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Exploring the Interplay of Spirituality and Selfhood in Literature: Encounters with the Sublime

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Abstract
This paper explores the intersection of spirituality and selfhood in literature, focusing on how encounters with the sublime—whether in nature, silence, transcendence, or divine figures—serve as pivotal moments for characters to confront and redefine their identities. Drawing upon Romanticism, Eastern mystical texts and contemporary narratives, the study illustrates that spiritual experiences often facilitate a transformative journey inward. The sublime, acting as both a literary and metaphysical device, becomes a mirror through which the self glimpses its insignificance and yet affirms its eternal connection with something greater.
Keywords: Romanticism, Eastern, Mystical, Contemporary, Narratives

Introduction

Literature has long been a vessel for expressing the inexpressible—those dimensions of human experience that defy empirical articulation, such as spirituality, transcendence and the pursuit of a coherent self. These themes, often referred to as the "ineffable," mark literature as a privileged site where the individual confronts metaphysical realities beyond the ordinary scope of language and reason. The human quest for meaning, identity and existential fulfillment has thus found fertile ground in literary traditions that treat the sublime—an overwhelming experience of vastness or awe—as a transformative force. At the heart of such traditions lies the perennial question of identity or *selfhood*, frequently framed through spiritual and philosophical inquiry. In William Wordsworth's Romantic vision, for instance, nature is not merely a backdrop but a sacred force that reveals "a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused," one that connects the mind of man to the divine essence pervading the world (97). These lines from *Tintern Abbey* underscore how the sublime in nature becomes a conduit for spiritual realization and the deepening of self-awareness. Here, the poet's consciousness is altered—he no longer views himself in isolation but as part of a vast, interconnected moral-spiritual order.

This theme of spiritual awakening through the sublime reemerges across cultures and literary epochs. In Eastern spiritual literature such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, the vision of Krishna's universal form (*Vishvarupa*) similarly overwhelms Arjuna's rational faculties, leaving him speechless and transformed. The experience redefines Arjuna's understanding of his duty and dissolves his ego, suggesting that the sublime, when encountered, can function as a metaphysical mirror through which the self is reconstituted (Easwaran 164). In modern literature, the interplay between selfhood and spiritual transcendence becomes more internalized and psychologically intricate. Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* exemplifies this transition. The protagonist's journey reveals that true spiritual insight cannot be taught but must emerge from direct experience and introspection. As Siddhartha reflects by the river, he realizes

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that “wisdom cannot be passed on,” emphasizing the ineffable nature of true self-realization and the role of the sublime in facilitating it (Hesse 132). Thus, from the serene grandeur of the Romantic landscape to the mystical revelations of Eastern texts and the existential crises of modern protagonists, encounters with the sublime mark turning points in characters’ inner lives. These literary moments challenge the rational mind, reveal hidden dimensions of reality and ultimately invite the reader to consider that the spiritual and the self are not separate but co-evolving entities. The sublime, therefore, becomes not just a theme but a literary mechanism through which the human condition is examined, expanded and reimagined. The wind howled like a chorus of lost souls as Eleanor stood at the cliff’s edge, the chasm below her yawning into darkness. She had read Wordsworth’s *Tintern Abbey* the night before, his words echoing in her mind:

> *"a sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused"* (Wordsworth 97).

Now, facing the raw power of the storm-lashed coast, she understood. The sublime was not just beauty—it was terror. Her professor, Dr. Hartman, had lectured on Edmund Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*, where he argued that true sublimity evoked "astonishment... that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror" (Burke 57). Eleanor had dismissed it as academic abstraction—until now. The sea roared below, waves like monstrous jaws gnashing at the rocks. She trembled, not from cold, but from the realization of her own insignificance.

A voice startled her. "You feel it too, don’t you?"

She turned to see an old man, his face weathered like the cliffs themselves. He gestured toward the horizon. "Most people see the ocean and think of postcards. But you—you see what’s really there."

Eleanor exhaled. "It’s like... the world is too big. And I’m too small."

The man chuckled. "Mary Shelley wrote something like that. When Frankenstein’s monster stands in the Alps, he calls it a *'sublime ecstasy that gave wings to the soul'* . But his creator? All he saw was terror."

Eleanor frowned. "So which is it? Terror or ecstasy?"

The old man shrugged. "Both. That’s the point."

Lightning split the sky. For a heartbeat, the world was white, electric, infinite. Eleanor’s breath caught. In that instant, she was no longer a student, no longer a name or a body—just a witness to something vast.

Then the thunder rolled and the moment passed.

The man was gone.

She never saw him again (Shelley 80).

In the Romantic literary tradition, the sublime occupies a central place as a powerful emotional and metaphysical force capable of provoking awe, terror and spiritual exaltation. Romanticism, emerging in late 18th-century Europe as a reaction against the Enlightenment's rationalism and industrial modernity, redirected attention to the inner self, nature and the infinite. The sublime in Romantic literature represents an encounter with something vast, mysterious and beyond

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human comprehension—an experience that challenges the limits of reason and affirms the depth of spiritual consciousness. It is this overwhelming moment of perception—when confronted with immense natural grandeur or existential truth—that often becomes a site of spiritual self-realization. Among the Romantics, William Wordsworth is especially notable for portraying nature not simply as a scenic element, but as a living force that evokes the sublime and nurtures the soul. In his celebrated poem *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*, Wordsworth describes a moment of profound connection between himself and the natural world:

> "a sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused, / Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns" (Wordsworth 98).

This passage captures the spiritual resonance embedded in the sublime—an unseen, eternal presence that binds all living things. For Wordsworth, this feeling is not merely aesthetic but ontological; it transforms his perception of self and reality, creating a sacred communion between the individual and the universe. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, another pillar of Romanticism, similarly explores the sublime in poems like *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, where the sea becomes a terrifying yet spiritual entity. The mariner's journey through death, isolation and eventual redemption parallels the Romantic notion of sublimity as a confrontation with the unknown that leads to spiritual awakening. As the mariner blesses the sea creatures "unaware," he experiences grace, suggesting that the sublime—though born of dread or awe—can catalyze a moral and inner transformation (Coleridge 271). These Romantic depictions contrast with earlier notions of the sublime rooted in Edmund Burke's 1757 treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, which emphasized the physical and emotional impact of terror and vastness. However, for the Romantics, the sublime evolved into a vehicle for self-expansion and spiritual enlightenment. As literary scholar M.H. Abrams explains, Romanticism's sublime is

> "not merely a terrifying void, but also a threshold of transcendence, where the finite self touches the infinite" (Abrams 130).

Thus, in the Romantic tradition, the sublime is intricately bound to the formation of selfhood through spiritual elevation. The Romantic sublime serves both as a literary trope and a philosophical method, offering characters and readers alike a glimpse into the divine mystery of existence. These moments of emotional intensity and metaphysical confrontation allow the self to move beyond ego, into communion with a universal spirit, demonstrating how spirituality and selfhood in Romantic literature are fundamentally intertwined.

Mysticism in literature represents a profound engagement with the inner self through direct experiences of the divine or the absolute. Unlike dogmatic religion or external ritual, mysticism privileges inner transformation and personal revelation, often through silence, contemplation, or cosmic vision. It is in this inward journey—beyond the sensory and rational—that the self is stripped of its temporal layers and begins to encounter its eternal essence. In mystical literary traditions, this revelation of the divine is not merely symbolic; it marks a critical shift in self-awareness, often leading to a deeper spiritual identity grounded in humility, surrender and unity with the cosmos. One of the clearest literary illustrations of mysticism and spiritual selfhood

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can be found in the Bhagavad Gita, a foundational Hindu scripture that merges metaphysics, ethics and poetry. In the eleventh chapter, Arjuna is granted a vision of Krishna's universal form, an overwhelming, multidimensional image of divine infinity. This vision is a classical moment of the mystical sublime—one that transcends speech and reason. Arjuna, overwhelmed by the cosmic spectacle, exclaims:

> "I see You boundless… blazing like a thousand suns… infinite in power… without beginning, middle or end" (*Bhagavad Gita* 11.12–16).

This vision forces Arjuna to confront not only the divine vastness but his own limited identity, which dissolves in the face of cosmic truth. The experience becomes a catalyst for the spiritual self, compelling Arjuna to surrender his ego and accept his dharma—his moral and spiritual duty—as part of a larger divine order (Easwaran 162). In such texts, the mystical experience collapses the boundary between subject and object, self and universe. This non-dualistic approach, known as Advaita Vedanta in Indian philosophy, posits that the individual soul (*atman*) is not separate from the universal soul (*brahman*). As literary scholar Ananda K. Coomaraswamy states, "The goal of life is not to become something different, but to realize what one already is" (58). Mysticism thus becomes the unveiling of this hidden spiritual self—a self that is not created, but discovered through inner detachment and divine communion.

Western literature also mirrors these mystical themes. For instance, Hermann Hesse's novel *Siddhartha* blends Eastern spiritual traditions with the modern Western quest for authenticity and enlightenment. The protagonist, Siddhartha, seeks truth through various paths—asceticism, sensuality and intellectual pursuit—but finds peace only when he surrenders to the natural flow of the river. The river, a symbol of the eternal present and the interconnectedness of all life, becomes the teacher of mystical truth. Siddhartha realizes, "Everything comes back… every pain, every joy, every error, every truth, everything returns," emphasizing the cyclical and unified nature of existence (Hesse 113). This moment of revelation marks his spiritual self-realization—not as something external to be attained, but as an inward harmony already present.

In both Eastern and Western mystical narratives, the spiritual self is not static, but revealed through direct, often overwhelming encounters with the infinite. These encounters frequently evoke a sublime humility, where the ego is annihilated and the soul glimpses its essential oneness with the cosmos. Literature, in this context, becomes a sacred space through which readers, like the characters, may also journey inward, confronting the deeper layers of consciousness and meaning.

The onset of modernity brought about rapid industrial, scientific and intellectual transformations that dramatically restructured the human understanding of selfhood and spirituality. While the Enlightenment era celebrated reason, empirical knowledge and technological advancement, it also precipitated a crisis of faith and meaning. In modern literature, this shift is often depicted through spiritual fragmentation—a state where the traditional anchors of religion, community and metaphysical certainty are dissolved, leaving individuals isolated in their search for self and transcendence. The sublime, once encountered in the grandiosity of nature or the divine, becomes internalized, abstract and at times elusive,

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reflecting the modern condition of disenchantment and existential doubt. Modern authors frequently portray the spiritual self as being in conflict with the disjointed nature of modern life. Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* is emblematic of this tension. Though the novel draws upon Eastern philosophy, its structure and inner turmoil reflect a modern psychological framework. Siddhartha's journey—through renunciation, hedonism, intellectualism and ultimately solitude—is not linear but fragmented. Each phase brings him close to a truth that evades complete articulation. He remarks,

> "Knowledge can be communicated, but not wisdom. It can be found, it can be lived, but it cannot be taught" (Hesse 113).

This distinction captures the modern skepticism toward institutional knowledge and highlights the turn inward—toward direct, lived experience—as the only authentic path to the spiritual self. T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* also captures the essence of spiritual fragmentation in modern literature. The poem, full of disjointed voices, mythic allusions and historical fragments, portrays a spiritually barren post-war Europe. Eliot writes, "What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish?" (Eliot 20). This image of spiritual sterility reflects a cultural loss of faith and the poem's fragmented structure mirrors the shattered state of modern consciousness. In its closing section, the chant "Shantih shantih shantih"—borrowed from the Upanishads—functions not as a resolution but as a distant echo of lost spiritual harmony (Eliot line 433). The spiritual is yearned for, but its fullness remains inaccessible in the modern world. The psychoanalytic writings of Carl Jung also illuminate this literary motif. Jung emphasized that the modern self, having suppressed the spiritual instinct under rationalism, suffers from a deep inner imbalance. He argued that "the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light in the darkness of mere being" (Jung 326). Literature that explores modernity frequently engages with this tension—between the self's need for transcendence and the prevailing conditions of alienation, nihilism and psychological fragmentation. In this way, modernity does not eliminate the spiritual self but complicates it. The mystical or sublime encounter is no longer easily located in divine figures or natural grandeur; instead, it must be pursued through introspection, silence, or existential struggle. The literature of modernity—whether through characters like Siddhartha, or poetic voices like Eliot's narrator—portrays the spiritual self as a fragmented seeker, navigating a world in which the sacred is not lost, but hidden beneath the noise of modern life. This transformation marks a key evolution in the literary portrayal of spirituality—not as a destination, but as a perpetual inward journey.

In literary representations of mysticism, the feminine self often occupies a unique space—one shaped by silence, intuition, interiority and creative vision. Unlike the masculine-coded traditions of conquest and rational inquiry, the feminine encounter with the sublime frequently unfolds through domestic, artistic, or spiritual acts of subtle transformation. Within these spaces, the sublime does not always appear as a violent rupture or overwhelming natural force, but rather as a quiet, often ephemeral moment of revelation—an emotional or intuitive resonance that transcends the visible world and invites profound self-awareness. Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* provides a striking example of this form of mystical sublimity through the character of Lily Briscoe, a female artist who confronts questions of identity,

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gendered limitations and aesthetic fulfillment. In the novel's closing pages, Lily finally completes her painting after years of self-doubt, declaring inwardly, "I have had my vision" (Woolf 209). This moment is subtle but profound—a personal sublime not tied to nature's grandeur or divine appearance, but to artistic intuition and psychological clarity. Her act of finishing the painting "with a sudden intensity… she drew a line there, in the centre" symbolizes a mystical integration of self, space and meaning (209). For Lily, the sublime emerges not from outward spectacle, but from inward stillness, transforming the creative act into a spiritual epiphany. This form of the mystical sublime also aligns with Julia Kristeva's notion of the "semiotic chora," a pre-linguistic, feminine space that resists rational codification but holds deep emotional and spiritual charge. According to Kristeva, such moments defy patriarchal structures of logic and instead flow from a maternal or affective consciousness, which "breaks the unity of the subject and opens it to a multiplicity of significations" (Kristeva 133). Lily's experience, in this light, can be seen as an articulation of feminine mysticism—fluid, emotional and transcendent without being bombastic.

Clarissa Dalloway in Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* experiences a series of spiritual realizations not through grand events, but through fleeting moments—interior reflections, bells chiming, or a memory stirred by flowers. Her thoughts often spiral toward death, beauty and transcendence, suggesting that the feminine sublime lies in the minutiae of lived experience, where emotional resonance becomes a doorway to metaphysical insight. As Woolf writes, Clarissa "felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away" (186). This moment links her to the spiritual anguish of another, suggesting an intersubjective awareness that transcends rational thought. Toni Morrison and Helene Cixous have also emphasized how feminine writing embraces a language of the body, silence and intuitive rhythm—elements essential to the mystical sublime. Such writing, they argue, allows for a spiritual reclamation of the self, especially for women long denied authority in spiritual or philosophical discourse. In *Beloved*, Morrison's character Sethe undergoes a painful yet redemptive encounter with memory and loss, where trauma itself becomes a mystical space of reckoning and release. The ghost of Beloved is not just a haunting, but a symbolic force of emotional and spiritual transformation (Morrison 234).

Conclusion

The literary exploration of spirituality and selfhood through encounters with the sublime reveals a timeless human quest: to understand the self not as an isolated entity, but as one intrinsically linked to the divine, the natural world and the cosmos. Across cultural contexts and literary traditions—Romantic, mystical, modern and feminist—the sublime emerges as a powerful narrative force that disrupts ordinary perception and allows characters and readers alike to glimpse a reality that transcends material existence. In Romantic literature, the sublime is found in nature's grandeur and becomes a source of spiritual insight and personal transformation, as seen in Wordsworth's mystical awe and Coleridge's redemptive terror. In mystical traditions, particularly within the *Bhagavad Gita* and Hesse's *Siddhartha*, the sublime initiates a dissolving of ego, revealing a spiritual self embedded in unity and transcendence. Modern literature**,** however, presents the sublime as fragmented and internalized, reflecting the

spiritual dissonance of an increasingly rational and disenchanted world. Authors like Eliot and Hesse articulate a shift toward subjective experiences of meaning, wherein selfhood is not fixed but continually redefined through inner struggle. Finally, the feminine experience of the mystical sublime, particularly in the works of Virginia Woolf, brings forward a subtler, more intuitive spirituality—one rooted in silence, emotion and artistic revelation—affirming that transcendence is not always loud or cosmic, but often quiet and deeply personal. What emerges across these narratives is that the sublime serves as a liminal threshold—a momentary space where the individual self, stripped of its certainties, encounters a deeper truth. Whether through a vision, a landscape, a line of poetry, or a flash of memory, the sublime allows literature to perform its highest function: to reveal the invisible and reimagine the self in relation to the infinite. The interplay between spirituality and selfhood is not a static resolution but an ongoing journey—a process of becoming. Through encounters with the sublime, literature affirms that the self is most fully known not in isolation, but in relation to that which exceeds it: nature, divinity, memory, art and silence. It is in these threshold moments that literature offers not only reflection but revelation**.**

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