounting the servants and the dialogue with Melville. The picturesque memory of Italy “brings out the connection between aesthetics and social bonds” that pervade Shelley’s body of work.<sup>64</sup>

Where cosmic voyage poetry figures the divine and often concludes in an acceptance that the godhead is beyond the grasp of the intellect in silence, the silence in relationships and kinship exposes a different sort of truth, one that exposes the follies of imagination, that it can “paint objects of little worth

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<sup>63</sup> Bohls, “Women Travel Writers,” 84.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 84.

in gaudy colour, and then become enamored of its own work".<sup>65</sup> This observation reiterates Shelley's investigation of the sublime throughout her body of work and affirms that both sense and mind tie the other to materiality and each other. There is no room for autonomous action when individuals are not equipped to sever the roles society prescribes them. Rather, Shelley's narratives utilize material desire in a unique way, that when tied to domestic relationships, turns sensual needs "outward as love".<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Zizek, "Sublime Object," 258.

<sup>66</sup> Mary Poovey, "My Hideous Progeny," 334.

## EPILOGUE

Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011) is an anomaly within his body of work, abandoning all stylistic similarities between itself and the Dogme 95 movement while utilizing genre to emphasize the film's character driven narrative. The stylistic marks that established Von Trier as an auteur are changed. Instead of strict adherence to cinematic doctrine, Von Trier uses special effects and non-diegetic sound to investigate the narrative's main character, Justine (Kirsten Dunst) and her interactions with her sister, Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg), Claire's husband, Michael (Alexander Skarsgard), and their son on the days prior to the end of the world. The film is a chronicle of inner life and external real life occurrences that effectively reconstruct the literary sublime on screen through use of narrative, cinematography and sound. Aesthetically complex, *Melancholia* utilizes two parts to explore the relationship between individuals and the selves and individuals and others through images saturated with ethereal colors and suffocating sets. In examining the film's use of stills alongside two of the film's scenes, von Trier's use of complexity to convey emotion and reconstruct the sublime through film will be demonstrated.

*Melancholia* opens with a sequence of tableaux vivants that reflect the psychological and internal struggles of the protagonist, Justine and the external and physical events that frame the film: a wedding and planetary destruction. What von Trier is attempting to accomplish with these shots is ambiguous. Saturated in colors of dusk and dawn, the audience is forced to comprehend *Melancholia* as a film whose narrative rests on something cyclic. The first still is

followed by a still of art that appears simultaneously primitive and photographed. The still contains an image that appears painted or photographed through a tilt-shift lens. Within the frame, human figures stand in the foreground of colossal organic shapes. Von Trier's image denotes the destruction of prehistoric animals by asteroid, perhaps an attempt at showing the audience the son's comprehension of planetary destruction in terms of dinosaurs and cave paintings or alluding to the cyclic nature of birth and death. Regardless of artistic intention, the film is framed in destruction. The vivants do not serve as a means of equating Justine's emotions and the occurrences of the physical world. This would be an impossible task as *Melancholia* serves as a character study of Justine and her sister, using the physical events of the world-at-large to emphasize the emotional gravity of depression on individuals and their interactions. *Melancholia* rarely offers perspectives of Justine's family members who do not suffer from mental illness. The characters alien to Justine's inner world are reduced to caricatures, even Justine's fiancée mistakes Justine's depression for something superficial and although he attempts to act in kindness, his apple orchard gift is left unfruitful. Thus, the occurrences of the physical world and the emotional inner world are not equated; instead the former emphasizes the latter through aesthetics.

Instead, von Trier's tableaux are an exploration of the relationship between the film's subject and the object that exist in relation to it. Rather, von Trier utilizes montage to present Justine's reactions or lack thereof to the events occurring around her and establish Justine's emotional state as something universal, but impossible to fully comprehend without experiential knowledge. Planetary collision begins to act as a metaphor for the



incomprehensibility of depression without knowledge stemming from experience and Von Trier's intention lies in explaining emotion through cinematography and sound. As if a parenthesis, the moving stills supply the audience with a framework for the narrative to unfold, while simultaneously contributing to the film's inescapable tone of tension. Such tension is created through the combined effect of shot composition and rare nondiegetic sound, an anticipation of the disastrous collision to come. Although completely lacking in narrative, *Melancholia's* first eight minutes are an effective introduction to Justine's depression and an ethereal declaration that von Trier's film is a tragedy, and Justine is both cast and condemned as Ophelia lying amongst river flowers.

The effect of the tableaux is exemplified from the film's first shot: a close up shot of Justine. Making the beginning of *Melancholia*, this is the first of multiple moving stills that disrupt linear time and leave the audience desperate for a narrative. Justine is introduced against a pastel sky, with birds falling from unseen perches. Justine's hair is wet, her eyes lidded and her expression somber. This is not the Justine introduced in the film's first active minutes, she is not smiling and her hair has been drastically cut. Instead, through use of a medium shot, von Trier is able to disturb the audience's understanding of time within the narrative while attempting to convey Justine's mental state and the contrast between her superficial behavior and internal struggle. Restraining from a symmetrical close up, Dunst's face is left of center and she is framed by warm sunset pastels and eventually, dead birds. Justine glows, despite Dunst's portrayal of exhaustion and mental melancholy on screen. The natural world, although dying, illuminates Justine in gold. The shot's composition begs the audience to wonder if

Justine's melancholy has rendered her as lifeless as the birds or if her prophetic knowledge of the Melancholia's collision has left her catatonic. Yet, with knowledge assimilated from the film's final half, the audience later learns that nature is sick with man's evil. Justine comprehends this, an illumination of the film's understanding of human nature.

Furthermore, the stills following Justine's close up shot are equally engaging and introduce the complicated relationship between subject and object throughout *Melancholia*. The film's end is foreshadowed within *Melancholia*'s first two minutes in the still featuring the colossal planet Melancholia and a smaller planet, later learned to be Earth. Where von Trier's previous films restrained from any sort of post-production effect, *Melancholia* benefits from the use of created graphics and special effects. The visible objects on screen are much less important than the personal experiences of the characters in the film. Although the titular Melancholia supplies the narrative with a source of problem, it is Justine's depression and understanding of existence that makes the narrative effective and illustrates von Trier's ability to present a conceptual emotion through a visual means.

Although ambiguous, the film's opening shot provides the audience with the understanding that Justine's mental life is dark and the natural world is dying. Although Trier's cinematography and use of color is a fabrication and a deviation from Dogme 95, the film is no less effective. The addition of a score and special effects emphasizes von Trier's skill as an auteur and allows the director to blend external actions with inward experiences, effectively exploring the relationship between personal emotions and the sublime through a medium other than literature.

This relationship is further complicated by von Trier's use of nondiegetic sound. The operatic score, taken from *Tristan und Isolde* (1865) supplies the tableaux with an element of orchestration. The director's hand is immediately apparent, and this is especially significant when understood in the context of von Trier's body of work. Just as the orchestra creates and slowly somber tone that contributes to the tension of the film's narrative, von Trier's orchestration of aesthetic elements for the same effect. The orchestrated soundtrack supplies the film's source of inescapable tension, and the music seems to be at a constant climax, never resolved under *Melancholia* collides and engulfs the Earth. While von Trier abstains from the use of non-diegetic sound in his earlier movies, the use of a soundtrack in *Melancholia* is highly effective. Without it, the moving stills would be nonsensical and less effective. The addition of an orchestrated 19<sup>th</sup> century opera allows von Trier to investigate elements of 19<sup>th</sup> century literature in his film, such as the sublime in Romanticism during the same time period.

One encounters criticism of *Melancholia* alongside criticism of von Trier's presentation of the sublime. THE SUBLIME in *Melancholia* stems from paradoxical experience, of Justine's simultaneous confrontations with the terrible and the beautiful. Von Trier's explorations of the sublime bring together incompatible feelings and modes of experiences, an effective assessment of the film. Yet, their assessment of the sublime within the film stems from analysis of the narrative whereas the sublime can also be found in the paradoxical visual and aesthetic elements utilized by von Trier's cinematography and use of color. Justine stands on the eighteen-hole course alone, gazing up at the sky. The camera cuts to a close up profile shot of her gaze and

suddenly the golf course becomes a surreal plain of gold light, unrecognizable when compared to the establishing shot from moments prior. The wind blows and the orchestra plays. Justine seems more like a fixture of nature rather than part of human society.

Such exploration of the sublime is exemplified in *Melancholia*'s Part I when Justine escapes to the golf course to observe the red star of Scorpio while combatting depression on her wedding night. Where French and Shacklock note the sublime to occur at the threshold of experience and perfection, and Justine's encounter at the gold course is just that. The orchestra slows until Justine gazes at the sky. A reinforcement of Justine's seemingly prophetic knowledge, the orchestra swells into a crescendo as Justine gazes at the sky. Framed against a black sky and a golf course saturated in warm golds, Justine seems momentarily at peace, until the camera jumpy cuts to her reentrance to the wedding party. The orchestra is lost, and the sounds become entirely diegetic. A man plays the keyboard and the audience can hear shuffling dancers. The orchestra exists when Justine is isolated but not when she is in a social environment. Following the jump cut, Justine seems entirely unaffected by her experience until moments later, when her stargazing becomes indicative of a dark depression and the knowledge the audience is given in the opening stills: that the world will end.

Justine escapes her wedding again and is indirectly characterized by her evasive actions. She dotes on her nephew as he falls asleep and rather than return to the wedding, begins to fall asleep. Justine's kindness is readily apparent and the audience becomes sympathetic to her despite her impulsive and dangerous actions later in the film. She lies on the bed and her veil suffocates the frame, the seemingly soft white fabric becoming visible as something airy, but

also something unwanted. The camera cuts to a close up on Dunst whose face is shrouded in white, and the fabric seemingly paralyzes her just as she will later be paralyzed by her depression. At once, the wedding's beauty seems tedious and constructed when compared to Justine's experience on the golf course and von Trier's exploration of debilitating depression begins. It is apparent that Dunst is playing a "double role" just as remarked by her boss during wedding speeches. Instead of being both employee and wife, Justine is trapped between her internal existence and emotions and her position in the external 'real' world.

Justine is trapped in dichotomy between subject and object until *Melancholia*'s end. She encounters the end of the world well-versed in suffering, and is the only person capable of easing the tension and catastrophe of planetary collision. She effectively reconstructs joy in the face of utmost terror by creating a 'magic fort' and allows her nephew to experience perfect joy briefly.

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