The Last Things and the Gothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature: Blended Frameworks in the Works of Poe, Hawthorne, and Dickinson

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The Last Things and the Gothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature: Blended Frameworks in the Works of Poe, Hawthorne, and Dickinson

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Critics have long acknowledged the prevalence of the Gothic mode in American literature as well as a standard set of themes and topics that appear repeatedly in the genre, such as the legacy of the Puritan past, the terrors of the frontier, and race. However, few scholars have recognized the importance of Apocalypse in American Gothic literature. Featuring Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Emily Dickinson as representative authors, this dissertation argues that the biblical Apocalypse is a primary subject of American Gothic literature during the early to mid-nineteenth century and beyond, and that authors of the era appropriated the Gothic mode as a way of expressing America’s collective cultural anxieties about national identity. These authors’ works are contextualized within their historical moment through a study of primary documents like letters, journals, personal libraries, historical periodicals, and other cultural influences. By framing biblical subject matter as Gothic, these authors contradict the sentimental and mainstream religious narrative of their contemporary society. Their pairing of Gothic and apocalyptic frameworks also suggests that the definition of American Gothic should be broadened to include Apocalypse in its range of featured subjects, and that this narrative pairing is peculiarly American. Further inquiry might provide both a historical record of America’s preoccupation, even obsession, with its role in the Apocalypse, and a record of the collective fears of a nation that yearns for an impossible ideal—a city on a hill, a government
founded on principles of equality and freedom, and a nation divinely delivered from the burden and horrors of history. The American Gothic Apocalypse may be a unique vehicle for the nation—authors and audiences alike—to process the failure of these ideals and to explore the human weaknesses and inner demons that prevented their achievement.
This dissertation by Ashley Anne Kniss fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in English approved by Glen Johnson, Ph.D., as Director, and by Joseph Sendry, Ph.D., and Rosemary Winslow, Ph.D. as Readers.

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Dedication

For Michael, whose love, support, and patience made this possible.

For my parents, June and Tony, who instilled in me a love of good books.

For Rosalyn and Fred, who always gave good advice and lent sympathetic ears.

And for Billy, my ever-faithful, four-legged writing companion.
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Chapter I

Introduction: The Gothic Apocalypse

During the first half of the nineteenth-century, religious fervor about the Apocalypse and “The Last Things”—death, judgment, Heaven, and Hell—as well as beliefs about the Resurrection of the dead and Christ’s Second Coming were pillars of American identity. Popular interest in these subjects was widespread, and contemporary magazines and newspapers often included religious references concerning death, Resurrection, and the afterlife. “The Last Things” usually refers to the doctrine of the Four Last Things: Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell. However, in this study the term will also apply to the individual experience of the end of life and the end of time, which encompasses four phases: death, the Intermediate State, Resurrection, and the Second Coming. The Intermediate State—the space of time between death and the Resurrection at the time of the Second Coming—and the fate of the body and soul during this time were subjects of widespread debate. Specifically, theologians, as well as the public, often speculated about whether the soul slept, ascended to Heaven, or remained somehow conscious with the body in the grave. Concerns about the Last Things also centered on the nature of the Second Coming itself, and whether it would coincide with an Apocalypse of darkness and violence, a vision described in both the Old Testament and the New, or instead resemble the optimistic Millennialism of human progress and peace depicted in the closing chapters of Revelation.

Popular writing such as consolation verse, hymns, and religious literature and tracts largely portrayed the more positive narrative, featuring a benevolent God who welcomes the spirits of the dead into Heaven where they reunite with loved ones and enjoy the other delights of
Paradise. These positive narratives sometimes depicted the dead proceeding to Heaven immediately, or alternatively, sleeping peacefully while both the body and soul awaited the Second Coming. Regardless, the Resurrection was commonly depicted as joyous, blissful, and even sublime, as the dead who are saved in Christ rise from their graves on the Last Day and ascend to Heaven to reap the reward of the faithful. For the most part, these mainstream narratives gloss over the time between death and Resurrection. The dead sleep or go to a state of provisional blessedness, or proceed immediately to Heaven in spirit form while the body awaits Resurrection. These positive narratives also largely ignore the apocalyptic destruction of the Last Day, focusing instead on the joyful Resurrection of the saved rather than the doomed fates of the non-Elect and of the earth. Finally, these narratives feature a linear timeline, in which humanity participates in the great arc of history that moves progressively toward culmination, either by the grace of God or through humanity’s endeavors to achieve worldwide conversion and perfectibility.

This cultural backdrop greatly influenced American writers and poets of the period. Despite the positive outlook of mainstream religious culture, some of America’s greatest authors explore an alternative narrative by telling the story of the non-Elect, interrogating the justness of earth’s annihilation, questioning the linear progression of time toward culmination, addressing the reality of the decaying corpse, and depicting the possibility of souls going conscious to the grave with their rotting corpses to await final judgment in terrifying isolation. This transgressive and subversive narrative was often expressed through the Gothic mode. Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Emily Dickinson, among others, appropriated elements of the Gothic
in a variety of ways to articulate America’s underlying anxiety about the Last Things and to question the optimism of mainstream religious thought.

While it might seem counterintuitive to link the sensationalistic Gothic genre with Christian doctrine on death and Resurrection, Gothic conventions, with their ability to elicit dread, apprehension, and suspense, effectively reflected and took advantage of growing anxieties about contemporary eschatology. As Teresa Goddu remarked, the Gothic genre provides a “primary means of speaking the unspeakable in American literature” (Goddu, *Gothic America* 10). Consistent with Goddu’s observation, Gothic literature of the time questioned the guarantee of an immediate spiritual ascension following death, God’s benevolence, and the narrative of teleological design in which humanity plays a vital role in the culmination of God’s divine plan to institute the New Jerusalem. While authors like Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman embraced optimistic spiritualism, writers like Poe, Hawthorne, and Dickinson resisted, exploring instead the darker implications of nineteenth-century discourse on The Last Things. This project seeks to explore why the biblical Apocalypse and the religious subject matter surrounding the Last Things was frequently engaged by some of the most important literary figures of the mid-nineteenth century. The primary contention is that the literary narratives that incorporate Apocalypse during this time period are almost always Gothic in nature and incorporate the conventions and narrative features of the Gothic as a framework that characterizes the biblical Apocalypse as frightening and dreadful. By doing so, these three representative authors undermine the optimistic attitude of mainstream religious culture toward Apocalypse and the afterlife, and also challenge concepts related to national identity and the mythology wherein
America was to be the site of the new millennium and Americans were God’s chosen people who enjoyed a particular intimacy with the deity.

Americans’ preoccupation with Apocalypse originated long before the nineteenth century, and was an integral part of both Puritan culture and America’s inception as a nation. A. W. Plumstead remarks that Puritan sermons and jeremiads exhibit a specific pattern: “a Puritan epic mythology, a story with a beginning, middle, and end, of a chosen people’s errand into a wilderness” (4). Sacvan Bercovitch claims that at the heart of the Puritan jeremiad is a single message: the Puritans’ “Great Migration” to America “had been foreshadowed in Scripture as the site of New Jerusalem, and it was their ‘special commission’ to lead the way, as God’s new chosen people in this new promised land, toward the millennium” (xiii). Bercovitch goes on to state that the rhetoric in these early sermons provides a “vision of America as an unfolding prophecy,” which “became in time the foundational national story” (xiii). This story is one in which the American people and the nation are an integral part of an apocalyptic narrative wherein Americans are unique, having been chosen for a special destiny within the cosmic arc of history, a destiny that would aid Providence in bringing about Christ’s kingdom on earth.

This national mythology developed further during the American War of Revolution, but reached its zenith during the Millennialism and religious revivalism of the early nineteenth century and then the outbreak of the Civil War mid-century. Contrary to the Puritans’ view of doomsday, with its emphasis on punishment and retribution of sin, hope and anticipation characterize popular nineteenth-century religious rhetoric associated with the Millennium and this sentiment is evident in the hymns and verse of the period. In August 1821 an author in The Religious Intelligencer identified only by the initials “A.G.” concludes a millennial hymn with,
“Soon, by that bright millennial sun / Be all our labours crown’d, / And thousand harvests wave in one, / The peaceful earth around!” (192). In an 1843 submission to *The United States Magazine, and Democratic Review*, Charles J. Fox submitted a poem titled “The Christian Promise.” One of the stanzas characterizes the millennium in a similar fashion: “And there are signs that brighter light is breaking / Through the thick clouds of eighteen hundred years; / That love and truth shall in new power be waking, /And earth be gladdened with millennial years” (490).

Besides hymns, the image of the Resurrection morn pulsed through popular culture and literature of the nineteenth century, providing positive narratives of both death and the Last Day. References to the Resurrection morn were prevalent in consolation poetry and periodicals. Lydia Huntly Sigourney’s poetry is a characteristic example of nineteenth-century consolation verse with dual images of Resurrection and a future reunion with loved ones in Heaven. In “Funeral of a Young Wife,” Sigourney writes: “But on the snows / that wreathed her pillow, Faith unblenching stood, / And of the Resurrection, and the life / That had no end, spake and assumed the hearts / That sorrowing, left, their dearest treasure there” (87). In another poem, “Child at the Mother’s Grave,” she offers consolation with the thought of a future reunion: “Then, when God shall say / My days are finished, will He give me leave / to come to thee? And can I find thy home, / And see thee with thy glorious garments on?” (100). Without explicitly describing the mechanics of Resurrection, both examples present the Resurrection as offering consolation for the bereaved.

In an 1854 article in *The Ladies’ Repository: A Monthly Periodical Devoted to Literature and Religion*, Mary A. Corlett describes the beauty of the dawn in a short vignette that illustrates
the pervasive image of the Resurrection. Corlett begins with a metaphor that compares twilight with the end of life: “Beautiful and glorious is the evening twilight, with its gorgeous hues and tranquil quiet; but it is the prelude to night and darkness. Its influences are pure and sweet, but melancholy in their sweetness, whispering of the close of life, the setting of its sun, the dreamless rest of the grave, to which we know we are tending” (125). Death’s approach is not a frightening prospect in Corlett’s description. Instead, Corlett’s characterization of a melancholy peacefulness adheres to the notion of soul-sleep in which the dead await the Resurrection in “dreamless” oblivion. Corlett’s description of the moment of death is equally serene: “Solemn and holy is the midnight hour, when the glittering gems of Heaven would seem spirit eyes, looking in love upon the world, and guarding its mystic slumbers. At such an hour, the soul may forget material things, may send its deep thoughts and feelings Heavenward, and grow purer and stronger by communion with its Maker” (125). This narrative of the sublime deathbed was particularly popular in the mid-nineteenth century, as it provided reassurance to bereaved family members that their loved one, though dying, was among the saved and righteous few that would be admitted into Heaven at the time of the Resurrection.

Corlett applies a similar approach in describing the Resurrection Morn. Extending her metaphor to the dawn of the new day she writes:

But the dawn—the glorious type of the Resurrection morn—how surpassingly lovely its triumphal approach! How exhilarating its influences! How grand its pageant! Darkness, affrighted, flies to its “cavernous home;” animated nature awakes from repose, with pulses bounding with renewed life and vigor; the feathered choir, with melodious gushings, gratefully pour forth their matin songs of love and praise; while from forest and glen, from shrub and dewy blossom, from placid lake and tiny rill, from all nature, arises a glad thank-offering to the great Giver of all good. And how cheering the reflections produced by the contemplation of it as a type of the Resurrection! The night of death is past; the sleep of the grave broken; its darkness and gloom are dissipated, and unending day, transcendent glory is the portion of the redeemed soul. (125)
Corlett’s brief article illustrates both the prevalence of the Resurrection Morn in popular culture, and how it was tied to Apocalypse. In contrast to Resurrection of the soul, which according to contemporary belief, could occur either immediately after death, separate from the body, or at the time of the Second Coming along with the body, the “Resurrection Morn” as a concept refers to the Second Coming as part of the Apocalypse when all souls and bodies will be resurrected. The mainstream depiction of this apocalyptic moment is, as Corlett’s article demonstrates, a positive, blissful moment of “transcendent glory” for all redeemed souls that occurs after “the night of death is past” and “the sleep of the grave is broken.” Corlett’s article also illustrates the grand sense of closure that accompanies mainstream apocalyptic narratives, as the Resurrection Morn she describes showcases the final defeat of death that will occur at the time of Christ’s triumphant return. This linear progression of death, followed by the Resurrection and the final destruction of evil is essential to an apocalyptic paradigm.

Frank Kermode’s *Sense of An Ending* (1967) and M.H Abrams’ “Apocalypse: Theme and Variation” (1971) create a foundation for literary analysis of the patterns, images, and texts of the biblical Apocalypse. Both authors establish the linear nature of an apocalyptic paradigm. Abrams defines Apocalypse as “a series of events, even now beginning, . . . [that] will culminate in the abrupt end of the present, evil world-order and its replacement by a regenerate mankind in a new and perfected condition of life” (Abrams, “Apocalypse: Theme and Variation” 343). Kermode similarly asserts that “apocalyptic thought belongs to rectilinear rather than cyclical views of the world” and also notes that this linear timeline illustrates the inherent need of humankind to “belong, to be related to a beginning and to an end” (5, 4). In that way, central to Abrams’ and Kermode’s apocalyptic paradigms is that humanity is active in bringing about a
future culmination of God’s divine plan. In other words, events, happening in the past and the present are part of a cosmic design that simultaneously allows humanity to give meaning to the present and leads to apotheosis in the future, a final revelation when truth and meaning are fully unveiled. Stephen D. O’Leary captures this sentiment as well in Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric (1994). He writes that apocalyptic traditions “exhibit a common concern: to understand the successive human ages and their culmination in a catastrophic struggle between the forces of good and evil.” (5). O’Leary also recognizes the role of the apocalyptic tradition in community formation: “The story of the apocalyptic tradition is one of community building, in which human individuals and collectivities constitute their identities through shared mythic narratives that confront the problem of evil in time and history” (6). This view of apocalyptic narratives and their role in the formation of community, identity, and meaning is especially true of American Apocalypses both in a religious context and a literary one. In religious contexts, the biblical narrative of Apocalypse adheres to Abrams’, Kermode’s, and O’Leary’s definitions. American identity and community formation have revolved around apocalyptic mythology since its inception. On the other hand, the literary treatment of Apocalypse in America tends to interrogate this mythology and thus the foundations of America identity; furthermore, these literary treatments of Apocalypse almost always incorporate the Gothic mode to subvert the national narrative.

Literary scholarship on the centrality of Apocalypse in American culture and letters is surprisingly scarce though a few important works are worth discussing. John R. May’s Toward a New Earth: Apocalypse in the American Novel (1972) provides close readings of twelve American novels with the goal of creating a typology of Apocalypse. He examines symbols
indicative of the importance of Apocalypse, especially in early narratives, and then identifies the “variations and innovations” in the novels featured in his study (201). While the resulting typological chart is fascinating, there is little cultural or historical inquiry into why American writers repeatedly revisit the subject and symbolism of Apocalypse. Lois Parkinson Zamora’s collection, *The Apocalyptic Vision in America: Interdisciplinary Essays on Myth and Culture* (1982), includes essays on subjects like philosophy, religion, history, literature, art, popular culture, biology and economics that highlight the centrality of Apocalypse in American culture. However, only one chapter, written by Zamora herself, is devoted to literature. Zamora recognizes the centrality of Apocalypse in the formation of American identity and notes that “our best writers have constantly questioned the nature of [the] end, and they have often framed their questions in the terms of the myth of Apocalypse” (97). In her conclusion, Zamora notes how Apocalypse frames an understanding of human time and “suggests a cosmic context for our individual ends,” which echoes Abrams’ and Kermode’s observations (132).

Douglas Robinson’s *American Apocalypses: The Image of the End of the World in American Literature* (1985) provides a rare full-length study of Apocalypse in American literature. Robinson recognizes the rich cultural environment in America out of which emerged America’s fascination with Apocalypse:

Images of the end of the world abounded in American literature, and with good reason: the very idea of America in history is apocalyptic, arising as it did out of the historicizing of apocalyptic hopes in the Protestant Reformation. Discovered by Europeans in the sixteenth century, America was conceived as mankind’s last great hope, the Western site of the millennium. Settled by millenarian religious groups, most notably the Puritans in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, its future destiny was firmly and prophetically linked with God’s plan for the world, and the national dream of an American Age, a great paradisal future to be ushered in by America, remains strong even into our own time. (xi)
As Robinson demonstrates, the narrative of Apocalypse is quintessentially American, connected not only to America’s Protestant beginnings, but to Americans’ sense of purpose and mission as a country. However, Robinson also contends: “American Apocalypses—American works that adopt some interpretive stance toward the end of the world—at once undermine basic American values and definitively express those values; they essay both a rejection and a signal exploration of American ideologies of the self, of nature, of God and the supernatural, and of the community” (xi-xii). Robinson goes on to explain that American Apocalypses involve “mediations across the oppositions implicit in time and judgment” and that the “problem of time leads to questions about linearity and irreversibility (how does one undo or correct or repeat the past?)” (xiii). American Apocalypses in literature, by nature, involve a confrontation with America’s failed mission. Poe expresses parts of the mainstream narrative of Apocalypse in “The Colloquy of Monos and Una,” but rather than ending the tale at the moment of glorious resurrection, he ends his narrative in the darkness of the grave and an emphasis on the body’s decomposition. In The Scarlet Letter Hawthorne explores Puritan mythology that cherished the intimate connection between God and the communities of humankind while simultaneously undermining the nature of this connection by questioning humanity’s capacity to comprehend teleological design. Dickinson capitalizes on the mainstream narrative of the deathbed, but rather than providing a confirmation of a heavenly afterlife, Dickinson omits the requisite vision of paradise.

The most salient aspect of these studies in Apocalypse is their overlap with the narrative features and preoccupations of Gothic literature. Among other themes, the tradition of Apocalypse develops a consistent narrative concerned with community building, national myth,
and national identity. These are also integral components of the American Gothic. When Robinson observes that American Apocalypses “at once undermine basic American values and definitively express those values,” he could also be describing the American Gothic. Teresa Goddu argues that American Gothic literature is primarily concerned with criticizing “America’s national myth of new-world innocence by voicing the cultural contradictions that undermine the nation’s claim to purity and equality” (10). Goddu goes on to state:

The nation’s narratives—it's foundational fictions and self-mythologizations—are created through a process of displacement; their coherence depends on exclusion. By resurrecting what these narratives repress, the gothic disrupts the dream world of national myth with the nightmares of history. Moreover, in its narrative incoherence, the gothic discloses the instability of America’s self-representations; its highly wrought form exposes the artificial foundations of national identity. (10)

Taking Goddu’s description, it is not surprising that authors like Poe, Hawthorne, and Dickinson would choose the conventions and narrative features of the Gothic to challenge issues surrounding national identity and myth, such as Apocalypse, Millennialism, and the theology of the Last Things, which were dominant subjects of interest in the nineteenth century.

Goddu characterizes history as a nightmare that the Gothic brings to the forefront. May similarly observes that an apocalyptic tradition “has accepted the irreversibility of time, the terror of history. It sees the value of the historical hour for salvation” (12). The difference between these paradigms is their outlook, or interpretation of the arc of history. Within the apocalyptic, the prospect of salvation gives purpose to historical terror and suffering; in other words, escape from the terrors of history is possible. Gothic literature also demonstrates an obsession with time and history, but contrary to Apocalypse, in the Gothic paradigm, the past is inescapable. History is recursive and circular. The past is never dead, but instead, erupts, often violently, into the present, returning in real form as a ghost, or in a thematic series of past sins repeated in the
present. In the *Literature of Terror: The Gothic Tradition*, David Punter characterizes the Gothic in this way:

>A particular attitude towards the recapture of history; a particular kind of literary style; a version of self-conscious un-realism; a mode of revealing the unconscious; connections with the primitive, the barbaric, the tabooed—all of these meanings have attached themselves in one way or another to the idea of Gothic fiction, and our present apprehension of the term is usually an uneasy concatenation of them, in which there is a complicated interplay of direct historical connections and ever variable metaphor. (4)

The past is an inextricable part of most Gothic narratives and often serves as the primary plot device. Alan Lloyd-Smith argues in *American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction* that “The message of Gothic . . . is that it isn’t so much a matter of whether you can repeat the past as whether the past will repeat itself on you. . . . The Gothic . . . is about the *return* of the past, of the repressed and denied, the buried secret that subverts and corrodes the present, whatever the culture does not want to know or admit, will not or dare not tell itself” (1). Thus, while Apocalypse is concerned with escaping the past through progress or salvation, the Gothic characterizes the past as a living entity that endlessly returns to affect the present. In this way, the Gothic enacts the fears inherent in an apocalyptic belief system. If the ability to make sense of history rests on a belief that time is linear, moving away from the evils of the past and progressing toward some bright future, then the Gothic represents the greatest threat to that belief system: the possibility that time and history are in an endless loop, and that because sin is inescapable and progress is thwarted by endless repetition, salvation is *impossible*.

Gothic and apocalyptic texts are also similar in their featuring of border crossings, investigations of extremes, and liminality. Where Gothic narratives cross boundaries and transgress limits to explore extreme emotion and the extents of human knowledge, apocalyptic narratives are positioned at the moment in time that functions as a bridge between this world and
the world to come. The Apocalypse offers a view into an unknown world. In both cases, the movement across boundaries results in frightening encounters with the unknown. Robinson writes that American Apocalypses are “investigations into the edge, the boundary, the interface between radically different realms. If the Apocalypse is an unveiling, . . . then clearly the veil is the eschaton, that which stands between the familiar and whatever lies beyond” (xii). Robinson’s observation is strikingly similar to descriptions of Gothic literature. For example, Lloyd-Smith writes:

Hallmarks of the Gothic include a pushing toward extremes and excess, and that, of course, implies an investigation of limits. In exploring extremes, whether of cruelty, rapacity and fear, or passion and sexual degradation the Gothic tends to reinforce, if only in a novel’s final pages, culturally prescribed doctrines of morality and propriety. . . . The Gothic deals in transgressions and negativity, perhaps in reaction against the optimistic rationalism of its founding era, which allowed for a rethinking of the prohibitions and sanctions that had previously seemed divinely ordained but now appeared to be simply social agreements in the interest of progress and civic stability. (5)

Fred Botting’s Gothic characterizes the Gothic’s preoccupation with border crossings in a similar fashion: “Gothic texts operate ambivalently: the dynamic inter-relation of limit and transgression, prohibition and desire suggests that norms, limits, boundaries and foundations are neither natural nor absolutely fixed or stable despite the fears they engender. Crossing a boundary, for all the tension released, shows that it is neither impermeable nor unchangeable” (9). In apocalyptic literature, authors explore extremes of destruction and creation, and the moment of Apocalypse is a liminal threshold between these two extremes that will result in an unfamiliar new world. In Gothic literature, the same is true: authors explore various extremes of human emotion and behavior in uncanny encounters with the unknown.

A final and critical characteristic that Gothic and apocalyptic narratives share is that both genres emerge out of times of social unrest, and are often aimed at addressing a community’s or
nation’s social anxieties. May observes that “Apocalypse is a response to cultural crisis. It grows out of that sense of loss that results from the passing of an old world-view” (19). This is also true of Gothic literature. Speaking broadly, Lloyd-Smith notes:

Gothic interest in extreme states and actions can also be seen to correlate with widespread social anxieties and fears. Significant among these fears having to do with the suppressions of past traumas and guilt, anxieties concerning class and gender, fear of revolution, worries about the developing powers of science; an increasing suspicion that empire and colonial experience might bring home an unwanted legacy (a suspicion related to xenophobia but also involving a fear of colonial otherness and practices such as Voodoo); post-Darwinian suggestions of possible regression or atavism; and displaced versions of the dread occasioned by syphilis, or much later, by AIDS. (6-7)

More specifically, in The Return of the Repressed: Gothic Horror from The Castle of Otranto to Alien, Valdine Clemens writes the following:

The usual interpretation of the historical connection between Gothic horror and periods of social unrest is that Gothic registers or reflects these moments of radical cultural shift. . . . This type of fiction does more than simply reflect popular attitudes, however; it also influences them. . . . Gothic horror can actually facilitate a process of cultural change. . . . Gothic protagonists’ struggles with hidden guilt, transgression, and retribution point to a larger societal need to confront similar issues of social and moral responsibility. Their stories identify a gap between official ideology and actual reality. (6)

David Punter observes something similar: “Gothic fiction becomes a process of cultural self-analysis, and the images which it throws up become the dream-figures of a troubled social group” (The Literature of Terror Volume 2, 205). The period of the early nineteenth century through the Civil War was a time of great cultural shift on a number of levels. As the religious mainstream became more sentimental and science more advanced, theological documents of the period demonstrated a remarkable variety of views on the afterlife, the Intermediate State, whether humankind might bring about the millennium (Postmillennialism), or whether God alone could bring about the millennium after the final overthrow of Satan (Premillennialism). The literature of the time reflects these issues, and more often than not, authors who explored
anxieties about the afterlife, the Second Coming, and Apocalypse framed their narratives as Gothic. Given the overlap in narrative features between Gothic and Apocalypse, the tendency to write apocalyptic narratives that also fit within a Gothic framework is unsurprising, and the approach was adopted by well-known, canonical authors, as well as some of the more popular writers of the early nineteenth century.

In addition to the three representative authors who will make up the better part of this study, two further examples illustrate the widespread public interest in the Last Things, as well as the literary phenomenon of the Gothic Apocalypse. Henry Clay Lewis and George Lippard had disparate backgrounds, the former from Louisiana swamp country and the latter from the urban North. Their texts illustrate the wide range of interest surrounding the subject of the Last Things and provide examples of how the Gothic subverts the optimism of the religious mainstream by questioning the fate of the body during the Intermediate State and highlighting fears and skepticism about the possibility of salvation.

Henry Clay Lewis was a country physician who drowned at age 25 while crossing a swamp, but little else is known about him. He wrote under the pseudonym, Madison Tensas, a narrator that Clay characterizes as an elderly physician working in the Louisiana swamp. *Odd Leaves from the Life of a Louisiana Swamp Doctor* was published in 1850 and contained a tale called “A Struggle for Life,” which is often included in American Gothic anthologies. In the tale an African American dwarf with monstrous features leads the narrator into a swamp toward his ailing master’s house. The dwarf becomes enraged with alcohol and attacks the narrator. The text features the Gothic “Other”, a journey into the wilderness, and a brutal attempted murder. Just after losing consciousness, the narrator relates the following:
I remember it all perfectly, for the mind, through all this awful struggle, still remained full of thought and clearness. . . . I had not a fear of death. But oh! awful were my thoughts at dying in such a way—suffocated by a Hellish negro in the midst of the noisome swamp. . . . I ceased to breathe. I was dead. I had suffered the last pangs of that awful hour, and either it was the soul not yet resigned to leave its human tenement, or else immortal mind triumphing over death, but I still retained the sentient principle within my corpse. . . . I was dead, yet am living now. Ay, dead as human ever becomes. My lungs had ceased to play; my heart was still; my muscles were inactive; even my skin had the dead clammy touch. . . . I was dead, all but my mind, and that still thought on as vividly, as ramblingly, as during life. My body lay dead in that murderer's swamp, my mind roamed far away in thought, reviewing my carnal life. (253-254)

The most fascinating aspect of this Gothic narrative is the author’s treatment of the afterlife because it demonstrates several concerns of a nineteenth-century audience. In this passage, the author depicts a conscious soul trapped in a dead body, the fear of decomposition, and the fear of death without the closure of nineteenth-century deathbed rituals.

Despite the optimism of mainstream religious discourse as observed in consolation poetry and hymns, the “reality of the human corpse [was] a particularly compelling dilemma” for nineteenth-century believers (Laderman 1). As Gary Laderman’s study, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883*, demonstrates, attitudes about the afterlife and final Judgment were in a state of flux throughout the nineteenth century. Puritan beliefs were losing their hold on American religion and giving way to more optimistic viewpoints: “the ideology of death began to value feeling and memory over corruption and sin” (Laderman 62). Laderman also describes the cultural significance of death:

Death was unequivocally bound to conceptions of an afterlife in the collective Protestant imagination. In opposition to the natural laws of decomposition, the imaginative fancies of spiritual continuity expressed through various cultural representations were acceptable to—and desired by—many . . . These representations offered innovative strategies for imagining the world of spirits. But whether placed in the context of a nuclear family, a spiritual journey, or an apocalyptic moment, the fate of the individual soul remained a gripping source of affection and memory for the living. (62)
Society sought consolation regarding the fate of the dead, yet authors like Lewis fixate on the terrible image of the dead body, which, as Laderman suggests, is in “opposition” to popular views of the soul’s fate. Throughout the passage, Lewis repeatedly describes the horror of the body’s decay bemoaning that his “flesh” would be “devoured by the carrion crow” and his “bones” would “whiten where they lay for long years” (254). The narrator claims not to fear death itself, but rather the manner of death in which his body would lie unprotected, rotting, and eaten. While part of the narrator’s horror is likely rooted in his society’s valuing of funeral rites and proper burial, the truly horror-inducing passages focus on the actual decay of the body and the mind’s continuing sentience:

Had men been there, they would have placed me in a coffin, and buried me deep in the ground, and the worm would have eaten me, and the death-rats made nests in my heart, and what was lately a strong man would have become a loathsome mass. But still in that coffin amidst those writhing worms, would have been the immortal mind, and still would it have thought and pondered on till the last day was come. For such is the course of soul and death, as my interpretation has it. (254)

Amplifying the horror of bodily decay is the greater horror of the narrator’s “interpretation” of the “immortal mind.” As the narrator would have it, the immortal soul remains sentient, clinging to its physical remains until “the last day was come.” To drive home this gruesome possibility, the narrator writes of someone finding his skull:

Then, after the lapse of long years, my bones will be found. I wonder who will get my skull? Perhaps an humble doctor like myself, who, meditating upon it, will not think that it holds the mind of a creature of his own ambition—his own lofty instincts. He will deem it but an empty skull, and little dream that it held a sentient principle. (254)

Thus, long after the flesh has decayed from the bones, the “sentient principle” remains. The Gothic elements that describe the gory details of decay underscore the horror of the idea that the mind might remain conscious, tied to the body while awaiting the Apocalypse.
The fate of the soul after death and the possibility of conscious burial was a common concern in nineteenth-century literature and popular imagination. Stories of people being buried alive, which abounded in early nineteenth-century periodicals, dramatized the living soul trapped within the grave. Inventions like the life-preserving coffin demonstrate society’s obsession with the fear of consciousness after death. For example, in an 1843 article in *The New Mirror*, the author states:

The Life Preserving Coffin lately exhibited at the Fair of the Institute, it is so constructed as to fly open with the least stir of the occupant, and made as comfortable within as if intended for a temporary lodging. The proprietor recommends . . . a corresponding facility of exit from the vault, and arrangements for privacy, light, and fresh air—in short, all that would be agreeable to the revenant on first waking. . . . I felt for the first time in my life, some little alarm as to the frequency of trance or suspended animation. (“Slip-Slopperies of Correspondence” 111)

Reflecting this societal fixation, Poe wrote a number of narratives that dramatized being buried alive, and a passage out of his short story “The Colloquy of Monos and Una” depicts a similar experience to Lewis’ narrator where sentience remains though life is gone. Dickinson’s disembodied speakers whose voices originate from within the grave indicate her own fascination with the fate of the soul after death.

Anxiety over the fate and location of the soul was also rooted in the theological dialogue surrounding the Last Things. An 1834 article in *The Salem Gazette* addresses several other writers and their views upon the general Resurrection, the judgment, the duality of soul and body, and the Intermediate State. The unnamed author identifies questions readers might have regarding the Intermediate State:

Soon the question rose, suggested perhaps by those who combined with the faith of the gospel the speculative habits of the ancient philosophy, whether the soul, after death, was in a conscious state until the Resurrection of the body and the general judgment? In consequence of a reluctance to suppose that the spiritual principle of thought could
continue for such a long period in inaction and slumber, the idea became prevalent, towards the middle of the dark ages, that, at death, the soul passed into an intermediate state of conscious existence until the Resurrection of the body, at the last day, when its final lot would be determined. (“Communication”)

The author goes on to address specific nineteenth-century questions: “If when the body dies the soul continues in a conscious state, and waits for the general Resurrection before it can be judged, what is the condition of particular souls during this period? Do the good receive their reward before it is adjudged to them? Or do the wicked enter upon their punishment before their sentence is pronounced?” (“Communication”). This article demonstrates a wider dialogue in America, which permeated popular culture and literature at the time Poe, Hawthorne, and Dickinson were writing. Despite the saccharine rhetoric of mainstream religious culture, the gruesome reality of the corpse caused American society and its authors to question the fate of the soul at death. Live burial and consciousness after death suggest the possibility of a conventional Gothic situation of imprisonment and isolation but without the comfort of Gothic distance or displacement. Rather, the horrors of the Gothic are projected onto waking life.

George Lippard’s *The Quaker City or, the Monks of Monk Hall: A Romance of Philadelphia Life, Mystery, and Crime* (1845) is more explicitly apocalyptic than Lewis’ tale. Lippard was a friend of Poe’s and was arguably a more successful author at the time. *The Quaker City* sold “60,000 copies in its first year and 10,000 copies annually during the next decade” and was “the most popular American novel before the appearance of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852)” (Reynolds, “Introduction” *The Quaker City* vii). Through its sensational Gothic conventions, the novel addresses a large number of societal ills: mob mentality, corruption of government, the seduction of innocent girls, prostitution, debauchery, drunkenness, the judicial system, grave robbers, and more. As part of his criticism of those varied evils, Lippard includes an apocalyptic
vision akin to that of John of Patmos’ in the Book of Revelation. However, in *The Quaker City* the prophet who receives the vision is a pimp named Devil-Bug, who is “perhaps the most gleefully evil, sadistic character in American literature” (Reynolds, “Introduction” *The Quaker City* xxiii). Devil-Bug’s dream occurs in a chapter called “The Last Day of the Quaker City.”

The narrative begins with a description of the various hypocrisies and moral failings of the upper classes. If the title of the chapter was not enough to indicate its apocalyptic content, Lippard’s depiction of the downtrodden poor, who suffer in martyred silence, further establishes the context: “the mechanic in his tattered garb, looking to the clear blue sky above, as he asked God’s vengeance upon the world that robbed and starved him” (372). This theme continues throughout the novel. The context of the Book of Revelation is also one of martyrdom and persecution, as the narrative offers a balm to those who suffer, promising comfort and reprieve, as well as final and terrible retribution upon those who inflicted such suffering.

A primary feature of the Gothic is the subversion of national myth, and the questioning of America’s dearly held values and beliefs. In Devil-Bug’s doomsday vision a ghostly figure states:

> Those chariots are the equipages of a proud and insolent nobility, who lord it over the poor of the Quaker City! Yes, there rides a Duke, and there a Baron, and yonder a Count! This place is intended for the residence of a king! Liberty long since fled from the Quaker City, in reality has now vanished in its very name. The spirit of the old Republic is dethroned, and they build a royal mansion over the ruins of Independence Hall! (373)

Lippard undermines the nation’s democratic ideals by envisioning an American monarchy to replace the one so recently overthrown. In addition to the subversive Gothic elements of this vision, it is simultaneously framed within an apocalyptic paradigm. In Devil-Bug’s dream, great multitudes of the dead arise from their graves, their bodies a mass of corruption and writhing
worms. Animated skeletons rise to battle one another in an epic, cosmic struggle in one scene, and in the next the walking dead sing a lament for the city: “It was a lament for the dead who were to die on the morrow. It was a lament for young maidens, for grey-haired and helpless men, for smiling and sinless babes. All were to be mingled in the destruction of the morrow, all were to share the doom and the death of the Last Day of the guilty and idolatrous city” (383). On the Day of Doom, the dead continue to roam the city: “And the warm sunlight shone full upon their ghastly faces, upon the livid lips and the discolored cheeks. Their leaden eyes, —O! merciful God, how fixed and ghastly was their glare!—Their leaden eyes were turned to horrible gold. The loathsome worms crawling around each forehead, glistened gaily in the light and wreathed a hideous coronet of death upon each festering brow!” (385). Though this scene is certainly replete with Gothic horror, it also echoes apocalyptic passages of the Bible such as Revelation 20:13: “And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and Hell delivered up the dead which were in them.” However, Devil-Bug’s vision of the Last Day, which features death in its most physical manifestation, —rotting corpses walk the streets lamenting the soon-to-die—is far from the mainstream depiction of a glorious day of triumph. The Last Day of the Quaker city does not affirm life by defeating death and instituting a New Jerusalem. The Gothic elements in Lippard’s tale, such as the walking corpses, contradict the mainstream narrative of regeneration, Resurrection, and closure, and there is no sense of apotheosis at the end of time.

All of this destruction, the reader is told, occurs because America has failed in its high and glorious destiny. The Gothic disrupts dearly held beliefs about American identity and national mythology, as illustrated by Devil-Bug’s meeting with an old man in the midst of the destruction:
“I’m an antiquary,” he said in that low-toned and mournful voice. “I gather up the relics of the past—. . . Look here!” whispered the old man. “Be careful that no one sees you, it will cost you your life. . . . “

He placed a piece of damp cloth in the hands of Devil-Bug. . . .

“Ho, ho,” chuckled Devil-Bug. “Why this is the ‘Merykin Flag!’”

“That was the American Flag,” said the grey-eyed antiquary.

“Was?” echoed Devil-Bug.

“Was the American Flag, I say! There is no America now. In yonder ruined Hall, America was born, she grew to vigorous youth, and bade fair to live to a good old age, but—alas! Alas! She was massacred by her pretended friends. Priest-craft, and Slave-craft, and Traitor-craft were her murderers. And now, a poor old Antiquary has to skulk like an assassin through the street, because he has discovered a relic of the olden time, and bears it with him—this proscribed and forbidden Flag!” (388)

This exchange depicts how, through a variety of sins—religious hypocrisy, slavery, greed, corruption—the prophetic vision of America as a city on a hill has failed utterly. In addition, the tale disrupts the linear progression of humankind moving toward perfectibility and the millennium. Instead, by its own shortcomings, humanity has doomed itself to suffer God’s righteous vengeance. The chapter closes with a spirit commanding Devil-Bug to look upon the detritus that was the Quaker City:

Behold the wreck of the doomed city. Temples and domes, heaps of dead and piles of solid earth mingled in one awful ruin! The river burdened with blackened corpses, and the bright sky watching smiling over all! Look and behold the Massacre of Judgments! The Sacrifice of Justice! The wrongs of ages are avenged at last! At last the voice of Blood crying from the very stones of the idolatrous city, has pierced the ear of God. Look beneath, and look upon the wreck of the Doomed City! Look below and with the angels of eternal justice, shout the amen to the litany of the city’s crimes, shout Wo, WO UNTO SODOM. (393)

By framing the chapter within an apocalyptic context, Lippard enhances the subversive nature of Gothic conventions and applies them in disturbing fashion to the dearly held belief in America as a unique experiment destined to bring about the fulfillment of God’s divine plan. Instead, in Lippard’s version of the Apocalypse, America falls utterly short and serves not as the site of the new millennium, but rather, as a paragon of human failing, corruption, and sin. By the end of the
chapter, the destruction is complete and the presentation fully conforms to an apocalyptic narrative, such as that in the Book of Revelation, though darker and without hope.

Lippard’s text serves as one example of many in the nineteenth century that blend the Gothic with the apocalyptic. The resulting “Gothic Apocalypse” serves to undermine various aspects of national identity and depicts a world wherein humankind cannot achieve salvation due to its inherent and irreversible sins. Consequently, as humankind fails, so too does America’s mission to lead the way to the millennium as God’s chosen people. Like Lippard, Hawthorne would focus on this failed mission. His texts relentlessly depict humanity as incapable of achieving perfection, highlighting instead human failings that repeatedly thwart progress. In Hawthorne’s case, it is the past and its sins that resurface in endless repetition and highlight America’s repeated failure to accomplish its errand in the wilderness.

Lewis and Lippard are two primary examples that demonstrate the prevalence of the Gothic Apocalypse in nineteenth-century American literature, and though the scope of this study does not allow for detailed analysis of their works, several other authors deserve mention for depicting various iterations of the Gothic Apocalypse. Philip Freneau’s “House of Night” (1786), Harriet Prescott Spofford’s “Circumstance,” several of Charles Brockden Brown’s works, and perhaps most conspicuously, Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* all contain the dual frameworks of Apocalypse and Gothic narratives. These examples do not represent an exhaustive list, and the three authors in this study function as representative case studies that exemplify a larger phenomenon in American letters of this period especially. The Gothic Apocalypse would also continue well beyond the nineteenth century.
Scholars like Robinson, May, and Zamora assert that Apocalypse is central to American culture and literature. As a result, the consistent intersection of Gothic and apocalyptic frameworks is significant from a cultural standpoint, highlighting uniquely American anxieties about the nation’s role in a cosmic narrative. The Gothic tendency to subvert the mainstream mythology of a nation born to lead humankind in the great historical progression toward apotheosis foregrounds society’s doubts about its own destiny and underscores its many failings. Leslie Fiedler famously wrote that American literature is “bewilderingly and embarrassingly, a gothic fiction, nonrealistic and negative, sadist and melodramatic—a literature of darkness and the grotesque in a land of light and affirmation” (29). While not all of American literature can be labeled as Gothic, America’s most dearly held ideals are relentlessly questioned and dissected in much of America’s greatest literature, and this act of subversion often takes the form of the Gothic narrative.

When critics catalogue American Gothic texts, they often identify a specific group of typical subjects. For instance, in “Nineteenth-Century American Gothic,” Lloyd-Smith writes that “four indigenous features will prove decisive in producing a powerful and long-lasting American variant of the Gothic: the frontier, the Puritan legacy, race, and political utopianism” (Lloyd-Smith, “Nineteenth-Century American Gothic” 109). While these topics are common in American Gothic literature, this list, and others like it, misses Apocalypse. In his introduction to Through the Pale Door, Frederick S. Frank writes:

Individual potential for evil in a new society of uncertainties would determine the primal American Gothic themes that have fascinated our writers over the years. In its obsession with family disintegration, incest, murder, racial and sexual violence, and contamination of the landscape, the American Gothic spirit was driven by what Herman Melville called in his review of Hawthorne’s Mosses from an Old Manse ‘the power of blackness.’ Terror of self, psychic and social disorder, ontological conflicts and dilemmas, a terrible
sense of loneliness and homelessness, and spiritual stagnation and entrapment have been
the motivating themes of American Gothicism from Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland*
(1798) to Stephen King’s *Carrie*. (ix)

While many scholars, like Frank, vaguely hint at Apocalypse in their descriptions of American
Gothic preoccupation, it deserves more attention, not only for its centrality in American literature
in general, but because it is so often an integral part of the American Gothic narrative. The
authors covered in this study demonstrate distinct ways that American writers explored various
aspects of Apocalypse and the Last Things. As a collective, they also reflect the necessity of
expanding the definition of American Gothic literature to include a preoccupation with the
biblical Apocalypse.

Chapter Two of this study will explore the influence of mainstream religious thought on
Edgar Allan Poe. The primary critical focus of the chapter will be “The Colloquy of Monos and
Una,” a tale told from the perspective of a once-human, now spirit narrator after the events of the
Apocalypse. Poe’s depiction of the afterlife, and specifically the period between death and the
Apocalypse, depicts a time when the consciousness of the individual lives on despite the body’s
decay, an idea that can be traced to other nineteenth-century authors, but more importantly to the
Bible itself, specifically Old Testament depictions of death. This concept of the living and
conscious soul going to the grave with the putrid corpse is also dramatized in Poe’s many
depictions of live burial. Given the prevalence of consolation poetry in nineteenth-century
culture, in which the afterlife is depicted as a beatific place where souls go immediately after
death, Poe’s contrasting exploration of the Intermediate State through Gothic conventions
highlights the underlying debate and anxiety caused by the dilemma of the body and its unclear
connection to the soul.
Chapter Three examines the influence of the Millerite movement on Nathaniel Hawthorne’s fiction. Hawthorne’s mention of William Miller in at least four short tales confirms his awareness of the movement and its cultural influence. Even before the Millerite craze, however, Hawthorne demonstrates his interest in Apocalypse. “Alice Doane’s Appeal” (1835) incorporates apocalyptic imagery through a Resurrection scene at the end of the tale. His novels *The House of the Seven Gables* and *The Scarlet Letter* also contain symbolism and imagery associated with the biblical Apocalypse. Throughout his corpus, when Hawthorne features apocalyptic subject matter, he frequently undermines one of its essential tenets: linear progress toward apotheosis. He does so by underscoring the Gothic feature of circular history, in which the past continually erupts in the present in a never-ending cycle that relentlessly thwarts progress and conclusion. Hawthorne also incorporates the uncanny, in which something familiar becomes distorted and thus frightening. In *The Scarlet Letter*, specifically, he transforms the biblical marriage between the Lamb and his bride, mentioned in the Book of Revelation, into something uncanny, contradicting mainstream religious beliefs about America’s role in a progressive movement toward cosmic apotheosis.

Chapters Four and Five cover the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Her poetry features the entire spectrum of apocalyptic concerns and the Last Things, from death and the Intermediate State, to Resurrection, Judgment, and Apocalypse. When Dickinson addresses these topics, she often incorporates Gothic conventions, images, and subject matter. Chapter Four will explore Dickinson’s subversion of various mainstream religious narratives in her Gothic poetry. Dickinson’s society had an intense preoccupation with what is often termed the “Good Death.” Consolation narratives describe how to die well, which includes a deathbed declaration of belief
and faith in one’s heavenly destination after death. Dickinson’s poetry tends to subvert the narrative of the Good Death, whether through grotesque rather than saccharine images of the deathbed or through depictions of lonely souls awaiting Resurrection from within the grave.

Chapter Five moves on to Apocalypse itself, and more specifically Dickinson’s allusions to the Book of Revelation. One of the key features of the text of Revelation is a series of tensions and opposing concepts: death versus life, destruction versus creation, and desire for the Apocalypse versus fear of the Apocalypse. These same tensions can be found in Dickinson’s poetry. Her poems suggest a resistance to apocalyptic destruction that is contrary to the desires expressed by mainstream religion. Dickinson’s culture, when referencing Apocalypse, told the tale of the happy soul, saved through the blood of Christ. In contrast, Dickinson appropriates the Gothic as an emotive framework to convey the experience of the non-Elect, writing a narrative of exclusion that focuses on those who are the recipients of God’s retribution on the Last Day. In this way, Dickinson transforms the narrative of cosmic culmination into a Gothic tale of terror.
Chapter II

“The mortal body had been at length stricken with the hand of the deadly Decay. Yet had not all of sentience departed”: Live Burial, the Intermediate State, and Apocalypse in the Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe

What has become of those blessed spirits which once walked the earth in mortal bodies like those which the living inhabit, bade a sad, a long farewell to all they loved below, and then died in the Lord to live unto Him in another state? What are they? Where are they? How are they employed? Do they sleep, or do they wake? Are they unconscious, or do they think? Do they dwell low down in hidden caverns of the earth? Do they float in an ocean of ethereal bliss in mid air? Or have they mounted aloft to one of those glorious orbs, which by night sparkle on the empyrean arch? –These are questions, which rise up spontaneously in the mind of the survivor, when he bids his mournful farewell to some beloved, congenial, and cherished spirit, as it forsakes its “house of clay;” and these are questions which many would gladly have satisfactorily answered. (41-42)

– J.W. McCullough, The Dead in Christ (1845)

The lack of attention on religious culture and its influence on Edgar Allan Poe’s literary corpus represents a significant lacuna in Poe studies both past and present. While Poe’s religious views are often considered murky at best, he could not have escaped the influence of one of the most influential cultural documents of the nineteenth century: The King James Bible. To date, there is only one full-length study of the Bible’s influence on Poe, Biblical Allusions in Poe by William Mentzel Forrest, published in 1928. Perhaps the most salient aspect of Forrest’s study is his nearly comprehensive list of Poe’s prolific allusions and references to the Bible. As other scholars have noted, Poe’s fascination with death, corruption, the afterlife, and Resurrection registers the “deepening spiritual uncertainty of the nineteenth century” and indicates a complex engagement with the religious culture of his time (Kennedy, A Historical Guide to Edgar Allan Poe 11). Poe’s preoccupation with “putrefaction without transcendence” emerges from ongoing debates within nineteenth-century religious discourse about the nature and existence of an
Intermediate State and from conflicting images of death and Resurrection within the Bible (A Historical Guide to Edgar Allan Poe 11-12).

Concerns about the afterlife in the nineteenth century were inextricably linked to the Second Coming and Apocalypse. Poe’s depictions of live burial and conscious burial in works like “The Sleeper” (1831-1845), “Berenice” (1835), “The Premature Burial” (1844) and “The Colloquy of Monos and Una” (1841) reflect contemporary theology and elements of the Gothic genre. Through a lens of terror, Poe capitalizes on America’s obsession with The Last Things. Poe further addresses the darker implications of the theology of the Intermediate State through his depictions of conscious burial and Apocalypse in “The Colloquy of Monos and Una” and “The Conqueror Worm” (1843). According to Patrick Quinn in The French Face of Poe, tales like “The Colloquy of Monos and Una,” are “imaginative excursions beyond the bourne of mortality; and in this sense . . . [belong] with his other tales of burial and Resurrection” (273). These tales, however, are more than mere “imaginative excursions.” They explore serious questions and doubts about the afterlife that reflect the religious discourse of nineteenth-century society. For example, though Poe states in “The Premature Burial,” “the boundaries that divide Life from Death are at the best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where the one ends and the other begins?” he was nevertheless intent upon exploring those boundaries as is evident in tales where the consciousness lives on, still aware, in a dead body no longer capable of movement. (Poetry and Tales 666). Even more frightening to modern readers, the body falls into putrefaction while the soul, tethered to the decaying body, remains conscious.

Mainstream religious discourse surrounding The Last Things sought to provide comfort in the face of death and routinely glossed over the terror and anxiety inherent in the subject. Poe,
on the other hand, embraces these anxieties, appropriating the Gothic genre to explore the Intermediate State, the question of Resurrection, and the role of the individual in the cosmic scope of Apocalypse. Rather than adhering to a mainstream linear narrative that follows the pattern of death, Intermediate State, Resurrection, and Apocalypse, Poe modifies the pattern for Gothic effect. His tales frequently feature death, but what follows subverts the conventional narrative by transforming it into a tale of terror. In “The Sleeper” a dead woman slumbers but is conscious, and Poe provides no promise of transcendence or Resurrection. In “Berenice,” Poe dramatizes the horrors of the Intermediate State through the live burial and the mutilation of the tale’s namesake. Poe further explores the sinister possibilities of the Intermediate State in “The Premature Burial,” which also contains a scene that suggests associations with the General Resurrection mentioned in Revelation. However, in both “Berenice” and “The Premature Burial” Poe refuses the closure that Resurrection provides, which is essential to an apocalyptic paradigm. In both “The Colloquy of Monos and Una” and “The Conqueror Worm” Poe addresses Apocalypse itself, but rather than allowing these works to reach apotheosis and culmination, both resist closure, ending in darkness rather than transcendence and regeneration. When Poe incorporates the Gothic as a framework, he emphasizes the problematic juxtaposition of death, bodily corruption, and burial with nineteenth-century beliefs about the immortality of the soul. Poe’s fiction and poetry suggest a frightening alternative to the sentimental optimism of the mainstream, as his starkly depicted reality of the decaying corpse thwarts the expected renewal in an apocalyptic paradigm.

In the early twentieth-century, Poe studies favored a psychological approach. More recently, the field has moved away from a focus on biography and aberrant psychology to direct
its attention to the cultural and historical significance of Poe’s corpus. However, detailed analysis of the Bible’s influence on Poe’s tales is bafflingly scarce. This is especially surprising given his numerous references to the Bible and the strong biographical evidence of his religious convictions, as evidenced in his letters, as well as various second-hand reports of his life. In one of the few works that explores Poe and the Bible, C. Alphonso Smith underscores Poe’s evident “familiarity with the Bible, . . . his keen interest in Biblical research . . . his oft-expressed belief in the truth of the Bible, [and] . . . his final and impassioned defense, in Eureka, of the sovereignty of the God of the Bible” (355). Smith goes on to argue:

Poe’s intimate knowledge of the Bible might be traced in the many allusions that he makes to Bible history and Bible imagery, but more than mere knowledge is seen in the conscious and vivid imitation of Bible style that he achieves in many of his greatest prose passages. (355)

In the argument that follows, Smith is too hasty in attributing strong conviction of traditional religion to Poe’s own beliefs, especially considering the experimental spirituality suggested in the rest of Eureka, not to mention Poe’s penchant for parody and hoax. However, Smith does reveal the abiding influences of Poe’s personal conception of the God of the Bible and the text of the Bible itself, which underlie much of his works.

Poe’s personal belief in the God of the Bible is less important than his public engagement with religious discourse, offering insight into his interest in the subject. In 1837, Poe wrote a review of Incidents of Travel in Egypt, Arabia, Petraea, and the Holy Land (1837) by John Lloyd Stephens. In the review, Poe refers to the Bible as “the book of books.” Later in the same review, Poe writes that “We look upon the literalness of the understanding of the Bible predictions as an essential feature in prophecy—conceiving minuteness of detail to have been but a particle in the providential plan of the Deity for bringing more visibly to light, in after-ages,
the *evidence* of the fulfillment of his word” (*Essays and Reviews* 923, 929). The review not only demonstrates Poe’s thoughts on the deity, but also his interest in prophecy and the fulfillment of providential design. In 1844 Poe commented on *A Sermon on a Future State, Combating the Opinion that “Death is an Eternal Sleep”* by Gilbert Austin in his “Marginalia” series from December. The sermon, published in London in 1794, refutes the idea that oblivion or sleep follows death, and Austin calls this conception of death, “the sleep of eternal death” (13). Austin asks if it is possible that a benevolent God could hurry human souls “down to darkness, oblivion and the grave!—Can it be to oblivion and darkness, through it is to the grave?—Can a being of such perfect goodness as we conceive God to be, delight to mock and interrupt forever our noblest and worthiest pursuits?—Can he wantonly break off by the relentless hand of eternal death, the fruit of reason . . . ?” (15). Austin resolves that such possibilities cannot be true and ends his sermon with a triumphant vision of the “awful trumpet” and the “great judgment before the Lamb of God, when all shall receive the final punishments or rewards” (34). Reviewing the sermon, Poe writes: “Nearly, if not quite the best ‘Essay on a Future State.’ The arguments called ‘Deductions from our Reason,’ are, rightly enough, addressed more to the *feelings* (a vulgar term not to be done without), than to our reason. The arguments deduced from Revelation are (also rightly enough) brief. The pamphlet proves nothing, of course; its theorem is not to be proved” (*Marginalia* 43). Poe’s engagement with this line of theological inquiry is remarkable because, like the review of John Lloyd Stephens’ work, it demonstrates a keen interest in the fulfillment of the apocalyptic culmination of Revelation as well as the condition of the human soul in the “Future State.” Poe’s comments also highlight Poe’s unwillingness to accept mainstream society’s confidence in the beatific vision of a Heavenly afterlife. For Poe, even the best essay on
the Future State is not enough to prove that Heaven exists, and he further suggests that such theorems in general cannot be proved, opening up far darker possibilities for the afterlife that he would explore in many of his most disturbing tales.

In 1845 Poe wrote a letter to mesmerist and Swedenborgian, George Bush (1796-1859), who was the first figure described in Poe’s “The Literati of New York City.” Appearing in the 1846 May issue of *Godey’s Magazine and Lady’s Book*, Poe writes of his interest in Bush’s recent work concerning the “Future Condition of Man,” which refers to Bush’s *Anastasis, or the Doctrine of the Resurrection; in which it is Shown that the Doctrine of the Resurrection of the Body is Not Sanctioned by Reason or Revelation*. Bush replied to the January 1845 letter, “giving a favorable opinion” of Poe’s “Mesmeric Revelation,” a tale that explores the materiality of the soul (Thomas and Jackson 485-486). Bush’s response is unsurprising, given that *Anastasis* attempts to resolve the problem of bodily Resurrection. Bush argues against physical Resurrection, stating, “A person who dies at the age of seventy has had ten different bodies. Which of these is to be the body of the Resurrection? Is it the body of infancy, of childhood, of youth, of manhood, or of old age?” (37). The manner of burial and state of the corpse was also problematic. Regarding those who were cremated and their ashes “scattered by the winds to the four quarters of Heaven,” Bush writes:

> How—in what sense—are these bodies to be raised? The question is not whether these persons are to live again. . . . But what is to be understood by these bodies being said to be raised at the final consummation? . . . The elements of these bodies, after having been submitted to the action of fire, are scattered through the universe, and we cannot conceive of any mode by which they can be said to be raised up, except by the re-gathering and re-construction of the dispersed atoms. (49)

Bush goes on to affirm that a “vital principle” escapes the body at death, which is commonly called the soul (72). More pertinent to Poe’s specific interests are Bush’s comments on the
material nature of the soul. Bush writes, “The precise boundaries between the physical and the psychical parts of our nature have never yet been determined. In many points they seem to run into each other” (73). In a later passage, Bush comments upon the possible materiality of the Resurrection body:

To the question whether such a body shall be material or immaterial, we may pledge ourselves to return an answer, when the naturalist shall inform us whether light is material or immaterial; whether electricity, electro-magnetism, caloric, and the principle of gravitation, be material or immaterial; in regard to which no one is at present prepared to affirm either the one or the other. The truth is, we know but little of the true nature of what we term matter when we come to its more refined and subtle forms. (75-76)

While Poe’s views in “Mesmeric Revelation” may not have aligned entirely with Bush’s views in Anastasis, the idea that the soul, like the corpse, was material would validate Poe’s depictions of the soul going conscious to the grave, and further blur the distinction between body and soul. In “The Literati of New York City,” Poe would give Bush’s work a mostly favorable review: “The ‘Anastasis’ is lucidly, succinctly, vigorously and logically written, and proves, in my opinion, everything that it attempts — provided we admit the imaginary axioms from which it starts; and this is as much as can be well said of any theological disquisition under the sun.”

While Poe states that theological disquisitions are predicated upon what he calls “imaginary axioms” he is not only aware of these theological debates, specifically ones concerned with the Resurrection, but he also challenges mainstream religion by addressing the darker implications of theological doctrine in the subject matter of his tales.

In Beneath the American Renaissance, David Reynolds also comments on Poe’s interest in religious subject matter, stating that Poe used the “visionary tale, or imaginary visions of angels and the afterlife” as a device that led to a “nonreligious literary aesthetic” (42). Poe’s tales are not religiously didactic. However, while many of Poe’s works may have been influenced by
the spirituality brought on by the pantheism of the Transcendentalists who were reacting against older Puritan religious views, they also exhibit the influence of traditional religious culture and discourse of the time. Poe was obsessed with the idea of Resurrection, the nature of the afterlife, and bodily corruption, concerns he absorbed from the dominant religious discourse around him.

In *America’s Gothic Fiction: The Legacy of Magnalia Christi Americana*, Dorothy C. Baker links Poe’s works to the providential tropes found in Cotton Mather’s *Magnalia Christi Americana*, establishing Poe’s knowledge of the biblical text and the influence of Puritan culture. Baker claims that when Poe “evokes Cotton Mather’s topoi, he creates readerly anticipation of its themes of epiphany, regeneration, and salvation—themes that he ultimately refuses to realize” (39). Baker pursues the claim that Poe was far more engaged with religious culture than previously believed. That said, in examining Poe’s engagement with religious culture, Baker focuses on one specific narrative—the providence tales found in the *Magnalia Christi Americana*—to prove that Poe’s Gothic undermines conceptions of divine providence and the role of the minister as historian. However, Poe’s combination of Gothic and religious subject matter is far more expansive than what Baker covers in her study. Throughout his works, Poe engages with specific theological questions concerning the body and soul as well as the Second Coming. Poe’s narratives of live burial and the conscious soul in a dead body suggest a complex and studied engagement with the varying religious constructs of the time—the Intermediate State, Resurrection, the afterlife, and the coming Apocalypse. Baker also claims that “it is abundantly clear that the adult Edgar Allan Poe did not adhere to a specific religious creed—Christian or otherwise” (37). This may be true to an extent. Poe may not have adhered to any specific mainstream theology, but his interest in the nature of God and the afterlife is evident in
his correspondence. For example, in 1844, Poe wrote two letters containing similar content, one to James Russell Lowell on July 2 and one to Thomas H. Chivers on July 10. In the letter to Chivers, Poe writes:

There is no such thing as spirituality. God is material. All things are material; yet the matter of God has all the qualities which we attribute to spirit: thus the difference is scarcely more than of words. There is a matter without particles — of no atomic composition: this is God. It permeates and impels all things, and thus is all things in itself. Its agitation is the thought of God, and creates. Man and other beings (inhabitants of stars) are portions of this unparticled matter, individualized by being incorporated in the ordinary or particled matter.—Thus they exist rudimentally. Death is the painful metamorphosis. The worm becomes the butterfly—but the butterfly is still material—of a matter, however, which cannot be recognized by our rudimental organs. But for the necessity of the rudimental life, there would have been no stars—no worlds—nothing which we term material. These spots are the residences of the rudimental things. At death, these, taking a n[e]w form, of a n[o]vel matter, pass every where, and act all things, by mere volition, and are cognizant of all secrets but the one—the nature of the volition of God—of the agitation of the unparticled matter. (LTR-179)

While the letter to Chivers confirms that Poe was not a conventional believer, Baker’s claim that he did not adhere to any religious creed is misleading, making him seem dismissive or even uninterested in matters of religion. In addition, when Poe engages with religious discourse, his interests center on the Last Things, death, the afterlife, the Intermediate State, and Apocalypse, subjects that the mainstream depicts optimistically. However, when these subjects appear in Poe’s poetry and fiction they are overlaid with a veneer of Gothic horror, undermining the conventional hopefulness and confidence of mainstream religious narratives. As the letter to Chivers indicates, Poe conceived of the soul as “material.” In his fiction and poetry, Poe’s fascination with the materiality of the soul often emerges as a physical connection between body and soul in which the soul remains tethered to the body, even after death.

Poe’s engagement with nineteenth-century religious thought is evident in poems like “The Sleeper” (1831-1845) where Gothic terror contradicts the saccharine narrative of
nineteenth-century consolation verse and emphasizes the conjectural nature of a Future State by undermining contemporary religious rhetoric. In “The Sleeper,” Poe writes from the perspective of a narrator mourning the death of his “lady dear.” While this poem is typical of Poe’s treatment of the death of a beautiful woman, it is also infused with religious concerns rooted in the Bible. The poem begins with common Gothic imagery, using the conventional romantic reference to Lethe and characterizing death as a state of forgetfulness:

At midnight, in the month of June,
I stand beneath the mystic moon.
An opiate vapour, dewy, dim,
Exhales from out her golden rim,
And, softly dripping, drop by drop,
Upon the quiet mountain top,
Steals drowsily and musically
Into the universal valley.
The rosemary nods upon the grave;
The lily lolls upon the wave;
Wrapping the fog about its breast,
The ruin moulders into rest;
Looking like Lethë, see! The lake
A conscious slumber seems to take
And would not for the world, awake.
All Beauty sleeps!–and lo! where lies
Irenë, with her Destinies! (Poetry and Tales 64)

The connection between death and forgetfulness also has biblical roots. For example, Ecclesiastes 9:5-6 states, “For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not anything, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, and their hatred and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion forever in anything that is done under the sun.” In Psalm 88:12, the dwelling place of the dead is called the “land of forgetfulness.” At the same time Poe draws upon biblical characterizations of
death, he also establishes a Gothic framework in this poem by incorporating images of mouldering ruins, enveloping fog, and nighttime visits to the “universal valley.”

Scenes of nature parallel the beautiful Irenë, who like the lake, remains in a state of “conscious slumber.” In the nineteenth century, most biblical scholars viewed “sleep” or “slumber” as a figurative description of death, and not a literal state of oblivion or unconsciousness. The following stanza continues the romantic description of the nighttime atmosphere:

Oh, lady bright! Can it be right—
This window open to the night?
The wanton airs, from the tree-tops,
Laughingly through the lattice drop—
The bodiless airs, a wizard rout,
Flit through thy chamber in and out,
And wave the curtain canopy
So fitfully—so fearfully—
Above the closed and fringed lid
‘Neath which thy slumb’ring soul lies hid,
That, o’er the floor and down the wall,
Like ghosts the shadows rise and fall!
Oh, lady dear, hast thou no fear?
Why and what are thou dreaming here?
Sure thou art come o’er far-off seas,
A wonder to these garden trees!
Strange is thy pallor! strange thy dress!
Strange, above all, thy length of tress,
And this all solemn silentness! (Poetry and Tales 65)

Poe emphasizes Irenë’s state as one of potential fear and activity: “Oh, lady dear, hast thou no fear? Why and what art thou dreaming here?” Despite the romantic description of the “wanton airs” dropping “Laughingly” through the lattice, the atmosphere of the scene is far from peaceful. The curtains wave “fitfully” and “fearfully” while “shadows rise and fall” like ghosts in the “solemn silentness.” For Poe as well, the association of sleep with death describes an active state.
Though Irenë “sleeps” it is a “conscious slumber.” In addition, the location of Irenë’s soul appears to be with her body in the coffin: “Above the closed and fringed lid/ ‘Neath which thy slumb’ring soul lies hid.” Despite the sing-song meter, the implied fate of Irenë is ghastly. She is semi-conscious, but trapped beneath the closed lid of her coffin. Adding to the macabre nature of the scene, the narrator appears to be in close proximity to Irenë’s corpse: “Strange is thy pallor! Strange thy dress! / Strange, above all, thy length of tress.” Even more gruesome is the suggestion of decay. The diction of the poem progresses from waxing romantic with descriptions of nature’s beauty to a description of Irenë’s appearance, which is characterized not as beautiful, but as “strange.” Her pallor and dress become unfamiliar as decomposition sets in, but it is the subtle mention of her “length of tress” that is perhaps most unsettling. As the body deteriorates and the skin dries out, it often appears that the hair and fingernails of a corpse have grown longer. If the narrator finds Irenë’s length of hair “strange” it is likely due to the process and extent of the corpse’s decay. Opening a coffin to gaze on a corpse may seem like aberrant behavior to the modern reader, but it actually demonstrates a common nineteenth-century behavior when coping with the loss of the body. As Gary Laderman writes in The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883, in the early nineteenth century, “three powerful characteristics” describe the attitudes regarding the dead: “a refusal to allow the dead to disappear from the living community, a fixation on the body of the deceased, and a demand that the integrity of the corpse be perpetuated in the grave as well as in collective memory” (73). The result of these attitudes was the not-infrequent practice of opening coffins periodically after a death to see how the corpse changed over time. Laderman lists several instances of this practice in nineteenth-century letters, and notes that even “Emerson, the New England Transcendentalist
who discoursed on the subject of death with a fairly cool, self-possessed awareness of the true nature of human mortality, alluded to a strong attachment to the corpse of his dead wife when he admitted in a diary entry a year after her death, ‘I visited Ellen’s tomb and opened the coffin’” (76). While the narrator’s behavior in “The Sleeper” may be disturbing to modern readers, it demonstrates the traumatic sense of loss for the bereaved when faced with the body’s decay and places in stark relief the inadequacy of the mainstream narrative regarding the afterlife.

In the face of the realities of the body, the narrator expresses the wish that Irenë’s sleep “which is enduring, so be deep!” and continues to pray:

The Lady sleeps! Oh, may her sleep,  
Which is enduring, so be deep!  
Heaven have her in its sacred keep!  
This chamber changed for one more holy,  
This bed for one more melancholy,  
I pray to God that she may lie  
Forever with unopened eye,  
While the pale sheeted ghosts go by!

My love, she sleeps! Oh, may her sleep,  
As it is lasting, so be deep!  
Soft may the worms about her creep!  
Far in the forest, dim and old,  
For her may some tall vault unfold—  
Some vault that oft hath flung its black  
And winged panels fluttering back,  
Triumphant, o’er the crested palls,  
Of her grand family funerals—  
Some sepulcher, remote, alone,  
Against whose portal she hath thrown,  
In childhood, many an idle stone—  
Some tomb from out whose sounding door  
She ne’er shall force an echo more,  
Thrilling to think, poor child of sin!  
It was the dead who groaned within. (Poetry and Tales 65-66)
Though the narrator prays that Heaven “have” her, this is merely a desire, not something that has come to pass with certainty. While the narrator hopes the lady’s “chamber” to be exchanged for one more holy, that change has not yet occurred, and in the meantime, the lady must remain in the grave indefinitely. The length of this waiting period is not reassuring. The narrator indicates that she will lie “forever with unopened eye” without the promise of Resurrection or change. Instead, the lady must simply wait in a state of conscious slumber, her only company, “the pale sheeted ghosts” of her vault. The final stanza continues the poem’s narrative descent from the sublime to the horrifying. The narrator’s lurid blessing, “Soft may the worms about her creep!” indicates the ghastly nature of death wherein the soul exists in a half-slumber while worms accelerate the body’s decay. The narrator’s wish for Irenë, that the worms might not wake her, intimates the even more grim possibility of full consciousness within the grave while the body slowly deteriorates. The poem ends with the image of Irenë the child, playfully throwing stones at the family vault to create echoes, never realizing the dead were groaning from inside.

This image of the child Irenë alludes to the phrase “poor child of sin,” which Thomas Ollive Mabbott, in his annotated edition of Poe’s poems, connects to verses from Genesis. Genesis 3:3 states, “But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die.” “The Sleeper,” like many of Poe’s other works, adopts the Gothic as a lens through which he explores nineteenth-century interpretations of the Bible. Mabbott makes the point that the sins of Adam and Eve make all of humanity subject to mortality, which is the biblical context of Poe’s treatment of death. Genesis 3:19 describes the curse put upon Adam and Eve: “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt
thou return” (Genesis 3:19). By using the terror of the Gothic, with its melancholy ruins and graveyard horrors, Poe articulates the terror and tragedy of humanity’s uncertain fate and undermines the mainstream religious narrative surrounding death and the afterlife with the stark reality of the corpse.

“The Sleeper” contrasts starkly with mainstream religious depictions of death and the afterlife, especially the typical narrative in nineteenth-century consolation verse. One of the most commonly cited examples of consolation verse is Lydia Huntley Sigourney’s collection, The Weeping Willow. These poems gloss over the reality of the decaying physical form and depict happy souls flying directly to Heaven without mention of the body. These departed souls enjoy the glories of the Future Life while the bereaved are assured of a future reunion with loved ones who have passed away. In “The Brothers,” Sigourney describes the wonders of Heaven for two young brothers who die in childhood:

Sad change came o’er each polish’d brow,
And so, we say, they died,
Yet rather let us say they rose
To their Redeemer’s side,
To Him, of whom their infant lips
Would lisp, in tuneful praise,
With cherubim and seraphim
A higher hymn they raise. (103)

Sigourney depicts the brothers protected and safe with their “Redeemer” in the afterlife. This is a stark contrast to Irenë, whose soul dreams fitfully within her coffin. Where Sigourney describes the departed brothers enjoying eternity by singing blissful hymns of praise, Poe’s Irenë dreams in the “solemn silentness” of the tomb. In another poem, “The Mother’s Departure,” Sigourney depicts the body as a burden to be cast off at death:

On a high arm,—and strong,
The soul its burden cast,
Till soaring free and high
The weakness of mortality
Fled like a wither’d leaf before the rushing blast,
And with a conqueror’s song
Heaven’s gate she pass’d. (118)

According to the mainstream narrative, the dead achieve “soaring” freedom, released from the “weakness” and “burden” of mortality while Irenë’s “slumb’ring soul lies hid” beneath the lid of her coffin. The soul remains with the body as it sinks into decay, and worms “creep” about the vault. Where Sigourney pictures the departed enjoying reunion with other departed loved ones, Poe’s dead are isolated. Where Sigourney imagines the souls of Christians enjoying the glories of Heaven, Poe’s “poor child of sin” groans from within the tomb. Sigourney’s poetry offers a rich repository of popular imagery and rhetoric that depicts death as a beautiful if sad occasion and offers comfort to the bereaved, but Poe omits any promise of Resurrection or description of a Heavenly afterlife. Even so, Poe incorporates just enough biblically derived depictions of death to make poems like “The Sleeper” particularly disturbing. Poe dilutes the sentimental narratives of popular culture by blending them with the incongruous elements of the Gothic. These elements turn horrifying when the frightening aspect of the tomb and the contents of the coffin are revealed to contain not just a body, but a soul as well. Regardless of the comfort consolation verse might provide, this comfort is vulnerable to the ghastly realities of the corpse and the loneliness of the tomb.

These fears about the fate of the soul after death have direct ties to nineteenth-century theological inquiry and debate, specifically regarding the Intermediate State. The Intermediate State was not merely a space of time, and for many represented an actual place where souls went that was neither Heaven nor Hell, but rather a place of provisional blessedness for those who had
achieved salvation or a place of misery that foretold of the greater torment of Hell for the wicked. In Alexander Copeland’s “Preliminary Observations” chapter of *Mortal Life; and the State of the Soul After Death; Conformable to Divine Revelation*, he outlines the contemporary debate in the following passage:

When some, like the present Archbishop of Dublin, Dr. Whately, assure us—“that with respect to an Intermediate State nothing is revealed to us,”—others appear confident that the soul, on leaving the body, goes instantly to the judgment-seat, and from thence, either to that Heaven or Hell where it is to live throughout eternity;—some believe with the Right Rev. Dr. Law, a Bishop of Chester, that in the interval between death and the Resurrection, the soul loses its consciousness, as the body does its life, passing the time in a sleep of insensibility; and that, as a mere quality of the brain, it lives only while the latter is animated with life, . . . and consequently may be said to go to the grave as well as the body;—many, who hold that the soul can exist separately from the body, suppose that it sleeps in senseless torpidity somewhere else;—while another class think it lives in an Intermediate State, without losing any of its mental powers, although it can no longer communicate with the external world by bodily organs, and does not go to the place of eternal happiness or of misery until after its reunion with the altered body, and after it has passed the judgment of the great and only day of account. (Copeland 8)

Another less widely held belief concerning the Intermediate State was that the soul might accompany the body into the grave in a fully conscious or semi-conscious state, as many Old Testament passages suggest, and it is this interpretation of the Intermediate State that Poe frequently engages. Copeland addresses this viewpoint only briefly: “In an unpublished Sermon now before me, which was preached in the presence of a Presbyterian Synod, it is said to be—‘a gloomy prospect to be lowered down to the bottom of the grave, there to see corruption. It is gladdening to anticipate the joyful time, when the grave shall yield up its ancient charge.’—We should anticipate no such gloomy descent” (Copeland 63). The unpublished sermon refers directly to Psalm 16:10 where it states “For thou wilt not leave my soul in Hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.” He also pinpoints two aspects of the Intermediate State
that caused unease: the concept of soul-sleep, which implies that the soul cannot be animate while the body is dead and the idea that the soul accompanied the body into the grave in a conscious state where it would endure the decay of its own body and await the Resurrection in isolation and darkness. Copeland argues vehemently against both the idea that the soul sleeps after death and the idea that the soul and body are inseparable, but his acknowledgment of the opposition is significant, as it reveals the scope of the debate surrounding these religious constructs.

Many authors asserted that it was impossible to describe the state of the dead in the period between death and Resurrection. Others made attempts based on reason and predominantly New Testament scripture concerning the afterlife:

"It is contrary to the very nature of the soul to be unconscious or inactive . . . The rich man and Lazarus are both represented by our Saviour as alive and conscious; and capable of thinking, feeling, and speaking, while the one is lifting up his eyes in Hell being in torment, and the other in Abraham’s bosom, or Paradise."

(McCullough 47-48)

Unlike many others, Walter Balfour provides a comprehensive list of verses from both the Old and New Testaments to prove the veracity of a Future Life in his three essays addressing the Intermediate State, Resurrection, and Judgment. Balfour lists four categories that are particularly significant in their biblical connection to Poe’s depictions of death: darkness, silence, forgetfulness, and corruption. In addressing darkness, Balfour lists verses like Job 3:5, “Let darkness and the shadow of death stain it; let a cloud dwell upon it; let the blackness of the day terrify it” and Job 10:21-22, “Before I go whence I shall not return, even to the land of darkness and the shadow of death; A land of darkness, as darkness itself; and of the shadow of death without any order, and where the light is as darkness.”³ For silence he refers to Psalms 115:17:
“The dead praise not the Lord, neither any that go down into silence.”" Proceeding, Balfour notes both the dead’s forgetfulness of the living and the living who have forgotten the dead in verses like Psalms 31:12, “I am forgotten as a dead man out of mind: I am like a broken vessel” and Psalms 88:12, “Shall thy wonders be known in the dark? And thy righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?” Poe mentions this particular biblical depiction of death in a letter written to Isaac Lea in 1829. Poe was writing to Lea, of the publishers Carey, Lea & Carey, for his consideration of “Al Aaraaf” and writes “One of the peculiarities of Al Aaraaf is that, even after death, those who make choice of the star as their residence do not enjoy immortality—but, after a second life of high excitement, sink into forgetfulness, and death—This idea is taken from Job—‘I would not live always—let me alone’” (LTR-12). Perhaps the most disturbing category is corruption. Balfour lists verses like Job 17:13-16: “If I wait, the grave is mine house: I have made my bed in the darkness. I have said to corruption, Thou art my father: to the worm, Thou art my mother, and my sister. And where is now my hope? As for my hope, who shall see it? They shall go down to the bars of the pit, when our rest together is in the dust.” Another verse listed is Psalms 88:11, which states, “Shall thy loving kindness be declared in the grave? Or thy faithfulness in destruction?” Balfour even points to New Testament references to corruption in verses like Acts 13:36: “For David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell on sleep, and was laid unto his fathers, and saw corruption.” The imagery of darkness, forgetfulness, silence, isolation, and bodily corruption reveals another horror: though the dead are silenced, isolated in darkness, and unable to communicate with the living or to praise God, the dead in these passages appear to be conscious enough to see corruption and make a bed in darkness.
Other authors of the era debated the fate of the soul after death. For example, Roswell D. Hitchcock’s analysis of the Bible provides entire sections on the “terrors of death,” the Intermediate State, including “the soul, conscious and active,” and “death, a rest in sleep” (377, 676, 378). Edmund Law’s *Considerations on the Theory of Religion* includes an appendix on death that lists verses describing death as a sleep: “consider what account the Scriptures give of that state to which death reduces us. And this we find represented by sleep; by a negation of all life, thought, or action; by rest or home; silence; oblivion, destruction, or corruption (381). Law notes that at death, biblical figures like David and Moses “sleep” with their fathers (Deuteronomy 31:16; I Kings 1:21; I Kings 2:10). Beyond the scriptures these authors tended to focus on, New Testament writers like Matthew also write “the graves were opened, and many bodies of the saints that slept, arose” (Matthew 27:52).

The spectrum of theological interpretations of the Intermediate State illustrate the extent to which religion, even amongst believers, was in a state of flux at the time that Poe was writing. The advent and then consequences of the Civil War would add to this turmoil, influencing later authors like Emily Dickinson. As James J. Ferrell notes, after the 1830s, Americans drew upon the competing “cosmologies” of “Puritanism, the Enlightenment, Unitarianism, and Romanticism” to “interpret the stark fact of death” (42, 42-43). According to J. Gerald Kennedy, even before the Civil War,

the continuing erosion of Christian belief, together with the development of scientific interest in the physiology of dying . . . further intensified the sense of a horrible discontinuity between bodily dissolution and spiritual transcendence. Indeed, the physical signs of approaching death now presented such a powerful challenge to faith that nominal believers agreed to ignore the former in order to protect the latter. (Kennedy, *Poe, Death, and the Life of Writing* 11)
Societal beliefs about death and the afterlife at the time Poe was writing were diverse and depended upon a complex matrix of religious influences and readings of the King James text. The discrepancies regarding the state of the dead found in the Bible itself contributed to the public fascination with, and concern over the state of the dead.

Of all the Gothic elements that Poe incorporates into his tales of conscious burial, the reality of decay is perhaps the most disturbing as it emphasizes the grisly reality of the corpse, which contradicts the concept of immortality. The decay of the corpse also embodies personal annihilation, the destruction of identity and the self that mirrors the destruction of Apocalypse. One of Poe’s tales that specifically engages with the dead body is “Berenice,” originally published in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1835. Due to its graphic original content, Poe wrote the following apologetic letter, dated April 30th 1835, to T.W. White, editor of the *Messenger* who had apparently received complaints:

> The subject is by far too horrible, and I confess that I hesitated in sending it to you . . . The history of all Magazines shows plainly that those which have attained celebrity were indebted for it to articles similar in nature—to Berenice . . . You ask me in what does this nature consist? In the ludicrous heightened into the grotesque: the fearful coloured into the horrible: the witty exaggerated into the burlesque: the singular wrought out into the strange and mystical. You may say all this is bad taste. I have my doubts about it . . . I allow that it approaches the very verge of bad taste—but I will not sin quite so egregiously again. (LTR-42).

Poe would later excise four offending paragraphs from the original tale. The tale features a good deal of Gothic burlesque with recognizable conventions like the ancient, failing family of the narrator, a dark and gloomy ancestral hall, and a monomaniacal narrator verging on the insane. The tale also addresses the problem of the corpse, the cultural fear of live burial, and the connection between personal identity (the soul) and the body itself. As Berenice is progressively afflicted by a mysterious malady, one that affects her “moral condition,” she is also physically
affected by “startling changes wrought in [her] physical frame . . . —in the singular and most appalling distortion of her personal identity” (Poetry and Tales 229). The link between the body and personal identity conveys a disturbing symbolism. The “moral condition” of the soul is mirrored in the state of the body, which inevitably falls into physical decay and corruption.

The paragraphs that Poe omits in later versions of the tale showcase this corruption though they begin with what must have been a familiar deathbed scene with mourners standing vigil around “all that remained of Berenice” (Tales and Sketches 1: 217). The deathbed scene would have signaled a specific narrative to nineteenth-century readers, one in which the mourners envision the soul of the dead already situated in Heavenly bliss, reuniting with loved ones long gone. These narratives often commented on how the visage of the deceased looked peaceful, blissful, and even life-like, as if the dead were merely sleeping. Poe thwarts this narrative, highlighting instead the reality of decay:

The very atmosphere was redolent of death. The peculiar smell of the coffin sickened me; and I fancied a deleterious odor was already exhalting from the body. I would have given worlds to escape—to fly from the pernicious influence of mortality—to breathe once again the pure air of the eternal Heavens. But I had no longer the power to move—my knees tottered beneath me—and I remained rooted to the spot, and gazing upon the frightful length of the rigid body as it lay outstretched in the dark coffin without a lid. (Tales and Sketches 1: 217)

The narrator’s experience in this scene reflects an inescapable reality of nineteenth-century America and echoes the experience of the conscious corpses in Poe’s other tales, unable to move, unable to breathe the “pure air of the eternal Heavens,” and unable to escape the reality of decomposition. More important, rather than offering reassurance that she has achieved heavenly bliss through the presence of a slight smile or a peaceful countenance, death has transformed Berenice into an object of revulsion. She has become a fearful confirmation of death’s
transformation power to destroy and mutilate. “Berenice” exhibits some of the characteristics of what Paul John Eakin calls a Lazarus plot wherein the tale “manages to provide for [its] hero’s venture into the great unknown a round-trip ticket, steering a precarious middle course between death and immortality” (9). Berenice displays all the signs of death. She is buried but then returns, and the cost of this return is traumatic. Berenice returns to the living disfigured, having had all her teeth pulled out by her cousin, the narrator, Egaeus, in an act of burlesque horror. Yet, despite its grotesque acrobatics, this tale addresses many of the fears felt by Poe’s contemporary society. In this tale of Resurrection, Poe offers no hope of regeneration. Berenice is not promised a new and more perfect body, nor does she experience final transcendence. The repulsive final scene of this tale invokes a set of underlying apprehensions regarding the nature of the afterlife, and concurrently, the hope of Resurrection. It must be assumed that Berenice’s Resurrection is impermanent and that she will soon return to the grave having truly perished after the double trauma of being buried alive and then mutilated. In this second and presumably final burial, her body goes incomplete into the grave, raising the question of how, at the time of Resurrection, she could possibly be made whole again.

This line of questioning prompted George Bush in Anastasis to discard the idea of bodily Resurrection completely: “If it is deemed that the Scriptures unequivocally assert the future resuscitation of the identical bodies which we lay down at death, then we are certainly authorized to demand how that identity is to be reconciled with the admitted fact of a perpetual change in the constituent particles during life, and a complete dissipation of them after death” (Bush 386). This line of questioning would remain a prominent facet of religious discourse from Poe’s time through the Civil War, a topic historian Drew Gilpin Faust appropriately describes as the “vexing
question of bodies” to the “traditional notion that corporeal Resurrection and restoration would accompany the Day of Judgment” (xvi). Berenice’s gruesome deathbed scene, her live burial, and subsequent mutilation, dramatize a complicated set of interlocking fears that find their source in the problem of the corpse and the murky nature of the biblical commentary on this subject. The elements of Gothic horror probe the nature of these fears; however, the tale’s lack of transcendence is its most disruptive element. The final scene offers no consolation, no serene sleep, no Heavenly whispers from a Berenice, now at peace. Instead, the final image lingers on the extracted pieces of Berenice’s body—her teeth, clotted with gore. She has been reduced to almost nothing, in the same way that all bodies are reduced to nothing through the process of time and decay.

Narratives like “The Sleeper,” “Berenice,” and Poe’s other tales of live burial dramatize the nineteenth-century religious concern over the fate of the soul during the Intermediate State. Scholars like Wendy Stallard Flory and Ruth Mayer view these tales as positive, an affirmation of the immortality of the soul as opposed to Gothic terror applied to religious thought. Flory, for example, sees the continuation of consciousness within a decomposing body as Poe’s attempt to ameliorate the prospect of annihilation at the time of death. She writes, “as a consoling alternative to the prospect of total annihilation at death, Poe conceives a theory of metamorphosis according to which the senses persist after the death of the physical body. The main weakness of this ‘consolation’ is that the sense must then experience the process of decomposition of the flesh” (17). Ruth Mayer also addresses Poe’s unusual depictions of death in her well-argued article, “Neither Life Nor Death: Poe’s Aesthetic Transfiguration of Popular Notions of Death.” Mayer draws on medical and popular writings of the time that highlight the
cultural concept of an intermediate period between “life and death, a state envisioned as both indeterminate and contained” (1). Mayer explores Poe’s “desire to envision a death untainted by pain, destruction, and fear” (1). However, both scholars overlook the religious significance of the Intermediate State during the nineteenth century, which was not merely a state between “life and death,” but rather one between death and Resurrection. For Mayer, Poe engages in an exploratory exercise to mitigate anxiety concerning death and its destruction of identity in connection to the physical self, but the religious nuance within Poe’s tales elevates his narratives to a far more substantive form of discourse as he engages with religious concerns over the final fate of the soul.

Rather than ameliorating the prospect of total annihilation, Poe’s depiction of live burial is a reflection of nineteenth-century concern over the state of the dead and the nature of the afterlife. Mabbott’s notes to Poe’s “The Premature Burial” provide ample evidence for society’s obsession with live burial and “apparent” death. Poe refers to apparent death when he describes his narrator in “The Premature Burial” as “asphyctic.” Mabbott explains, “Asphyctic is an adjective derived from asphyxia. N. P. Willis . . . noted that ‘asphyxia, or a suspension of life, with all the appearance of death, is certified to in many instances, and carefully provided for in some countries’” (Tales and Sketches 2: 970). Mabbott also includes notes about the “life-preserving coffin” featured in magazine articles in 1843 and 1845 that provided a bell for the entombed to pull should they revive after burial. Poe’s frequent treatment of the subject matter reflects a widely held set of fears and questions about the afterlife, and specifically regarding the location and state of the soul after death. Due to the lack of theological consensus about the location of the soul after death, nineteenth-century obsession with live burial is not surprising. If
the soul remains conscious and attached to the body at the time of death, then the Intermediate State is essentially a period of indefinite live burial. Flory makes this connection as well:

We can easily see a consistency between Poe’s theories of what happens to the body at death and his fascination with premature burial. If the senses do persist into the grave, the correspondence to premature burial exists. Since the senses are alive at death, to be buried is to be buried alive. (19)

Though Flory overlooks much of the religious discourse of the period as well as Poe’s own beliefs about the materiality and immortality of the soul in her larger argument, she does make a critical observation: in Poe’s works, any kind of burial, whether alive or dead, is a form of live burial since Poe consistently depicts the soul going conscious to the grave, enduring the Intermediate State in agonized isolation, darkness, and decay. In the case of Irenë, she resides with the other groaning corpses who consciously slumber within the vault. Poe omits a vision of Irenë’s soul in paradise, further emphasizing her soul’s location in the tomb amidst worms and ghosts. Though physically dead, Irenë, as Flory notes, is essentially buried alive.

Poe explores the same situation in “Berenice” where Berenice’s premature burial enacts the terror and claustrophobia of this terrifying portrayal of the Intermediate State where the dead, trapped in their own decaying body, must wait indefinitely for Resurrection. Even though Berenice is buried while physically alive, her burial corresponds to the burial of a live soul in a dead body. Poe’s excised paragraphs depict the physical reality of death when Poe describes Berenice’s body as having a “peculiar smell” and a “deleterious odor” that exhaled from the body. Though alive, Berenice experiences the horror of burial, augmented by the terrible implication of a conscious soul trapped within a decaying body. The gory mutilation Berenice experiences at the hand of Egaeus mimics the soul’s helplessness and lack of volition as the body undergoes the mutilation of decomposition. In typical Poe fashion, both “The Sleeper” and
“Berenice” feature the juxtaposition of the death of a beautiful woman and her bereaved lover with the grotesqueries of decay, but their Gothic effect depends more on Poe’s omission of transcendence at the end of both tales. Neither tale provides the comforting closure and vision of Heaven that concludes mainstream religious narratives, and worse, both remind readers of the realities of mortality—the physical body and its ultimate destruction.

“The Sleeper” and “Berenice” are only two examples of many tales that highlight Poe’s fascination with the survival of the soul in a dead body. Allen Tate wrote in “Our Cousin, Mr. Poe,” that “All Poe’s characters represent one degree or another in a movement toward an archetypal condition: the survival of the soul in a dead body; but only in ‘The Facts in the Case of Monsieur Valdemar’ is the obsessive subject explicit” (390). While Tate recognizes one of the most prevalent themes in Poe’s stories, his claim is misleading. This archetype is treated explicitly in many of Poe’s tales and poems like “The Sleeper” and any tale of live or premature burial such as “Berenice” and “The Premature Burial,” not just “The Facts in the Case of Monsieur Valdemar.” In fact, in the tale of Monsieur Valdemar, the soul is held in the body via mesmeric experiments with the purpose of arresting the “encroachments of Death,” so the soul remains in the body only while the mesmeric experiments are in progress (Poetry and Tales 833). Once these experiments have ceased, the body, “within the space of a single minute, or even less, shrunk—crumbled—absolutely rotted away beneath my hands. Upon the bed, before that whole company, there lay a nearly liquid mass of loathsome—of detestable putridity” (Poetry and Tales 842). There is no evidence that the soul of Monsieur Valdemar remained with his body to experience its decomposition as the narrative is solely conveyed through the perspective of the mesmerist. The archetypal condition Tate alludes to can also be traced to
biblical passages and imagery that depict the soul as active after death, though existing in darkness, isolation, and bodily corruption. Many verses in the Bible depict death as a place that the dead must go, a land of “darkness” and “shadow . . . without any order, and where the light is as darkness” (Job 10: 21-22). Many of these verses depict the land of the dead as a place where the dead experience and fear bodily corruption, a fear that is echoed in nineteenth-century popular literature and in Poe’s tales as well. Recognizing the biblical context of this archetype—the living soul in a dead body—as a possible source raises the level of discourse in Poe’s texts; rather than writing lurid Gothic tales for the sole purpose of scandalizing his audience, Poe adopts the genre to address a subject of a far more serious nature—the loss of the body. Poe manages to express legitimate religious anxieties by foregrounding a Gothic framework that emphasizes the horror inherent in the prospect of a conscious soul going to the grave trapped within its dead body.

In “The Premature Burial,” Poe begins the tale by highlighting the public’s “all-absorbing” interest in the subject of premature burial, but also notes that such subjects are “too entirely horrible for the purposes of legitimate fiction” (Poetry and Tales 666). Poe implies the source of this horror in an early passage of the tale:

The boundaries which divide Life from Death, are at best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where one ends, and where the other begins? We know that there are diseases in which occur total cessations of all the apparent functions of vitality, and yet in which these cessations are merely suspensions, properly so called. They are only temporary pauses in the incomprehensible mechanism. A certain period elapses, and some unseen mysterious principle again sets in motion the magic pinions and the wizard wheels. The silver cord was not forever loosed, nor the golden bowl irreparably broken. But where, meantime, was the soul? (Poetry and Tales 666-667)

When Poe calls attention to the nebulous boundary that divides life from death, he locates the source of public fascination with live burial as well as its connection to the greater questions
about the nature of the Intermediate State and the afterlife. The murky theology of the soul’s fate during the time between death and the Resurrection generates not only fascination, but also fear about what the soul might experience during this intermediate period. Poe further identifies the source of this fear in his final question: “But where, meantime, was the soul?” Poe uses a matrix of associative concepts—live burial, catatonic states, even sleep—to capture the essence of the Intermediate State and raise the question of the soul’s location during this interim.

The tale continues by chronicling a series of accounts that depict premature burial. One of the primary narratives in sensational literature during the early nineteenth century was the narrative of live burial, indicating that Poe’s own tales of premature interment are not anomalous, but are evidence of his engagement with popular literature and public interest. One of the accounts the narrator in “The Premature Burial” provides tells the tale of a Premature burial victim who was buried alive, but was saved by “body-snatchers” and “deposited in the operating chamber of one of the private hospitals” (Poetry and Tales 671). The victim, Mr. Edward Stapleton, is subjected to “an application of the battery” as well as the initial horrors of dissection. Upon reviving, he recounts that “at no period was he altogether insensible—that, dully and confusedly, he was aware of everything which happened to him from the moment in which he was pronounced dead by his physicians, to that in which he fell swooning to the floor of the Hospital” (Poetry and Tales 671).

This particular account coincides with an anonymous submission to The Casket in 1826 titled “The Buried Alive,” the narrator finds himself dead in a darkened world, where he could yet “hear, and feel, and suffer” (257). The narrator hears those around him talking of the “smell
of corruption,” emanating from the narrator’s own body. He is conscious of being prepared unceremoniously for the grave, placed in the coffin, and buried. The anonymous author writes:

I had no means of knowing the lapse of time; and silence continued. This is death, thought I, and I am doomed to remain in the earth, until the Resurrection. Presently the body will fall into corruption, and the epicurean worm, that is only satisfied with man flesh, will come to partake of the banquet that has been prepared for him with so much solicitude and care” (257-258).

This particular account is remarkable due to its specific reference to the Resurrection and the narrator’s realization of the state of the body as it falls into corruption and is consumed by the “epicurean worm.” Later, when grave robbers exhume the narrator’s body, looking for medical cadavers, the narrator describes himself being “carried swiftly away, I thought to judgment, perhaps to perdition” (258). The author, like Poe, blends the sensational, Gothic tale of live burial with religious beliefs about the bar of judgment and Hell. Though the title of this particular tale is “The Buried Alive,” the narrator states that he is truly dead upon arriving at the medical school where he is to be dissected. Despite being subjected to “galvanic experiments,” the narrator states, “still I was dead,” which further integrates the dual Gothic and religious frameworks (258). Similar to the account in “The Premature Burial” the narrator in “The Buried Alive” is brought back to life with the first touch of the surgeon’s knife upon his chest.

As Poe’s narrator continues his tale, he relates humanity’s innate fear of premature interment through a harrowing description of the confines of the tomb:

It may be asserted, without hesitation, that no event is so terribly well adapted to inspire the supremeness of bodily and of mental distress, as is burial before death. The unendurable oppression of the lungs—the stifling fumes of the damp earth—the clinging to the death garments—the rigid embrace of the narrow house—the blackness of the absolute Night—the silence like a sea that overwhelms—the unseen but palpable presence of the Conqueror Worm—these things, with thoughts of the air and grass above, with memory of dear friends who would fly to save us if but informed of our fate, and with consciousness that of this fate they
can never be informed—that our hopeless portion is that of the really dead—these considerations, I say, carry into the heart which still palpitates, a degree of appalling and intolerable horror from which the most daring imagination must recoil. We know of nothing so agonizing upon Earth—we can dream of nothing half so hideous in the realms of the nethermost Hell. (Poetry and Tales 672)

This passage contains similarities to another anonymous author who published a sensational account in The Casket of his own death and resuscitation, entitled “Post Mortem Recollections of a Medical Lecturer” (1837). Like the passage from “The Premature Burial,” this narrative conveys a fear of bodily decomposition, a terrifying paralysis, an inability to communicate with the living, and a horror at the prospect of an afterlife wherein a soul goes living to the grave trapped within a dead body. The narrator in “Post Mortem Recollections” describes a final convulsion and a sudden lapse into unconsciousness, signifying the death of the body. Upon regaining consciousness, the narrator finds himself unable to move and recounts his horrifying realization:

I now knew well that I had died, and for my interment was intended the awful preparations about me. Was this then death? Could it be, that though coldness wrapped the suffering clay, passion and sense would soon survive—and that while every external trace of life had fled, consciousness should still cling to the cold corpse destined for the earth. – Oh! How horrible, how more than horrible! The terror of that thought. (“Post Mortem Recollections” 118)

In addition to the immediate horror of death is the terrifying realization concerning the nature of the afterlife: “was this then death?” As this particular narrative proceeds from the realm of the known into the unknown, it reveals horrors beyond imagining. The root of these horrors lies in the narrative’s contradiction of national myth, identity, and narrative. Accounts like “Post Mortem Recollections,” as well as Henry Clay Lewis’ “A Struggle for Life” and several of Poe’s tales, undermine the mainstream narrative wherein the dead, as members of God’s chosen people, are whisked away either to Heaven, some form of provisional blessedness, or are granted
the reprieve of oblivion until the time of the universal judgment and the Second Coming. As a result, the typical narrative that depicts America and its people being granted God’s mercy and love at the time of death, becomes a tale of terror in which an afterlife of bliss transforms into a living Hell where the soul witnesses the annihilation of the body.

“The Premature Burial” frequently refers to the annihilation of the body with its references to the gory realities of decomposition. In one of the narrator’s accounts of premature interment, a woman was placed in a vault quickly due to “what was supposed to be decomposition” (Poetry and Tales 667). Years later when her husband opened the vault, “some white-apparrelled object fell rattling within his arms. It was the skeleton of his wife in her yet unmouldered shroud” (Poetry and Tales 667). The lady, having been entombed alive, had tried to get out, and in the process, swooned. Her shroud caught upon some iron-work, holding her body upright. The narrator’s account of this tale ends with the final words, “Thus she remained, and thus she rotted, erect” (Poetry and Tales 668). In another account, the narrator describes a man who was buried when the “weather was warm,” and thus “he was buried, with indecent haste, in one of the public cemeteries” in order to avoid putrefaction before burial (Poetry and Tales 669). The narrator, describing the terrors of premature burial, refers to “The Conqueror Worm,” a thought that the authors in “The Buried Alive” and “Post Mortem Recollections” also articulate (Poetry and Tales 672). For example, in “Post Mortem Recollections” the narrator agonizes over the fate of being buried alive:

How shall I tell the heart-cutting anguish of that moment, as my mind looked forward to a futurity too dreadful to think upon when memory should call up many a sunny hour of existence, the loss of friends, the triumph of exertion, and then fall back upon the dread and consciousness of the ever busied life the grave closed over—and then I thought that sense but lingered round the lifeless clay, as spirits of the dead are said to hover round the places and homes they had lived in
life, ere they leave them forever—and that soon the lamp should expire upon the shrine, when the temple that sheltered it lay mouldering and in the ruins. Alas! How fearful to dream of even the happiness of the past in that cold grave where the worm only is a reveler. (“Post Mortem Recollections” 118)

The realities of the corpse, the idea that the body will fall into decay, produces much of the tale’s terror as it does in other popular literature of the era because it undermines conventional narrative that promises Resurrection and immortality.

Religious writing of the time acknowledges the problem of the corpse to some extent. In an anonymous 1832 article called “Reflections on Death,” the author writes:

Heavens! What a moment must that be, when the last flutter expires on our lips! What a change! To what new worlds are we borne? What new being do we receive? Whither has that spark, that unseen, that uncomprehended intelligence fled? Look upon the cold, livid, ghastly corpse that lies before you! That was but a shell, a gross earthly covering, which held for a while the immortal essence that has now left it;—left it, to range perhaps, through illimitable space;—to receive new capacities of delight; new powers of perception; new glories of beatitude! Ten thousand fancies rush upon the mind as it contemplates the awful moment between life and death! It is a moment big with imagination’s greatest hopes and fears;—it is the consummation that clears up all mystery—resolves all doubts—which removes contradiction, and destroys error. Great God! What a flood of rapture may at once burst upon the departed soul! (“Reflections on Death” 179)

The passage certainly acknowledges the limits of human understanding, asking, “Whither has that spark, that unseen, that uncomprehended intelligence fled?” The passage also highlights the contradiction of the mainstream hope for Resurrection in the face of the “cold, livid, ghastly corpse.” Mayer also refers to this passage in her article and highlights the excerpt’s emphasis on the repulsiveness of the dead body (“the cold, livid, ghastly corpse”), and describes how “the noncommunicating presence of the dead body seems to fence off once and for all the idea of transgressing the boundary [between life and death] unharmed” (1). Mayer’s assertion calls attention to the problematic nature of the corpse as it obstructs conceptualization of the afterlife.
Still, Mayer’s reading remains positive, claiming, “the awful moment between life and death . . . might serve as a link between the living and the dead” (1). The moment between life and death mattered less to a nineteenth-century audience than the hope for the Future Life. The thought of the “celestial regions” of the afterlife is evident in another passage from “Reflections on Death” that Mayer omits:

The unclouded brightness of the celestial regions—the pure existence of ethereal beings—the solemn secrets of nature may then be divulged; the immediate unity of the past, the present, and the future; strains of unimaginable harmony; forms of imperishable beauty may then suddenly disclose themselves bursting upon the delighted senses, and bathing them in measureless bliss! The mind is lost in this excess of wondrous light, and dares not turn from the Heavenly vision of one so gloomy, so tremendous as the departure of the wicked!—Human fancy shrinks back appalled—while Hope and Charity whisper to the bleeding heart that there where all mercy is, there too will be forgiveness! (“Reflections on Death” 179)

The second passage describes the mainstream narrative that Poe undermines through his Gothic dramatization of the Intermediate State in tales of live burial. The passage Mayer quotes calls attention to the question of the location of the soul, stating, “whither has that spark, that unseen, that uncomprehended intelligence fled?” but the full passage indicates the lack of certainty and the speculative nature of the subject, which Poe explores at length through the lens of Gothic horror. The seed of uncertainty contained in the second passage demonstrates why authors like Poe explore religious subject matter through Gothic horror. The author’s rapturous descriptions of the “glories” to come, the “measureless bliss,” and the “wondrous light,” are undoubtedly speculative: the soul will “range perhaps through illimitable space.” The word “perhaps” indicates at least some measure of uncertainty. Though the tone is hopeful, the word “may” throughout the passage also foregrounds the uncertainty regarding the state of the dead in the afterlife, especially in light of the stark reality of the “cold, livid, ghastly corpse.”
The reality of the corpse also negates the American mythology of an afterlife, Resurrection, and the subsequent Apocalypse. In a strange dream sequence, the narrator of “The Premature Burial” describes awakening in a dream from “an icy hand upon [his] forehead, and an impatient, gibbering voice whisper[ing] the word ‘Arise!’ within [his] ear” (Poetry and Tales 674). When the narrator asks who is speaking, the voice replies,

I have no name in the regions which I inhabit . . . I was mortal, but am fiend. I was merciless, but am pitiful. Thou does feel that I shudder. My teeth chatter as I speak, yet it is not with the chilliness of the night—of the night without end. But this hideousness insufferable. How canst thou tranquilly sleep? I cannot rest for the cry of these great agonies. These sights are more than I can bear. Get thee up! Come with me into the outer Night, and let me unfold to thee the graves” (Poetry and Tales 675).

The scene that greets the narrator’s eyes bears an uncanny resemblance to visions of the Resurrection from the Bible where passages like that in Matthew 27: 52 describe graves being opened on the Last Day: “And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose.” In “The Premature Burial,” the unseen fiend, “caused to be thrown open the graves of all mankind; and from each issued the faint phosphoric radiance of decay; so that I could see into the innermost recesses” (Poetry and Tales 675). The opening of the graves of “all mankind” correlates to the final Resurrection in its grand scale, but instead of a joyous host experiencing the triumph of regeneration, what emanates from the graves is the “phosphoric radiance of decay.” Further undermining the national narrative of Resurrection and apocalyptic fulfillment is the following scene where the narrator sees the dead within their graves:

I could see into the innermost recesses, and there view the shrouded bodies in their sad and solemn slumbers with the worm. But, alas! The real sleepers were fewer, by many millions, than those who slumbered not at all; and there was a feeble struggling; and there was a general sad unrest; and from out of the depths of the countless pits there came a melancholy rustling from the garments of the buried. (Poetry and Tales 675).
The narrator describes those who have been buried alive, but his vision, with its epic scale that includes all mankind, generates a tale more sinister than the sensational live burial plot of popular Gothic literature. Instead, this vision suggests the horrible fate of the dead as they endure the time between death and an uncertain Resurrection. These unhappy souls utter “despairing cries” from within the grave, as they remain conscious of their circumstances rather than sleeping in peaceful oblivion (Poetry and Tales 675). Further upending the conventional narrative, the fiend closes the graves “with sudden violence” at the end of the narrator’s vision. Once again, Poe resists the closure of the mainstream narrative that calls for Resurrection, regeneration, or at the very least, a confirmation that the dead have flown to Heaven, happy to be reunited with deceased loved ones. Instead, the dead simply continue their terrible existence from within the grave, awaiting the Resurrection without the affirmation of mainstream narratives that the Resurrection will occur.

If the commonly held belief was that the body and soul would separate at the time of death to be reunited at the time of Christ’s Second Coming, then the dark-twin of such a belief, what haunts the national narrative, is the unsettling possibility that the dead do not separate from their bodies, but go with their bodies to the grave, awaiting a Second Coming that is at best, mere conjecture. The Gothic framework with its characteristically nightmarish atmosphere, its incorporation of the irrational, and its narrative ambiguity provide the essential apparatus for Poe to subvert common belief and national narrative regarding the possibility of a Future Life. The prospect of a Future Life was a dearly held hope in a society so familiar with death, and the narrative of death was inextricably linked to the narrative of Apocalypse and Resurrection. In an 1871 bibliography of literature relating to the Doctrine of the Future Life, the compiler, Ezra
Abbot, lists 2,671 entries for the section on Christian Theology, demonstrating the pervasive influence of this subject matter. As Adam Bradford notes in “Inspiring Death: Poe’s Poetic Aesthetics, ‘Annabel Lee,’ and the Communities of Mourning in Nineteenth-Century America”: “antebellum culture . . . was intimately concerned with ways of conceptualizing and coping with death” (73). Yet despite the fact that society in the nineteenth century was “focusing less on the putrefaction of the body and the fear of damnation and more on the bliss of a celestial afterlife enjoyed in the presence of family and loved ones,” the physical reality of the corpse remained, especially in light of its connection to the soul after death (Bradford 75). Poe, unlike his contemporaries, refused to gloss over the “putrefaction of the body,” and in doing so, undermines the popular conception of a blissful afterlife and the glorious triumph of the Second Coming.

“The Colloquy of Monos and Una” demonstrates a nexus of Poe’s treatment of conscious burial and Apocalypse. The Intermediate State, whatever its nature, is a necessary phase in the linear process toward Resurrection and Apocalypse. This tale in particular illustrates the intimate connection between death, the Intermediate State, Resurrection, and Apocalypse as understood by nineteenth-century society. By bringing together the narrative of conscious burial and the narrative of Apocalypse, “The Colloquy,” more than any other tale, explores the fear of a sentient soul existing in a dead body, emphasizing decay and degeneration rather than regeneration and conveying an Apocalypse that is ultimately terrifying rather than hopeful. It is also one of the few tales in Poe’s corpus that begins with an explicitly biblical framework, initially incorporating the hopeful rhetoric of contemporary religious discourse before descending into the darkness of the grave. In “The Colloquy,” Poe depicts two spirits reuniting
after the final judgment and references specific passages from the Bible with phrases like “Born again?” which echoes John 3:3: “Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” This reference to a specific biblical verse creates a clear genre framework and constructs a set of expectations for the reader; these expectations would likely have included the wonders of being “born again,” flying to the “bosom of Abraham” after death, and witnessing the wonders of paradise after the final judgment. From this point, the tale regresses from Monos’ present position in paradise to a depiction of his death, his burial, his isolation within the grave, and finally ends within the darkness of the grave without ever returning to the initial scene of Monos and Una reunited in paradise.

As the tale progresses, Poe continues to establish a biblical framework as Monos responds to Una’s question regarding the phrase “Born again?” by saying “these are the words upon whose mystical meaning I had so long pondered, rejecting the explanations of the priesthood, until Death himself resolved for me the secret” (Poetry and Tales 449). Poe then engages contemporary debate surrounding the doctrine of the Last Things with Monos’ objections to the “explanations of the priesthood.” The beginning of the tale establishes an almost exclusively biblical framework as Monos references scripture when he speaks of the “novelty of the Life Eternal,” which borrows from John 17:3, “This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God.” The tale proceeds with even further biblical references. Monos describes death, or more specifically the time between death and Resurrection, as “the Valley of the Shadow,” a reference to Psalms 23:4. However, the tone of the tale changes gradually as Poe relies more and more upon the conventions of the Gothic genre to depict the
Apocalypse from an individual perspective rather than a cosmic one, subverting much of the hopeful rhetoric of his time regarding “life’s cessation” (*Poetry and Tales* 450).

Like much of the religious discourse of the day, “The Colloquy of Monos and Una” functions as conjecture, an attempt to discern what lies beyond the shadowy moment of death, which as Una remarks is “beyond the propensity of man to define” (*Poetry and Tales* 450). In addition to exploring the nature of consciousness after death, in tales like “The Colloquy of Monos and Una,” Poe recontextualizes the contemporary nineteenth-century theological debates regarding the doctrine of the Last Things through the Gothic modality, which allows him to explore the terror inherent in death and Resurrection. With its gory conventions, the Gothic also enables Poe to articulate the terror within the Bible itself in passages like Amos 5:18: “Woe unto you that desire the day of the Lord! To what end is it for you? The day of the Lord is darkness, and not light.” These passages contradict many of the other more optimistic passages in the Bible regarding death and Apocalypse. Kenneth Silverman writes “In its several varieties, Gothic fiction aimed at creating the presence of something that suspends and calls into doubt the laws of the universe. . . . it implied that the terrors of the world we know are driven by something unknown and unknowable beyond them” (112). Silverman underscores one of the key features of Poe’s Gothic when blended with a religious framework—his exploration of the unknown and the unknowable as applied to religious conceptualizations of the afterlife. Poe calls into doubt many of the dearly held religious sureties of his day: the benevolence of God and even the existence of God, the assurance of a Heavenly afterlife, the guarantee of Resurrection, and the ultimate cosmic regeneration of the earth. These beliefs are all upended as Monos describes his death and his subsequent burial.
The religious context of the tale, especially the reference to being “born again” and its associations with the mainstream beliefs about Resurrection make Monos’ account of death particularly devastating. Poe projects the typical Gothic tale of live burial and continued consciousness after death onto a set of genre expectations that are religious rather than Gothic. When those around Monos determine him dead, he describes his state of consciousness as having been like one slowly waking up from an afternoon slumber: “It appeared to me not greatly dissimilar to the extreme quiescence of him, who, having slumbered long and profoundly, lying motionless and fully prostate in a midsummer noon, begins to steal slowly back into consciousness” (*Poetry and Tales* 453). Though Monos “breathed no longer,” and his “heart had ceased to beat” he declares that his “condition did not deprive him of sentience.” (*Poetry and Tales* 453). Perhaps even more disturbing, Monos also relates his utter inability to move or speak: “Volition had not departed, but was powerless” (*Poetry and Tales* 453). Poe does not place the dead, those who “sleep” into a state of oblivion. Rather, like Irenë in “The Sleeper,” Monos exists in a state of semi-consciousness, not dreaming, but not completely aware of the world. If “The Colloquy” were merely a lurid tale from *Blackwood’s Magazine*, it would certainly be frightening, but when Poe blends the Gothic elements of live burial with a familiar religious lexicon that includes specific biblical allusions, the tale becomes terrifying as Poe negates the mainstream religious narrative.

Poe draws on several mainstream theologies of the afterlife in tales like “The Colloquy,” indicating that his conceptions of the afterlife are not merely the products of a disturbed mind, but rather indicate that Monos’ description of death had roots in the contemporary theology of the nineteenth century. John Williamson Nevin’s best-known work, *The Mystical Presence*
(1846), argues that there was no separation between the body and the soul. As a result, Nevin clarifies that “when [believers] die, their bodies sleep in Jesus; so that at the last God brings them with him again, when the Church is made complete by his second coming” (Nevin 228). Nevin also writes that the

Soul and body, their ground, are but one life; identical in their origin; bound together by mutual interpenetration subsequently at every point; and holding forever in the presence and power of the self-same organic law. We have no right to think of the body as the prison of the soul, in the way of Plato; nor as its garment merely; nor as its shell or hull. We have no right to think of the soul in any way as a form of existence of and by itself, into which the soul as another form of such existence is thrust in a mechanical way. Both form one life. (Nevin 171)

In a footnote on the same page, Nevin notes that upon Christ’s Second Coming, “when the Resurrection body appears, it will not be a new frame abruptly created for the occasion, and brought to the soul in the way of outward addition and supplement. It will be found to hold in strict organic continuity with the body, as it existed before death” (Nevin 171). This coincides with Monos’ description of mankind’s new state after the Apocalypse: “man the Death-purged, . . . the redeemed, regenerated, blissful, and now immortal, but still . . . the material man” (Poetry and Tales 453). Gary Laderman writes, “Other conservative religious communities, like Old School Presbyterians” underscored the “necessity of the corpse for the Future Life. According to this perspective, the physical remains were of profound significance for the individual after death” (54). Laderman quotes a church constitution from 1822 regarding the bodies of the dead: “even in death [the bodies] continue united in Christ, and rest in the grave as in their beds, till at the last day they be again united with their souls, . . . the self same bodies of the dead which were laid in the grave, being then again raised up by the power of Christ” (54). In “The Colloquy,” the dead are conscious after death though in an altered, sleep-like state with heightened senses and
without the power of will. Like Nevin and other conservative Protestant voices, Poe does not separate the body from the soul in this tale, but maintains their intimate connection.

By engaging with this spectrum of religious beliefs, Poe not only sheds light on the diversity within nineteenth-century theology, but also foregrounds the terrifying questions these theologies raise. His narrative explores the potential experience of the individual in death should these conceptions of the afterlife prove to be reality and not merely hypothetical conjectures, transforming Gothic fantasy into terrifying actuality. Monos recounts the oppression of his body after being attired for the coffin. He describes a “heavy discomfort” as his limbs felt “the oppression of some dull weight” (*Poetry and Tales* 455). Though dead, the body continues to suffer discomfort, even pain, after death, which coincides with Job 14:22: “Only his flesh upon him suffereth pain, And his soul within him mourneth.” At times it seems as if Monos feels something “akin to sentiment itself” at the approach of his beloved Una, but ultimately, this sentiment takes “no root in the pulseless heart, and seem[s] indeed rather a shadow than a reality” (*Poetry and Tales* 455). What Poe describes is not merely a bodily separation at death between the dead and the living, but a spiritual one as well. Feelings of love and sentiment cease to hold meaning for the dead, their conscious state being too altered to experience this emotion. This loss of sentiment echoes Nevin’s claims that the body and soul form “one life.” As the body sinks further into decay, so too does the mind. Death does not merely annihilate the body, but also the mind and therefore identity. Later, Dickinson would also reference this problematic aspect of decay when she links the ability of two spirits lain in “adjoining” graves to talk “between the Rooms” (F448). However, these spirits can only manage to speak to one another until the “moss had reached [their] lips – / And covered up – [their] names –.” As this “moss”
covers what is presumably the names carved into the gravestones it simulates the physical decay that slowly overtakes the speakers’ bodies and eventually their lips. For both Dickinson and Poe, death and its subsequent decay slowly and agonizingly remove volition, speech, identity, and connection to community.

As Monos continues his tale, his consciousness becomes more attuned to his connection to eternity, gaining new knowledge of “duration” as “the intemporal soul” stepped “upon the threshold of the temporal Eternity” (Poetry and Tales 456). Despite this optimistic, almost transcendental unity with the cosmos that Monos initially experiences, it is temporary. As Monos begins to describe the process of being “deposited” in the coffin, which coincides with the deterioration of his heightened senses so that he maintains only the sense of “entity”—of being and duration—his body begins to undergo the inevitable process of decomposition. The sudden deterioration of his heightened senses is due to “the hand of the deadly Decay” (Poetry and Tales 456). From this point, the tale turns progressively darker and more terrifying. Despite the fact that the senses had ceased their operations, “not all of sentience [had] departed” (Poetry and Tales 456). Monos remains aware of the “direful change now in operation upon the flesh” and of being “confined . . . within the coffin,” being carried by the hearse, of being borne to the grave and lowered within it, of the “mould” being heaped upon the coffin, and finally, of being left in the “prison-house” of the grave, in “blackness and corruption, to [his] sad and solemn slumbers with the worm” (Poetry and Tales 457). Monos describes changes in consciousness, how his sense of entity changes to a sense of “locality” and his sense of being merges into merely a sense of place: “The narrow space immediately surrounding what had been the body, was now growing to be the body itself” (Poetry and Tales 457). Poe implies that the consciousness of the dead is
irrevocably tied to the physical condition of the body. As the body decays and becomes one with the dust, the consciousness also becomes its location as the body literally becomes the earth surrounding it. Poe’s description of the slow deterioration of the body and the coinciding reduction of consciousness to a mere sense of location emphasizes the loss of the self in a prolonged and perhaps even eternal experience of death in the grave while awaiting the Second Coming.

Poe’s exploration of the nature of the body-soul connection was intimately tied to his society’s fascination with the subject. It is unsurprising that Poe incorporates the common metaphor of sleep to describe Monos’ state in the coffin. Monos experiences a momentary reprieve from the “strict embrace of the Shadow” when the body of Una is placed within its coffin upon his “mouldering bones” (Poetry and Tales 457). Monos states that only this “light of enduring Love” had the power to wake the consciousness out of its stupor, as if waking from a dream: “by sleep and its world alone is Death imaged” (Poetry and Tales 457). This notion of death as a sleep, as Poe here notes, corresponds with Edmund Law’s Considerations on the Theory of Religion (1859), in which an appendix lists verses that depict various ways death is depicted in the Bible, as a “sleep; a negation of all life, thought, or action; as a rest or home; as silence, oblivion, destruction, or corruption” (Law 381). Poe clearly draws upon these biblical references, especially those found in Job. While Poe does not depict death as a reprieve or rest, death nevertheless shares certain qualities of sleep as described earlier in the tale. However, this sleep is an active one, consistent with the rest of Poe’s corpus, wherein the line between dreams and reality remains murky. This depiction of death may also have roots in Poe’s contemporary religious culture. Alexander Copeland, quoting an 1831 sermon by George Garioch, minister of
Meldrum, writes: “sleep is both a correct and pleasing emblem of death, since, in both, the soul continues in a state of vigour and activity at the time when the body is at rest” (Copeland 116-117). Garioch goes on to state the following:

A consideration of the powers of the soul in dreaming, while the bodily organs of sensation have ceased to act, will also tend to show a distinct and separate nature between them. The body sinks down from fatigue,—is overpowered by sleep and loses its waking senses for a time: Its eyes see not, its ears hear not, and its limbs are usually powerless. At such times, however, the soul is often most active; its memory, imagination, and other faculties are more alive, and it seems to live in an aerial world of its own creation. (117)

For Poe, the metaphor of sleep provides a way to conceptualize the condition and the state of consciousness after death wherein the soul remains active and conscious regardless of its sleep-like state, countering the mainstream narrative.

Another way Poe counters traditional narratives of death and Resurrection is the tale’s narrative structure. Poe ends his tale in the midst of the long night of the grave rather than at the moment of glorious Resurrection, which inverts the structure of traditional narratives of death and paradigms of Apocalypse. Poe directly undermines M.H. Abrams’ definition of an apocalyptic paradigm—“a series of events, even now beginning, which will culminate in the abrupt end of the present, evil world-order and its replacement by a regenerate mankind in a new and perfected condition of life,”—by ending the tale in darkness and degeneration rather than progressing to a “new and perfected condition” (343). Where traditional narratives move in a linear progression from death to Resurrection to Apocalypse, this tale moves backwards from an Apocalypse that occurs outside the main narrative to Monos’ slow deterioration into senselessness and near-complete annihilation, ending with the following description:

And now again all was void. That nebulous light had been extinguished. That feeble thrill had vibrated itself into quiescence. Many lustra had supervened. Dust
had returned to dust. The worm had food no more. The sense of being had at length utterly departed, and there reigned in its stead—instead of all things—dominant and perpetual—the autocrats Place and Time. For that which was not—for that which had no sentence—for that which was soulless, yet of which matter formed no portion—for all this nothingness, yet for all this immortality, the grave was still a home, and the corrosive hours, co-mates. (Poetry and Tales 457)

Poe’s conclusion depicts the near-annihilation of the body and the soul, without resolution or Resurrection, an Apocalypse of mere destruction with no unveiling and no regeneration. Though the consciousness slowly deteriorates into a mere sense of place and time, having no “sentience” and being “soulless,” Monos retains something akin to sentience and remains aware of his body’s slow deterioration. Though the soul does not experience a complete annihilation as the body does, retaining something of its immortality, it is nevertheless reduced to the smallest particle of what might be called “being.” The soul’s immortality becomes more curse than blessing, being tied to a mortal vessel, the body. This near annihilation of the soul begs for renewal, a regeneration to coincide with a new Heaven and new earth. However, in Poe’s version of the Apocalypse, there is little guarantee of this renewal given the tale’s conclusion in the darkness of the grave. Poe’s Apocalypse is problematic due to its lack of hope on a number of levels. There is no Resurrection, no regeneration of the body, no extended vision of the Heavenly afterlife. Poe’s Apocalypse is more akin to verses like that in Amos 5:18: “The day of the Lord is darkness, and not light” than to Revelation’s “Come, Lord Jesus.”

Poe’s omission of the Resurrection counters his society’s obsession with narratives that depict souls rising from their graves to greet the Second Coming of their savior with their newly regenerated bodies. When Douglass Robinson suggests that “American Apocalypses . . . undermine basic American values and . . . essay both a rejection and a signal exploration of American ideologies of the self, of nature, of God and the supernatural, and of the community,”
he describes what Poe is doing in “The Colloquy” and tales like it (xi-xii). Poe ultimately undermines his society’s depiction of the Apocalypse by focusing on the individual experience rather than a cosmic narrative wherein America is depicted as “mankind’s last great hope, the Western site of the millennium” (Douglas xi). In this mainstream narrative, death, the Intermediate State and the Resurrection are all part of a teleological narrative. Humanity plays an integral part in this narrative, which ultimately converts “the tragedy of human history into a cosmic comedy” (Abrams 334). However, the apocalyptic narrative does not take into account the gruesome tale of the individual who undergoes personal Apocalypse as the body goes conscious to the grave to experience decomposition while awaiting an uncertain Resurrection.

Poe actively engages with the individual experience of Apocalypse, calling into question American ideologies and belief systems. Poe explores a micro-Apocalypse: what it means to be human and an individual experiencing the destruction of the world, the body, identity, and perhaps even the soul. This is not to say that the typical images of cowering masses do not make an appearance in his apocalyptic tales. On the contrary, Poe establishes the framework of “The Colloquy” by referencing the typical view of Apocalypse as a “fiery overthrow” due to an “infected world” (Poetry and Tales 453, 452). In another apocalyptic tale, “The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion,” Poe describes in detail the “final destruction of all things by fire,” as “a combustion irresistible, all-devouring, omni-prevalent, immediate;–the entire fulfillment, in all their minute and terrible details, of the fiery and horror-inspiring denunciations of the prophecies of the Holy Book” (Poetry and Tales 359, 363). Poe is aware of the traditional view of Apocalypse, a narrative of prophecy fulfillment on a cosmic scale and incorporates traditional
apocalyptic concepts in his writing such as the purging of iniquity and ignorance or an unveiling that allows humanity to be “born again.”

In “The Colloquy” Poe only briefly describes what receives the most attention in traditional apocalyptic narratives: the final destruction and purging of the earth, the historic arc of humanity’s beginning and end, a macro-historical view of cosmic upheaval to culminate in a final Resurrection and the creation of a new Heaven and earth. Instead, Poe explores the experience of a single soul’s harrowing annihilation. Even in a tale like “Eiros and Charmion,” which focuses on the destruction of the earth, there is still a reference to the experience of the individual soul after death. The time between death and Resurrection is described as a state of “stupor,” of “wild sickness and terrible darkness,” and of “passing into Night through the Grave” (Poetry and Tales 359). By centering the tale’s perspective on the experience of a single soul, Poe removes the cosmic layer of the narrative and by doing so destabilizes the American mythology that lionizes the American people as instruments of God’s design in bringing about the kingdom of Heaven. Instead, Poe foregrounds the experience of death as the primary narrative of the Apocalypse, rendered within a Gothic framework that contradicts the rhetoric of triumph that so often formed the center of nineteenth century American narratives of Apocalypse and Resurrection.

Even more devastating than the conclusion of “The Colloquy” is Poe’s infamous poem, “The Conqueror Worm” (1842-1849). Like “The Colloquy,” “The Conqueror Worm” depicts the horrifying prospect of decay and by doing so transforms the Apocalypse into a horror story, rather than a narrative of cosmic fulfillment and the regeneration of humankind. However, “The Conqueror Worm” is Poe’s bleakest treatment of the apocalypse and the afterlife. The poem is
utterly nihilistic with its preoccupation with gore and the futility of human life. Mabbott asserts that “The Conqueror Worm” is “unsurpassed in its power and pessimism,” an observation that becomes even more pronounced in light of the poem’s references to the end of the world. (Complete Poems, 323). In the first two stanzas, Poe establishes both Gothic and apocalyptic frameworks:

Lo! ‘tis a gala night
Within the lonesome latter years!
An Angel throng, bewinged, bedight
In veils, and drowned in tears,
Sit in a theatre, to see
A play of hopes and fears,
While the orchestra breathes fitfully
The music of the spheres.

Mimes, in the form of God on high,
Mutter and mumble low,
And hither and thither fly—
Mere puppets they, who come and go
At bidding of vast formless things
That shift the scenery to and fro,
Flapping from out their Condor wings
Invisible Wo! (Poetry and Tales 77-78)

For Poe’s first two lines, “Lo! ‘tis a gala night/ Within the lonesome latter years!” Mabbott provides the following annotation: “See the phrase ‘the lonesome latter days’ in Poe’s ‘Addenda’ to Eureka. This probably alludes to 1 Timothy 4:1: ‘in the latter times some shall depart from the faith.’ According to a note by Richard Wilbur . . . Poe here suggests that the end of the world approaches” (Mabbott, Complete Poems 326). 1 Timothy is not the only place where the concept of “latter” days or “latter” times appears in the Bible. The concept of “latter” appears throughout the Old Testament; for example, in Daniel it refers to the end of the world: “Now I am come to make thee understand what shall befall thy people in the latter days: for yet the vision is for
many days” (Daniel 10:14). In “The Conqueror Worm” the cosmic scope of the end of the world is reduced to a mere “play of hopes and fears” and a “motley drama” while God is presented as a mumbling, muttering mime. The cosmic import of this drama is further diminished by the reference to humans as mere “puppets,” reducing the concept of teleological design to cosmic farce. Even more disturbing are the “formless things” with “condor wings,” which appear to control the lives of the human puppets. Poe’s implication is more than nihilistic; he suggests that not only is the concept of teleological design a joke, but even worse, something formless and evil controls humankind’s destiny. Later, this pessimism appears in Hawthorne’s depiction of Apocalypse in *The Scarlet Letter* though Hawthorne’s evil is much less nebulous and “formless.” For Hawthorne, human sin irreversibly paralyzes positive cosmic apotheosis. In both instances, the meaning that accompanies human existence within an apocalyptic paradigm is rendered impotent. The nightmare of history and the suffering of the present, including the trial of death, are necessary parts of the cosmic narrative, but that narrative deteriorates when human agency is rendered powerless whether by a cosmic “formless” source of evil or through sin.

The third and fourth stanzas echo biblical variations on the end of the world, especially those passages in the Bible that depict the Day of the Lord as a day of darkness and horror. Though the Book of Revelation may end positively with “Even so, come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20), other passages in the Bible do not view the day of the Lord as desirable. Poe explores the latter version of Apocalypse where the Day of the Lord is a day of destruction and terror:

That motley drama—oh, be sure
It shall not be forgot!
With its phantom chased for evermore,
By a crowd that seize it not,
Through a circle that ever returneth in
To the self-same spot,
And much of Madness, and more of Sin,
And Horror the soul of the plot.

But see, amid the mimic rout
A crawling shape intrude!
A blood-red thing that writhes from out
The scenic solitude!
It writhes!—it writhes! With mortal pangs
The mimes become its food,
And seraphs sob at vermin fangs
In human gore imbued. (Poetry and Tales 78)

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all echo the same sentiment, “For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be” (Matthew 24:21). Poe conveys this sentiment as well regarding the “plot” of the cosmic drama: “And much of Madness, and more of Sin,/ And Horror the soul of the plot.” Most disturbing of all is the depiction of humanity’s fate in stanzas four and five. What lies in store for humanity at the end of this poem is not a glorious new Heaven and new earth nor an ethereal existence on a higher aesthetic plane. Rather, the end depicts a Gothic image of death: a “crawling shape,” a “blood-red thing.” This writhing figure devours humanity with its “vermin fangs,” feasting on “human gore.”

The final stanza reveals an Apocalypse of darkness, decay, and utter annihilation rather than regeneration:

Out—out are the lights—out all!
And, over each quivering form,
The curtain, a funeral pall,
Comes down with the rush of a storm,
While the angels, all pallid and wan,
Uprising, unveiling, affirm
That the play is the tragedy, “Man,”
And its hero the Conqueror Worm. (Poetry and Tales 78-79)
Poe resumes his metaphor of a stage with the lights turned out, plunging the audience into darkness as the curtain, “a funeral pall,/ Comes down with the rush of a storm,” echoing aspects of the Apocalypse such as thunder, wind, and darkness, all featured in The Book of Revelation. There is no triumph in this Apocalypse; it is apocalyptic in the sense that it represents an ending, but what lies at the boundary between life and death are annihilation and unexplainable malevolent forces. This apocalyptic unveiling reveals that the true “hero” in humanity’s cosmic destiny is that which obliterates even the last remnants of existence: the Conqueror Worm. “The Conqueror Worm” ventures beyond the merely frightening and sensational. The poem contains a cosmic horror so profound, it creates what H.P. Lovecraft called, “A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces . . . a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature” (144). Poe projects these unexplainable, unknown forces onto the biblical narrative of Apocalypse, stripping it of its logic and design and transforming the biblical Apocalypse into one of violent and unpredictable horror.

William Mentzel Forrest draws the following parallel between Poe and the Old Testament vision of death:

For both Poe and the Hebrew Bible there is present a hope that death might be escaped. To neither was it annihilation, to neither was there much thought of a Resurrection. That doctrine was used figuratively in the Old Testament to express the hope of Hosea and Ezekiel that their destroyed nation would live again in this world [See Hosea 13:14; Ezek. 37:1-14]. Only in a very late book was it applied to individuals [See Dan. 12:12], and not until the centuries immediately preceding the opening of the Christian era did it become anything like the Resurrection doctrine of the New Testament. Without such a doctrine, and with nothing better to hope for in the realms of the dead than a poor shadowy existence, the ancient Israelites and our modern poet both dreaded death and dreamed of a way to escape it. (Forrest 68)
For nineteenth-century audiences and for Poe, death was, as Forrest notes, inescapable, ubiquitous, palpable, and visceral in a way that a modern reader cannot fully understand. As evident in the consolation poetry of the time, society turned to sentimentalized religion for comfort and hope in the face of the gruesome finality of death. In light of this cultural interest, it is not surprising that Poe chose to engage with these concerns. The Bible’s influence on Poe’s corpus and his familiarity with it are incontestable, but his engagement with specific theological questions regarding The Last Things as well as the echo of specific verses of the Bible in his works reflect a broader cultural concern over the fate of the body and soul after death. By appropriating the Gothic genre, Poe’s exploration of his society’s questions and fears about possible states of being in the after-life is far more nuanced and complex than the more simplistic mainstream narrative. Poe addresses questions about the afterlife that ultimately transgress the typical narrative of celestial bliss: Will the dead be conscious or asleep? What is the nature of sleep within the grave? Are the dead attached to their bodies or are the body and soul independent of one another? Or, perhaps most frightening of all, is death a descent into nothingness? These questions all share a common feature: They undermine the American mythology of death, Resurrection, and Apocalypse. Specifically, they force readers to question the narrative that forms American identity, and instead consider that death, corruption, and the conqueror worm are the true American reality, leaving little room for the beloved narrative that characterizes America as God’s chosen location and his chosen people to bring about God’s kingdom of Heaven on earth.

1 The review was originally published in *The New York Review*, October 1837.
All of Poe’s letters are taken from *The Collected Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*, originally edited by John Ward Ostrom and revised, corrected, and expanded by Burton R. Pollin and Jeffrey A. Savoye.

Other verses Balfour lists in this category include Job 3:16, 12:21-22, 33:28; Psalm 88:12, 44:19, 107:10 and 14; 1 Samuel 2:9.

Balfour also lists Psalms 94:17 under the category of “Silence.”

Balfour also lists the following under the category of “Corruption and Destruction”: Job 4:18-20, 26:6, 28:22; Psalms 16:10, 40:9-20, 88:11; Proverbs 15:11, 27:20. Roswell D. Hitchcock also has a section titled “Corruption,” and another on “The Grave” (381).

See also Gary Laderman’s *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes toward Death, 1799-1883*.

The excised paragraphs are from Thomas Ollive Mabbott’s *Edgar Allan Poe: Tales and Sketches* (2000).

This is not the only tale that expresses these sentiments. In *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), the title character undergoes symbolic burial when he finds himself trapped in the dark hold of the *Grampus*, describing his situation as one in which he was “entombed,” allowing his mind to give way to “the most gloomy imaginings, in which the dreadful deaths of thirst, famine, suffocation, and premature interment, crowded upon me” (*Poetry and Tales* 1030). In a later passage the narrative also states, “I firmly believe that no incident ever occurring in the course of human events is more adapted to inspire the supremeness of mental and bodily distress than . . . living inhumation” (*Poetry and Tales* 1153).

See also Ruth Mayer’s interpretation of this account in relation to Poe’s treatment of an Intermediate State as well as her focus on nineteenth century scientific interest in death.
In *The Sacred Remains*, Gary Laderman describes Nevin as the “spokesperson for the ‘Mercersburg theology’ within the German Reformed Church and one of the leaders of the High Church movement in antebellum Protestant culture” (53-54). In a note, Laderman further elaborates that the Mercersburg theology was “skewed toward Catholicism and a romantic return to ‘historic’ traditionalism” (184).
Chapter III

“But the past was not dead”: Millennial Versus Gothic Paradigms of History in the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne

Hawthorne’s Gothic fiction is similar to Poe’s in that it incorporates a concurrent religious framework that features contemporary theological concerns related to death, the Intermediate State, Resurrection, and the Second Coming. For example, one of Hawthorne’s earlier tales, “Alice Doane’s Appeal” (1835), incorporates apocalyptic imagery in a Resurrection scene at the end of the tale that reflects the Millennialist fervor of the time. In addition, this parallel framework of Gothic and religious subject matter is directly linked to what Gary Scharnhorst terms “the most notorious Millennial movement in American history” (19). Spurred by the predictions of William Miller, an Adventist prophet who predicted the “cataclysmic inauguration” of Christ’s kingdom in 1843 or 1844, the Millerite movement had a profound effect on nineteenth-century American culture (Scharnhorst 19). This revivalist fervor is evident in many of Hawthorne’s works, and especially, four short stories written at the height of the Millerite enthusiasm. These tales include “The New Adam and Eve” (February 1843), “The Hall of Fantasy” (February 1843), “The Christmas Banquet” (January 1844), and “Earth’s Holocaust” (May 1844). Hawthorne’s major works written in the decade following the Millerite craze, specifically The Scarlet Letter (1850) and The House of the Seven Gables (1851), do not mention Miller by name, but they do contain apocalyptic imagery and contemporary religious concerns connected to the final judgment and the Second Coming. Millennialist views of history see time progressing in a relentless forward movement toward culmination and Apocalypse. A Gothic paradigm of history directly opposes this apocalyptic sequence of events because in Gothic
narratives, the past erupts, often violently, into the present, contaminating the present with past sin and disrupting modern notions of progress. The Gothic elements in Hawthorne’s works—the disruptive past and uncanny transformations of the biblical Apocalypse—and his blending of Gothic and Millennial paradigms of history contradict mainstream religious beliefs about both America’s role in a progressive, teleological arc of history and the relationship between “the Deity and the communities of mankind” (Hawthorne 1:249)

Hawthorne’s references to Cotton Mather, the Puritan historian, theologian, and preacher, as well as William Miller indicate a fascination with American Millennialism. In *The Millennialism of Cotton Mather: An Historical and Theological Analysis*, John S. Erwin claims that Millennialism is the most prominent feature of Mather’s “sermons, treatises, letters and unpublished manuscripts, as well as his diary” and recognizes Mather as a central figure in the development of American Millennialism (1-2). Mather, like Miller after him, would spend much of his time delving into “a complex series of prophetic predictions which included 1697, 1716, and 1736 as dates when the first conflagration would arrive and the Millennium would begin” (Erwin 8-9). Like Mather, William Miller also attempted to predict the date of Christ’s return through a systematic study of scripture, which was published in *Evidences from Scripture & History of the Second Coming of Christ about the Year CE 1843*. The date Miller ultimately deciphered was the twenty-first of March, 1843, but the day came and went without the appearance of Christ, which understandably incited substantial criticism of Miller’s prediction. The “Great Disappointment” of 1844 heralded the end of the Millerite fanaticism, but the subject of the Millennium and the destruction of the earth would continue to fascinate authors like Hawthorne and Poe.
The Millennial writings of Puritans like Mather are strikingly similar to the rhetoric of nineteenth-century Millennial and revivalist groups. In the decade leading up to some of Hawthorne’s greatest works, American society was flooded with the Millennial fervor of the diverse religious revivals that swept through America. Theological rifts became more pronounced during this era of Millennial fervor, especially within groups like the Postmillennialists and the Premillennialists. Postmillennialists believed that Christ would return after a Millennium of peace, which indicates that should humanity achieve the ideal of a peaceful Christian kinship throughout the world, humankind could bring about the Second Coming and institute God’s kingdom on earth. These more progressive Postmillennialists were often made up of reform groups such as the abolitionists, temperance societies, and other humanitarian organizations interested in societal improvement. An 1848 article titled “Signs of the Times” articulates this position well:

He who, anxious for a more perfect and purified state of society, watches with that intensity which so laudable a desire creates, the existing indications, will find much to fortify his position and confirm his hope. He will discover that while few sneer, the many are emphatically champions of Reform, willing to volunteer their aid and influence on behalf of those progressive principles so cogently urged. He will watch the general signs and indications which are so undoubtedly obvious, and, withdrawing attention from particular things, devote his gaze to more extensive and comprehensive objects. . . . The Nineteenth Century knows no watchword but PROGRESS. (84)

This notion of relentless forward movement toward a “perfect and purified state of society” is a frequent foil in Hawthorne’s texts, as he undermines the capability of a flawed human society to achieve this perfection and hasten the Millennium.

The Premillennialists, on the other hand, “saw a gloomy future dominated by accelerating evil behavior and cataclysmic events until Christ intervened at the Second Coming to redeem a righteous remnant, who would then enjoy the Millennium” (Aamodt 967). In contrast to the
Postmillennialists, the Premillennialists saw no human means of introducing the Millennium other than the intervention of Christ himself. In an 1822 article in the *Christian Repository*, the anonymous author writes: “none of these things, (human reason, progress of literature and science, nor human laws,) then, can bring on the latter-day glory; or, by themselves essentially ameliorate the condition of man in this world” (“Means of Introducing the Millenium” 140).

According to this view, the inability of humankind to introduce the Millennium was due to its innate depravity. Only the utter destruction of the world could cleanse and renew the world and those who populated it. The author of “Means of Introducing the Millenium” emphasizes the absolute necessity of the Gospel to purify humanity’s sinful nature:

> Nothing can be considered . . . but the religion of Jesus Christ;—the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth;—which alone can reach the heart . . . purify its blackest pollutions—and control its fiercest passions. Men may dream of other remedies; but there is no other really effectual remedy for the disease of man; . . . Here and here alone we find light for human darkness, pardon for human guilt, cleansing for human depravity, consolation for human sorrow, strength for human weakness, and a complete repairer of human ruin. . . . It is when the rod of Jehovah’s strength shall be sent out of Zion, that the nations are to be made willing in the day of his power. (140)

Only the Apocalypse, the “day of [God’s] power” would change the hearts of the nations, and the Premillennialists, like the Postmillennialists, displayed a strong yearning for the advent of Christ.

The rhetoric of both the Premillennialists and the Postmillennialists echoes the hopeful cry, “Come, Lord Jesus” at the close of the Book of Revelation, the same hopeful rhetoric that Mather employs in much of his writing as well.

Both the Pre and Postmillennialists viewed history as a linear movement forward toward culmination. David Reynolds asserts that “elite nineteenth-century novelists . . . were dismayed by the liberalization of the religious mainstream. Hawthorne satirized the facile optimism and
mechanized morality of liberals so pointedly in “The Celestial Railroad” (1846) that the work was pirated and distributed as an orthodox tract” (206). Satirical works like “The Celestial Railroad,” which depicts time and history through the relentless forward movement of railroad tracks, reveal Hawthorne’s skepticism of the Millennial view of progress. This same skepticism is present in other tales that specifically mention William Miller. While these tales are not among those most often cited as “Gothic,” they show how the Gothic subtly emerges out of literature that addresses apocalyptic subject matter. Even without clear Gothic conventions, these tales introduce the seed whence the Gothic would emerge in Hawthorne’s later works—the troubling idea that humanity would inevitably fail at its mission to achieve perfection and overcome the sins of the past. In “Images of the Millerites in American Literature,” Gary Scharnhorst writes that both Poe and Hawthorne responded to the Millerite “excitement” in their works “with apparent appreciation for the imaginative thrust of the movement and claimed romantic kinship with the prophet” (21). However, tracing the influence of Millerism on American authors offers more than a mere examination of their “artistic or political temperament” as Scharnhorst seems to suggest (Scharnhorst 20). Hawthorne’s engagement with Miller’s doomsday prophecy reveals less a romantic kinship with the prophet as much as direct opposition to the idea that any person could decipher the inscrutable nature of God and Providence.

“The Hall of Fantasy” underscores Hawthorne’s interest in the Millerite movement and illustrates how the tales that involve “Father Miller” set the stage for more complex treatments of Apocalypse in works like *The Scarlet Letter*. The tale begins with a day-dreaming narrator attempting to write “an idle tale.” In his reverie, the narrator enters the Hall of Fantasy where any who “have affairs in that mystic region, which lies above, below, or beyond the actual” may
meet and talk about their dreams (10:173). With a friendly guide, the narrator makes his way through the hall, observing poets, businessmen, inventors, and reformers who “rejoice in the progress of mankind” (10:180). Hawthorne thus recognizes the cultural impact of the reforming Postmillennialists, but not without criticism:

It would be endless to describe the herd of real or self-styled reformers that peopled this place of refuge. They were the representatives of an unquiet period, when mankind is seeking to cast off the whole tissue of ancient custom like a tattered garment. Many of them had got possession of some crystal fragment of truth, the brightness of which so dazzled them that they could see nothing else in the wide universe. Here were men whose faith had embodied itself in the form of a potato; and others whose long beards had a deep spiritual significance. Here was the abolitionist, brandishing his one idea like an iron flail. In a word, there were a thousand shapes of good and evil, faith and infidelity, wisdom and nonsense—a most incongruous throng. (10:180)

Hawthorne concedes that the spirit of these reformers is powerful.\(^2\) However, in their optimism and desire to concoct an immediate plan for the perfection of the world, they fail to recognize the inherent imperfection of humanity, a theme that Hawthorne would later underscore in *The Scarlet Letter*.

The Premillennialists, who yearned for the fiery overthrow of a sinful world, also receive a share of the narrator’s criticism. The guide describes the tendency of the Millerites to swallow up and annihilate other reform movements (10:181).\(^3\) Hawthorne mentions “Father Miller,” and describes him as “an elderly man of plain, honest, trustworthy aspect. With an earnestness that betokened the sincerest faith in his own doctrine, he announced that the destruction of the world was close at hand” (10:181). Comparing the two reform movements, the narrator’s guide remarks:

observe how picturesque a contrast between [Father Miller’s] dogma and those of the reformers whom we have just glanced at. They look for the earthly perfection of mankind, and are forming schemes, which imply that the immortal spirit will be connected with a physical nature for innumerable ages of futurity. On the other hand,
here comes good Father Miller, and with one puff of his relentless theory scatters all their
dreams like so many withered leaves upon the blast. (10:182)

When he says that these various reform groups believe in the perfectibility of mankind, the guide
alludes to a common theological debate about physical regeneration at the time of the final
Resurrection. While some believed that the Resurrection would be spiritual, others believed it
would be a literal Resurrection of the same physical body one had in life, albeit in a perfected
state. Those who believed in the perfectibility of mankind, the Postmillennialists, were
proponents of physical regeneration as humanity slowly moved toward perfection in their current
physical states. Miller’s view of utter annihilation completely contradicts the Postmillennialist
view that human progress would eventually achieve perfectibility and the Millennium.

The narrator reveals that despite the hopeful rhetoric surrounding the onset of the
Millennium, the prospect of the world’s demise provides little pleasure: “I wish that the world
might be permitted to endure until some great moral shall have been evolved” (293). The
narrator continues: “Now, if [the world] should be burned to-morrow morning, I am at a loss to
know what purpose will have been accomplished, or how the universe will be wiser or better for
our existence and destruction” (293). At the end of the tale, the overriding sentiment the narrator
expresses is a love of the “poor old earth. . . . She has faults enough, in all conscience, but I
cannot bear to have her perish” (10:182). Despite the faults of the world, the narrator notes that
the root of human nature strikes down deep into this earthly soil, and it is but reluctantly
that we submit to be transplanted, even for a higher cultivation in Heaven. I query
whether the destruction of the earth would gratify any one individual, except perhaps
some embarrassed man of business whose notes fall due a day after the day of doom.
(10:183)

Beneath the light-hearted tone of “The Hall of Fantasy” is a serious commentary at the close of
the tale. Hawthorne reacts to his society’s Millennialist fervor by stressing that humankind is tied
to the earth by bonds that go beyond mere affection; the very nature of humanity exists in
kinship with the earth. The destruction of the earth, therefore, holds no real gratification—only
deep sadness and regret that she must perish. This sentiment is contrary to Millennial rhetoric
and lays the groundwork for Hawthorne to later appropriate the Gothic to undermine the popular
notion that the Day of the Lord would be a day of joyful celebration.

Where “The Hall of Fantasy” makes use of satire, rather than explicitly Gothic elements,
to undermine Millennial notions of Apocalypse, an earlier tale, “Alice Doane’s Appeal” (1835),
prominently features a Gothic framework to challenge these optimistic, contemporary religious
beliefs. “Alice Doane’s Appeal” comprises two tales, both of which are Gothic. In the frame, the
narrator entertains two young women by recounting stories for them upon Gallows Hill. The first
story features the sensational tale of Alice Doane and contains several Gothic conventions such
as doubling, incest, revenge, murder, sorcery, and graveyard visions. After this tale fails to
properly frighten his audience, the narrator provides a historical account of the executions of five
condemned witches on August 19, 1692. Unlike the first tale, this tale successfully frightens his
young listeners. Both the frame tale and the tale of Alice Doane rely on the blending of past and
present for their effect. Throughout the text, Hawthorne’s most powerful application of the
Gothic is this blending of past and present, which disrupts the traditional view of history as a
linear progression that ends in cosmic apotheosis. In this way, the past is never truly buried, but
returns to thwart progress toward salvation and the Millennium. By making use of a circular
Gothic timeline, Hawthorne questions the matrix of beliefs surrounding both national destiny and
individual participation in that destiny, for if humankind is too depraved to rise above its
historical sins, then salvation remains forever out of reach.
The blending of past and present is apparent from the moment the tale begins as the narrator ascends Gallows Hill with two young female companions and describes the hill as a place where “a physical curse may be said to have blasted the spot where guilt and frenzy consummated the most execrable scene that our history blushes to record” (11:267). The earth, in this case, has not recovered from the sins of the past; the “blasted” spot of Gallows Hill reminds the reader of the past’s ability to linger in the present world. As the narrator recounts his Gothic tale to his two young listeners, this interweaving of past and present becomes more pronounced. As the “veil” of imagination falls over the scene, the narrator and his listeners become witnesses to the transformation of the present into the world of the past as the narrator states: “Retaining these portions of the scene, and also the peaceful glory and tender gloom of the declining sun, we threw, in imagination, a veil of deep forest over the land, and pictured a few scattered villages, and this old town itself a village” (11:268-269). The vision of the town as it was in 1692 provides the setting for the “wondrous tale,” but Hawthorne draws his audience into the world of the past by projecting it onto the current setting. The past, a time when “the prince of Hell bore sway” is fused with the present, conveying the idea that so long as memory and history influence the present, the evil of the past will continue to implicate the living. This blending of past and present results in what G.R. Thompson calls “the tension between the interpenetration of fiction and history and the veil of appearances over ‘truth’” (160). In other words, the past cannot be interpreted properly because it can never be properly understood in the context of cosmic design due to the fact that no one person can conceive of the whole, only particular perspectives. In addition, the past’s return contradicts the “truth” of the present, especially when what has happened in the past is embarrassing, immoral, or an affront to the idea of progress so prized in
the nineteenth century. The past’s return disrupts any movement toward cosmic apotheosis. Instead of a linear movement toward culmination, there is instead a recursive doubling back that thwarts the narrative of cosmic closure.

After Hawthorne’s narrator sets the scene in the past, the tale that emerges is brimming with the trappings of Gothic literature, opening with a description of the murdered corpse of Walter Brome, found dead in the snow with a “look of evil and scornful triumph” fixed upon his frozen corpse (11: 270). Leonard Doane, Alice’s brother, killed Brome upon being presented with “indubitable proofs of the shame of Alice” who had fallen in love with Brome (11: 272). Alice’s brother reveals his incestuous desire for Alice, his jealousy at discovering her affections for Walter, and the uncanny doubling of himself in Walter Brome. The narrator reveals that Walter and Leonard are the “joint possessors of an individual nature, which could not become wholly the property of one, unless by the extinction of the other” (11:272). Later, the narrator reveals that Walter Brome was actually Leonard’s twin brother, and thus Alice’s brother as well. These Gothic conventions of the doppelganger, incestuous desire, and the murdered corpse are more atmospheric devices than serious plot elements. They create a set of genre expectations that establish suspense and a mood of unease, apprehension, and uncertainty.

The true source of terror in this text, however, does not originate from these Gothic conventions. Rather, the tale’s effect results from the blending of Gothic and religious subject matter in the final Resurrection scene in which fiends arise en masse from the graves in the cemetery in a grotesque figuration of General Resurrection, further paralyzing the movement toward cosmic apotheosis. As Alice and Leonard visit the town graveyard at midnight, they find that “Suddenly there was a multitude of people among the graves. Each family tomb had given
up its inhabitants, who, one by one, through distant years, had been borne to its dark chamber, but now came forth and stood in a pale group together” (11:275). These apparitions are either souls lost to the fires of Hell or “fiends counterfeiting the likeness of departed saints” (11: 276). The scene echoes several biblical passages:

And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and Hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works (Revelation 20:13)

For as the Father raiseth up the dead, and quickeneth them; even so the Son quickeneth whom he will. (John 5:21)

Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the Resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the Resurrection of damnation. (John 5:28-29)

And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. (Daniel 12: 2)

And have hope toward God, which they themselves also allow, that there shall be a Resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust. (Acts 24:15)

Most Millennialist rhetoric focused upon the wondrous day of Resurrection when bodies would be made whole again, but these verses indicate that the Resurrection will occur for both the righteous and the wicked. “Alice Doane’s Appeal” is disturbing precisely because it depicts the opposing narrative—the narrative of the damned.

The fate of the damned during the Intermediate State is murky in early theological writings as most writers were more concerned about the fate of the Elect. However, when the narrator states that the inhabitants of the grave were “borne” to a “dark chamber,” he alludes to passages in both the Bible and other religious writing in which “chamber” is a euphemism for the grave. In 1728, Cotton Mather published a short sermon called The Chambers of God Opened and Visited, On the Death of the Valuable Mr. Peter Thatcher. The sermon opens with a quote
from Isaiah 26:20: “Come, my People, Enter thou into thy Chambers.” What follows is an explanation of where faithful Christians go upon dying, defining “chambers” as “Receptacles of the Dead” (2). Mather explains that the dead will be raised from the earth, but not until a “Grand Revolution . . . a Tremendous Day of Indignation on the World” (2). Mather defines this “indignation” as “the Long Reign of Antichrist” (2). However, “Good Men . . . shall be sheltered from a share in this Indignation,” and the “chambers” of death will offer shelter “until there comes the Time of the dead, for them to have their full reward given unto them (2-3). Mather makes clear that only the body goes to the “chambers” of the grave while the spirit will be “lodged in the chambers of Paradise,” quoting John 14:2: “In my Father’s House are many Mansions; I go to prepare a Place for you” (5). Focusing on the faithful, Mather glosses over the fate of the wicked. Mather suggests that those who prove to be “Stumbling Blocks unto the Living” are “Men who deserve rather to lie buried in Oblivion, among Mischievous Persons,” implying that the wicked lie in Oblivion during the Intermediate State (23).

The fate of the wicked during the Intermediate State was a subject of widespread debate in the nineteenth century though religious narratives still primarily focused on the Resurrection of the saved. An 1830 article titled “It is a Fearful Thing to Fall into the Hands of an Angry God” suggests that the “impenitent sinner” will be “by death separated from every object of his cherished affections,” and “cut off from every source of enjoyment,” neither of which suggests oblivion. In an anonymous 1843 review of George Bush’s A Treatise on the Millennium: The First Resurrection. The Second Resurrection, the author posits his own beliefs about the fate of the damned during the Intermediate State before the Resurrection of the wicked:

the verb . . . to live, in nearly every instance of its use, denotes the principle of celestial life belongs to the beatified soul, in contradistinction to the eternal death of the damned. .
This life, or living of the soul, it must be specially observed, is opposed, not to the
annihilation of the soul, but to the death of the soul, the second death. The death of the
body is not the annihilation of the body; nor is the annihilation of the body the proper
opposite of the life of the body. Bodily life is opposed to bodily death and existence of
the body is the proper opposite of its nonexistence or annihilation. So the death of the
soul is not its extinction; on the contrary, the life of the soul is not only a continued
existence, but a blissful exemption from eternal death, and the positive possession of the
principle of a glorious immortality. . . . When thou hearest of the death of the soul,
imagine not the soul becomes extinct; the death of the soul is sin and eternal punishment,
. . . a deathless death. (94)

This author implies that the wicked will not experience oblivion in the Intermediate State, but
rather a “deathless death” or eternal dying. This is not the same as Hell, for the wicked will only
be cast into Hell on the day of the final judgment when they are raised from their graves to stand
before the bar of the Lord. Whatever the fate of the damned, be it oblivion, isolation, or eternal
death, the Resurrection on the Last Day will not be a joyful reunion with the body, but rather a
day of horror wherein the wicked are cast from one form of torment into final and eternal
suffering.

It is this fate of the wicked that Hawthorne depicts in the final Resurrection scene of the
tale. Hawthorne intensifies this already disturbing narrative by disintegrating the veil that
separates fictional horror from reality by using a familiar cast of characters in the Resurrection
scene. By using these character types and creating a set of figures not unfamiliar to nineteenth-
century society, Hawthorne also interrupts the Millennial timeline. Not only does the past erupt
into the present in “Alice Doane’s Appeal,” thwarting movement toward culmination, but
Hawthorne also paralyzes this forward movement by underscoring the evil that emerges out of
the past. The narrative of the Resurrection Morn was integral to nineteenth-century religious
society. It represented the final defeat of death and evil. Hawthorne contradicts this narrative by
depicting the resurrection of the damned as a cast of character types that would have been familiar to nineteenth-century society:

**There was the gray ancestor, the aged mother, and all their descendants, some withered and full of years, like themselves, and others in their prime; there, too, were the children who went prattling to the tomb, and there the maiden who yielded her early beauty to death’s embrace, before passion had polluted it. Husbands and wives arose, and who had lain many years side by side, and young mothers who had forgotten to kiss their first babes, though pillowed so long on their bosoms. . . . All, in short, were there; the dead of other generations, whose moss-grown names could scarce be read upon their tombstones, and their successors, whose graves were not yet green; all whom black funerals had followed slowly thither now reappeared where the mourners left them. Yet none but souls accursed were there, and fiends counterfeiting the likeness of departed saints. (11: 275-276)**

Hawthorne projects the Gothic horrors of death, of consciousness within the grave, and of the Resurrection of the sinful dead onto the nineteenth-century narrative of the Resurrection morn, a narrative usually infused with hopeful longing. Hawthorne’s Resurrection is a lurid tale. These dead do not receive the new and perfect bodies of the resurrected good, but rather remain in the habiliments of the grave with their original bodies. In this narrative, the dead continue to experience death, for there is no progress for the damned. This narrative, which emphasizes the sins of the past, underscores stasis rather than culmination.

As the tale progresses, the description of this familiar cast of characters takes on aspects of Freud’s “uncanny” (*das unheimlich*). According to Freud, the uncanny is the “class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar,” but because it has become unfamiliar through some novel or strange feature, it creates “intellectual uncertainty” and fear (125). In addition, the root of the word “heimlich” in German means “homely,” “belonging to the house, not strange, familiar,” which implies that at the heart of what is frightening is the transformation of something that was once held dear and beloved into
something simultaneously familiar and foreign (Freud 126). Hawthorne exploits the intellectual uncertainty of the uncanny by questioning the possibility of salvation. Hawthorne describes the dead, stating that “the countenances of those venerable men, whose very features had been hallowed by lives of piety, were contorted now by intolerable pain or Hellish passion, and now by an unearthly and derisive merriment” (11:276). Hawthorne mentions “venerable men” and continues by including “pastors,” “chaste matrons,” “maidens with untasted lips,” and “the faces of fond lovers.” (11:276-277). However, in each case, he adds an element of the unfamiliar, transforming the scene from a familiar religious narrative into a Gothic tale of terror. The venerable men, though suffering “intolerable pain” nevertheless expressed a “derisive merriment.” The pastors “seemed” to pray like saints though “it had been blasphemy” (11:277). The chaste matrons and the maidens with untasted lips “shrank, as if the unimaginable sin of twenty worlds were collected there” (11:277). The faces of fond lovers “were bent on one another with glances of hatred and smiles of bitter scorn” (11:277). Adding to the uncanny horror of the scene, the narrator states:

At times, the features of those who had passed from a holy life to Heaven would vary to and fro, between their assumed aspect and the fiendish lineaments whence they had been transformed. The whole miserable multitude, both sinful souls and false spectres of good men, groaned horribly and gnashed their teeth, as they looked upward to the calm loveliness of the midnight sky, and beheld those homes of bliss where they must never dwell. (11: 277)

In Hawthorne’s Gothic portrayal of the Resurrection, the righteous are conspicuously absent. In their place are “fiends” and “false spectres of good men.” Hawthorne infuses this Resurrection scene with horror by transforming a narrative of joy and triumph into one of ghastly horror and defeat. This scene is particularly disturbing because of the cultural popularity of the Resurrection narrative. Rather than depicting the mainstream, beatific Resurrection of the righteous, replete
with triumphant angels and benevolent God, Hawthorne’s Resurrection only features the
damned, who groan and gnash their teeth while looking, “upward to the calm loveliness of the
midnight sky” to behold “those homes of bliss where they must never dwell” (11:277).

This Gothic vision of the dead with biblical, historical, and cultural connections to
religious belief conveys a terrifying nightmare-vision. Though the tale ends with Alice’s
absolution, the narrative backdrop remains that of the damned—those who experience
Resurrection only to be cast into Hell for eternity—and thus undermines a Millennial paradigm
of history because progress toward resolution is impossible. Though Alice is cleared of guilt, the
sinners and fiends of the graveyard scene remain the dominant image of the tale. In the
conclusion to Alice’s tale, the narrator emphasizes the “company of devils and condemned souls
[who] had come on a holiday, to revel in the discovery of a complicated crime; as foul a one as
ever was imagined in their dreadful abode” (11:277). In addition, the narrator describes the “glee
of the fiends” as they await confirmation of the guilt and shame” of Alice (11:277). Alice’s
innocence receives a passing confirmation, but the conclusion remains unsatisfactory, as a vision
of Heaven is conspicuously absent. The tale ultimately underscores the past sins of humankind,
suggesting that the nineteenth-century belief in human perfectibility is far less attainable than
religious and Millennial rhetoric implies.

The lack of closure in the Resurrection scene is all the more disturbing when considered
against the backdrop of nineteenth-century theological debate. At the time the tale was
published, Millennial fervor was high, and theological commentary surrounding the nature of the
Resurrection was frequently published in many of the popular religious periodicals of the time.
One of the more visited topics of theological writings was the description of two Resurrections mentioned in Revelation 20: 4-6:

And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. But the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first Resurrection. Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first Resurrection: on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years.

According to the common Calvinist theology of the time, those who are among the Elect will be those who experience this first Resurrection. As noted by many theological writers, this would be a bodily Resurrection. This theology coincides with the vision Hawthorne presents in Alice’s narrative up to a point. The resurrected dead do not appear as “apparitions” until the very end of the tale, creating what Steven Frye calls “the ambiguous gothic”; “Hawthorne is a master practitioner of the ambiguous gothic, wherein the ‘Actual and the Imaginary,’ the natural and the supernatural, each offer potential explanations for events within the narrative” (Frye 108). In this case, the ambiguous Gothic obscures whether or not the Resurrection scene is merely a vision, created for a Gothic thrill or if it is indeed intended to convey biblical and apocalyptic significance. This ambiguity also contributes to the question of closure. If these ghosts were mere apparitions that the wizard conjured, then the story adheres to a merely Gothic framework. However, given the cultural emphasis on the Resurrection as depicted in The Bible and in contemporary periodicals, Hawthorne’s Resurrection scene in “Alice Doane’s Appeal” has far more serious implications than simple Gothic effect.

As Alice and Leonard’s tale comes to a close, and the two female companions laugh at its Gothic extravagance, the narrator is “piqued that a narrative which had good authority in our
ancient superstitions, and would have brought even a church deacon to Gallows Hill, in old witch
times, should now be considered too grotesque and extravagant for timid maids to tremble at”
(11: 278). Before the party leaves Gallows Hill the narrator detains them once again to see if
“truth were more powerful than fiction” (11:278). He continues with an account of the execution
of alleged witches that occurred on the spot centuries before. In the second tale, an innocent
group trudges toward the gallows, having been judged and sentenced to death while the
“afflicted, a guilty and miserable band” who had falsely accused the innocent look on (11: 279).
As the narrator begins to describe the gallows, his two young listeners “seized an arm on each
side; their nerves were trembling; and, sweeter victory still,” the narrator relates, “I had reached
the seldom trodden places of their hearts, and found the well-spring of their tears. And now the
past had done all it could” (11:279-280). The tale closes in the same way it began—by
indistinguishably blending the past with the present, and underscoring the disruptive nature of
the past: it had “done all it could.” The retelling of past events leads to trembling nerves and
tears, as the past revives, like the resurrected dead, and confronts the living with disturbing
memories of their ancestors’ capacity for evil.

Arguing for a historically contextualized reading of Gothic literature, Teresa Goddu
remarks that “the American Gothic is viewed within psychological and theological rubrics.
Because of America’s seeming lack of history and its Puritan heritage, the American gothic, it
has been argued, takes a turn inward, away from society and toward the psyche and the hidden
blackness of the American soul” (9). Goddu astutely observes that Gothic literature is often read
psychologically at the expense of a reading rooted in history and the formation of national
identity. However, the two theoretical lenses are not necessarily in opposition. Hawthorne’s
fiction does “turn inward,” exploring the monsters within the soul rather than those outside, but his writing is also a product of its time, and as Goddu asserts, Hawthorne’s Gothic “disrupts the dream world of national myth with the nightmares of history” (10). For Hawthorne, the past is the nightmare of the present in which the evils of the nation’s history cannot die or fade with the passage of time, but return again and again. As a simultaneous reminder of prior sins and a disruption of the linear timeline, this return of the past interferes with the progressive movement toward cosmic apotheosis and precipitates the final scene in “Alice Doane’s Appeal,” a grotesque parody of the hoped-for Resurrection that emphasizes the fallen nature of humankind rather than its potential for perfectibility.

This same emphasis on the fallen nature of humankind within the context of Millennialism appears in Hawthorne’s longer works such as *The House of the Seven Gables* and *The Scarlet Letter*. Though *The House of the Seven Gables* contains fewer direct allusions to judgment and Apocalypse, it nevertheless demonstrates Hawthorne’s interest in history and progress. John Gatta raises several questions about the nature of history in *The House of the Seven Gables*. Gatta writes:

> Assuming that history is moving somewhere, in some sense, one is still perplexed by the book’s contradictory suggestions about the figure that best represents this progress. Is the underlying pattern of history to be understood as a nonprogressive circle, as an ascending straight line, or, as Clifford argues at one point, as an ascending spiral curve? Finally, one is led to ask where Hawthorne located the effective cause of whatever human progress he might have been willing to believe in. Can men and women themselves act as principal or assisting agents, either through social reform movements or other means, to transform the social order they inhabit? Or must any essential improvement in society and its institutions wait upon the decrees of Fate or the providential design of an intelligent deity? (“Progress and Providence” 38)

Gatta asserts that the answer to these questions is Providence, “the ever mysterious but ultimately benevolent designs of a hidden God” (“Progress and Providence” 39). Gatta argues
that the novel ends with the optimistic view that the hand of Providence ensures the progress of human society and history. Gatta writes that Hawthorne “believed in his ending, as he did in Phoebe, since for him they were a figurative testimony to the reality of providential involvement in the individual pilgrim’s progress as well as in the transhistorical spiritual progress of the human community” (47-48). Though the novel ends with the triumph of human goodness, most notably in the happy fate of Phoebe, the most dominant image throughout the novel remains the darkness in the house of the seven gables.

*The House of the Seven Gables,* undermines the typical optimistic theology regarding Providence, progress, and Apocalypse.6 The chapter titled “The Flight of Two Owls” notably mimics Hawthorne’s earlier tale, “The Celestial Railroad,” which satirizes the liberal optimism of the mainstream. The relentless forward movement of the train tracks in “The Flight of Two Owls” establishes the typical view of time and history, a linear movement toward a fixed destination. Hawthorne further establishes this metaphor by describing the train as the “great current of human life” (2: 256). When Clifford and Hepzibah join the occupants of the train, they are “drawn onward by the same mighty influence” as the other passengers. Hawthorne goes to great lengths to describe a wide swath of society within the train car and ends his description with the following: “New people continually entered. Old acquaintances—for such they soon grew to be, in this rapid current of affairs—continually departed. Here and there, amid the rumble and the tumult, sat one asleep. Sleep; sport; business; graver or lighter study;—and the common and inevitable movement onward! It was life itself!” (2: 257). At first, it seems as if Clifford and Hepzibah have indeed joined the forward movement that characterizes the optimistic mainstream and indicates a final escape from the Gothic darkness of the House of the
Seven Gables. However, Hepzibah cannot escape the bleak vision of the house. Clifford exclaims, “You are not happy, Hepzibah! . . . You are thinking of that dismal old house, and of Cousin Jaffrey” (2: 257-258). The continuing narrative corroborates Clifford’s observation:

> With miles and miles of varied scenery between, there was no scene for her, save the seven old gable-peaks, with their moss, and the tuft of weeds in one of the angles . . . This one old house was everywhere! It transported its great, lumbering bulk, with more than railroad speed, and set itself phlegmatically down on whatever spot she glanced at (2: 258).

Despite the train’s movement to a seemingly brighter future, Hepzibah cannot escape the Gothic past represented by the ever-present image of the house. In addition, Clifford characterizes human progress as “an ascending spiral curve,” which seems to blend Gothic and Millennial paradigms of time. Though Clifford’s view of human progress is atypical, it nevertheless conforms to a view of forward motion, though more circuitous than mainstream depictions. Despite Clifford’s optimism, the chapter’s ending belies the mainstream vision of progress. Millennial paradigms of history move toward closure, but for Clifford and Hepzibah there is no fixed destination—Clifford even romanticizes the potential for nomadic existence brought by the invention of the steam engine. When Clifford and Hepzibah exit their train car, their prospects are no brighter than when they first embarked:

> The world had fled away from these two wanderers. They gazed drearily about them. At a little distance stood a wooden church, black with age, and in a dismal state of ruin and decay, with broken windows, a great rift through the main-body of the edifice, and a rafter dangling from the top of the square tower. Farther off was a farm-house in the old style, as venerably black as the church, with a roof sloping downward from the three-story peak to within a man’s height of the ground. (2: 266)

Their surroundings are hardly different than the dismal house from which they had so recently fled. Although the chapter engages with the optimistic mainstream view of movement toward cosmic apotheosis, Hawthorne thwarts this movement by placing Clifford and Hepzibah in a
location that mirrors the House of the Seven Gables. If anything, their new situation is worse than the one they had fled, and the chapter ends, dismally, with Hepzibah falling to her knees in a desperate prayer: “Oh, God—our Father—are we not thy children? Have mercy on us!” (2: 267).

Another scene—Judge Pyncheon, dead in his chair—thwarts the Millennial concept of progress. The darkness that emanates from the House of the Seven Gables is one of the most dominant and oppressive images of the novel and much of that darkness originates from this chapter. Hawthorne’s description of Judge Pyncheon’s body incorporates both Gothic and apocalyptic elements to highlight the loss of the body to physical decay, a reality that belies the promise of new bodies at the time of the Second Coming. The narrator, speaking to the judge, states: “Up, therefore, Judge Pyncheon, up! You have lost a day. But tomorrow will be here anon. . . . As for him that has died to-day, his morrow will be the Resurrection-morn” (2:276).

This death exists in the context of nineteenth-century theology in which death occurs first, then an Intermediate State, and finally Resurrection on the Last Day. The death scene is also associated with the chaotic Gothic void defined by loss of identity and non-being:

The features are all gone; there is only the paleness of them left. And how looks it now? There is no window! There is no face! An infinite, inscrutable blackness has annihilated sight! Where is our universe? All crumbled away from us; and we, adrift in chaos, may hearken to the gusts of homeless wind, that go sighing and murmuring about, in quest of what was once a world! (2:276-277)

Hawthorne’s depiction of death is similar to Poe’s in “The Colloquy of Monos and Una.” Death precipitates the loss of something essential—the features, the face, the physical “world” of human existence. Hawthorne describes existence after death as an “infinite, inscrutable blackness” that annihilates sight, which echoes the change in consciousness that Poe’s Monos
experiences as his body decays. Hawthorne’s depiction of death, however, is far more nihilistic than Poe’s. Despite his reference to the “Resurrection-morn,” rather than depicting the soul sent to either Heaven or Hell, the soul in this case is set “adrift in chaos.” In this version of the afterlife, the chaos of non-being overwhelms the assurance of cosmic order associated with Providence and teleological design. Death is not an event that leads to union with the divine, but rather an event that prevents such a union.

Hawthorne further underscores death’s power to disrupt Millennial progress by ending the chapter with a symbol of the gruesome reality of decay—a fly. The narrator states:

What! Thou art not stirred by this last appeal? No; not a jot! And there we see a fly—one of your common house-flies, such as are always buzzing on the window-pane—which has smelt out Governor Pyncheon, and alights now on his forehead, now on his chin, and now, Heaven help us, is creeping over the bridge of his nose, towards the would-be chief-magistrate’s wide-open eyes! Canst thou not brush the fly away? Art thou too sluggish? Thou man, that hadst so many busy projects, yesterday! Art thou too weak, that wast so powerful? Not brush away a fly! Nay, then, we give thee up! (2:283)

No amount of Phoebe’s cheerfulness ameliorates the reality of death conveyed in this scene. The Gothic emphasis on darkness, chaos, and decay overshadows the concept of a benevolent Providence. In addition, the movement toward chaos and destruction emphasizes devolution rather than evolution, thus developing an anti-apocalyptic narrative that undermines cosmic culmination. By foregrounding the decay of the corpse rather than its eventual regeneration, Hawthorne destabilizes the national myth wherein humanity plays a vital role in the renewal of a broken world—symbolically enacted through the regeneration of decayed and broken bodies.

The paralysis of Millennial progress present in *The House of the Seven Gables* is even more fully developed in *The Scarlet Letter*, which represents Hawthorne’s most sophisticated use of the Gothic as a means to question the national narrative about cosmic design, Apocalypse, and
national identity. In addition to examining more fully the paralysis of Millennial paradigms of history, *The Scarlet Letter* explores the indeterminacy surrounding divine signs and wonders and the likelihood of the apocalyptic marriage of the Lamb. In *The Scarlet Letter*’s introductory sketch, “The Custom-House,” the narrator writes: “the past was not dead. Once in a great while, the thoughts, that had seemed so vital and so active, yet had been put to rest so quietly, revived again” (1:27). This introductory chapter illustrates how the vitality of the past threatens an apocalyptic paradigm by reversing its forward momentum. The recursive or circular paradigm of history—a Gothic view—reimagines history as a non-linear movement with no clear beginning or end. “The Custom-House” establishes this Gothic framework in the novel by introducing the recursive view of history as well as a standard set of Gothic conventions, such as narrative ambiguity, anti-closure, and an exploration of how the past erupts violently in the present to disrupt the linear timeline and undermine beliefs surrounding national identity. The Gothic framework ceaselessly pushes the novel’s teleological themes into the realm of the uncanny. As a result, belief in cosmic design and a benevolent creator who speaks to his people through signs and scripture, crumbles under the weight of humanity’s sin. Sin is never overcome, but rather repeated in a cycle, over and over into a “futurity of endless retribution” (1: 80).

Early scholarship on *The Scarlet Letter* viewed the prefatory essay, “The Custom-House,” as a nebulous introduction, not necessarily essential to the novel itself. Some printings even omitted the essay entirely. Current scholarship, however, views the introductory chapter as vital to interpreting the novel. Nina Baym, for example, asserts that “the circumstances of its composition argue as strongly for its relatedness to *The Scarlet Letter* . . . as they do for the reverse, and now criticism has begun to note parallel themes, symbols, and situations” (14).

On the surface, “The Custom-House” sets the narrative tone, as well as reader expectations with traditional Gothic conventions such as the narrator happening upon an “ancient yellow parchment,” imagery of death, bones, and tombstones, ancestral curses, and the scarlet relic that resurfaces out of the past like a ghost (1: 29). The introductory chapter also introduces the Gothic preoccupation with history. Taking into account the novel’s apocalyptic overtones, as well as the prevailing beliefs of Hawthorne’s contemporaries, readers may expect a narrative movement toward apotheosis, Resurrection, and closure. However, the Gothic framework of the text erodes the idea of progress from the outset. Referring to his sentimental attachment to the town of Salem, the narrator states:

> The figure of that first ancestor, invested by family tradition with a dim and dusky grandeur, was present to my boyish imagination, as far back as I can remember. It still haunts me, and induces a sort of home-feeling with the past, which I scarcely claim in reference to the present phase of the town. I seem to have a stronger claim to a residence here on account of this grave, bearded, sable-cloaked, and steeple-crowned progenitor—. . . he had all the Puritanic traits, both good and evil. He was likewise a bitter persecutor; . . . His son, too, inherited the persecuting spirit, and made himself so conspicuous in the martyrdom of the witches, that their blood may fairly be said to have left a stain upon him. So deep a stain, indeed, that his old dry bones, in the Charter Street burial ground, must still retain it, if they have not crumbled utterly to dust! I know not whether these ancestors of mine bethought themselves to repent, and ask pardon of Heaven for their cruelties; or whether they are now groaning under the heavy consequences of them, in another state of being. At all events, I, the present writer, as their representative, hereby take shame upon myself for their sakes, and pray that any curse incurred by them—as I have heard, and as the dreary unprosperous condition of the race, for many a long year back, would argue to exist—may be now and henceforth removed. (9-10)
Some of the language in the passage may suggest a linear or causal relationship between events when the narrator wonders if his ancestors “bethought themselves to repent . . . or whether they are now groaning under the heavy consequences” of their actions. However, these questions are conjectural, and the primary force of the passage showcases the influence the past has on the narrator, and how it disrupts the present. The conventional character of the dark ancestor with his “Bible and his sword,” who is both “good and evil,” and whose “dry old bones” retain the stain of blood if “they have not crumbled utterly to dust,” draws upon Gothic conventions like an ancestral curse, a dark past, and graveyard imagery to establish a circular timeline wherein the past is not dead, at least not to the living. The sins of the past haunt the living, forcing them to experience again the horrors of history. The novel’s setting is America’s own “dim and dusky” past, but it addresses issues of contemporary significance to a nineteenth-century audience. The narrator’s hope that the curse of his ancestors be “henceforth removed” mirrors the hope of the American people during the 1830s and 40s. With Millennial fervor high, “progress” was the word of the hour. Religious reform magazines and newspapers across the country called for America to detach from the sinful past and to embrace the various religious and reform movements that would herald the new Millennium. The prevailing strength of the past in “The Custom-House” suggests that no amount of progress overcomes the influence of history on the present.

In addition to the dominance of the past, Hawthorne enlists narrative indeterminacy—a dominant feature of the Gothic mode—to disrupt nineteenth-century preoccupation with progress and apocalyptic fulfillment as national destiny. Narrative indeterminacy calls into question whether events have supernatural explanations or causes rooted in reality, or whether certain
events happened at all. Hawthorne uses this technique throughout the novel to instill this ambiguity and uncertainty as the narrator questions the veracity of the events he chronicles. From the outset, the narrator states that he has “allowed [himself], as to such points, nearly or altogether as much license as if the facts had been entirely of [his] own invention” (1:33). The narrator only contends “for the authenticity of the outline” (1:33). For example, when Hester is harassed by Mistress Hibbins, their interview is followed with the narrator’s interjection that calls into question whether the event actually took place: “But here—if we suppose this interview betwixt Mistress Hibbins and Hester Prynne to be authentic, and not a parable” (emphasis mine) (1:117). The same interruption occurs during the meeting between Arthur Dimmesdale and Mistress Hibbins: “And his encounter with old Mistress Hibbins, if it were a real incident, did but show his sympathy and fellowship with wicked mortals and the world of perverted spirits” (emphasis mine) (1:222). Perhaps most famously, the narrator calls into question the mark over Dimmesdale’s heart, relating that in the end, upon the scaffold, “certain persons, who were spectators of the whole scene, and professed never once to have removed their eyes from the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale, denied that there was any mark whatever on his breast, more than on a new-born infant’s” (1:259).

These examples of narrative instability contribute to the catalogue of Gothic conventions in the text, but Hawthorne takes this technique a step further by applying Gothic indeterminacy to the subject of “signs of the times” and, more broadly, signs of religious import. Throughout the novel Hawthorne questions religious society’s ability to interpret divine signs, a theme that is unsurprising given William Miller’s repeated failure to predict the Second Coming. In The Scarlet Letter, written after Miller’s incorrectly identified date of the Second Coming, the
problem of interpreting signs of religious import reflects the contemporary concerns of
nineteenth-century society. Due to the predictions of William Miller, Hawthorne’s society was
fascinated by the idea that signs in the natural world could foretell the Second Coming. The
Gothic indeterminacy that surrounds these signs in *The Scarlet Letter* counters that common belief to which Hawthorne’s contemporaries would have subscribed, and results in the
deterioration of the connection between God and his people.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne depicts in detail the superstition that was endemic to
the Puritans and that mirrored the susceptibility of the nineteenth-century public to believe in
signs of the End Times. The Puritans’ belief in witches and the lurking presence of the “black
man” in the woods, as well as their whispered fears surrounding Hester’s red letter “A” are also
Gothic contrivances that heighten the misgivings surrounding such signs. After her first ascent to
the scaffold, Hester returns to prison with Pearl in her arms, and “it was whispered, by those who
peered after her, that the scarlet letter threw a lurid gleam along the dark passage-way of the
interior” (1: 69). This “lurid gleam” might intimate the fires of Hell, but neither the reader nor
those who listened to the “whispers” can be certain of the letter’s correct religious interpretation.
Perhaps the letter does symbolize God’s retribution for Hester’s sin, revealing a soul in jeopardy,
foretelling of damnation, and warning others not to fall into Hester’s sinful error. On the other
hand, perhaps the letter is merely a letter, upon which the reader and the townspeople project
false import. Regardless, Hawthorne does not indicate whether or not the community’s
interpretation of Hester’s letter is correct.

This indeterminacy surrounding the Puritans’ interpretation of signs is troubling because
the belief that God speaks to his people, who play an integral role in the movement toward
cosmic apotheosis, is essential to a Millennial faith paradigm. Without the assurance that God’s people have the ability to interpret signs accurately, the connection between God and the “newly gathered people of the Lord” loses its assurance and comfort. Dimmesdale’s final sermon emphasizes this connection, focusing on the “relation between the Deity and the communities of mankind, with a special reference to the New England which they were here planting in the wilderness” (1:249). Hawthorne emphasizes the belief in America’s special role in the cosmic narrative as Dimmesdale “foretell[s] a high and glorious destiny for the newly gathered people of the Lord” (1:249). The Bible itself depicts this connection in the way God communicates to his people by means of signs and wonders in the natural world. As stated in Luke 21:11, “And great earthquakes shall be in divers places, and famines, and pestilences; and fearful sights and great signs shall there be from Heaven.”

In the second scaffold scene of the novel, Hawthorne foregrounds the futility of interpreting signs in the natural world when human experience is unfailingly subjective and prone to error. As soon as Dimmesdale, Hester, and Pearl ascend the scaffold together, a great comet illuminates the sky: “So powerful was its radiance, that it thoroughly illuminated the dense medium of cloud betwixt the sky and earth. The great vault brightened, like the dome of an immense lamp. It showed the familiar scene of the street with distinctness of mid-day, but also with the awfulness that is always imparted to familiar objects by an unaccustomed light” (1:154). Hawthorne follows this description of the comet with the following commentary: “Nothing was more common, in those days, than to interpret all meteoric appearances, and other natural phenomena, that occurred with less regularity than the rise and set of sun and moon, as so many revelations from a supernatural source” (1:154). The novel’s description of the comet, as well as
Hawthorne’s commentary on society’s propensity to assign supernatural significance to such events, was likely influenced by first-hand experience. In February of 1843 a comet shone in the sky for over a week. The American Journal of Science and Arts (1843) called it the “Great Comet of 1843” and described it as follows:

This splendid comet, which was seen in the sunshine on the 28th day of February last by thousands of spectators in New England, and which for a month after adorned the evening sky with its long and brilliant train, has excited uncommon interest in all quarters of the globe. A letter from Mr. John Taylor, of Liverpool, to the Editors of this Journal, states that in the Isle of France . . . the comet was seen in great splendor from the 28th of February to the 8th of March, (and doubtless later,)—the train resembling “a stream of fire from a furnace.” (“Miscellanea’s” 229)

Hawthorne mentions the comet in a letter to Sophia dated March 16, 1843. He writes:

The world deserves to come to a speedy end, if it were for nothing else save to break down the abominable system of credit—of keeping possession of other people’s property—which renders it impossible for a man to be just and honest, even if so inclined. It is almost a pity that the comet is retrograding from the earth; it might do away with all our perversities at one smash. (15:678-679)

Hawthorne associates the comet with the end of the world, which is unsurprising given that the comet of 1843 was widely viewed as a “sign of the times,” and Millennialist groups like the Millerites regarded it as a sure sign of the imminent Second Coming predicted to occur in the year 1843. The comet was mentioned in several magazines and newspapers and often in connection to the Millerites. The Niles’ National Register ran an article on March 18, 1843 called “Celestial Phenomenon” that addressed the Great Comet and others like it. The introduction to the article states that “The Comet blazed out conspicuously about sunset last evening, the long bushy tail stretching from near the south western horizon to near the zenith. Some fearful imaginations, filled with the follies of Millerism, were foolishly frightened at its aspects” (43). Regardless of whether or not members of society subscribed to Miller’s predictions, the comet
did create some apprehension that his prophecy might be fulfilled. Clark Elliott and Margaret Rossiter write that Miller’s teaching attracted the following it did due “in part to a fantastic meteor shower in 1833, which reminded many of the wreck of the world described in Revelation” (42).

While portents of the end of the world struck fear into the hearts of many, these signs also provided reassurance that humanity remained part of a cosmic plan. The appearance of such signs provided evidence of God’s connection and direct communication with his people. In Josiah Litch’s Prophetic Expositions (1842), he refers to the signs named in New Testament scripture, particularly the twenty-first chapter of Luke, to substantiate Miller’s predictions. Litch writes:

Luke xxi. 6,7: “As for these things which ye behold, the days will come, in them which there shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down. And they asked him, saying, Master, but when shall these things be? And what sign will there be when these things shall come to pass?” In answer to these questions, Christ proceeded to tell them (from verses eight to twenty-four) what signs there would be which should precede the destruction of Jerusalem. The language is so plain that it cannot well be misunderstood. (Litch, Prophetic Expositions 150)

In the pages that follow, Litch connects scripture to current natural disasters. He references signs seen in the “sun and in the moon” citing Luke 21:25 and Joel 2:31, which state, respectively, that “there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring,” and that “The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and the terrible day of the Lord come.” Litch links these scriptures with a darkening of the sun on May 19th, 1780, which was a “day of supernatural darkness. It was not an eclipse of the sun, for the moon was nearly at the full. It was
not owing to a thickness in the atmosphere, for the stars were seen” (151). Litch also mentions signs in the moon as well as earthquakes signaling the end of the world:

“The moon to blood.” The following extract of a letter from Mr. Beadle at Aleppo, and published in the Missionary Herald of June, 1842, page 234, will illustrate this point. It is an account of an earthquake at that place in 1822. He says, “On the night of the earthquake there was something peculiar in the atmosphere, the moon appearing as red as blood. This greatly alarmed the inhabitants, who were continually crying out, “Now we shall hear the trumpet sound! And the dead will rise! The Day of Judgment has arrived!” (153)

Litch cites signs in the stars as yet another portent of the end and references Revelation 6:13 and Matthew 24:29 which both describe the stars falling from the Heavens “even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind” (Revelation 6:13). Litch then links these verses to a shower of meteors on the night of November 13, 1833. Having connected the signs named in the scriptures to their occurrences on earth, Litch writes:

Each of these events has made a deep impression on the world that it presaged the great and terrible day of the Lord; some in each time believing it had come; others that it would soon come. It was thus on the dark day, when the moon was turned to blood, and during the showers of meteors. To the people, generally, at the time they were witnessed, they were a sign. If they do not fulfill the prophecy, it cannot be fulfilled. For if it is ever done, it must be by just these appearances. If this does not accomplish the prediction, the repetition of the same thing again would not do it, but would rather produce infidelity by the commonness of the phenomena. I must, therefore, believe the signs to have already appeared. (155-156)

Litch’s publication is one example of many that emerged from Millerite and other Millennial movements of the early nineteenth century. Many of these publications predicted the fiery end of the world. While frightening, these texts conform to the narrative in which God communicates with his people, alerting them and helping them prepare for the coming disasters. Hawthorne’s fiction consistently scrutinizes this narrative. In *The Scarlet Letter* Dimmesdale’s obsessive and subjective interpretation of the comet’s meaning undermines the notion that humanity is capable
of reading divine signs, especially when “the gray-bearded sexton” interprets the comet in an entirely different manner, claiming that the red letter “A” stood for “Angel” since the “good Governor Winthrop was made an angel this past night” (1:157-158).

Hawthorne questions the reliability of signs by underscoring the subjectivity of human experience, which makes interpreting such signs on the cosmic level impossible. The narrator states that though these signs were seen by multitudes, it was more often the case that “credibility rested on the faith of some lonely eyewitness, who beheld the wonder through the colored, magnifying, and distorting medium of his imagination, and shaped it more distinctly in his after-thought” (1:155). The distorting power of the imagination is particularly disturbing when applied to reading signs and wonders from Heaven, as the subjective nature of human experience ruptures the communication between the divine and the communities of humankind.

Similarly problematic is the disruption of the national narrative that Hawthorne conveys in the following passage:

It was, indeed, a majestic idea, that the destiny of nations should be revealed, in these awful hieroglyphics, on the cope of Heaven. A scroll so wide might not be deemed too expansive for Providence to write a people’s doom upon. The belief was a favorite one with our forefathers, as betokening that their infant commonwealth was under a celestial guardianship of peculiar intimacy and strictness. (1:155)

Hawthorne makes clear that even if the destiny of nations, especially this nation, is written in the Heavens, the dream of the city on a hill is rendered impotent when subjective human experience proves incapable of deciphering God’s messages. In this way, Hawthorne undermines the national myth in which a “celestial guardianship of peculiar intimacy and strictness” presides over the American people, ensuring their destiny and singular role in the movement toward apotheosis.
Hawthorne showcases the limitations of human subjectivity in Dimmesdale’s reaction to the meteor. The narrator highlights Dimmesdale’s “disordered mental state,” describing him as nearly monomaniacal:

But what shall we say, when an individual discovers a revelation, addressed to himself alone, on the same vast sheet of record! In such a case, it could only be the symptom of a highly disordered mental state, when a man, rendered morbidly self-contemplative by long, intense, and secret pain, had extended his egotism over the whole expanse of nature, until the firmament itself should appear no more than a fitting page for his soul’s history and fate. We impute it, therefore, solely to the disease in his own eye and heart, that the minister, looking upward to the zenith, beheld there the appearance of an immense letter, – the letter A, – marked out in lines of dull red light. Not but the meteor may have shown itself at that point, burning dusky through a veil of cloud; but with no such shape as his guilty imagination gave it; or, at least, with so little definiteness that another’s guilt might have seen another symbol in it. (1:155)

Dimmesdale’s “disordered mental state,” his “disease” of the “eye and heart,” his guilt, bordering on madness, and his obscured reading of the meteor’s import are characteristics reminiscent of one of Poe’s mad narrators. More important, this characterization undermines the teleological narrative that Dimmesdale himself preaches in his final sermon, emphasizing God’s plan for and relationship with the communities of humankind. Though the novel is set in the distant past, Hawthorne’s claim that “all meteoric appearances” were interpreted as “revelations from a supernatural source” reflects a contemporary observation about his own society. As Miller’s predicted date for the end of the world drew nearer, “frenzied” Millennialist groups “redistributed personal property and prepared to meet the Lord” (Elliott and Rossiter 42). Hawthorne’s skepticism of “signs of the times” is unsurprising in light of the Millerites’ actions, but his society’s belief in America’s role in the end times goes deeper than the Millerite predictions. Using Gothic conventions to relegate predictions of the future to mere superstition, Hawthorne creates a cleavage between the present and future. He jettisons American identity as
God’s chosen people from its understood context within an apocalyptic paradigm and places it in a Gothic void, dislocated in time and history.

The chapter titled “The Revelation of the Scarlet Letter” not only functions as the moment of literal unveiling in the text, but also most clearly reveals America’s apocalyptic preoccupation, specifically through the metaphor of Revelation’s marriage of the Lamb.

Dimmesdale’s Election Day Sermon signals the thematic culmination of the narrative. According to A.W. Plumstead, the Election Day Sermon traditionally includes the following elements though the list is hardly comprehensive: “an exegesis on the history of Israel, a survey of Biblical ideas on government and the good ruler, a look at the good old days, a catalog of what’s wrong with New England, a plea to do better, and a look at what might lie ahead” (Plumstead 18). Given those common subjects, Dimmesdale’s sermon appears to be less severe than other examples of election sermons:

> His subject, it appeared, had been the relation between the Deity and the communities of mankind, with a special reference to the New England, which they were here planting in the wilderness. And, as he drew towards the close, a spirit as of prophecy had come upon him, constraining him to its purpose as mightily as the old prophets of Israel were constrained; only with this difference, that, whereas the Jewish seers had denounced judgments and ruin on their country, it was his mission to foretell a high and glorious destiny for the newly gathered people of the Lord. (249)

In Hawthorne’s depiction of the sermon, the emphasis is not on sin and possible retribution, but rather on the connection between God and his people and the grand destiny in store for God’s children. This focus more accurately captures nineteenth-century hopes regarding America’s role in the Apocalypse than it does Puritan. In the mid-nineteenth century, the established mythology saw the churches of America as the bride mentioned in Revelation: “Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself
ready” (Revelation 19:7). The Day of the Lord would represent not merely destruction, but more importantly a union between “the Deity” and “the newly gathered people of the Lord.” All questions, uncertainty, and doubt would be finally defeated in this apocalyptic marriage.

Dimmesdale and Hester’s hope of union in the future life mirrors the marriage of the Lamb in the Book of Revelation. The narrator explains that Hester did not leave the scene of her ignominy because she remained tied to Dimmesdale by “iron links” that “never could be broken” (1:80). Hester specifically conceptualizes her union with Dimmesdale in apocalyptic terms, echoing images from the Book of Revelation: “There dwelt, there trode the feet of one with whom she deemed herself connected in a union, that unrecognized on earth, would bring them together before the bar of final judgment, and make that their marriage-altar” (1:80). This language explicitly ties Hester and Dimmesdale’s marriage to the Day of Judgment. The Book of Revelation also depicts a marriage tied to the Day of Judgment, that of the Lamb and his bride. John writes, “Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints” (Revelation 19: 7-8). The bride is the New Jerusalem, and the marriage of the Lamb to his bride represents the communion between God and his people, a sentiment echoed in Dimmesdale’s Election Day sermon. Revelation 21: 2-4 states:

And I John saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down from God out of Heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of Heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.
This marriage, which John describes in chapters nineteen and twenty-one in The Book of Revelation, serves as narrative bookends to chapter twenty’s description of the great Day of Judgment: “the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works” (Revelation 20:12). Hester and Dimmesdale’s union, which as Hester declares, will take place at the great bar of judgment, conjures an image of the apocalyptic union between God and his people; after all, Dimmesdale is a man of God and Hester, with her charitable works, might provide a fair representation of God’s people.

Hawthorne transforms the marriage of Hester and Dimmesdale—and the marriage between the Lamb and his bride—into something frightening. Though Dimmesdale may be a man of God, beloved amidst his community of believers, he is nevertheless a representation of humanity at its most flawed. Hawthorne rarely recounts the community’s praise of the preacher without also mentioning Dimmesdale’s hypocrisy. Hester, on the other hand, is anything but the bride of Heaven, arrayed in the color of innocence and purity. Despite her charitable deeds and saintly forbearance in the face of public shame, Hester bears a striking resemblance to the woman in scarlet in the Book of Revelation. John describes this woman as the “mother of harlots”; she is “arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls” (emphasis mine) (Revelation 17: 4-5). The color scarlet is mentioned four times to describe this woman and the beast she sits upon, and she is associated with “abominations” and “fornications” (Revelation 17:4). Despite Hester’s good deeds, the parallel between her and this “mother of harlots” proves troubling. Rather than the familiar, beatific vision of the lamb and his bride, the post-mortem marriage between Hester and Dimmesdale underscores humanity’s
exclusion from paradise and the imperfectibility of humankind, heralding instead a “futurity of endless retribution” (emphasis mine) (Hawthorne 1:80).

The prospect of an eternity of “endless retribution” does not appear to frighten Hester, so long as the culmination of her life and Dimmesdale’s ends with their union on the great Day of Judgment. Dimmesdale expresses the same expectation of union as he stands upon the scaffold under the protection of night with Pearl and Hester. Pearl asks when they shall all stand together in the light of day, and Dimmesdale replies, “At the great judgment day! . . . Then, and there, before the judgment-seat, thy mother, and thou, and I, must stand together! But the daylight of this world shall not see our meeting!” (1:153). Yet for Hester, it does not matter whether their union is one of Heavenly bliss or “endless retribution.” Hester’s perverse prioritization of union over entrance to Heaven transforms the beatific vision of Heavenly union between Hester and Dimmesdale into something else entirely.

Even though Dimmesdale and Hester both foresee their union at the great Day of Judgment, this marriage cannot take place, as Dimmesdale finally recognizes as he lies dying in Hester’s arms in the last scaffold scene. Hester asks if they might “spend [their] immortal life together,” but Dimmesdale can give her no such reassurance:

The law we broke!—the sin here so awfully revealed!—let these alone be in thy thoughts! I fear! I fear! It may be, that, when we forgot our God,—when we violated our reverence each for the other’s soul,—it was thenceforth vain to hope that we could meet hereafter, in an everlasting and pure reunion. (1:256)

Hester’s desire for reassurance of a future union mirrors the religious culture in America and its desire for the cosmic marriage between earth and Heaven. However, Hawthorne allows for no such marriage to take place. As a result, the narrative movement of the text—driven in part by its Gothic elements—forces the apocalyptic paradigm into paralysis. As John Gatta states in “The
Apocalyptic End of *The Scarlet Letter,*” Hawthorne depicts the American Millennium as being “colored by darkening shades of gloom and irony as the tale approaches its actual endtime” (512). The Gothic components of the narrative, which serve to reveal the black recesses of the human soul and the power of the past to disrupt the present, shape this atmosphere of gloom. Chillingsworth is frequently described in infernal terms, associated with “blackness” and having “a glare of red light” that issues from his eyes (1:169). Pearl receives similar dark associations, such as when her face becomes “fiend-like, full of smiling malice, yet bearing the semblance of features that [Hester] had known full well” (1:97). The “dismal forest,” which is consistently described as being “shadowed” with “gloom,” also serves to underscore the frailty of the two human hearts that meet there (1:187, 1:186). In such an environment, Hester and Dimmesdale appear as specters, their forms becoming shadowy and indistinct against the “gray twilight” and darkness of the forest (1:189). Though Gatta does not recognize the conventions of the Gothic genre within his study, the Gothic atmosphere of gloom and a past that haunts nevertheless contribute to what Gatta calls the “anti-Apocalypse” of the novel. This anti-Apocalypse belies the “dream-future” of Dimmesdale’s sermon and “enacts typologically on that last fateful day of Dimmesdale’s career . . . neither the glorious onset of Millennium nor the catharsis of apocalyptic cataclysm” (Gatta, “Apocalyptic End” 513). Gatta goes on to argue that by the end of the novel, “the obscurity of earthly revelation is underscored” since “nothing is concluded” (“Apocalyptic End” 516). For example, the text calls into question whether the unveiling of Dimmesdale’s sin-made-manifest is a sign of the divine at work in the world. Similarly, the text does not confirm or reassure that Hester and Dimmesdale will be reunited in the Future Life. The
reliability of signs is tenuous at best, and Dimmesdale’s sermon depicting a “good and golden” future for mankind is overshadowed by his own anguish, sorrow, and pain.

In Hawthorne’s version of Apocalypse, the revelations at the ends of his tales are strikingly consistent: the faults and frailty of humanity relentlessly thwart the advent of the Millennium. For example, in Hawthorne’s “Earth’s Holocaust,” the narrator notes that the reforming zeal that spurs the bonfire will amount to nothing if the “human heart itself” is not thrown into the flames; “unless they hit upon some method of purifying that foul cavern, forth from it will reissue all the shapes of wrong and misery—the same old shapes or worse ones” (10: 403). As Frye notes, “providential design on earth fails . . . not because God’s providence is not operative in the world, but because a flawed humanity is unable to fully perceive it” (132). Again, the Gothic elements of this tale underscore Hawthorne’s conviction of a flawed humanity, haunted by its own sins that turn history not into a progressive movement forward, but into a cycle in which the sins of the past return either in “the same old shapes or worse ones.” The anguish, sorrow, and pain that haunt Dimmesdale’s life are a direct result of past sin as well as Dimmesdale’s inability to escape the weight of sin through a blunt confession to his community. Even Pearl is haunted and transformed by the sin of her parents, resembling an otherworldly fiend or sprite until the day her father reveals his sin to the community.

Through a series of repetitions, the novel’s conclusion further solidifies the retrograde or circular movement of a Gothic text. The novel ends where it began, with the enigmatic letter “A” functioning as the primary image in both the introductory and final chapters. Gatta notes:

[Hawthorne] ends the dramatic action of his tale where all earthly revelation ends: back at the beginning, at the cryptic Alpha of our understanding. . . . Hawthorne’s story does not finish in any New Heaven and New Earth, either trans-temporal or—as Dimmesdale and
Hester briefly imagine—European. Instead we are taken back to the scaffold—quite literally, back into the marketplace of human affairs. (“Apocalyptic End” 515)

The scaffold is significant because Dimmesdale, Hester, and Pearl have stood upon it many times in a figuration of the Judgment Day. This event seems endlessly repetitive, requiring Dimmesdale’s death to put an end to the circular nature of their punishment. The scaffold, however, is not the only significant location that frames the novel; the cemetery also illustrates the novel’s circular movement and resistance to closure. The narrative in “The Custom-House” features the ghostly presence of the narrator’s “first ancestor” whose body reposes in the “Charter Street burial ground” (1:9). Throughout the course of the novel, the movement toward a new Heaven and a new earth is paralyzed by human frailty and iniquity. As a result, those who “sleep” beneath the sod of the King’s Chapel burial ground do not slumber in a “pleasant transitional state,” but rather wait indefinitely for a Resurrection that may never occur. Perhaps this is the reason why the “ghostly hand” and “ghostly voice” of Surveyor Pue with his “mouldy and moth-eaten lucubrations” did not fully “perish in the grave”; rather than sleeping during the eternal interim between death and Resurrection, he returns to haunt the living (1:33). The primary plot of the novel opens with an assertion of the colony’s need for a prison and a cemetery, which would later become the “nucleus of all the congregated sepulchers in the old church-yard of King’s Chapel” (1:47). Events in “The Custom-house” and the scene of Hester’s first public shaming begin with images of the cemetery, and the novel closes in the cemetery. Though the bodies of Hester and Dimmesdale are buried next to one another, they are not united nor are they redeemed or promised a Resurrection:

After many, many years, a new grave was delved, near an old and sunken one, in that burial ground beside which King’s Chapel has since been built. It was near that old and sunken grave, yet with a space between, as if the dust of the two sleepers had no right to
mingle. Yet one tombstone served for both. . . . and on this simple slab of slate . . . there appeared the semblance of an engraved escutcheon. It bore a device, a herald’s wording of which might serve for a motto and brief description of our now concluded legend; so somber is it, and relieved only by one ever-glowing point of light gloomier than the shadow:—“On a field, sable, the letter A, gules.” (1:264)

The tale ends with a motto that is “somber,” and the “point of light,” which might otherwise symbolize future hope, is instead “gloomier than the shadow.” In the midst of darkness, the red letter “A” intimates a sorrowful reminder of humanity’s failure to uphold its covenant with the divine. The gravestone marks the resting place of the tale’s two emblems of human imperfection. The image of the tomb, like the image of Judge Pyncheon’s corpse, belies the nineteenth-century hopefulness of rhetoric associated with death and Resurrection. As Roberta Weldon writes in *Hawthorne, Gender, and Death*, the final image of the novel raises “doubts . . . about immortality systems and consolations of dying” (30). Weldon asserts:

> In the face of the grave, Hawthorne does not deny death but leaves us in mourning, a place of loss and longing. He resists speaking moral platitudes and offering conventional consolations. There are no heroes, no new social order, no recognition of the power of absolute justice, undying romantic love, or eternal life to console us. (Weldon 31)

In terms of narrative structure and the movement toward apocalyptic fulfillment, this ending is particularly troubling. Hawthorne provides little reassurance regarding Hester and Dimmesdale’s fate. Hester and Dimmesdale remain in stasis, their dust forever close, but never mingling in a union that might have represented a small step toward redemption and human perfectibility. Instead, the final image of the novel highlights humanity’s failure to achieve such progress.

In a review of *The Scarlet Letter* dated April 13, 1850, the writer complains that although the novel “as a literary performance” is “almost flawless,” Hawthorne “nowhere recognizes the transforming and redeeming power of that Christian faith through which the spiritually dead may yet live and the lost be restored” (Scharnhorst, *The Critical Response* 25, 28). This early
reviewer articulates the unmet expectations of the nineteenth-century reading audience for hopeful and transformative rhetoric to lighten this dark tale of human sin. To be fair, the tale is not entirely negative. In the final pages of the novel, Hester expresses “her firm belief, that, at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven’s own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness” (1: 263). However, in the very next sentence, the narrator describes Hester as a woman “stained with sin”:

Earlier in life, Hester had vainly imagined that she herself might be the destined prophetess, but had long since recognized the impossibility that any mission of divine and mysterious truth should be confided to a woman stained with sin, bowed down with shame, or even burdened with a life-long sorrow. The angel and apostle of the coming revelation must be a woman, indeed, but lofty, pure, and beautiful; and wise, moreover, not through dusky grief, but the ethereal medium of joy; and showing how sacred love should make us happy, by the truest test of a life successful to such an end! (1:263)

Hawthorne ends the tale with feeble hope for humanity to achieve such idealized joy and love, especially in light of how the novel foregrounds humanity’s flaws. Hawthorne’s audience, like Hester, remains in stasis, in hopeful anticipation of the perfectibility of humankind, which seems increasingly unlikely. Hawthorne contradicts both his audience’s expectation of triumphant culmination and the ingrained Puritan mythology depicting Americans as God’s chosen people. If, as Frank Kermode suggests, apocalyptic beliefs demonstrate humankind’s yearning to see itself in relationship with cosmic design—to see the self and the nation in the context of an epic narrative moving toward closure—then to question such beliefs destabilizes a central tenet of American identity. Hawthorne’s corpus, therefore, represents not only the rich intersection between the Gothic and American conceptions of the Apocalypse, but also a bold exploration of humanity’s limitations when attempting to comprehend history, scripture, and the divine.
1 Records from the Salem Athenaeum indicate that Hawthorne borrowed Mather’s *Magnalia Christi Americana* in December of 1827, again in June of the same year, and once more in April of 1828 (Kesselring 56). The records also indicate that Hawthorne borrowed a volume of Election sermons on September 20, 1828. Also, for an excellent study of Mather’s influence on Hawthorne, see Dorothy Z. Baker’s *America’s Gothic Fiction: The Legacy of Magnalia Christi Americana*. In her chapter on Hawthorne, Baker argues that a primary concern of Hawthorne’s fiction is his “discontent with earlier and contemporary American historical narrative” (93). Baker asserts that Hawthorne believed it necessary for the community to claim responsibility in “revisiting and revising its story of nation with the object of refining one’s story of self,” something that was not possible if historians like Mather were given too much authority as mouthpieces of God (92).

2 As William Warren Sweet notes in *The Story of Religion in America*, at the same time as the Millerite movement was gaining momentum, there were also “numerous other reform movements, such as temperance and other humanitarian societies of one kind or another” (274). This is likely why Hawthorne groups the Millerites with nineteenth-century reform movements.

3 Here, Hawthorne is perhaps referring to the fact that two of Miller’s “chief lieutenants, Joshua Himes and Charles Fitch, had defected from abolitionist ranks” (Scharnhorst 25). Both William Lloyd Garrison and John Greenleaf Whittier published essays bemoaning the “social quietism” of the Millerites. As Scharnhorst notes, “by promoting a narrow interpretation of Holy Writ, Millerism undermined efforts at social reformation” (25).

4 See Robert H. Fossum’s “The Summons of the Past: Hawthorne’s ‘Alice Doane’s Appeal’”: The ascent to Gallows Hill . . . represents the ominous passage to a spot where past and present
inextricably intermingle. . . . On this spot, Hawthorne assumes his characteristic stance between, on the one side, the Puritan witch-hunters, ancestors of narrator and audience alike, and, on the other, his two young listeners, representatives of those Americans who take pride in ignoring “legend and tradition” and any “idea beyond the momentary blaze. (295)

5 The use of the word “chamber” for grave is not without biblical precedent. See Proverbs 7:27: “Her house is the way to Hell going down to the chambers of death.”

6 In The Shape of Hawthorne’s Career, Nina Baym, also argues that Hawthorne’s tales contain a more skeptical view of Providence and cosmic design; see pages 68-69, for example.

7 See Austin Warren’s “Introduction” in Nathaniel Hawthorne: Representative Selections for an example of this line of scholarship. Additionally, Sam Basket enumerates several examples of this critical perspective: “The sketch has been called ‘inappropriate’ (Robert Cantwell), ‘curious’ (Roy Harvey Pearce), ‘a superfluous appendage’ (Alfred S. Reid)” (321).

8 Steven Frye provides an excellent study in how human subjectivity, or “perspectivity” hinders a complete understanding of history: “The image of the patchwork quilt is an effective metaphor in describing the radical historiographic perspective that appears in The Scarlet Letter. History as ‘patchwork’ implies that humans can never perceive the linearity or sequential organization to the process of historical development over time. History from a human perspective must always be comprised of the stories of individual people, the unique perspectives of specific historical interpreters, and while there are important linkages that lead to relationships between past and present, humans can never fully perceive the plan, the grand design, and they are left only with the rough woven particulars of individual lives” (131).
Chapter IV

“I sing, as the Boy does by the Burying Ground – because I am afraid – ”: Gothic Fear and the Good Death in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson

In 1862 Dickinson wrote a letter to T.W. Higginson, stating, “I sing, as the Boy does by the Burying Ground – because I am afraid – ” (L261).¹ Her letter reveals one of the central concerns of her poetry: fear of death and the unknown possibilities of the afterlife. Unlike the religious mainstream’s sentimental, optimistic, and reassuring narrative of death, Dickinson engages with a darker tale that addresses the fate of the non-Elect, the possibility of death without Resurrection, and the potential horrors of the Intermediate State. Dickinson adopts the Gothic as a central framework to explore such subjects, not solely for its characteristic terror, but because the Gothic provided a rhetoric of tensions—tension between exhilaration and terror, captivation and horror, belief and doubt. Dickinson’s Gothic engenders a nuanced dialogue with faith-based narratives that allows for doubt, fear, and even non-belief. Dickinson’s Gothic is a metaphor for religious experience that is at once frightening and enticing. With its lack of closure and unstable narratives, the Gothic allows Dickinson to wrestle with inherently frightening questions and thus upend overly sentimental depictions of death and the afterlife common in mainstream religion.

Scholars have long recognized Dickinson’s tendency to incorporate Gothic conventions and effect in her poetry. In Daneen Wardrop’s “Emily Dickinson and the Gothic in Fascicle 16,” she refers to a specific group of poems, numbers 336 to 346, that make use of Gothic conventions such as “apparitions, mirrors, windows, smoke, ghosts, things that wink in the gloaming, lightning, a funeral, repetitious beating sounds, and eerie depths” (142).² Helen

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McNeil also writes that the “sensibility of the Dickinson tradition . . . would seek out those intermediate, borderline, and ambiguous states and places which go by the name of the uncanny” (133). McNeil explains that “uncanny events do not occur in classical myth or in primitive folk-tale because the relation of natural to supernatural is known; it is in the interstices of doubt that the uncanny enters” (140). Jane Kirkby has a similar view of Dickinson’s Gothic poetry, stating that “To approach the border between life and death is a dangerous undertaking . . . However, Dickinson capitalizes on that border; she writes her most disconcerting poems on that border; and they still have the power to ignite” (108). As these scholars demonstrate, Dickinson incorporates traditional Gothic conventions while consistently exploring borders such as between life and death. For example, she draws on the uncanny to turn familiar images of hearth and home into items that instill terror.

Like Poe and Hawthorne, Dickinson’s Gothic is at its most compelling when it contradicts the mainstream narrative of death and the afterlife. For example, her poetry rejects the popular tradition of “the Good Death,” or alternatively, “the Happy Death,” a set of prescribed and ritualized declarations that would define both the life of the dying and provide the family with hope for future reunion in Heaven. In doing this, Dickinson’s poetry also rejects the popular consolation verse of the nineteenth century, and this rejection also extends into popular hymn culture as well. In dialogue with her society’s sentimental rhetoric surrounding death, her poetry does not merely contradict these cultural constructs. Instead, she blends Gothic narrative elements with images of death from the Old Testament and Calvin’s theology regarding the afterlife to expose the inadequacy of the newer and more optimistic systems of belief within the mainstream.
Most scholars view Dickinson’s Gothic poetry through a feminist critical lens. Wardrop’s comprehensive study, *Emily Dickinson: Goblin with a Gauge*, explores various ways Dickinson engaged with “Gothicism,” which Wardrop defines as “the literary threshold inherent in the setting, plot, character, image, or language that causes hesitation in the reader” (xi). Wardrop elaborates by stating, “I consider a range of literature, from supernatural and occult tales, to ghost stories, to existential novels of dread, to contextualize my notion of the gothic, but my central concern remains with the texts of female fears as they manifest in both female characters and female readers” (xi). Wardrop further emphasizes the role of women’s writing within the Gothic genre when she asserts, “I see Gothicism, as I use the term here, as a tradition of women writing literatures of hesitation primarily for women readers” (xiii). Wardrop is not alone in viewing Dickinson through the lens of feminist criticism. Jane Kirkby separates Dickinson’s poems into three categories, one of which includes her poems in which the speakers are dead. Kirkby claims that these “walking dead are women” and that these poems “continue Dickinson’s exploration of gender” (88). Perhaps most famously, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar wrote that authors like Dickinson, working within the Gothic genre, “dealt with central female experiences from a specifically female perspective” (72). While Dickinson and many other women writers did employ the Gothic, at times, to explore female experience, this lens has inappropriately become a near requisite when addressing Dickinson and the Gothic. This reductive approach to Dickinson’s Gothic limits exploration of the many ways Dickinson incorporates Gothic conventions and effects into her multifaceted poetry. This is not to say that viewing Dickinson’s poetry though the lens of “the female Gothic” fails to provide valuable insight; after all, she existed in an almost exclusively feminine sphere of housework, letter
writing, and care-taking during her lifetime. However, viewing Dickinson’s poetry solely through this lens precludes a study of her interaction with wider culture that extends beyond “female experience,” specifically her engagement with contemporary religious society.

Though Dickinson’s preoccupation with religious experience, specifically death, has been studied at great length by Roger Lundin, Jane Donahue Eberwein, and James McIntosh to name just a few, her blending of Gothic and religious frameworks has been largely overlooked. Dickinson frequently raises questions through her incorporation of Gothic conventions that undermine traditional rhetoric surrounding death, grief, mourning, and the afterlife. While Wardrop does address this relationship between the Gothic and religion briefly in her introduction, she does not explore this nexus elsewhere in her study. Dickinson’s Gothic facilitates a nuanced dialogue about religious belief, one that is not filled with absolutes, but instead focused on the fear that accompanies the unknown. The Gothic mode traditionally resists closure, and thus the Gothic treatment of religion does not provide answers, but rather embraces open-ended questions to engage with the fearful aspects of the sacred.

Many of Dickinson’s poems demonstrate a deliberate blending of religious and Gothic frameworks to create a scenario wherein Dickinson recruits Gothic effect to reimagine popular narratives of death. One of the common features of these poems is Dickinson’s hypothetical scenarios that launch readers into a counterfactual reality wherein the circumstances Dickinson describes could happen though in actuality, they do not. This method creates an unstable narrative due to the ambiguity surrounding the actual events in the poems, adding to the effect of Gothic disorientation. These hypothetical structures also enact a discourse of doubt that
destabilizes the religious subject matter within the poems by placing religious images and beliefs into a world of mere conjecture.

Poem 619 functions entirely within a hypothetical landscape, blending religious and Gothic elements to expose the vulnerability of popular religious rhetoric. As popular narratives of the afterlife often depicted the soul flying to Heaven at the time of death or sleeping peacefully, writers like Poe and Dickinson wrestled with more disturbing questions, such as, “what if the dead remain conscious while waiting for the Resurrection?” While consolation verse offers visions of saved souls praising God in Heaven, the opposing narratives depict an alternative experience of conscious souls speaking from within the isolation and darkness of the grave. In poem 619 Dickinson applies Gothic effect as metaphor, capturing these dual experiences of death and the Judgment as a Gothic narrative told from the perspective of the non-Elect:

Did you ever stand in a Cavern's Mouth –
Widths out of the Sun –
And look – and shudder, and block your breath –
And deem to be alone

In such a place, what horror,
How Goblin it would be –
And fly, as 'twere pursuing you?
Then Loneliness – looks so –

Did you ever look in a Cannon's face –
Between whose Yellow eye –
And your's – the Judgment intervened –
The Question of "To die" –

Extemporizing in your ear
As cool as Satyr's Drums –
If you remember, and were saved
It's liker so – it seems –
In the first stanza, Dickinson begins with the hypothetical construction, “Did you ever,” projecting the reader into a scenario replete with typical Gothic conventions. Wardrop emphasizes Dickinson’s incorporation of the Gothic, noting that Dickinson “recuperates all her gothic devices here, not only attempting to produce physical sensations of fear in the reader but specifying those very sensations in the shuddering and blocked breath of her speaker” (Emily Dickinson’s Gothic 35). Among these Gothic devices is the conventional treatment of a female heroine. The first stanza establishes the typical situation of women in Gothic tales: alone, in the dark, pursued, underground. The speaker’s “shudder” and “blocked breath” convey the breathless fear of the pursued heroine. The conjectural function of the word “deem” emphasizes the possibility that perhaps there is a lurking, antagonistic presence within the dark recesses of the cavern. This presence of an unknown, unseen antagonist heightens the Gothic effect and intensifies suspense as the poem progresses.

In the second stanza Dickinson begins again with a hypothetical phrase, “In such a place, what horror,” building upon the Gothic scenario of the previous stanza. Then, Dickinson introduces the “Goblin,” which she uses here (abnormally) as an adjective. Despite its adjectival function, the figure of the Goblin is nonetheless disturbing, implying the presence of something evil and fiendish within the world of Dickinson’s poem. Dickinson then suggests the flight of the speaker, running from an unnamed thing, as “‘twere pursuing you.” The echoing presence of the Goblin, the breathless fear and flight of the speaker impart the sensational imprisonment and flight of the conventional Gothic heroine. But in the last lines of the second stanza, Dickinson ejects the reader out of the hypothetical scene of Gothic sensationalism into the world of reality, creating a metaphor out of the scenario. The resulting comparison is one in which the Gothic
experience, one that encompasses darkness, isolation, terror, and panic is utilized to encapsulate
the experience of loneliness.

Having established the Gothic condition of fear, panic, and isolation within the poem, Dickinson moves on to the next stanza by providing a new framework of religious uncertainty while also retaining aspects of the Gothic such as violence and death. Again, Dickinson projects the reader into a hypothetical scenario with the phrase, “Did you ever.” The following image, in which one “look[s] in a Cannon’s face – ” suggests the prospect of violent death. The next two lines, however, indicate something unusual: the “Judgment intervene[s]” between the cannon’s “Yellow eye” and the speaker, suggesting God’s judgment either at the moment of death or on the final judgment day. Dickinson characterizes the Judgment as force that “intervene[s]” between life and imminent destruction, violence, and pain. Yet, only the “saved” will experience Judgment in this sense, as a moment of intervention and reprieve.

For the non-Elect, those who face the cannon’s “Yellow eye,” the “Question of ‘To die’” is a source of terror and anxiety amplified by the previous Gothic stanzas. Dickinson writes that the question of death “Extemporiz[es] your ear,” which is a strange choice of words for such a serious subject, especially when considered in the context of the Judgment. The word “extemporizing” trivializes the selection of souls who are “saved” versus souls who are not upon the Day of Judgment, as if God merely improvises when selecting souls for Heaven. Dickinson’s depiction of God here is not unusual for her. She makes several statements in her letters that question God’s mercy and general attitude toward humankind. In a letter written to Louise and Frances Norcross in 1881, Dickinson writes of the assassination of the president: “When we think of the lone effort to live, and its bleak reward, the mind turns to the myth ‘for His mercy
endureth forever,’ with confiding revulsion” (L727). Dickinson discredits God’s mercy, characterizing it as a “myth” and her reaction to that myth is one of “revulsion.” Where a nineteenth-century reader might have expected to find comforting affirmation of the heavenly afterlife in religious narratives, Dickinson explores a darker narrative that foregrounds the lack of salvation for the non-Elect wherein the “indignation” of the body in the grave may never find respite and the promised Resurrection may never occur.

The final two lines of the last stanza include another hypothetical construction: Dickinson’s speaker says that if “you” remember the experience of judgment but were also saved, then death (“It”) can be compared to her description in the final two stanzas wherein the question of “To die” is “cool as Satyr’s Drums.” Her description of death for the saved is a trivial matter, almost a pleasant or pleasurable experience when paired with the image of “cool” Satyr’s Drums. However, the presence of the hypothetical “If” suggests an alternative narrative where the speaker of the poem is not among the “saved,” but by implication exists in a state much like that described in the first two stanzas: a state of darkness, terror, and loneliness. Dickinson’s overlay of a Gothic scenario onto religious notions of death and Resurrection in this poem results in a harrowing narrative that features the non-elect rather than the saved.

Dickinson’s blending of Gothic and religious frameworks is not limited to the perspective of the dead. She features the same technique to undermine the typical narrative of the bereaved. Dickinson never reconciled herself to the death of loved ones in her own life. For Dickinson, the concept of physically burying a body, of hiding it away beneath the earth where it will decay in the darkness, was horrific and unthinkable, and in this she was not alone in nineteenth-century America. Despite the abundance of consolation verse, the compulsion to return to the physical
body and touch it after death was not uncommon in nineteenth-century society. Gary Laderman’s *The Sacred Remains* includes an entire chapter on “Morbid Obsessions,” exploring nineteenth-century society’s “fixation on the body of the deceased” (73). He explains that it was not unusual for people to return to an above-ground tomb to view a corpse days, weeks, and even years after death. Dickinson’s poem 431 conveys this unwillingness to let go of the physical corpse by once again incorporating an initial hypothetical situation that projects the reader into a Gothic scenario:

If I may have it, when it’s dead,  
I’ll be contented – so –  
If just as soon as Breath is out  
It shall belong to me –

Until they lock it in the Grave,  
‘Tis Bliss I cannot weigh –  
For tho’ they lock Thee in the Grave,  
Myself – can own the key –

Think of it Lover! I and Thee  
Permitted – face to face to be –  
After a Life – a Death – we’ll say –  
For Death was That –  
And This – is Thee –

I’ll tell Thee All – how Bald it grew –  
How Midnight felt, at first – to me –  
How all the Clocks stopped in the World –  
And Sunshine pinched me – ‘Twas so cold –

Then how the Grief got sleepy – some –  
As if my soul were deaf and dumb –  
Just making signs – across – to Thee –  
That this way – thou could’st notice me –

I’ll tell you how I tried to keep  
A smile, to show you, when this Deep  
All Waded – We look back for Play,  
At those Old Times – in Calvary.
Forgive me, if the Grave come slow –
For Coveting to look at Thee –
Forgive me, if to stroke thy frost
Outvisions Paradise!

As Cynthia Griffin Wolff notes, scholars have labeled poem 431 a “Gothic poem that has sometimes been cited as an example of mere perversity” (Emily Dickinson 378). However, this assertion does not hold up considering Laderman’s evidence of nineteenth-century preoccupation with the physical corpse. Instead, it appears that Dickinson’s speaker’s desire to touch and own the corpse is in line with a common cultural sentiment. Linking poem 431 to poem 355, “It was not Death, for I stood up,” Wolff asserts that Dickinson’s speaker wishes to convey a “nightmarish vision of the Resurrection” and “prepare her beloved for the horrors of God’s ‘Heaven’” (379). While Dickinson did frequently depict God as brutal, cruel, and unmerciful, that does not seem to be her purpose in “If I may have it, when it’s dead.” Rather, Dickinson employs the same technique of blending Gothic and religious frameworks, in order to capture the experience of grief though Gothic metaphor and counter the depictions of happy death scenes in hymns and popular religious culture.

The first line of the first stanza contains a familiar hypothetical construction: “If I may have it, when it’s dead,” which launches the reader into a Gothic scenario of possessing a corpse, drawing upon one of the more lurid Gothic subjects—necrophilia. This hypothetical scene—describing the desire of the speaker to possess a corpse—modifies every stanza in the poem. The ambiguous pronoun “it” refers to the corpse, emphasizing its loss of identity and associating the corpse with something nameless and verging on the monstrous. In the second stanza, the pronoun shifts from “it” to “thee” suggesting an eerie, even grotesque, intimacy between the speaker and
the corpse that draws upon the uncanny for its effect—what was once beloved is now transformed to something unfamiliar. The third stanza underscores the reluctance of the speaker to give up the body. When the speaker says, “Death was That,” she refers to the experience of witnessing death. When the speaker continues by saying, “And This—is Thee—,” the pronoun “This” refers to the corpse and the intimate “Thee” creates a renewed identity for the corpse that contradicts the previous reference to “It” and implies the possibility of continued consciousness.

The fourth stanza shifts from this intimate hypothetical address to the dead lover, to a devastating metaphorical description of grief. The fourth and fifth stanzas illustrate the experience of utmost loss through a series of impressions:

- how Bald it grew . . .
- How Midnight felt . . .
- How all the Clocks stopped . . .
- how “Sunshine pinched . . .
- how the Grief got sleepy . . .
- my soul were deaf and dumb

These images are at once frightening and distressingly effective in conveying the experience of grief. First, the strange choice of the term “Bald,” which Webster defines as “unadorned; inelegant; mean; naked; base; without dignity or value,” illustrates both the indignity and baseness of death, but also the emotional experience of grief, the feeling of being naked and exposed due to grief’s lack of composure and dignity. Dickinson then mentions midnight, a time full of “gloom” according to Webster’s 1828 version of *The American Dictionary of the English Language*, the dictionary that Dickinson used on a daily basis. For Dickinson, time itself stops and the chill, or “cold” of grief runs so deep that sunshine is painful, rather than warming. The fifth stanza illustrates the numbness of grief, signaling an almost comatose state in which the very soul goes “deaf and dumb.”
After this series of impressions describing grief at the time of death, the speaker returns to the hypothetical scenario implied in the final two lines of the fifth stanza, reestablishing intimacy with the corpse by the speaker making “signs” that she might be noticed. The sixth stanza depicts the speaker’s attempts to smile through grief, rationalizing that perhaps one day, she and the lover might look back on these “Old Times—in Calvary” as a source of laughter or “Play.” While Calvary may have contained connotations of salvation for many nineteenth-century Christians, Dickinson’s dictionary also defines Calvary as “A place of skulls; particularly as the place where Christ was crucified.” In this instance, “Calvary” takes on its darker meaning, representing death and bereavement as a “Deep” that must be “Waded,” a place of ultimate suffering. In this way, the common religious image of Calvary as signifying salvation through the blood of Christ is transformed into a symbol of human grief and suffering. In addition, Dickinson maps the Gothic element of corpse-love from the first two stanzas onto the religious connotations of Calvary, thus producing a grotesque depiction of death that captures grief’s ugliness.

The final stanza reemphasizes the Gothic framework that began the poem. The speaker asks her beloved to forgive her “if the Grave come slow,” returning focus to the speaker’s reluctance to give up the physical body of her lover. Though the corpse may be an object that causes revulsion, Dickinson effectively undermines the message of popular consolation verse that maintains a glorious vision of the afterlife where souls might be reunited with loved ones after death. For Dickinson’s speaker, the act of “strok[ing]” the “frost” of the corpse “Outvisions Paradise,” a declaration that repudiates the promise and consolation of a Heavenly afterlife.
Again, Dickinson’s blended frameworks wherein a Gothic scenario of “stro[k]ing” a corpse becomes paradise results in an eerie and grotesque articulation of grief.

This resistance to the Heaven of popular culture is not entirely surprising. In a letter to John L. Graves written in April, 1856, Dickinson writes of the difficulty of accepting the idea of Resurrection:

   It is Sunday–now–John–and all have gone to church–the wagons have done passing, and I have come out in the new grass to listen to the anthems.
   Three or four hens have followed me and we sit side by side–and while they crow and whisper, I’ll tell you what I see today, and what I would that you saw–
   You remember the crumbling wall that divides us from Mr Sweetser–and the crumbling elms and evergreens–and other crumbling things–that spring, and fade, and cast their bloom within a simple twelvemonth–well–they are here, and skies on me fairer far than Italy, in blue eye look down–up–see!–away–a league from here, on the way to Heaven! And here are Robins–just got home–and giddy Crows–and Jays–and will you trust me–as I live, here’s a bumblebee–not such as summer brings–John–earnest, manly bees, but a kind of a Cockney, dressed in jaunty clothes. Much that is gay–have I to show, if you were with me, John, upon this April grass–then there are sadder features–here and there, wings half gone to dust, that fluttered so, last year–a mouldering plume, an empty house, in which a bird resided. Where last year’s flies, their errand ran, last year’s crickets fell! We, too, are flying–fading, John–and the song “here lies,” soon upon lips that love us now–will have hummed and ended.
   To live, and die, and mount again in triumphant body, and next time, try the upper air–is no schoolboy’s theme!
   It is a jolly thought to think that we can be Eternal–when air and earth are full of lives that are gone–and done–and a conceited thing indeed, this promised Resurrection! Congratulate me–John–Lad–and “here’s a health to you”–that we have each a pair of lives, and need not chary be, of the one “that now is” (L184).

Dickinson’s loving description of the physical world ends with further affirmation of the here and now as opposed to a “promised Resurrection.” For Dickinson, paradise is the physical world, and while the thought of being “Eternal” may be a “jolly” thought, the thought of a distant Resurrection falls short in light of the “lives that are gone–and done.” Though her letter to Graves is light-hearted, it contains the same reluctance to accept the tenuous promise of Heaven seen in poem 431, a promise that falls short in the face of the reality of death. Instead of looking
toward the mere possibility of Heavenly reward, Dickinson urges Graves not to be “chary” of the life that “now is,” a life where even the grim act of stroking the frost of a beloved corpse is more of a reward than Heaven because that reunion exists in the here and now rather than in the distant promise envisioned in consolation verse and other popular narratives.

The hypothetical natures of poems 619 and 431 also rely on Gothic hesitation for their effect to heighten the strangeness of the blended frameworks. The concept of Gothic hesitation applies particularly to religious subject matter in Gothic literature though the term was originally coined to define a literary genre. Tzvetan Todorov’s theory of hesitation defined the genre of the fantastic in literature. The fantastic, according to Todorov, stands between the uncanny (Freud’s unheimlich) and the marvelous, a term Todorov employs to describe traditional fantasy literature in which characters accept supernatural events as a matter of course. The fantastic is identified by the phenomenon of hesitation. This hesitation is characterized by the struggle characters exhibit between belief and disbelief when confronted with the supernatural. Todorov writes, “the fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event” (25).

When authors like Poe, Hawthorne, and Dickinson undermine the religious paradigms of the nineteenth century, they create narratives of hesitation. The characters and personas in their texts are confronted with uncanny and frightening versions of religious narratives, subject matter that is already inherently supernatural. However, the characters themselves do not experience this hesitation; rather, hesitation becomes a Gothic effect upon the reader. In poems 431 and 619,
the hypothetical structures first establish this hesitation. Dickinson thrusts the reader into a suspended or liminal space where it is not clear whether Dickinson’s narrative should be taken seriously or as mere sensational conjecture. This hesitation on the part of the reader does not resolve into the uncanny or the marvelous, but rather lingers in liminal suspension between belief and disbelief. As a result, it remains unclear whether the reader should assume, for example, that Dickinson’s poems with dead speakers are serious theological narratives about the afterlife (the explained supernatural of the uncanny), or whether these speakers are merely sensational conventions of an already sensational genre, intended to be taken as entirely fanciful creations (the supernatural world of the marvelous). In other words, in Dickinson’s poems about death and Apocalypse, it remains ambiguous whether the reader should take the narratives as theologically serious or as Gothic send-up. The result is an uneasy reading experience, in which the reader remains in liminal suspension between the horrors of belief should Calvin’s doctrine of the non-Elect prove true versus the horrors of the Gothic narrative as mere fiction. These horrors compound as the line between Gothic sensationalism and waking life becomes increasingly indiscernible.

The pairing of serious religious subject matter and the sensational content of Gothic literature also engenders the effect of hesitation in many of Dickinson’s Gothic poems. Dickinson incorporates religious subject matter into her Gothic poetry, specifically cultural touchstones like Calvin’s theology of the Intermediate State, Old Testament images of death from the King James Bible, the popular narrative of the Good Death, and the rhetoric of popular hymns. Engaging this content through unstable narratives wherein the author’s intentions are not entirely clear causes angst for the reader as to whether the narrative should be taken seriously or
merely enjoyed as a superficial form of sensational entertainment. This problem intensifies in light of Calvinist theology regarding the dead and the Intermediate State. Considering the many poems that feature a conscious voice emanating from within the grave, Dickinson, like Poe, explores the fear of conscious burial as connected with the Intermediate State. In a brief article, Mark Spencer recognizes this religious significance in poem 479, “Because I could not stop for Death—,” stating that most readings of the poem assume that the “soul at death immediately attains its eternal state,” to which Spencer responds, “this is not the most theologically accurate” interpretation of scripture (95). Spencer goes on to write:

The Revelation of John presents a quite different scenario, in which the Last Judgment will not take place until the Second Coming of Christ at some undetermined point in the future, when the saved will be restored to life and the damned shall perish utterly. Several of the puzzling features of Dickinson’s poem make perfect sense if read from the perspective of a delayed final reconciliation of the soul with God. (95)

Many of Dickinson’s poems seem clearer when read with this in mind. For example, her disembodied voices that issue from within the grave are those spirits waiting for the final Resurrection.

Whether souls remained conscious or unconscious during this Intermediate State was the subject of widespread theological debate at the time and one that Poe explores in “The Colloquy of Monos and Una.” The Gothic elements in “The Colloquy” foreground the terrors of the grave while simultaneously undermining consolation verse where the dead fly immediately to Heaven, forsaking their non-sentient body until the Last Day. Dickinson’s poetry compounds this terror by adding another layer of spiritual anguish. Though Poe’s tale ends in the darkness of the grave, he at least depicts Monos and Una as celestial beings in paradise at the beginning of the tale, having presumably experienced Resurrection after the Intermediate State. Furthermore, in “The
Colloquy” the dead are only semi-conscious, existing in a dream-state. Dickinson’s speakers, on the other hand, are fully conscious. It also appears that Dickinson’s dead speakers may have far less reason to hope for future Resurrection.

Despite the fact that many congregations and denominations in America at the time were eschewing a literal reading of the Bible in favor of a more sentimental reading of the text, “Trinitarian garrisons like Amherst, Hanover, and Williamstown” remained strongholds for the old puritanical forms of Christianity (Wolff, Emily Dickinson 260). Growing up in Amherst, Dickinson would have been immersed in Calvinist doctrine and evangelicalism. She even mentions Calvin by name in one of her letters: “I fear my congratulation, like repentance according to Calvin, is too late to be plausible, but might there not be an exception, were the delight or the penitence found to be durable?” (L406). Calvin’s doctrine of the “discarnate soul in the interval between death and the Last Judgment,” offers significant insight into Dickinson’s treatment of the dead and the afterlife (Quistorp 55). Calvin wrote of a state of “provisional blessedness” for the Elect in which a “man’s soul, which is immortal in essence, does not perish nor sleep in death but in so far as it is born again in Christ already enjoys Heavenly peace in the expectation of the Resurrection of the body, which will bring it consummate blessedness” (Quistorp 81). Of the non-Elect, Calvin asserts, “but the souls of the impious will be held imprisoned in terrible expectation of their final condemnation” (Quistorp 81). The non-Elect’s experience of being “held imprisoned in terrible expectation” indicates consciousness; they are not cast into oblivion between death and the Final Judgment. Of the non-Elect Calvin also states, “Their souls are agitated with terrible fear of the Judgment which awaits them” (Quistorp 93). This same depiction is featured in a hymn by Isaac Watts titled “The Death of a Sinner,” hymn
number two. The hymn depicts death, but the events that follow are more sinister: “Then, swift
and dreadful she descends/ Down to the fiery coast,/ Amongst abominable fiends,/ Herself a
frightened ghost./ There endless crowds of sinners lie,/ And darkness makes their chains:/ Tortur’d
with keen desaire, they cry;/ Yet wait for fiercer pains.” Dickinson reflects this narrative in
much of her poetry, especially when she features voices from beyond the grave. Dickinson’s
dead speakers are often forlorn, isolated, and imprisoned. Their existence within the grave is
hardly that of “provisional blessedness,” indicating that Dickinson’s speakers are “the lingering
bad ones,” the non-Elect, who must wait in “terrible expectation of their final condemnation”
(L36, Quistorp 81). When Dickinson’s dead speakers are viewed as lost souls awaiting the final
and terrible sentence of hellfire, the Gothic elements in the poem such as isolation,
imprisonment, darkness, and terror seem even more appropriate as a means to not only convey
the harrowing plight of the non-Elect, but also to undermine the optimistic narrative within
consolation verse that glosses over the fate of the impious.

In poems like “Because I could not stop for Death—” (479) Dickinson foregrounds
Calvin’s claims about the experience of the unsaved and undercuts popular consolation verse.
She magnifies the jarring combination of religious and Gothic elements by incorporating Old
Testament images and conceptions of the afterlife. As Daneen Wardrop observes, “we locate two
poles, almost compass points, of Emily Dickinson’s poetry: the Heaven-North, which, as she
approaches it, takes on the qualities of romantic literature, and the underworld or Pit, which, as
she approaches it, turns progressively fantastic and gothic” (Emily Dickinson’s Gothic 14). The
poles of Dickinson’s poetic corpus also reflect the poles within broader society, theological
debate, and the Bible itself about death and the afterlife. During the nineteenth century, concerns
about the Intermediate State often focused on the nature of the Second Coming, whether it would coincide with an Apocalypse of darkness and violence, a vision described in both the Old Testament and New, or with the optimistic millennialism depicted in the closing chapters of the Book of Revelation with its vision of human progress and peace. The same is true regarding images of the afterlife. The New Testament offers reassurance of new bodies and Resurrection while the Old Testament speaks of darkness and isolation after death. The latter is the narrative that Dickinson features in her poetry of the non-Elect such as poem 479, “Because I could not stop for Death – ”:

Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.

We slowly drove – He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility –

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess – in the Ring –
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –
We passed the Setting Sun –

Or rather – He passed Us –
The Dews drew quivering and Chill –
For only Gossamer; my Gown –
My Tippet – only Tulle –

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground –
The Roof was scarcely visible –
The Cornice – in the Ground –

Since then – ‘tis Centuries – and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses’ Heads
Were toward Eternity –

Though poem 479 begins with a typically optimistic treatment of death, Dickinson gradually incorporates Old Testament conceptualizations of death that undermine the mainstream narrative. In the first two lines, the speaker states, “Because I could not stop for Death – / He kindly stopped for me –” reinforcing the cultural metaphor of death as deliverer, “kindly” and merciful, which was a fairly ubiquitous characterization in the nineteenth century. A book in the Dickinson family library, titled Inscriptions on the Grave Stones in the Grave Yards of Northampton, and of Other Towns in the Valley of the Connecticut, as Springfield, Amherst, Hadley, Hatfield, and Deerfield, further reflects this cultural metaphor. Some of these gravestones bear the characteristic messages of the Puritan memento mori, but many bear a more optimistic sentiment. For example, one inscription reads, “Life makes the soul dependent on the dust/ Death gives her wings to mount above the spheres” (Bridgman 29). Another inscription reads, “Jesus can make a dying bed/ Feel soft as downy pillows are/ While on his breast I lean my head,/ And breathe my life out sweetly there” (Bridgman 29). In the first example, death provides freedom from the body/dust, and in the second example, death allows one to experience mercy and repose in Christ. Both examples illustrate the mainstream conception of death in Dickinson’s society. As the poem progresses, however, Death’s more sinister aspects of isolation, darkness, and loneliness emerge, highlighting an Old Testament characterization of death. First, Dickinson references a common biblical metaphor for the grave as a “house” or “chamber.” Dickinson writes, “We paused before a House that seemed/ A Swelling of the Ground – / The Roof was scarcely visible – / The Cornice – in the Ground –.” Dickinson offers a narrative like Poe’s in “The Colloquy of Monos and Una,” wherein Monos remembers being
placed in a coffin and carried to a gravesite. Dickinson’s speaker, riding along in a carriage with death, is riding in a hearse toward her final resting place, the grave. The reason that this “House” is scarcely visible with a cornice in the ground is because it is literally a fresh grave and the ground is still swollen rather than sunken as older grave sites often are. This image of the grave as house or dwelling place can be found in Old Testament passages like Proverbs 7:27, “Her house is the way to Hell, going down to the chambers of death” and perhaps most prominently in the book of Job in passages like “the grave is mine house: I have made my bed in the darkness. I have said to corruption, Thou are my father: to the worm, Thou art my mother, and my sister. And where is now my hope? As for my hope, who shall see it? They shall go down to the bars of the pit, when our rest together is in the dust” (Job 17:13-16). The grotesque images conveyed in both passages illustrate an uncanny transformation of hearth and home. In death, the concept of home transforms from a place of refuge and familiarity to a locality of darkness, where instead of being surrounded by family, one is surrounded by death, the worm, and corruption.

The Old Testament also features the separation of the dead from the world of the living, an aspect of death that Dickinson frequently incorporates into her depiction. In Psalms 6:5 the speaker writes, “For in death there is no remembrance of thee: in the grave who shall give thee thanks?” A similar passage in Ecclesiastes 9: 5-6 states, “For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not anything, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, and their hatred and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever in anything that is done under the sun.” Isaiah 38: 17-18 also states, “For the grave cannot praise thee, death cannot celebrate thee: they that go down into the pit cannot hope for thy truth.” The characterization of death in the Old Testament is one of utter separation
from the world of the living, wherein the dead never take part again “in anything that is done under the sun.” Instead, the world of the dead is “A land of darkness, as darkness itself; and of the shadow of death, without any order, and where the light is as darkness” (Job 7: 9-10).

The speaker in poem 479 experiences this same isolation and loneliness that accompanies the dead into the ambiguous afterlife of the Old Testament. The speaker not only puts away her “labor” but also her “leisure” for the boon of death’s “Civility,” perhaps implying that the speaker may not have been treated so civilly had she not cooperated with Death. Dickinson’s lexicon defines “leisure” as “Freedom from occupation . . . time free from employment . . . convenience of time”. In light of this definition death is less a deliverer from life’s labor and more an antagonist who robs the speaker of her freedom. While the dictionary defines “labor” in part as “that which requires wearisome exertion,” and the “the evils of life; trials; persecution, etc.,” it also defines “labor” as an action: “to work at; to till; to cultivate . . . to form with toil and care.” Seen in this light, to be robbed of “labor,” the ability to cultivate, toil, and care, is to be robbed of life’s joys, just as the Old Testament writers describe. This loss is evident in the following lines that describe the scenes the carriage passes:

We passed the School, where Children strove  
At Recess – in the Ring –  
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –  
We passed the Setting Sun –

The speaker in the poem is separated from these images of life—children playing, grains ready for harvest, the sun; these are the images of labor and leisure that Death has revoked. Dickinson captures the same anguished thoughts of the Old Testament writers who emphasize this separation between the living and the dead as in Proverbs 2:19, “None . . . return again, neither take they hold of the paths of life.” These writers frequently focus on the grief of the dead who
are separated from the living rather than the grief of the living who mourn their dead. The result is a narrative that emphasizes the fate of the dead as one to be pitied, contradicting the mainstream depiction of death as deliverer.

In addition to the Old Testament conceptualizations of death Dickinson weaves into poem 479, she also incorporates a Gothic scenario to articulate the terror of death. The first stanza of the poem firmly establishes the Gothic narrative: a lone woman narrates the scene, keeping company with a “Civil,” yet antagonistic male character (Death), who controls the woman’s fate by driving the carriage that separates the speaker from her former life. Wardrop notes that “Dickinson gives us ‘a Death that breathes’ (L553), a spooky proposition and one that gets at the chill heart of the gothic. The gothic allows a death in paranormal form; it overdetermines death” (Wardrop, Goblin with a Gauge 88). As Wardrop correctly implies by personifying Death and making him not just an antagonist, but also a character within a Gothic narrative, Dickinson overlays the helplessness, isolation, fear, and uncertainty of countless heroines in Gothic novels onto the experience of death, an experience that can only be imagined through metaphor. However, with Wardrop’s reading of the poem as a tale of rape, asserting, “Dickinson accomplishes a double gothic objective . . . by giving us Death as a gentleman suitor who becomes a kind of rapist within the poem’s progression,” she ignores the poem’s religious references and its engagement with cultural practices surrounding death (Wardrop, Goblin with a Gauge 88).

While the threat of rape and female oppression are often features of the Gothic, and Dickinson may be capitalizing on this plot element, the religious concepts of “Immortality” and “Eternity” expand the subject matter of the poem beyond the earthly domination of women to a
more cosmic exploration of death’s dominion over human life. The speaker is scantily clad in “Gossamer” and “Tulle,” perhaps suggesting the threat of rape, but her dress also suggests the garments of the grave—a winding sheet or death shroud—as well as decay with the eerie suggestion of cobwebs. In Webster’s dictionary the definition for “Gossamer” was “a fine filmy substance like cobwebs.” These dueling readings, one of rape and one of death, may seem at odds, but are actually characteristic of Dickinson’s blending of Gothic and religious subject matter. This blending captures the profound helplessness of the speaker as she is carried away in Death’s carriage. The speaker’s loss is similar to themes of loss associated with rape—she is isolated, separated from her former life, and she has little to no control over her body. Feelings of isolation and loss of control are typical of both Poe and Dickinson’s narratives of death wherein consciousness no longer has the power of volition as the body is placed in a coffin, and carried to the grave, and then begins the process of decay. Though Dickinson may be capitalizing on the sensational, she enlists Gothic conventions, like rape, to serve as metaphor to convey the utter helplessness and accompanying terror of transgressing the boundary between life and death, especially insofar as this boundary confronts the realities of decay and the loss of autonomy over one’s body.

As in Hawthorne’s fiction, Dickinson’s inclusion of the corpse as character and motif in her poetry confronts religious optimism with the stark reality of decomposition though often the corpse’s decay is a subtle implication rather than a prominent feature as is the case in “Because I could not stop for Death—.” That said, decay is somewhat less than subtle in other poems. In “Of nearness to her sundered Things,” (337), Dickinson describes a dead child as a “mouldering playmate,” and in “I died for Beauty – but was scarce” (448), she depicts two dead bodies
speaking “between the Rooms” of their adjoining graves. This conversation continues until the “moss had reached [their] lips – / And covered up – [their] names – ,” indicating that as the body decays, so too does the ability to speak.

The rotting corpse as convention is a prominent feature of the Gothic genre. In *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Radcliffe’s corpse behind a curtain—even if it was only made of wax—Matthew Lewis’ infant corpse in *The Monk*, George Lippard’s gory descriptions of corpses and ghosts in *The Quaker City*, and many of Poe’s tales reveal a pattern in Gothic literature. Gothic literature, however, is not the sole province of the corpse as convention. Old Testament writers also spoke of the dissolution of the body with anguish. In Job 17: 13-16, the speaker cries out, “If I wait, the grave is mine house: I have made my bed in the darkness. I have said to corruption, Thou art my father: to the worm, Thou art my mother, and my sister. And where is now my hope? As for my hope, who shall see it? They shall go down to the bars of the pit, when our rest together is in the dust.” Another verse in Job describes the corpse’s decay while awaiting Resurrection: “For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God” (Job 19:25-26).

The final stanza of the poem elicits the ambiguity and lack of closure so familiar in Gothic texts, and Dickinson’s reference to “Eternity” makes this lack of closure all the more disturbing. In mainstream narratives, every human life ends in death, but death is ameliorated by the soul’s ascension to Heaven, offering positive closure to what would be an otherwise unhappy tale. However, this is not the case with Dickinson’s speakers. Similar to the speaker in Poe’s
“Colloquy of Monos and Una,” in “Because I could not stop for Death – ,” the speaker’s sense of time in the poem becomes warped, and centuries feel shorter than a day:

Since then – ‘tis Centuries – and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses’ Heads
Were toward Eternity –

This idea that the Intermediate State, the time between death and Resurrection, will pass in what feels like a moment has biblical precedent. Most nineteenth-century theologians who believed that the soul slept, oblivious to the passing of the ages would also have asserted that the space of time between death and the Second Coming passes in what feels like an instant. In Isaiah, the speaker writes, “Come, my people, enter thou into thy chambers, and shut they doors about thee: hide thyself as it were for a little moment, until the indignation be overpast” (Isaiah 26:20). Isaiah describes the time in the grave as “indignation,” and the Old Testament passages on death are characterized by anguished lament about being separated from the living, both of which imply some form of consciousness after death, especially in the case of the damned. In this context, the implication of Dickinson’s final stanza in poem 479 is profoundly disturbing, especially in contrast to the culturally accepted notion of Heaven instantly following death. The poem ends with the speaker, conscious within the grave waiting for “Eternity,” which the reader and possibly the speaker “surmise” is the traditional notion of Heaven. Dickinson’s dictionary defines “Eternity” as “Duration or continuance without beginning or end” (310). Just a few lines up from the entry for “Eternity” is the entry for “Eternal,” “An appellation of God” (310). Thus, if the horses’ heads point toward eternity, they are also riding toward God. However, Dickinson’s image that the presence of God is merely “surmised” calls into question the commonly accepted narrative of the afterlife—that the end of life’s journey culminates with the
soul’s ascension to Heaven. Dickinson’s dictionary defines “surmise” as “suspicion; the thought or imagination that something may be, of which, however, there is no certain or strong evidence” (813). This is devastating. Without “strong evidence” of a Heavenly afterlife or even the existence of God, the speaker remains within the carriage/coffin with the realization that, as “Centuries” have passed, her current state is eternity. The horses have brought her body and her soul to their final resting place, which is not the golden streets of Heaven, nor the burning pit of Hell. Instead, what follows death is waiting. The speaker waits. Her journey has not ended, as she remains pointed toward eternity, but she never arrives. The combination of this open question regarding eternity, the lack of closure, and the blend of Gothic and Old Testament images produce a narrative that is at once familiar and strange, and thus terrifying.

In addition to “Because I could not stop for Death –,” Dickinson wrote a number of poems in which the speakers are dead, and their voices issue presumably from within the tomb. Most of these poems incorporate at least brief references or allusions to Old Testament imagery. Poem 344, part of the Gothic fascicle, explores loss and the agonizing separation of the dead from the living.

‘Twas just this time, last year, I died.
I know I heard the Corn,
When I was carried by the Farms –
It had the Tassels on –

I thought how yellow it would look –
When Richard went to mill –
And then, I wanted to get out,
But something held my will.

I thought just how Red – Apples wedged
The Stubble’s joints between –
And Carts went stooping round the fields
To take the Pumpkins in –
I wondered which would miss me, least,
And when Thanksgiving, came,
If Father’d multiply the plates –
To make an even Sum –

And would it blur the Christmas glee
My stocking hang too high
For any Santa Claus to reach
The altitude of me –

But this sort, grieved myself,
And so, I thought the other way,
How just this time, some perfect year –
Themselves, should come to me –

In its emphasis on the exclusion of the dead from the world of the living, poem 344 draws a particularly striking kinship to a passage from Ecclesiastes 9:5-6:

For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not anything, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, and their hatred and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever in anything that is done under the sun.

The Gothic elements of the poem, such as the implication of imprisonment against the speaker’s will, further intensify this exclusion of the dead. Unlike “Because I could not stop for Death,” the speaker in poem 344 exhibits resistance to her imprisonment within the grave when she says, “And then, I wanted to get out, / But Something held my will.”

The first and second stanzas set the Gothic tone for the entire poem, and these lines are particularly chilling in their similarity to Poe’s treatment of death with the corpse experiencing paralysis though consciousness remains. Even more disturbing is the plaintive desire of the speaker to “get out” though she no longer has the will to do so. The speaker remembers dying and being carried past the corn in the fields on the way to interment. Upon seeing the corn, she thinks of “Richard” and the way the corn would look once harvested. These vibrant scenes of life
create a desire for the speaker to “get out” of the coffin and rejoin the living. Like the writers in the Old Testament, the speaker worries about being forgotten by the living. She wonders if “Father” will set a plate for her in her absence and if a stocking will be hung for her. The thought of life’s events continuing when the speaker remains excluded and isolated grieves her. Instead she turns her thoughts the “other way,” and thinks of how “some perfect year” her loved ones will come to her.

This happy reunion suggests one of the principal features of consolation verse where future reunion was often depicted as a joyous occasion that both the living and the dead might look forward to with anticipation. For example, in one of Lydia Huntley Sigourney’s poems titled “The Peace of the Christian,” the bereaved are comforted by the thought of the happy state of the dead and by the prospect of a future reunion:

No dimness quells her spirit’s light,  
Her fearless faith is turn’d to sight,  
And welcom’d by celestial bands  
Safe on the eternal shore she stands.  
But ye who mourn with ceaseless tear  
The absence of a friend so dear, –  
Who find inscrib’d on all below,  
A want, a weariness, a woe,  
Look up! Her home of bliss survey  
The pole-star of your pilgrim-way,  
Grave on your hearts her parting strain,  
And heed her charge “to meet again.” (27-28)

In this vision of the afterlife, the dead are happily situated in Heaven, “welcom’d by celestial bands,” experiencing bliss while they await the joyful reunion when loved ones will “meet again.” Dickinson’s poem undermines this vision, especially because consolation verse is frequently written from the perspective of the bereaved, not the perspective of the dead. The speaker in Dickinson’s poem does not enjoy Heavenly bliss, but rather resides in her coffin for
an eternity of waiting. *Something* prevents the speaker from moving or speaking, and the only joy in the speaker’s current state is an imagined holiday scene and the prospect of an uncertain future reunion. From a theological standpoint, this reunion will take place at the time of the Second Coming when all pious souls will ascend to Heaven. Yet, Dickinson does not mention Resurrection, a conspicuous omission given that the very next poem (poem 345) in the Gothic fascicle is one that mentions death, life, and Resurrection. Instead, the speaker here expects her loved ones to join her someday in this land of the dead, which is described in terms of Job’s land of darkness, not a land of Heavenly light, suggesting that the afterlife is more akin to Old Testament depictions than the mainstream vision of golden streets and celestial bliss.

In addition to consolation verse, one of the most prominent mainstream narratives surrounding death in the nineteenth century was called the “Good Death” or alternatively the “Happy Death.” Historian Drew Gilpin Faust illustrates the prominence of the concept of the Good Death in *This Republic of Suffering*. In her first chapter about dying, she quotes a tract given to Confederate soldiers by the Presbyterian Church: “What you are when you die, the same will you reappear in the great day of eternity. The features of character with which you leave the world will be seen in you when you rise from the dead” (8-9). Faust notes that “how one died thus epitomized a life already led and predicted the quality of life everlasting” (9). For nineteenth-century society, it was important to die well. In addition, the tradition of bearing witness to death, according to Faust, was critical “in order to assess the state of the dying person’s soul, for these critical last moments of life would epitomize his or her spiritual condition. The dying were not losing their essential selves, but rather defining them for eternity. Kin would use their observations of the deathbed to evaluate the family’s chances for a reunion.
in Heaven” (10). In a publication titled *The Christian Victor; or, Mortality and Immortality: Including Happy Death Scenes* (1858), J.G. Adams includes several descriptions of “happy death scenes” that describe various persons upon their deathbeds, all of whom confirm their faith even up to the moment of death. Despite pain and suffering, they display Christian resignation because the glories of Heaven stretch out before them, and generally, they set an example for their families, reassuring their loved ones that their spirits will indeed reside in Heaven, being among the saved. In one passage Adams writes:

> He looked upon that ordinance which ends life, as originating in the same benevolence with that which begins it. Death was, to him, a necessary event in existence, without which the great consummation of a glorious and happy immortality could not be achieved. Indeed, to one who saw him from day to day, it almost seemed as if he felt conscious that the invisible hand of his divine Father was leading him gently along into and through the dark passage between this and the future world, and impressing upon his confiding faith the full conviction that it was leading him only to his home. (Adams 200)

Faust observes that narratives like this follow a consistent pattern: the dying are “conscious of [their] fate,” are willing to accept it, and show “signs of belief in God and in [their] own salvation” (17). These common features embody the “assumptions most Americans shared about life and death” (17).

Adams’ commentary also demonstrates the tension between the narrative of the “happy death” and the reality of decay and the loneliness of the tomb. Though Adams attempts to offer consolation and hope to alleviate the terrors associated with death, his language depicts two opposing conceptual frameworks: that which is true on earth (death, corruption, decay) and that which religious society hopes is true in the future (Resurrection, regeneration, Heaven). This juxtaposition is particularly evident in a passage in which Adams describes the benefits of burial accompanied by music:
There is an elevating influence imparted to the susceptible soul, when, at the passing forth of the funeral train for the “narrow house,” the strains of music are struck from the dirge-band, not to the ear of the dead, but to the ears of the living. The dead-march to me has not that awful, appalling sound which some have heard in it. It has a sweeter, richer tone. I love it, because it speaks not so much of the ghastliness of physical decay and death, as of the renewal of life in its harmony with the imperishable and divine. That which is temporal speaks not, but that which is spiritual. Music is spiritual. It is an angelic voice, and discourses of Heaven. And when I hear it, on its approach to the tomb, I give thanks for its inspiration. It helps me to think as I should think, not of darkness, corruption, and disconsolate grief, but of light, of joy, of immortality. (44-45)

The passage illustrates the opposing concepts surrounding death in the nineteenth century and in Dickinson’s cultural context specifically. On one hand, in Adam’s words, there was the hope of Heaven, the “imperishable and divine,” the “light, of joy, of immortality.” On the other hand, there was the reality of the corpse, the “ghastliness of physical decay and death,” the loneliness of the tomb where “darkness” and “corruption” reigned. This tension between physical decay and the promise of divine renewal creates a cognitive dissonance that in turn makes the concept of Resurrection less familiar, less cheerful, and even less believable. The Gothic provides a vehicle wherein Dickinson can explore these contradictions by using the dissonance of the uncanny and the hesitation of the Gothic narrative form to articulate the experience of doubt and fear of the unknown.

In Poem 591, “I heard a Fly buzz – when I died – ,” Dickinson undermines the concept of a Good Death by appropriating aspects of the Gothic such as the dead speaker, the lack of closure that suspends the narrative in a liminal space, the grotesque focus on decay, and the conspicuous absence of religious ritual all of which contradict the narrative of the Good Death.

I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air –
Between the Heaves of Storm –
The Eyes around – had wrung them dry –
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset – when the King
Be witnessed – in the Room –

I willed my Keepsakes – Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable – and then it was
There interposed a Fly –

With Blue – uncertain – stumbling Buzz –
Between the light – and me –
And then the Windows failed – and then
I could not see to see –

Dickinson undermines the mainstream narrative of the Good Death by juxtaposing the diminutive symbol of the fly, an image that represents death and decay, with the grand “Onset” of the “King” at the time of the speaker’s death. She explores this cultural tension and the struggle to understand the unknown. Adams agrees that death is problematic for humankind to comprehend. In one instance Adams states, “I contend that it is impossible for us to be fully reconciled to the belief that our existence ends with death. The human mind starts back from the prospect of annihilation. It was not constituted to endure, unmoved, this doom” (15). Dickinson’s fly, a reminder of the grotesque realities of decomposition, questions the narrative of the Good Death by forcing the reader to confront the terror of annihilation. George Monteiro notes that nothing about the deathbed scene in poem 591 is unusual except perhaps the posthumous narrative voice, which, according to Monteiro, “teases us into looking beyond the naturalistic details of the scene toward some sort of symbolic meaning. Why is that ‘Fly’ in the room? Is there import in that fly’s being present at the moment of death? And why, further, is death (the moment of death) personified as the ‘King’ . . . ?” (44). Though Monteiro recognizes the grotesque nature of such a strange conceptual pairing, he concludes that the symbolism is
positive. He argues that according to folklore, flies mimicked nails at Christ’s crucifixion, sparing him from having more driven into his body, the result of which is that “flies may now dine at Kings’ tables with impunity” (Monteiro 44). Similarly, Katrina Bachinger also interprets the poem positively, adhering to the idea of a “happy death” in the nineteenth century. She writes, “for Dickinson, that little Fly is God. He who hears its ‘uncertain stumbling Buzz’ and sees its ‘Blue,’ a favorite Romantic color for Eternity, does not neglect God, the King of Kings, but enters Heaven before Death. The Fly and the King are conjoined for the very good reason that in Dickinson’s eschatology they become one and the same” (15). Both readings are problematic in their optimism about the Good Death. Dickinson’s poem falls drastically short of acceptable deathbed narratives. The speaker displays few if any of the accepted actions of the dying that Faust outlines in her chapter on dying. Instead, death arrives almost as a surprise; the speaker says little to affirm her faith to the family members in the room, and the final image of the poem is that of a fly and the onset of darkness.

More specifically, the first stanza is simultaneously typical of deathbed narratives as well as problematic. The “stillness” in the room indicates the hushed anticipation of the dying’s last words, words that will confirm the accepted beliefs about life and death in American culture and will give the family hope of a future reunion in Heaven. However, the first two lines undermine this narrative from the outset. The mundaneness of a fly’s buzz erodes the cultural importance of the communal moment intended to serve as confirmation of the transcendent significance of death.

At every opportunity, Dickinson thwarts the closure and reassurance her audience expects. In the second stanza, those holding vigil in the room are silent waiting for the last
“Storm” or “Onset” when “the King/ Be witnessed – in the Room – .” In other words, those others in the room wait for the moment of death, the moment when Christ arrives to escort the soul to Heaven. In the context of The Good Death, this last “Storm” or “Onset” might also be the moment, just before death, where the dying witnesses or testifies to the presence of Christ, to their belief in God and Heaven, and to their acceptance of death. The third stanza indicates that at some point the speaker was able to sign away her keepsakes, so some communication between the dying and the living did take place. However, the “King” is never “witnessed” in either sense of the word. Dickinson never confirms the presence of God or Christ. Those keeping vigil never “witness” a holy moment where Christ’s presence might be confirmed. Neither does the speaker “witness” to the vigil keepers a confirmation of her faith. Instead of the arrival of the King, a fly “interposes,” interrupting the narrative of the Good Death with a symbol of bodily decay, disrupting the hope of new and everlasting life in Heaven. The two opposing images presented in the poem—the “Fly” and the “King”—demonstrate Dickinson’s exploration of the inherent tension between the reality of the corpse and the spiritual narrative of the Good Death.

Religious writing of the time demonstrates this tension as well. Adams writes of death and Resurrection, stating, “the whole body of the dead . . . whatever mode of earthly death is ours, whatever be our state when death shall come, there is still to be effected with us the glorious Resurrection change” (23). Later, Adams writes of this Resurrection change, “Mortal decay and dissolution—mortal bereavement in its sable hues, and with its mournful dirge—the darkness and silence of the tomb—these shall not be. Life and joy immortal shall come forth with anthems of victory!” (27). In Adams’ descriptions of death the state of the dead between death and Resurrection is far from clear. Though the Resurrection change be “glorious,” “our
state when death shall come” is conceptualized through “Mortal decay and dissolution.” Though the “silence of the tomb . . . shall not be” once the Resurrection change occurs, the time between death and Resurrection is still clouded in uncertainty.

In “I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –,” Dickinson captures this intermediate period with her repetition of words that indicate liminal spaces. For example, in the third stanza, the fly “interposes,” or interrupts, coming “Between” the light of the window and the speaker. The fly, a symbol of death and decay, blocks the speaker from the light-filled window, a liminal space, but one that represents escape and freedom. The speaker is held in stasis, going neither to Heaven nor Hell. There is no joy of Heavenly afterlife, no assurance for the readers of the speaker’s comfort and solace now that her soul has flown to Heaven. Here, there is no conclusion, no closure, only the continued consciousness of the speaker, who, like Poe’s Monos, experiences the slow deterioration of the senses, indicated in the last lines of the poem: “And then the Windows failed – and then / I could not see to see –.”

The 1856 letter to John L. Graves reveals part of Dickinson’s resistance to the narrative of the Good Death. In it, she expresses a love for the physical beauty of the mortal life over the distant unknown of Heaven when she writes, “a conceited thing indeed, this promised Resurrection! . . . we have each a pair of lives, and need not chary be, of the one ‘that now is’” (L184). In a similar letter from 1846 to Abiah Root, Dickinson writes,

Does not Eternity appear dreadful to you. I often get thinking of it and it seems so dark to me that I almost wish there was no Eternity. To think that we must forever live and never cease to be. It seems as if Death which all so dread because it launches us upon an unknown world would be a relief to so endless a state of existence. I don’t know why it is but it does not seem to me that I shall ever cease to live on earth—I cannot imagine with the farthest stretch of my imagination my own death scene—It does not seem to me that I shall ever close my eyes in death. I cannot realize that the grave will be my last home—that friends will weep over my coffin and that my name will be mentioned, as one who
has ceased to be among the haunts of the living, and it will be wondered where my disembodied spirit has flown. (L10)

Dickinson’s letter depicts “Eternity” after death as unbearably endless, and “dark,” and refers to the grave as her “last home.” These images all contradict the mainstream notion of eternity. When Dickinson acknowledges the near impossibility of conceptualizing death, stating, “I cannot imagine with the farthest stretch of my imagination my own death scene,” she expresses the locus of her poetry’s horror. If Heaven is an unknown entity, impossible to conceptualize, then what is witnessed on earth affords the only dependable understanding of death and the afterlife. What Dickinson witnessed all too frequently at the bedsides of dying friends and family members were the horrors of the deathbed and the burial of the corpse. She makes it clear that she cannot fathom the event of dying, and her poetry suggests that she does not adhere to the notion of oblivion between death and Resurrection. As a result, Dickinson incorporates the reality of the corpse into her depictions of the afterlife precisely because the corpse is an object that she can see and touch in the physical world, requiring no leap of faith or acceptance of the distant promise of Heaven. The contrast between Dickinson’s beloved mortal world and the frail promise of Heaven is never fully reconciled in her poetry, and typically when Dickinson attempts to articulate a boundary crossing beyond death, the resulting narrative is one of Gothic horror that emphasizes the loss of the mortal life rather than celebrating the Future Life.

In poem 341, “’Tis so appalling – it exhilarates –,” Dickinson narrates another deathbed scene, and again, she omits the elements of the Good Death. Even more troubling is Dickinson’s unrelenting incorporation of the Gothic into a scene that otherwise should be somber and transcendent as a soul is gathered to Heaven. Scholars frequently quote this poem when attempting to provide a definition of the Gothic mode, specifically referencing the first two lines:
‘Tis so appalling – it exhilarates –
So over Horror, it half captivates –

These lines often provide an entry point for defining Gothic literature and Gothic effect because the experience of reading Gothic literature is at once appalling and exhilarating. The first two lines of poem 341 have been used so often that the subject matter of the rest of the poem is overlooked, and as a result, the interplay between religious conceptions of the afterlife and the Gothic is also overlooked. The next two lines introduce the terror at the heart of Dickinson’s Gothic:

The Soul stares after it, secure –
To know the worst, leaves no dread more –

Due to the lack of an antecedent for “it,” reading Dickinson’s poem produces the effect of disorientation, especially when “it” is surrounded by the language of Gothic effect. This “it” is appalling and horrible but also exhilarating and captivating. This dual experience can only be articulated “after it,” whatever “it” is. Once “it” is over, the soul rests secure, knowing the worst is over and there is nothing left to dread. Later, the poem reveals that Death is the subject of the poem, specifically the experience of observing and waiting for death, an experience that Dickinson attempts to articulate by drawing parallels to Gothic suspense, which entails both dread and eager anticipation.

In the stanzas that follow, poem 341 explores the relief the dead must feel when the terrible mystery of the afterlife becomes known:

To scan a Ghost, is faint –
But grappling, conquers it –
How easy, Torment, now –
Suspense kept sawing so –

The Truth, is Bald – and Cold –
But that will hold –
If any are not sure –
We show them – prayer –
But we, who know,
Stop hoping, now –

Looking at Death, is Dying –
Just let go the Breath –
And not the pillow at your cheek
So slumbereth –

Others, can wrestle –
Your’s, is done –
And so of Wo, bleak dreaded – come,
It sets the Fright at liberty –
And Terror’s free –
Gay, Ghastly, Holiday!

The suspense that suffuses the poem is simultaneously that of the mourners in the room waiting for the moment of death, as well as the universal suspense surrounding one’s own death as a venture into the unknown. When Dickinson writes, “To scan a Ghost, is faint — / But grappling, conquers it” she appropriates the Gothic figure of the ghost as metaphor. Rather than a dead figure that haunts the living, this “ghost” is the figure of death that haunts humanity. Dickinson suggests that a direct confrontation with death somewhat dissipates the suspense of the unknown. Though “Torment” is still present, it becomes “easy” when the moment of crisis finally comes. Dickinson’s description of the “Truth” as “Bald” and “Cold” establishes the conventional Gothic figure of the corpse as encompassing “Truth,” which further underscores her conception of the afterlife as being rooted in the reality of the corpse and not the hope of Heaven. Though there is some comfort in a direct confrontation with death and the unknown, the cold, bald figure of the corpse remains a frightening and problematic reality, especially in light of mainstream religious optimism. By the end of the poem, the speaker seeks to bring an end to suspense, an end to the
agonizing wait for the dying to “Just let go the Breath –”. For the speaker of the poem, once the dying has “let go,” it is the living who must “wrestle” with what has been “witnessed – in the Room –,” as well as with their own attempts to understand death once it has been witnessed. Rather than wrestling with the suspense of one’s own death, it is easier to embrace the “Wo” of mourning as it keeps terror’s “Gay, Ghastly, Holiday!” at bay.

In addition to Dickinson’s rebuttal consolation verse and the Good Death, her poetry also contradicts the rhetoric of popular hymns. The Dickinson household library contained two of Isaac Watts' Hymnals: *The Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs of the Reverend Isaac Watts*, and *Christian Psalmody in Four Parts*. Dickinson's frequent use of hymn meter as well as religious discourse and imagery in her poetry suggests a substantive knowledge of and engagement with nineteenth-century hymn rhetoric. Like the narratives of the Good Death and consolation verse, these hymns provided a rhetoric of comfort, reassuring believers that the dissolution of the body was no tragedy when the promise of Heaven and the Resurrection awaited beyond the boundary of death. Many hymn narratives asserted further that the destruction of the body was actually something to be desired; only through the annihilation of the corrupt flesh could the refined soul enter paradise. Despite these messages of comfort and promise of a new life, the rhetoric contained in these hymns also contained the same images of decay and isolation in the grave that were depicted in the Old Testament. As with the narrative of the Good Death, Dickinson maps Gothic narrative elements onto the religious rhetoric within hymns, rendering the hymnic vision of the afterlife devastatingly inadequate. Rather than providing comfort by depicting the body as something disposable, even undesirable, Dickinson reveals that the language within the hymns
compounds the terror of the unknown and heightens Gothic disorientation when attempting to articulate existence after death.

The influence of hymn culture and tradition is not new to Dickinson scholarship. One of the most recent and lengthy works that seeks to situate Dickinson within the culture of hymnody is Victoria Morgan’s *Emily Dickinson and Hymn Culture*. One of the primary points Morgan makes is to identify Dickinson and Watts as “dissenters” within their respective religious cultures. She notes, “with an attitude of defiance, Dickinson finds her autonomous voice in opposition to the prescribed paradigms for spirituality in revivalist New England” (Morgan 83). While Morgan draws attention to one of the most important aspects of Dickinson’s poetic discourse surrounding religion in her culture, that of defiance, it is also important to note that Watts’ hymns were themselves part of the “prescribed paradigms for spirituality” in New England, paradigms with which Dickinson engaged through her subversive recruitment of Gothic conventions to undermine mainstream optimism.

A common theme emerges in many of the hymns that reference death and Resurrection, that humanity’s “sentence,” death and bodily corruption, is “just.” In other words, bodily corruption is a “just” punishment in light of the weight of human sin and depravity. As a result, the sinner in the hymns always demonstrates resigned acceptance toward the fate of the body. Oft-accompanying images of worms and decay align this resigned acceptance more with grotesque horror than with religious optimism. While the hymns depict death as a joyful time when the soul might be rid of the sinful weight of the body, by projecting the Gothic onto this hymn rhetoric, Dickinson exposes its inadequacy by revealing the inherent horror of bodily annihilation regardless of the promise of Resurrection.
One of the common images that appears repeatedly in Watts’ hymns is the corruption of the flesh after death, as it is eaten by worms, moulders in the grave, or returns to the “clay” from whence it came. This bodily corruption is frequently linked to human corruption and depravity, often through the frequent comparison between humanity and “worms,” relegating the human condition to that of vermin. The hymns depict the spirit triumphing over the flesh, further relegating the physical body. After death, the soul either flies gladly to Heaven, happy to be rid of the sin-filled weight of the body or “slumbers,” awaiting the Resurrection morn. What is perhaps most disturbing in these hymns is the implication that a good Christian gladly embraces the notion of bodily decay, exhibiting a passive acceptance of this fate—an acceptance that Dickinson rejects. Though Dickinson acknowledges a separation of body and spirit, she also recognizes their interdependency. Dickinson consistently roots her poetic discourse in a middle ground that simultaneously raises the estimation of the body and grapples with a subject that Dickinson’s religious culture merely glossed over with its expectation of resigned acceptance: how does being exist without a body after the body decays? This is the same quandary that both Poe and Hawthorne explore in “The Colloquy of Monos and Una” and The House of Seven Gables, respectively. Hawthorne’s depiction is especially bleak, describing life after death as an “infinite, inscrutable blackness” wherein the soul is set “adrift in chaos” (2:276-277). With Hawthorne, as with Dickinson, this chaos occurs in direct correlation with the loss of the body and the stark reality of the corpse.

Hymn number six in The Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs, of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D, exhibits the thematic patterns regarding the body that are consistently included in hymns of the period:
Great God, I own the sentence just,
And nature must decay
I yield my body to the dust
To dwell with fellow clay.
Yet faith may triumph o’er the grave,
And trample on the tombs;
My Jesus, my Redeemer, lives,
My God, my Saviour comes.
The mighty conqu’ror shall appear,
High on a royal seat;
And death, the last of all his foes,
Lie vanquish’d at his feet.
Though greedy worms devour my skin,
And gnaw my wasting flesh;
When God shall build my bones again,
He’ll clothe them all afresh.
Then Shall I see thy lovely face,
With strong, immortal eyes;
And feast upon thy unknown grace,
With pleasure and surprise. (294)

The speaker of the hymn admits that the “sentence” of death and corruption is “just,” and he willingly “yield[s]” his body to the “dust.” Yet, despite the horror of having “greedy worms devour [his] skin/ And gnaw [his] wasting flesh,” he speaks of death and decay positively, looking forward to the day of Resurrection when God will “build [his] bones again.” Dickinson’s lexicon defines “decay” as “To pass gradually from a sound, prosperous, or perfect state, to a less perfect state, or towards destruction,” echoing the fall of mankind from a state of perfection to destruction and expulsion from Eden. This connection between bodily decay and sin is also present in the comparison of human beings to worms, a symbolic connection rooted in the Calvinist view of the human condition as one of “natural depravity and of inherited sin” (Morgan 88). Dickinson’s adverse reaction to this particular view of the human condition is evident in a letter written in late August 1858 to Samuel Bowles: “Our Pastor says we are a ‘Worm.’ How is that reconciled? ‘Vain – sinful Worm’ is possibly of another species” (L193). Dickinson’s
poetry, while it recognizes a separation between body and soul, never relegates the body to the
level of vermin. More often, she demonstrates a love of the body that she incorporates into her
experience of loss and grief at the death of a loved one, as is the case in “If I may have it, when
it’s dead.” For Dickinson, the frequent images of bodily corruption in the hymns and also in the
Bible become a source of terror rather than a blessing that allows the soul to be rid of its earthly
encumbrance. In another hymn, Watts’ hymn refers to the flesh as “vile bodies,” and anticipates
when the body will be made new on the Judgment Day. Dickinson’s depiction of the body is
strikingly different. In one poem she writes:

The Body grows without –
The more convenient way –
That if the Spirit – like to hide
It’s Temple stands, alway,

Ajar – secure – inviting –
It never did betray
The Soul that asked it’s shelter
In solemn honesty (438)

For Dickinson, the body, though certainly distinct from the spirit, is nonetheless a comforting,
sheltering, and necessary part of existence. She describes the body as a trusted place, a shelter
wherein the soul can “hide,” and a place that does not “betray” the soul. She even refers to the
body using the biblical term “Temple,” which corresponds to 1 Corinthians 6:15-19, which
states, “Know ye not that your bodies are the members of Christ? . . . What? Know ye not that
your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not
your own?”

In Dickinson’s poetry the body is never depicted as morally corrupt, which makes it
unsurprising that she converts the image of decay that is so redolent in the hymns into an image
of horror in her poetry to underscore her resistance to meekly accepting the loss of the body as spiritually necessary. Poems like “Because I could not stop for Death – ,” “‘Twas just this time, last year, I died,” and “I died for Beauty – but was scarce” all function beyond the grave’s edge and the moment of death, where consciousness is present but altered. The speaker’s body has begun the process of decay, but neither body nor consciousness has moved beyond the grave or the deathbed. These poems depart from the hymnic rhetoric that views the body’s decay as a welcomed separation from the sinful aspects of being human. Instead, consciousness remains attached to the body and witnesses its slow destruction. In Dickinson’s narratives, the death of the body is devastating, indicating a separation between the speaker and the living world, and speakers are isolated in darkness, which is a complete reversal of many hymns’ promises of Resurrection and paradise. By highlighting hymns’ emphases on worms and destruction through Gothic speakers whose voices emanate from within the grave, Dickinson exposes the problematic juxtaposition of corruption and Resurrection within the hymns themselves. As the lines of the hymn number six state, “Though greedy worms devour my skin,/ And gnaw my wasting flesh;/ When God shall build my bones again,/ He’ll clothe them all afresh./ Then Shall I see thy lovely face,/ With strong immortal eyes.” Only after a period of decay will the dead experience grace. The hymn does not describe the nature of existence between death and Resurrection or the duration of such a state. The lines do indicate, however, that only after God builds the dead’s bones again, only “then shall [the dead] see [God’s] lovely face.” Within Dickinson’s poems, the promise of Heaven is rendered less potent when she relentlessly foregrounds the isolation of the grave and the annihilation of the body.
Consistently, the narrative voices within hymns resignedly accept the decay and loss of the body, suggesting that Christians must accept their punishment for the weakness of the flesh. For example, hymn 91 includes the following lines: “Laden with guilt and heavy woes,/ Down to the regions of the dead,/ With endless curses on his head,/ The dust returns to dust again” (Worcester 339). The weight of sin in this hymn is evident and the punishment is depicted as entirely justified. Hymn 63 similarly encourages a resigned acceptance of such a fate: “No, I’ll repine at death no more, / But with a cheerful gasp resign, / To the cold dungeon of the grave, / These dying, with’ring limbs of mine. / Let worms devour my wasting flesh, / And crumble all my bones to dust: – / My God shall raise my frame anew, / At the revival of the just” (Worcester 438). This particular hymn illustrates the juxtaposition of cheerful resignation in the face of being imprisoned in the “cold dungeon of the grave” while “worms devour” the flesh and “crumble . . . bones to dust.” Though the Resurrection is mentioned and looked forward to with hope, the dominant images remain those having to do with death and decay. Unlike the sentiments expressed in the hymns, Dickinson’s poetry resists, rather than accepts, the decay of the body by foregrounding the Gothic elements in poems like “‘Twas just this time, last year, I died,” “I died for beauty, but was scarce,” “Because I could not stop for Death –,” and “I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –.” None of the poems address decay explicitly, but they all reference it indirectly through the loss of bodily autonomy as in “‘Twas just this time, last year, I died,” and “I died for beauty, but was scarce,” or through subtle references such as the “gossamer” in “Because I could not stop for Death” or the fly in “I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –.” In each case, the body’s decay signals a singular loss, which Dickinson also expresses in “If I may have it, when it’s dead”—the loss of something incredibly dear. The Gothic elements within these
poems highlight loss and grief by characterizing death as a Gothic scenario and thereby contradicting the message of resigned acceptance present in many hymns.

Like Adams’ passages in *The Christian Victor*, hymn rhetoric contains conflicting sentiments about death. Even while they express hope and anticipation of the Resurrection, they describe death within a Gothic framework. Dickinson capitalizes on these conflicting sentiments by foregrounding death’s terrors rather than glossing over them. For example, hymn 88 simultaneously depicts the horrors of the grave even while it looks forward to the “great reward”:

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Life is the time to serve the Lord,
The time to insure the great reward;
And while the lamp holds out to burn,
The vilest sinner may return.
Life is the hour that God has given,
To ‘scape from hell and fly to Heaven;
The day of grace;—and mortals may Secure the blessings of the day.
The living know that they must die,
But all the dead forgotten lie:
Their mem’ry, and their sense is gone,
Alike unknowing and unknown.
Their hatred, and their love is lost,
Their envy buried in the dust;
They have no share in all that’s done,
Beneath the circuit of the sun.
Then, what my thoughts design to do,
My hands, with all your might, pursue;
Since no device, nor work is found,
Nor faith, nor hope, beneath the ground.
There are no acts of pardon past,
In the cold grave to which we haste;
But darkness, death, and long despair
Reign in eternal silence there. (337-338)
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The hymn is Gothic in nature and has roots in Old Testament verse, specifically Ecclesiastes 9:4-10. Even though the hymn states that the dead exist without memory or sense, and that they are “unknowing,” it ends with a description of the dead without faith or hope in the “cold grave,”
depicting the dead with some measure of consciousness in the form of emotion. The dead are also depicted as experiencing “long despair” and “eternal silence,” indicating again that some form of consciousness remains within the grave. This description of existence within the grave, its silence and isolation, is even more disturbing because the hymn ends in narrative stasis when considered within the framework of a teleological timeline. There is no cosmic closure in the hymn, no Resurrection morn—only death, darkness, despair, and a rotting corpse—and this clack of culmination is particularly Gothic in its effect. The narrative thrives on suspense without offering alleviation, a convention Dickinson highlights in poem 775: “Suspecte – is Hostiler than Death – / Death – tho’soever Broad, / Is just Death, and cannot increase – / Suspense – does not conclude – ”. In other words, Dickinson recognizes the Gothic nature of the murky conceptions surrounding the Intermediate State. Not only does the Intermediate State thrive as a subject of Gothic narrative due to its liminality, but it also depicts the suspenseful metaphor of a prisoner waiting for a rescue that is not guaranteed and remains utterly conjectural.

Dickinson juxtaposes the terrible nature of death with the hope of the future life in poem 653, “No Crowd that has occurred.” If the fate of the dead is as horrible as the hymns suggest, then the opposing rhetoric of comfort in the same hymns is rendered almost ridiculous. Hymn number three asks, “Why do we mourn departing friends? / Or shake at death’s alarms?” (375). The question seems almost grotesque when the contrasting images of isolation, decay, and darkness are so prevalent in hymn imagery. Dickinson’s poem 653 adopts much of the vocabulary and rhetoric of contemporary hymns while also undermining their message. This poem also questions the likelihood of Resurrection as strongly as it acknowledges the simultaneously frightening and awe-inspiring nature of immortality and eternity.
No Crowd that has occurred
Exhibit – I suppose
That general Attendance
That Resurrection – does –

Circumference be full –
The long restricted Grave
Assert her Vital Privilege –
The Dust – connect – and live –

On Atoms – features place –
All Multitudes that were
Efface in the Comparison –
As Suns – dissolve a star –

Solemnity – prevail –
It’s Individual Doom
Possess each – separate Consciousness –
August – Absorbed – Numb –

What Duplicate – exist –
What Parallel can be –
Of the Significance of This –
To Universe – and Me?

Dickinson’s poem contains the same vocabulary of popular hymns. Phrases and images like
“Resurrection,” “the long restricted Grave,” “The Dust – connect – and live –,” “Doom,”
“Multitudes,” and “General Attendance,” create the familiar religious framework found in the
hymns and popular religious discourse of her time. Dickinson’s phrase, “The Dust – connect –
and live –,” is especially suggestive of a common image in Watts’ hymns, present for instance,
in hymn 6: “I yield my body to the dust/ To dwell with fellow clay. / Yet faith may triumph o’er
the grave, / And trample on the tombs”; hymn 102: “Let worms devour my wasting flesh, / And
crumble all my bones to dust: – / My God shall raise my frame anew,/ At the revival of the just.”;
hymn 110: “God, my Redeemer, lives,/ And often from the skies/ Looks down and watches all
my dust – / Till he shall bid it rise.”; and hymn 232: “When op’ning graves shall yield their charge, / And dust to life awake; – / Those bodies, that corrupted fell, / Shall incorrupted rise.”

Like many of her other poems, the first few stanzas of “No Crowd that has occurred” begin by creating a religious framework. In this case, first two stanzas are remarkably similar to the rhetoric and diction of a hymn. However, Dickinson embeds a naysayer in the conventional hymn rhetoric. Dickinson’s “I suppose” plants a seed of doubt within the hymn framework, subtly calling into question the reliability of accepted religious expectations surrounding death and Resurrection. The third stanza includes clever word play through the inclusion of “Atoms” and “Multitudes.” “Atoms,” the multitude that constitutes the body parallels Dickinson’s “Multitudes,” which simultaneously connects the image of Atoms to the Multitudes present on the day of general Resurrection. Along the same lines, in “Textual Scruples and Dickinson’s ‘Uncertain Certainty’” Don Gilliland asserts, “The process of ‘Connecting’ the ‘Dust’ both looks forward to the general Resurrection and looks back to Yahweh’s molding of Adam out of dust, as anthropomorphic ‘features’ are imparted to the ‘Atoms’ of the material world” (53). For all of Dickinson’s incorporation of the grand rhetoric surrounding the Resurrection, her word choice in the final stanzas does not indicate a joyful acceptance and willingness to enter Heaven and be made new. Instead, she introduces Gothic elements that provide a sinister seed of doubt amidst the otherwise traditional religious rhetoric.

Poem 653 is rarely connected to Dickinson’s Gothic poetry. However, starting with the third stanza, Dickinson begins incorporating Gothic effects that undermine the traditional images associated with death and replace them with a terrifying loss of identity, both physical and spiritual. In the third stanza Dickinson clarifies that whatever becomes of the soul or individual
identity when the “Dust” is raised from the grave, it is something different than what that identity was before. The body that was is “Efface[d] in the Comparison –” to what is, indicating a total erasure of physical and even spiritual identity. Dickinson begins the fourth stanza with reverence, letting “Solemnity – prevail –”. The solemnity of the occasion is tied to the word “Doom,” a word that is loaded with religious significance in Dickinson’s lexicon. According to her dictionary, the word “doom” means, “Judgment; judicial sentence. To Satan, first in sin, his doom applied. – Milton. Hence the final doom is the last judgment. Condemnation; sentence; decree; determination affecting the fate or future state of another; usually a determination to inflict evil, sometimes otherwise.” Just a few lines down from the word “doom” is the entry for the word, “doomsday,” which is, “the day of the final judgment; the great day when all men are to be judged and consigned to endless happiness or misery.” Along with the references to Resurrection and the gathering of the “dust” to be made to live again, the word “doom” in this poem further develops the subject of the poem: the day of Final Judgment. The third line of the fourth stanza continues the “effacement.” “Possess each – separate Consciousness – ,” again depicts, a loss of identity and autonomy as the consciousness is “Possessed.” Even more disturbing, Dickinson suggests that the Resurrection is not a day of joy, but rather, it is a day of further loss when the dead who have maintained consciousness through the loss of the body, will be submitted to further indignation as their consciousness is possessed. This powerlessness and lack of autonomy is a frequent feature of Gothic writing. In this specific case, Dickinson recruits this powerlessness to undermine the mainstream depiction of the Resurrection. Rather than the dead being restored to autonomy and consciousness, as was typical, Dickinson offers a darker vision wherein the dead are characterized as “absorbed” and “numb.” Dickinson recognizes the
frightening aspects of Resurrection, which entails a complete transformation of the body. If identity is connected to the physical body, what might such a change entail? This line of questioning challenges the likelihood of maintaining identity in the face of such a change. The Bible itself confirms a change in the body at the time of the Resurrection. 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 states, “Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.” Dickinson’s poem resists this change, or at least refuses to accept such a change with complacency.

The last line of this stanza depicts an existence that transforms the images of triumph and Heavenly bliss in Watts’ hymns into something entirely different. Dickinson allows that Heaven, or life after death will be “August,” maintaining the traditional grandeur and majesty of God’s Heaven. However, the words that follow are devastating. Whatever the afterlife might be, in Dickinson’s vision, each “separate Consciousness” is “Absorbed” and “Possessed,” further suggesting the loss of something vital to identity after death even if the Resurrection were to occur. Dickinson characterizes the afterlife as “Numb,” which her lexicon defines as “Torpid; destitute of the power of sensation and motion… to deaden; to stupefy.” This word choice seems apt considering Dickinson’s description of eternity to Abiah Root: “I almost wish there was no Eternity. To think that we must forever live and never cease to be. It seems as if Death which all so dread because it launches us upon an unknown world would be a relief to so endless a state of existence.” This depiction of eternity without the constant change and challenge of mortal life exemplifies the sort of torpid and deadened existence that Dickinson captures with the word “Numb.”
In the final stanza of poem 653 Dickinson illustrates the inadequacy of the concept of *Resurrection bodies* in light of humanity’s inability to comprehend a *new* body. Hymn 110 describes the “new bodies” given to the resurrected on the Day of Judgment:

Corruption, earth, and worms,
Shall but refine this flesh;
Till my triumphant spirit comes,
To put it on afresh.
God, my Redeemer, lives,
And often from the skies
Looks down and watches all my dust –
Till he shall bid it rise.
Array’d in glorious grace,
Shall these vile bodies shine;
And ev’ry shape, and ev’ry face,
Look Heavenly and divine. (Worcester 441)

Seemingly in response to these very lines, Dickinson asks, “What Duplicate – exist –/ What Parallel can be – / Of the Significance of This –/ To Universe – and Me?” Dickinson’s pronouns often go unnamed, an ambiguity within her poetry that makes interpretation difficult. In this stanza the lack of a clear antecedent for “This” is particularly problematic. Throughout the poem, however, Dickinson’s religious references to the body (“Dust,” “Atoms,” and “Resurrection”) indicate that “This” refers simultaneously to earthly, corporeal existence, *and* the body itself.

Gilliland also contends the following about the final stanza:

completes the poem’s expression of attachment to the world of “Dust” and “Atoms” in their fallen, pre-Resurrection state, and marks its accompanying skepticism about the merits of paradise. The statement of the unparalleled “Significance” of the “Resurrection,” it turns out, is a lament for the body’s exit from the world. The poem expresses the emotional condition of one who can both treat “Resurrection” as inevitable and also equate it with “Doom” (54).

Dickinson is not merely skeptical about the merits of paradise, but directly undermines its merits by foregrounding the loss of identity and autonomy that must accompany Resurrection. Her
choices of words like “Efface,” “Absorbed,” and “Numb,” and her reference to the “long restricted Grave” indicate the same lack of control and paralysis that are so prevalent in Gothic narratives about the afterlife.

In prose fragment 70, Dickinson writes “Death being the first form of Life, which we have had the power to Contemplate, our entrance here being [before our own comprehension] (preliminary to our own) an Exclusion from comprehension, it is [strange] amazing that the fascination of our predicament does not entice us more. With such sentences as these directly over our Heads we are as exempt from Exultation as the Stones.” As this passage and many more illustrate, the central preoccupation of Dickinson’s life and poetry was death. Her poetry does not merely explore conceptions of the afterlife, but undermines the mainstream narrative that depicts death as deliverer, a rescue from the sin and suffering of the mortal life. When Dickinson incorporates elements of the Gothic into her poems about death and the afterlife, she creates a space for a more nuanced exploration of religious narratives. Rather than endorsing popular religious concepts like that of the Good Death, consolation verse, and hymns, Dickinson depicts traditional religious discourse through the lens of Gothic terror. That darkness allows her to engage with some of the more frightening implications of death and the unknown. The resulting Gothic verse articulates grief and loss in a way not afforded in more traditional narratives, expressing an unparalleled love of the mortal world and an unutterable anguish at its loss. Her Gothic poetry is not a mere attempt to terrorize, but rather a means by which she exposes the inadequacy of America’s mainstream narratives of the afterlife and explores her own fear of death as well. As one of Dickinson’s letters expresses, “I sing, as the Boy does by the Burying Ground – because I am afraid – ” (L261).
I have adopted Johnson’s numbering of Emily Dickinson’s Letters.

When citing Emily Dickinson’s poetry, it is customary to indicate the poem number, not the page number. I use R.W. Franklin’s numbering of Dickinson’s poems.


Dickinson’s dictionary defined “Goblin” as “a fiend… an evil spirit; a walking spirit; a frightful phantom.” Wolf and Wardrop both note the Goblin’s antagonistic role in Dickinson’s poetry.

The online introduction to the *Emily Dickinson Lexicon Project*, edited by Cynthia L. Hallen, notes that Dickinson’s brother Austin recalled seeing “Webster’s big dictionary” on the kitchen table of the Dickinson home. Martha Dickinson Bianchi reported that her aunt Emily read the dictionary “as a priest his breviary” or a book of daily devotions. Dickinson also wrote to Higginson in 1862, stating, “for several years, my Lexicon—was my only companion” (L261).

The 1828 version of Webster’s *The American Dictionary of the English Language*, the dictionary Dickinson herself used daily, reveals much about Dickinson’s choice of words not only insofar as it includes definitions but also for its frequent reference to scripture and classic literature. Wolff also notes that it was “inconceivable that the Dickinson family would have used any dictionary other than Webster’s—although until the Lyman letters came to light, no one could know with certainty which edition they possessed… Joseph Lyman’s remarks make it almost certain that the Dickinson’s owned the 1828 edition” (*Emily Dickinson* 562). Throughout this chapter, I use the 1828 edition of Webster’s dictionary to define and expand upon the possible connotations of Dickinson’s word choice.
The Dickinson family library contained a number of books with Calvinist eschatology. See Roswell D. Hitchcock’s *New and Complete Analysis of the Holy Bible*, which contains a large section on eschatology; Seth Williston’s title listed in the bibliography; and Samuel Calcord Bartlett’s *Life and Death Eternal: A Refutation of the Theory of Annihilation*, which is another defense of the Christian doctrine of the Last Things. For more on Dickinson and Calvinist influence, see Jane Donahue Eberwein’s “‘Where—Omnipresence—fly?’: Calvinism as Impetus to Spiritual Amplitude,” “Emily Dickinson and the Calvinist Sacramental Tradition,” “Emily Dickinson and ‘the Weight of Glory’,” and *Dickinson: Strategies of Limitation*, as well as Magdalena Zapedowska’s “Wrestling with Silence: Emily Dickinson’s Calvinist God.”

For the purposes of this project, I refer only to the text of *The Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs, of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D.*, as representative hymns. This particular collection of hymns was part of the Dickinson library. Though attributed mostly to Isaac Watts, the collection includes additions by Samuel Worcester, who maintained the original hymn numbering for convenience in congregations who were used to the old numbering of earlier versions of the same collection. However, Worcester also added several new hymns to the collection, some by Watts, some by other hymnists. As Worcester does not maintain continuous numbering for the hymns, the page number where the hymn appears is cited.

For further information outlining how Dickinson does not carry on the traditional narrative of the Good Death, see Barton Levi St. Armand’s *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture: The Soul’s Society*. St. Armand includes a chapter about the Victorian way of death, which examines Dickinson’s treatment of death in contrast to the tradition of consolation poetry, specifically the
poetry and letters of Lydia Huntly Sigourney, as well as the tradition of mourning and other cultural traditions surrounding death.

9 There are several examples of equating human beings with worms and corruption in the rhetoric of the hymns. A few specific examples include hymn 55: “How feeble is our mortal frame,/ What dying worms are we!”; hymn 220: “Thy flesh, perhaps thy chiepest care,/ Shall crawling worms consume”; hymn 82: “Shall the vile race of flesh and blood/ Contend with their Creator God?/ Shall mortal worms presume to be/ More holy, wise, or just than he?”; hymn 31: “What tim’rous worms we mortals are!”; and hymn 97: “Poor, helpless worms in thee possess/ Grace, wisdom, power, and righteousness.”
Chapter V

“Of Tribulation – these are They, / Denoted by the White”: Emily Dickinson’s Gothic Apocalypse

Despite the ubiquity of consolation verse, the Good Death, and other optimistic mainstream narratives, Dickinson’s poetry suggests that the promises of eternal life in the Bible are problematic at best, especially within the context of Apocalypse and, as Seth Williston describes it, the “harvest of souls” to occur on the Last Day (Williston v). Several contradictions emerge from biblical passages that feature death and Apocalypse, and the resulting tension can be traced through the Gospels and the Book of Revelation. For instance, the Gospels describe the Day of the Lord as both when the righteous “shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of Heaven with power and great glory” and also as a time when “nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places” (Matthew 24:30, Matthew 24:6). This same tension extends into The Book of Revelation, which describes the annihilation of the earth while also expressing desire for such destruction in the final exclamation of “Even so, come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20).

This tension between destruction and desire in order for God’s teleological plan to be fulfilled is one of the primary catalysts for the Gothic’s repeated emergence in literary treatments of the Apocalypse. The Gothic is a literature of extremes, and with it Dickinson emphasizes the extreme terror contained within the pages of Revelation and other apocalyptic passages of the Bible. Though Dickinson’s society did not gloss over the destruction and terror that were part of the apocalyptic narrative, the trend toward gentler doctrine, religious optimism, and more importantly, the practice of conversion within a community of believers ameliorated some of the
harshness and fear inherent in Apocalypse. Dickinson’s apocalyptic poetry, on the other hand, embraces the “extremes and excess” of Gothic literature by foregrounding the excessive destruction and suffering in the Book of Revelation, transforming the narrative of cosmic culmination into a tale of uncertainty and paralysis, and in the process, undermining the mainstream religious narrative of the nineteenth century (Lloyd-Smith 5). When Dickinson incorporates both the Gothic and the text of Revelation into her poetry, she builds upon and enhances the Gothic elements already contained within the biblical narrative. By foregrounding the Gothic framework in Revelation, Dickinson draws attention to the uncertainty within apocalyptic narratives that her society downplayed, and in so doing, produces a retelling of the biblical narrative with new and unfamiliar emphases that question the legitimacy of conversion, and the certainty of American mythology surrounding Apocalypse. Dickinson’s Gothic halts the narrative of progress toward culmination with poems that foreground paralysis, liminality, and anti-closure.

The contrast between terror and desire is evident in the first section of the Book of Revelation. Praising the love of God that has freed his people from sin, John writes, “Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever. Amen” (Revelation 1:5-6). The next line states, “Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him. Even so, Amen” (Revelation 1:7). These verses establish a consistent pattern of contradictory messages; though John praises God for his love and the glory of his being, he also states that God brings violence, wailing, punishment, and destruction. This is the same contrast present in the Gospels regarding
the Day of the Lord. Despite constant glorification of God’s power and dominion, echoes of a
darker prophecy from the earlier Book of Amos reverberate through the New Testament: “Woe
unto you that desire the day of the Lord! To what end is it for you? The day of the Lord is
darkness, and not light” (Amos 5:18). The Gospels, in particular, contain passages akin to the
depiction in Amos. For example, the following is from the Book of Matthew:

All these are the beginning of sorrows. Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and
shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name’s sake. And then shall
many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another. And many
false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. And because iniquity shall abound, the
love of many shall wax cold. . . . For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since
the beginning of the world to this time, no nor ever shall be. (Matthew 24: 8-21)

In direct contrast to this depiction of extreme “affliction and tribulation,” each of the Gospels
contains passages like the following: “And they shall see the son of man coming in the clouds of
Heaven with power and great glory. And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet,
and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of Heaven to the
other” (Matthew 24:30-31). These contradictory outcomes—destruction and glory, terror and
awe—function like the Gothic on a narrative level. The effect of this contradiction is
disorienting, compressing two extremes of emotion into the same event and calling into question
the nature of God: Is God the savior, robed in grandeur, or is he the executor of human suffering,
an antagonistic force that precipitates destruction upon a helpless world? Identifying this dual
agenda, Judith Lee remarks that any narrative of Apocalypse, especially the Revelation of St.
John, has “contradictory tasks” (220). According to Lee, these tasks include the following:

to counter complacency by reminding listeners that the God in whom they believe is
mysterious and strange, beyond knowing, and at the same time to console suffering
believers that God is familiar and faithful to them. Nevertheless, in reading the
Revelation to John we are prompted to protest, ‘What kind of God is this?’ How alien is
this God of wrath from the loving and immanent God of much contemporary Christian
Theology, how different the fear evoked by John of Patmos from the engagement and empowerment called for by many modern Christian prophets. (Lee 220)

The questions that Lee raises are the same questions that Dickinson explores in her poetry, especially as she characterizes God as alien, unknowable, and distant, quite different from the benevolent God of Dickinson’s religious circles. Dickinson’s apocalyptic poetry, especially when referencing Revelation, contains the same contradictory elements that are inherent in both apocalyptic and Gothic narratives.

One example of this contradictory narrative approach is poem 132, “Just lost, when I was saved!”:

Just lost, when I was saved!  
Just felt the world go by!  
Just girt me for the onset with Eternity,  
When breath blew back,  
And on the other side  
I hear recede the disappointed tide!

Therefore, as One returned, I feel,  
Odd secrets of the line to tell!  
Some Sailor, skirting foreign shores –  
Some pale Reporter, from the awful doors  
Before the Seal!

Next time, to stay!  
Next time, the things to see  
By ear unheard –  
Unscrutinized by eye –

Next time, to tarry,  
While the Ages steal –  
Slow tramp the Centuries,  
And the Cycles wheel!

Dickinson sets the poem’s framework, using an apocalyptic lexicon from the outset. She mentions “Eternity,” “the awful doors/ Before the Seal,” “Ages,” “Centuries,” and “Cycles,” all
of which contain apocalyptic undertones that point to the end of time and refers to features within the Book of Revelation like the seven seals. In contemporary writing, these references to time in the context of Apocalypse often would have been accompanied by positive allusions to progress, the triumph of good over evil, and confirmation of the fulfillment of God’s teleological design. Dickinson, however, refuses to offer such confirmation. Instead, she provides a series of contradictions. The speaker states that she is both “lost” and “saved,” establishing a link to the apocalyptic narrative of salvation through suffering or destruction. “Eternity” is not met with optimism or joy. Instead, the speaker must be “girt” for the “onset” of “Eternity” as if she is preparing for battle or an equally unpleasant, perhaps violent experience. The “doors / Before the Seal” are presumably the gates of Heaven. These would usually be described in rapturous terms, describing the glories of the Heavenly city, but here, the speaker calls the doors “awful.”

Dickinson’s dictionary provides several definitions for the word “awful”:

1. That strikes with awe; that fills with profound reverence; as the awful majesty of Jehovah. 2. That fills with terror and dread; as the awful approach of death. 3. Struck with awe; scrupulous. A weak and awful reverence for antiquity. Watts. Shakespeare uses it for worshipful, inspiring respect by authority or dignity. Our common people use this word in the sense of frightful, ugly, detestable.

The dictionary itself contains the contradictory messages of Revelation in which God and eternity are described in terms that describe both majesty and terror. The speaker, who describes a near-death experience, states that “Next time” she will “stay” though she does not clarify where she was. This pronouncement is not presented as a desired outcome. Instead, the speaker merely states, “Next time, to tarry, / While the Ages steal – / Slow tramp the Centuries, / And the Cycles wheel!” Dickinson omits the element of closure that is essential to apocalyptic narratives. Instead, she describes two contradictory images of time—one linear, “the Ages steal” and one
cyclical, “the Cycles wheel!” This long series of contradictions resists the mainstream view of death and Apocalypse as positive events and subverts the apocalyptic narrative that moves linearly toward culmination by refusing to provide closure at the end of her poem.

Dickinson’s retelling of the biblical Apocalypse in her poetry is the result of her own affinity for the Book of Revelation. In a letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson in 1862, Dickinson describes her reading: “For Poets – I have Keats – and Mr and Mrs Browning. For Prose – Mr Ruskin – Sir Thomas Browne – and the Revelations” (L261). In another letter, she refers to the book of Revelation as “the gem-chapter,” commenting on the book’s frequent use of gems to describe the throne of God and the New Jerusalem (L536). The Bible, however, was not Dickinson’s only source of exposure to the apocalyptic narrative. The Dickinson family library contained a number of books on religious subject matter that encompassed the Last Things. One book they owned, in particular provides insight into the cultural influence of Apocalypse in the nineteenth century and within the Dickinson household—Seth Williston’s *Millennial Discourses; or a Series of Sermons Designed to Prove that There Will Be a Millennium of Peace and Holiness; also to Suggest Means for Hastening Its Introduction* (1849). Williston’s book is decidedly Postmillennialist in its optimism that humankind can bring about the millennium. Williston also mentions the Millerites in a refutation against skeptics: “‘But all your expectations of a Millennium,’ says the skeptic, ‘will, like those of the Millerites, end in disappointment’” (ix). Williston goes on to address a number of millennial subjects, and while it is impossible to prove that Dickinson read this particular book, she could hardly have escaped seeing it in the library or being exposed to the millennial fervor of religious culture in the nineteenth century. Dickinson’s personal interest in the apocalyptic narrative is evident in the number of times she
references apocalyptic scripture in her poetry. In Jack L. Capps’ *Emily Dickinson's Reading*, he includes an appendix that provides the number of direct references to biblical passages. While Matthew (74 references), Luke (33 references), and John (35 references) receive the most allusions in Dickinson’s poetry, the Book of Revelation is not that far behind with 29 explicit references to the text, according to Capps. However, Capps does not list poems such as “There came a Wind like a Bugle –” and “A Lady red – amid the Hill” (among many others) that also allude to the Book of Revelation, suggesting that Dickinson’s references to this book in her poetry are more widespread than what Capps indicates in his reading list.

Capps’ limited reading list is evidence of a larger problem in Dickinson studies; for the most part, critics read Dickinson’s apocalyptic poetry as positive and as an indication of Dickinson’s endorsement of the Second Coming. This reading aligns Dickinson with her contemporary religious circles that ardently wished for the coming of the Lord. However, both her letters and her poetry fail to support this reading. Capps believes that Dickinson’s approach to the Book of Revelation is optimistic. He writes, “had Emily Dickinson been asked to name the book of the Bible most interesting to her, she would without question have replied that it was Revelation . . . the vision and prophecy of Revelation were for her a return to the images of Eden that brought her Bible reading full circle. She anticipates a verdant Eden-Paradise . . . She brings the images from Genesis and Revelation together” (Capps 56-57). Capps’ stance is valid to an extent. At times, Dickinson’s approach to faith and religious experience *does* “anticipate a verdant Eden-Paradise;” however, this is not always the case in her treatment of Apocalypse and especially the Resurrection Morn.
In poem 124, Dickinson uncharacteristically depicts the dead awaiting the Resurrection in seemingly peaceful oblivion, a deviation from her typical depiction of the conscious dead. The “meek members of the Resurrection” wait in the darkness of the grave—described again in terms of a house—for the “Morning” of the Second Coming:

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers –
Untouched by Morning –
And untouched by noon –
Sleep the meek members of the Resurrection,
Rafter of Satin and Roof of Stone –

Grand go the Years – in the Crescent – above them –
Worlds scoop their Arcs –
And Firmaments – row –
Diadems – drop – and Doges – surrender –
Soundless as Dots – on a Disc of Snow (F124).

In the most widely accepted version of this poem, Dickinson’s depiction of time reduces these sleepers to nothing more than silent, “Dots, / On a Disc of Snow.” These “meek” corpses are weak, powerless, and silent. The passage of time depicted in the second stanza does not depict a hastening millennium, but rather an endless stasis. While these sleepers may be safe in their Alabaster Chambers, they are not clearly saved. Even though these dead are “members of the Resurrection,” Dickinson maintains a sense of foreboding that problematizes their fate. Dickinson’s depiction of the dead as insignificant “Dots” on a “Disc of Snow” makes ciphers out of these sleepers.

In other versions of the poem, the first stanza remains mostly consistent while the second stanza undergoes several variations. One such variation follows:

Light laughs the breeze
In her castle above them,
Babbles the bee in a stolid ear
Pipe the sweet birds in ignorant cadence:
Ah! What sagacity perished here!

In this instance, the second stanza seems slightly less severe, but still, Dickinson emphasizes the myriad life that continues above the earth while emphasizing the “sagacity” of the dead that has perished forever. In yet another variation, Dickinson once again takes on a more Gothic overtone:

Springs – shake the Sills –
But – the Echoes – stiffen –
Hoar – is the Window – and numb – the Door –
Tribes of Eclipse – in Tents of Marble –
Staples of Ages – have buckled – there –

This variation is perhaps the most enigmatic because it functions as a series of impressions rather than clear narrative. Here the dead seem more active as “Springs – shake the Sills –” and “Echoes” reverberate through “Tents of Marble.” The dead are described as “Tribes of Eclipse,” mirroring their characterization as ciphers in the original variation. In a final variation, Dickinson writes:

Springs – shake the seals –
But the silence – stiffens –
Frost unhook – in the Northern Zones –
Icicles – crawl from polar Caverns –
Midnight in Marble –
Refutes – the Suns –

This variation is perhaps the most disturbing. The new line of “Springs – shake the seals –” suggest the beginning of Armageddon as the seals mentioned in Revelation are opened. In all the variations, the dead are characterized as being under stone or marble, but in this case as well as the previous variation, the houses or “Tents” of marble are freezing, numb, and polar. Dickinson compounds this already disturbing scene with the word “silence,” which suggests the silence of
the tomb but also the silence of God. These sleeping dead have no guarantee of Resurrection, and God’s silence is as numbing and terrifying as the polar temperatures of the tomb. The word “stiffens” simultaneously recalls the stiffness of the corpse as well as God’s unyielding nature and forgetfulness of those trapped within the confines of the tomb. Dickinson’s dictionary specifically defines “stiffens” as becoming “less tender or yielding,” characterizing the God of Armageddon as antagonistic rather than the caring shepherd of souls typical of mainstream narratives. Despite the biblical allusion to seals in this last variation, the dead are not rescued from their freezing “Caverns,” and the Resurrection is never realized. Even when Dickinson incorporates the more comforting idea of sleeping until the Resurrection, she undermines that optimism by depicting death as a cold, dark, eclipse, and by omitting the necessary culmination of the Resurrection Morn common in conventional apocalyptic narratives. Perhaps the most disturbing lines of this variation are the last two: “Midnight in Marble – / Refutes – the Suns –.” The lines suggest that the long night of the grave—“Midnight in Marble –”—contradicts or proves false, the “Sun.” Dickinson’s dictionary provides several definitions of the word “Sun,” but one is particularly significant: “In Scripture, Christ is called the sun of righteousness, as the source of light, animation and comfort to his disciples.” In other words, death contradicts Christ’s promise of Resurrection. As with many of her other poems, the result is stasis, a refusal to progress toward the millennium that her culture so valued and that formed an essential part of the American identity.

In 1883, three years before her own death, Dickinson wrote, “There came a Wind like a Bugle –” (1618), which describes the violent destruction of the earth through nightmarish, Gothic images, and includes several references to the Book of Revelation:
There came a Wind like a Bugle –
It quivered through the Grass
And a Green Chill upon the Heat
So ominous did pass
We barred the Windows and the Doors
As from an Emerald Ghost –
The Doom’s Electric Moccasin
That very instant passed –
On a strange Mob of panting Trees
And Fences fled away
And Rivers where the Houses ran
Those looked that lived – that Day –
The Bell within the steeple wild
The flying tidings told –
How much can come
And much can go,
And yet abide the World! (1618)

The first line refers to the following passage in Revelation: “Behold, a door was opened in
Heaven; and the first voice which I heard was as it were a trumpet talking with me; which said,
Come up hither, and I will shew thee things which must be hereafter” (Revelation 4:11).

Dickinson’s lexicon defines “bugle” as a “trumpet; cornet, military signal horn” and defines
“trumpet” as “an instrument to announce the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and the
Resurrection of the dead; (see 1 Corinthians 15:52).” Here, the sounding of the bugle announces
the Second Coming, but those who hear the bugle’s call bar their doors and windows, against the
“ominous” sights of Armageddon. This is a strange action, especially within the religious context
of Dickinson’s society.

Typically, the Resurrection Morn, a concept largely associated with the End of Days, was
described in beatific terms like the following passage titled, “Morning of the Resurrection”
included in The Mourners Friend: or Sighs of Sympathy for Those Who Sorrow:

What a sight will the morning of the Resurrection disclose! Time no longer! At the sound
of God’s trump, all the dead start from their long, long homes of the grave, and come
forth to the judgment! Many shall awake to everlasting life. The sea and earth shall yield up their innumerable dead. But some men will say, “How are the dead raised up, and with what body do they come?” . . . To the grandeur of the scene in the Resurrection, in which the dead are raised from the grave, and their bodies changed to such an incomprehensible degree, that corruption puts on incorruption, and mortality immortality, he makes this extraordinary addition, that those who are then living shall be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, and their bodies of flesh and blood be made immortal bodies; the saying being for the first time brought to pass, Death is swallowed up in victory; and all the redeemed, clothed with their house from Heaven, break forth in harmonious concert, O Death! Where is thy sting? O Grave! Where is thy victory?

What a scene, the Resurrection morn! God gathering home his saints; Christ come to take his bride home to the mansions he has prepared for her! For whom are those glories prepared? For whom those glorious spiritual bodies? For those who shall have part in the first Resurrection. (107-108)

The passage above makes several specific references to the Book of Revelation. The sound of God’s “trump” and the dead rising up “from their long homes of the grave,” the sea and earth yielding up their dead is a direct reference to chapter twenty, and Christ coming to “take his bride home” refers to the bride of the Lamb from chapter nineteen. Those who take part in this Resurrection can only be described as joyous and triumphant. Compared to this traditional narrative, Dickinson’s poem, “There came a Wind like a Bugle –” is disturbing because of the fearful actions of its speakers as they bar the windows and doors against the signs of the Second Coming.

Dickinson undermines the beatific vision of the Second Coming by using the darker depiction of the Last Day in biblical texts. The Gospels state that the Day of the Lord will be a day of terror, not joy: “For these be the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled. . . . For there shall be great distress in the land, and wrath upon this people” (Luke 21: 21-23). These verses affirm that the violence and destruction that accompany Armageddon will mean suffering for the inhabitants of the earth, especially for those who do not experience
the first Resurrection, those who are raptured before the destruction of the earth and the following General Resurrection. Poem 1618’s description of the speakers barring their doors and windows suggests that they are in a house, which both the passage above and the Old Testament associate with the grave. Reading these speakers as dead, their attempt to barricade themselves from a host of fantastic creatures takes on a new meaning. The “Green Chill,” an “Emerald Ghost,” a “Mob of panting Trees,” and “Doom” with its “Electric Moccasin” echo Revelation’s fantastic monsters and beasts, especially John’s description of God in Revelation 4:3: “he that sat upon the throne] was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone: and there was a rainbow around the throne, in sight like unto an emerald.” The “Electric Moccasin” may refer to lightning, which is also an element associated with the throne of God in Revelation 4:5, “and out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunderings.” Dickinson also conflates the image of God in Revelation with the reference to “Moccasin,” which recalls a common Puritan and New England fear: the Indian. Indians were commonly viewed as minions of Satan, as evidenced in countless Indian captivity narratives of the nineteenth century and by their frequent presence in early American Gothic writing. One specific example is Harriet Prescott Spofford’s “Circumstance,” which recounts the tale of a woman attacked in the forest by a wild panther. The tale consistently refers to the panther as “the Indian Devil,” a colloquialism that demonstrates the association of the Indian and the Devil, as well as the Indian’s association with violence, aggression, and the evils of the American wilderness. The female protagonist only escapes his clutches by singing hymns, many of them referencing apocalyptic passages from Isaiah, the Psalms, and the Book of Revelation. Dickinson specifically mentions this tale in a letter to Higginson in 1862, the same letter in which she mentions her reading of the Book of Revelation.
She writes, “I read Miss Prescott’s ‘Circumstance,’ but it followed me, in the Dark—so I avoided her” (L261). Dickinson’s many allusions to the Book of Revelation as well as her inclusion of the word “Moccasin” to establish the presence of something evil, places the poem in the context of Armageddon.

However, the most disturbing feature of the poem is not the grand cosmic battle, but rather that it is written from the perspective of the non-Elect. While Dickinson’s poem includes some of the same images as “Morning of the Resurrection” such as the trumpet sounding and the grave characterized as a “home,” the primary sentiment is not one of hope. Instead, the speakers bar their windows and doors to keep the coming judgment from reaching them. The terror these speakers experience is far more horrific than merely being unprepared for confrontation. If the non-Elect suffer imprisonment while waiting for more terrible tortures to come after the Day of Judgment, then it is no wonder that these speakers bar their doors and windows.

Dickinson’s poem has far more in common with contemporary narratives that featured the Last Day as told by a sinner rather than the beatific vision of the Second Coming told from the perspective of the saved. For example, the 1853 Memoirs of William Miller by Sylvester Bliss, provides a section titled “A Scene of the Last Day” that relates “the supposed reflections of a sinner, witnessing the solemn events which immediately precede and follow the second advent of our Lord Jesus Christ and the conflagration of the world” (Bliss 405). In describing the end of the world from the perspective of the damned, the narrative contains many of the same images and circumstances as “Morning of the Resurrection” and Dickinson’s poem 1618. Miller’s narrative of the Last Day begins in almost the exact same way as the other two narratives, with thunder and the trumpet’s blast: “Ah! What means that noise? Can that be
thunder? Too long, too loud and shrill; more like a thousand trumpets sounding an onset. It shakes the earth” (Bliss 405). The narrator goes on to describe various signs and wonders like falling stars and other “freaks” of nature that heralded the terrible events of the Last Day. Also similar to Dickinson’s poem 1618, the narrator exclaims that “The wind is pent up in the bowels of the earth, and, in seeking vent, makes all this uproar” (Bliss 406). Miller’s account also contains similar features of a storm as Dickinson’s: “a flash of lightning showed me that I was still on earth, and then a peal of thunder, which shook the globe to its very centre, and made this earth to tremble like a poplar leaf; while flash after flash of vivid lightning made darkness visible, and roar after roar of the approaching thunder made horror still more horrible” (Bliss 408). The narrator of Miller’s account repents too late: “I remembered . . . the Scriptures which spoke of this great burning day, which I had treated as a fiction to frighten weak and silly mortals. I saw, and now believed—but O, too late!—that all that God had promised had been, was now, and would be, literally fulfilled. My conscience now spoke terror to my soul. I cried for mercy; but where was mercy now?” (Bliss 409). The narrator proceeds by recounting the damned of Earth attempting to find shelter during the destruction of Armageddon, mostly to no avail. Finally, the narrator describes the destruction of his own body and the final damnation of his soul:

My flesh began to quiver on my bones, my hair rose up on end, and all within me was suddenly turned into corruption. . . . I shrieked with pain, and, for a moment, I was all unconscious. The next moment I found myself a spirit, and saw the mass, of which my body lately was composed, a heap of ashes; and, although my spirit yet retained a form like that which I had dropped, yet half the pain was gone, and a moment I seemed to live again for pleasure. But the next moment, turning from the loathsome lump of ashes, I saw the flame, and in it saw the form of the Most Holy. I fled as on the wings of the wind, and skimmed the surface of the earth, if possible to escape the sight of that All-seeing Eye; and, as I flew, I soon found many thousands more unhappy spirits like myself, seeking for the same object. We fled together, and every moment added to our numbers scores of
these unhappy beings; but still the same most holy flame pursued, until we found no place on earth could hide us from his view. We then launched forth into the lower air, and sunk, and sunk, and sunk, until we came to this dark gulf; and here we found this pit, where light can never enter; and, glad to find a place where holiness will never enter, we plunged in here. And when we left the light, and sunk into this dark and dismal place of wretchedness and woe, we found ourselves enclosed on every side in chains of darkness, that all the demons and spirits of the damned can never break, until He who shut us up will please to let us loose again. And then we know there is another place, which lies far beneath this dark and dismal pit, that, if he conquers then, will be our last abode,—A LAKE OF FIRE AND BRIMSTONE. (Bliss 413-414)

The passage describes the fate of the damned within a Premillennialist narrative of Armageddon. This excerpt focuses on the damned during Christ’s return, wherein Christ imprisons Satan and the damned before the millennium of peace. Only after the millennium will Christ unleash Satan and cast him and his minions into the fiery pit for all eternity. This narrative mirrors Calvin’s view of the damned during the Intermediate State, as they await greater punishment after being measured at the Bar of Judgment on the Last Day. Dickinson’s “There came a Wind like a Bugle —” has far more in common with Miller’s narrative of the damned than it does with the narrative of the righteous in “Morning of the Resurrection,” especially in Dickinson’s use of the plural “We,” as speakers. Just as Miller’s narrator seeks company with other “unhappy spirits,” Dickinson’s narrator actually comprises several unhappy spirits attempting to escape the destruction and chaos of the Last Day. Dickinson’s speakers, had they been among the saved, would have been whisked away to God’s New Jerusalem or given new bodies during a glorious Resurrection scene. Both of these scenes are conspicuously absent.

The end of poem 1618 is particularly problematic due to the ambiguity regarding whether the earth is destroyed or regenerated. Suzy Clarkson Holstein notes the subtext in both Revelation and Dickinson’s poem 1618: “beneath the beauty [of the New Jerusalem], there is an ominous threat, and it goes beyond a simple fear of hell, . . . Before the new can be established,
the old must be utterly destroyed and blotted out (6). Dickinson ends the poem with this destruction but denies her readers a final vision of the New Jerusalem and a regenerated earth. Her poem progresses from the terrifying announcement of the Second Coming with allusions to the Book of Revelation, to a vision of the world descended into chaos, and then to the final enigmatic lines, “How much can come / And much can go, / And yet abide the World!” The final lines appear at first to be a comforting contrast to the storm’s chaos, and many critics interpret the lines as evidence of Dickinson’s desire to emphasize the abiding world in the face of apocalyptic destruction. Lisa Day-Lindsey argues that poem 1618 describes a tornado. She notes that the Dickinson household subscribed to The Springfield Republican, a periodical that, like many others of its era, reported on the tendency of the public to assign supernatural meaning to any aberrant natural phenomena. Day-Lindsey reports that during July, August, and September of 1883, The Springfield Republican covered “both factual and affective descriptions of at least fifteen tornadoes, cyclones, and tempests . . . which reports the ominous portent that the storm wrought on witnesses: ‘Superstitious people are shaking their heads at the terrible wind, rain, and electric storms of the season and are prophesying the end of all things’ (‘Springfield: Superstitious People’)” (31). This reading material within the Dickinson household, invests poem 1618 with further ties to the apocalyptic fervor of Dickinson’s religious society. Besides capitalizing on the connection between storms and Apocalypse, Dickinson also makes reference to Ecclesiastes 1:4: “One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth forever.” The earth abides, but humanity is conspicuously absent. The saved should be abiding with the newly remade earth within God’s New Jerusalem, but Dickinson excludes this aspect of the mainstream narrative. Instead, Dickinson underscores the terror of the non-Elect
and the destruction of the earth. Furthermore, the fate of the narrators is unclear. In a mainstream apocalyptic narrative, the damned should experience their just retribution in order to provide closure. Dickinson refuses to adhere to this and instead paralyzes the movement toward apotheosis. There is no union between God and his people, and no lifting of the darkness even if the earth continues to abide.

Dickinson’s poetry characterizes God as inscrutable at best, a far cry from the loving, benevolent God of conventional belief. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne effectively captures the nineteenth-century religious mainstream’s view of America’s relationship with God: “The belief was a favorite one with our forefathers, as betokening that their infant commonwealth was under a celestial guardianship of peculiar intimacy and strictness” (1:155). In conventional portrayals, God watches over America with special care because of the integral role America was to play in bringing about the Millennium. This sentiment can be found in many of the popular periodicals of the time, including those to which the Dickinson household subscribed, such as *Harper’s Weekly*. In a *Harper’s* article published in 1857, titled “Democracy by Precedence,” the anonymous author writes the following:

> We remember that it is humanity . . . that God watches over and leads onward to a glorious earthly destiny . . . to find its millennium of intellect and love in a brotherhood of peace and purity. And perhaps no countries have illustrated this fact better than England and the United States. . . . The older the world grows the more numerous the instances of this splendid success. (18)

Despite society’s optimistic view of America’s “splendid success,” progress toward the Millennium, and approval from God, Dickinson’s poetry suggests a less stable relationship between America and the deity. In Dickinson’s poetry, God is distant, alien, and unpredictable, not the paternal God of popular culture. Dickinson’s speakers are also frequently appalled at
God’s absence. In poems like “I know that He exists” (365), Dickinson affirms her belief in God, but also her dismay at his inscrutability and absence in the opening stanza: “I know that He exists. / Somewhere – in silence – / He has hid his rare life / From our gross eyes.” Likewise, in poem 747 Dickinson, expresses what Wolff calls the “appalling whimsy” of God as he creates and destroys according to his whim:

It’s easy to invent a Life –
God does it – every Day –
Creation – but the Gambol
Of His Authority

It’s easy to efface it –
The thrifty Deity
Could scarce afford Eternity
To Spontaneity –

The Perished Patterns murmur –
But His Perturbless Plan
Proceed – inserting Here- a Sun –
There- leaving out a Man –

Both poems illustrate a common vein in Dickinson’s characterizations of God. Dickinson, like many of her contemporaries, had no doubts about God’s existence, but she rejected the “conventional definition of God’s nature” (Wolff 143). Wolff observes that religious leaders of the era “urged hope upon their flock—enjoined them to believe that God was loving and benevolent, that despite the evidence of disease and death, God would lead the chosen into a joyous Eternal Life, in the Hereafter” (143). God’s absence or failure to give signs of his presence, or his advent in the case of Apocalypse, would consistently prove problematic for Dickinson. In poem 747 God is characterized by words such as “Gambol,” “Authority,” “thrifty,” and “Spontaneity.” These are not the typical descriptions of God found in mainstream pulpits where God is portrayed as the benevolent, loving shepherd. In poem 747, humanity is
dispensable; it is as easy to “invent a Life” as it is to “efface” a life in order to accomplish “His Perturbless Plan.” Dickinson does not place humanity at the center of teleological design. Humanity does not participate in a joint covenant with God that will bring about fulfillment of the “Perturbless Plan.” Instead, humanity is utterly disposable. Dickinson’s emphasis on God’s capriciousness regarding human life often results in a characterization that makes him seem more alien and antagonistic than benevolent. This characterization is not entirely without biblical precedent, however, and is nowhere more strongly evidenced than in the Book of Revelation.

The Book of Revelation was, by Dickinson’s own admission, a favorite source of inspiration. Although she whimsically referred to it as the “Gem Chapter,” its influence can be traced to some of the darker treatments of God and the problem of death in Dickinson’s poetry. The promise of Resurrection was little comfort to Dickinson when, to her, it refuted the possibility of Resurrection. In the same way, the destruction within the Book of Revelation refutes the promise of regeneration. In addition, the God of Revelation is God, the destroyer, the characterization of God that Dickinson explores in poems where God’s capriciousness is the most prominent aspect of his character. Tina Pippin’s “Apocalyptic Horror” argues that the text of Revelation is essentially a horror tale, comparing it to “Gothic romances” and “contemporary shudder pulps” (198). Her analysis identifies specific features and conventions of the horror genre that can be found within the text of Revelation. Pippin’s analysis of Revelation as horror fiction focuses specifically on the character of God:

There are many monsters in the Apocalypse, but the real bad-ass monster sits on the Heavenly throne. In horror literature the unexpected happens—the dead come back to life, angels exist and speak, and evil is thoroughly (?) destroyed. . . . The monster committing these deeds is not the assorted beasts who “represent” (and embody) evil. Who is responsible for this final holocaust? God/Son of man/Lamb does more evil (for good?) than any other monster in the text. The beasts are certainly cruel, but the
destructive God of the Apocalypse is far crueller. . . . God is a destroyer, the leader of the ultimate massacre. Although in the Apocalypse the promises for the faithful witnesses are great, the vengeful deity is incredibly frightening. (210).

Pippin writes about the Book of Revelation from a modern perspective, linking its features to both Gothic Romances and modern horror cinema. This reading overstates the horror element in Revelation. Despite this hyperbole, Pippin notes a significant overlap between the conventions of the horror genre and the features of Revelation. Dickinson capitalizes on this overlap by using the Gothic—a genre of extremes—to construct her apocalyptic narrative. Despite her society’s willingness to do so, Dickinson was unable to ignore how the optimistic Apocalypse that conventional tradition developed contradicted the actual text of Revelation.

Poem 1356 probes the questions these contradictory narratives raise by exploring the ideas of ownership and power over creation:

A little Madness in the Spring
Is wholesome even for the King,
But God be with the Clown –
Who ponders this tremendous scene –
This whole Experiment of Green –
As if it were his own! (1356)

The Bible indicates that one day earthquakes, fire, war, famine, and death will devastate the earth, and will be followed by a darkened sky when the “third part of the sun was smitten, and the third part of the moon, and the third part of the stars” (Revelation 8:12). These are what Pippin identifies as the monstrous qualities of God depicted in the Book of Revelation. According to Pippin, God is the “destroyer, the leader of the ultimate massacre” (210).

Dickinson’s depictions of God in poem 1356 are less malignant than Pippin’s, but are nevertheless fraught with troubled queries about God’s capriciousness regarding his “Experiment of Green.” Dickinson’s speaker muses on the joys of spring after a long winter, exclaiming that a
bit of madness is “wholesome” during the spring, even suggesting that God himself (“the King”) enjoys spring’s beauty. If “the King” is meant as a reference to God, as it most certainly was in “I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –” (591), then here Dickinson portrays a human-like God who revels in the beauty of his own creation. At the same time, Dickinson writes, “God be with the Clown,” a term that Wolff links to the fool in *King Lear*. If “Clown” refers to humanity, it characterizes humanity as fools who must not look at God’s creation as if they control or own it. The earth and the fools who inhabit it remain God’s “Experiment,” subject to his caprice. Among Dickinson’s extensive corpus, she prepared few of her poems for publication herself, making it difficult, and nearly impossible in some cases, to discern which version she meant as the definitive text. Franklin’s variorum edition of Dickinson’s poetry includes a variation of the poem. Instead of “Experiment of Green,” Dickinson wrote as an alternative, “Apocalypse of Green,” which suggests the correlation between God’s caprice and the Apocalypse. The earth and its natural beauty are mere experiments that can be destroyed in the Apocalypse at a moment’s notice. In this context, Dickinson’s poem reads as a warning not to become too attached to the bounty of creation when at any moment, the Lord might come “as a thief in the night” to destroy it (1 Thessalonians 5:2). Dickinson’s juxtaposition of “Spring” and “Experiment” is also disturbing. Spring is a time of regeneration and rebirth when new life emerges out of winter’s destruction, which is not unlike the narrative of Apocalypse when God erects the New Jerusalem out of the detritus of Armageddon. However, the word “Experiment” undermines the certainty that is typical in apocalyptic narratives.

Poem 425 also lacks the apocalyptic movement toward apotheosis, providing little closure, relief, or salvation. It also demonstrates a remarkable blending of apocalyptic and Gothic
features. The repetition of temporal images coming to an end, of boundaries, and of Judgment and death produce the foundation of an apocalyptic narrative. At the same time, the Gothic character of the “Goblin” and the helplessness and imprisonment of the “you” within the poem frame the narrative as Gothic and create a version of the Apocalypse that goes beyond the terror of destruction to address the horror of personal annihilation without the promise of salvation:

‘Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch,
That nearer, every Day,
Kept narrowing it’s boiling Wheel
Until the Agony

Toyped coolly with the final inch
Of your delirious Hem –
And you dropt, lost,
When something broke –
And let you from a Dream –

As if a Goblin with a Guage –
Kept measuring the Hours –
Until you felt your Second
Weigh, helpless, in his Paws –

And not a Sinew – stirred – could help,
And Sense was setting numb –
When God – remembered – and the Fiend
Let go, then, Overcome –

As if your Sentence stood – pronounced –
And you were frozen led
From Dungeon’s luxury of Doubt
To Gibbets, and the Dead –

And when the Film had stitched your eyes
A Creature gasped “Reprieve”!
Which Anguish was the utterest – then –
To perish, or to live?

The poem depicts the approach of death, only to have death retreat in the end. The result is agony without reprieve. In the same way, by recognizing the poem’s apocalyptic elements, it
becomes an anguished movement toward total apocalyptic annihilation without the relief of closure or regeneration.

The word choices of the first three stanzas suggest a preoccupation with time coming to an end, introducing an apocalyptic framework. Words like “nearer” and “narrowing,” emphasize the “Agony” of waiting for an ending, especially when the nature of that end is unknown. The reference to the end of time is notable given Dickinson’s historical context in which much of the population was caught up in millennialist fervor. *Harper’s Weekly* ran a number of articles directly related to millennialism and the end of the world, all of which Dickinson would have had access to in her home. In 1859, Martyn Paine wrote an article in *Harper’s* called “Signs of the Times,” claiming that the signs were plentiful and the end of the world was near. Paine concludes his article by stating, “if our premises be sound we are clearly justified in the opinion that we are very near the time when the great battle of Revelation will be fought, since it is highly probable that Commerce will have carried Christianity and the one ‘pure language’ over the earth before another half-century shall have expired” (442). Another article written in 1860 by an anonymous author was titled, “The End of the World,” and criticizes the public for believing such claims: “We are ashamed that there is need to call attention to the emptiness of all these false pretensions to a kind of knowledge that no man possesses” (59). In 1865 another anonymous author writes jokingly that “Some look for the Millennium, for which they are not prepared; and some for the Last Day, for which they are less prepared. Some fear that our coal-beds will fail, and that we shall have chilblains and frosted toes for want of fuel; others, that gold will become as common as copper, and then what shall we do for our currency?” (263). These texts make up only a small portion of the multitude of publications that expressed opinions about...
the End of Days and signs of the times. Regardless of whether or not the articles expressed skepticism or eager anticipation, together they record the ubiquity of apocalyptic obsession during the time Dickinson was writing.

Poem 425 features this obsession with Apocalypse with its movement toward inevitable cataclysm. The image of the narrowing center of a maelstrom in the first stanza is particularly effective in conveying the slow but inevitable progression toward disaster, and the second stanza continues this movement toward an inevitable conclusion with the words, “final inch,” and “Hem.” The oncoming destruction is characterized as brutal torture inflicted by an antagonist who toys “coolly” with the subject of the poem. While the identity of this antagonist is somewhat ambiguous, the poem’s imagery suggests it is God, capriciously playing with human life, not unlike the “Goblin” in the third stanza. This “Agony” of anticipation continues with the Goblin who has a “Guage,” a “standard of measure,” according to Webster’s 1828 dictionary. The Goblin measures the “Hours” and “Seconds” as the “you” of the poem waits “helpless” in his “paws.” Here Dickinson expands the apocalyptic anticipation of the end of time—suggested by the reference to hours and seconds—by including a reference to the Final Judgment as the Goblin measures, “weighs,” and gauges the worth of the “you,” in a figuration of God’s bar of judgment.

The third stanza introduces the Goblin and reinforces a Gothic framework, in a similar way as poem 619, “Did you ever stand in a Cavern’s Mouth –,” which also incorporates the figure of the Goblin as Gothic antagonist. As Wardrop notes, poem 425 is the “prototypical poem of gothic concerns: the enclosure in the dungeon, the relationship between passive speaker and goblin-ravisher, the potential doubling with an unnamed ‘Creature,’ the nihilism of a
maelstrom, and the horror of recurrence” (Wardrop, *Goblin with a Gauge* 169). The Goblin intensifies the horror of the first two stanzas by emphasizing the Gothic elements of helplessness and paralysis through the metaphor of the Goblin with a “Guage.” In a typical apocalyptic narrative, God should be “measuring” or judging souls, but in Dickinson’s narrative a Goblin performs this action of judgment. The comparative parallel between God and Goblin undermines the optimistic narrative of the Judgment Day and results in an appalling narrative in which Dickinson replaces the conventional character of God with something far more sinister.

Like much of Dickinson’s apocalyptic and Gothic poetry, poem 425 offers no closure. Instead, the poem ends in darkness and uncertainty, both of which are magnified by the final question: “Which Anguish was the utterest – then – / To perish, or to live?” As the “you” sinks into senselessness in stanza four, not unlike the post-mortem experience of Poe’s speaker in “The Colloquy of Monos and Una,” God suddenly “remembere[s],” the suffering “you” which presents God as forgetful, and even careless. That said, despite God’s apparent forgetfulness, he does “Overcome” the “Fiend.” Though subtle, the struggle between God and the Fiend conjures images of the battle between good and evil on the Last Day and suggests that the narrowing of time and the agonizing suspense of linear progression throughout the poem is, in fact, a movement toward apocalyptic denouement. The penultimate stanza launches the reader into a hypothetical scenario that modifies the entire poem. Dickinson compares the experience of the first four stanzas to being sentenced to death after a waiting period in the “Dungeon’s luxury of Doubt.” On an individual level, this period of waiting could represent the soul’s waiting during the Intermediate State; Dickinson characterizes this period of time as similar to being held within a dungeon, which is consistent with her other poems that feature a disembodied voice held
prisoner within the grave. That said, the frequent references to time suggest that this period of waiting may function on a broader level as well, that of universal Apocalypse. In that context, the event of a sentencing—the Final Judgment—does not indicate a glorious moment of salvation or even retribution upon those who have sinned. Instead, Dickinson’s narrative subverts the typical apocalyptic poem in order to focus, like Miller, on the fate of the damned. In either a Premillennialist or Postmillennialist narrative, when God overcomes Satan in the final battle, the wicked will be cast into even greater torment than they had yet experienced either in the Intermediate State or in the “bottomless pit” that would serve as prison for the wicked during the Millennium. The “you” of Dickinson’s poem moves from “Dungeon” to “Gibbet” once a judgment has been pronounced and is thus among those who will experience retribution, torture, and imprisonment. Dickinson frames the experience of sinners as a Gothic narrative, one that ends in the darkness rather than the glories of the New Jerusalem. The final stanza solidifies this Gothic narrative, when the “you” is blinded and has her eyes “stitched” closed. Dickinson offers no finality; the narrator ends by asking a question—“Which Anguish was the utterest”—rather than giving an answer and providing the reader with a sense of closure. Dickinson’s “you” is granted no reprieve. Neither the dungeon nor death provides an end to suffering. Instead, this eternity of punishment represents endless, static retribution.

This static characterization of eternity is not limited to Dickinson’s narrative of the non-Elect. Both Hawthorne’s and Dickinson’s Gothic narratives include images of the bride and bridegroom; these brides are frequently joined by images and language that parallels the marriage between the Lamb and his bride as portrayed in the Book of Revelation: 19:7-9:

Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed
in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints. And he saith unto me, Write, Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb. And he saith unto me, These are the true sayings of God.

This marriage is central to the apocalyptic concept of culmination because it symbolizes a final, irreversible union between God and his people. Hawthorne highlights this union in Dimmesdale’s election day sermon that focuses on the relationship between “the Deity and the communities of mankind” (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* I:249). In the book of Revelation, the destruction of the earth and the ruthless defeat of “the beast, and the kings of the earth, and their armies” are part of the necessary process toward this union and the realization of the divine plan (Revelation 19:19). However, Dickinson projects this fantastic imagery and the violence of Revelation onto a domestic rather than a cosmic marriage. The Gothic elements overshadow the glory and triumph of the bride narrative in Dickinson’s poem, which again undermines the mainstream’s fervent desire for apotheosis. In addition, Dickinson’s injection of the Gothic into the bride narrative transforms this apocalyptic trope into a metaphor for paralysis and dread.

While scholars have previously explored Dickinson’s bride poems, few have noted their apocalyptic nature with more than a passing observation. For example, Daneen Wardrop explores Dickinson’s bride poems extensively in *Emily Dickinson’s Gothic*. Wardrop glosses over the apocalyptic overtones of many of these poems. Though she often notes that “the possibility . . . exists that the identity of the groom is God,” her references to the Apocalypse are usually given only a brief phrase of recognition (Wardrop, *Emily Dickinson’s Gothic* 52). Despite the conspicuous downplaying of Apocalypse, Wardrop’s comprehensive list of Gothic elements within the bride poems is useful. Wardrop notes that for Dickinson’s brides, the moment of union generates fear, not joy. In addition, these poems always contain the perception
of prolonged waiting, and although Wardrop does not include the commonality, this waiting is also a feature inherent in apocalyptic narratives (Wardrop 53). According to Wardrop

The gothic wedding is a wedding gone wrong: in the unheimlich mode, that supposedly radiant day portends horror. It forebodes a marriage of dread . . . It offers a horrific hiatus in the narrative . . . or it delivers a reversal, often with an undercurrent of violence . . . Even more, it presages death. (53-54)

Each of these aspects of the “gothic wedding” could also describe the Gothic Apocalypse. The Day of the Lord should be a radiant day of victory, but within the Gothic mode, it becomes a day of horror. In the same vein, the marriage of the Lamb becomes a marriage of dread. The Gothic Apocalypse also provides a “horrific hiatus in the narrative” by refusing closure or apotheosis, and through its lack of hope for culmination this stasis without end and eternal paralysis form the typical narrative pattern. The violence described in the passage is also a central feature in the Gothic Apocalypse; the traditional Gothic narrative is soaked in blood, emphasizing death and destruction rather than the beatific vision of the New Jerusalem.

Dickinson’s bride poems are identifiable by their mention of dowers, veils, ties, briddles/bridals, betrothals, and other wordplay associated with weddings and marriages. One example is poem 638:

The Future never spoke –
Nor will he like the Dumb
Reveal by sign a Syllable
Of his profound To Come –

But when the News be ripe
Presents it in the Act –
Forestalling Preparation –
Escape – or Substitute –

Indifferent to him
The Dower – as the Doom –
His Office but to execute
Fate’s Telegram – to Him –

The indifferent groom and the opposition between “Dower” and “Doom” halt the narrative progression toward culmination. Wardrop calls this stasis “temporal suspension” wherein the bride finds herself suspended between two thresholds—the life of the maiden and the life of the wife. This “temporal suspension,” a common feature of the Gothic, is inextricably linked to the apocalyptic elements in the poem. The first stanza frames the apocalyptic narrative with the figure of “The Future” refusing to speak. The subject then, can be read as God, which is a common characterization because Revelation establishes in multiple places that God is time itself: “I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last” (Revelation 22:13). The third line indicates that the Future refuses to “Reveal by sign.” Dickinson’s dictionary defines “Reveal” by noting the etymology of the word, which has its roots in the French and Latin words for “to veil.” This definition brings to mind the conventional image of unveiling, which is a conventional feature in apocalyptic narratives. Her dictionary also references scripture, further solidifying the idea that “to reveal” is an action performed primarily by God: “To disclose, discover or make known from Heaven. God has been pleased to reveal his will to man. The wrath of God is revealed from Heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. Rom. i.” Dickinson also connects the action of revealing to “signs,” a term loaded with Millennialist connotations. Dickinson’s lexicon specifically mentions Luke’s passage about “signs,” which was a part of the traditional lexicon surrounding the Second Coming: “And great earthquakes shall be in divers places, and famines, and pestilences; and fearful sights and great signs shall there be from Heaven” (Luke 21:11). These allusions to the Book of Revelation form an apocalyptic lexicon in the first stanza that ends with a reference to
the Future’s “profound To Come,” which refers to the Second Coming. These biblical references not only establish an apocalyptic framework, they also offer an indictment of God and Christ. Dickinson simultaneously accuses Christ of failing to provide clear signs of the Second Coming, and worse, charges him with the more egregious refusal to speak and provide a sign. For Dickinson, the “Future” will not reveal the time of his coming, indicating intention rather than mere forgetfulness.

Dickinson does not reveal the sinister nature of this accusation until the third stanza. Here, the groom (Christ) is “Indifferent” to both “Dower” and “Doom,” dower, being the property which a woman brings to her husband in marriage, in this case, the whole earth, and “Doom,” being the sentence given at the final judgment. In Revelation, the celebration of the marriage between the Lamb and his wife is described in traditional terms: the bride wears white linen and guests prepare for the “marriage supper” (Revelation 19:8-9). However, Dickinson depicts this marriage in primarily Gothic terms. The groom is indifferent to the bride; the bride cannot escape or present a “substitute”; and the bride has no time to “prepare.” This overlap of the Gothic with the apocalyptic lexicon of the first stanza interrogates the celebration surrounding the marriage of the Lamb. Christ becomes the indifferent groom who merely carries out his “Office,” and his “Execution” of “Fate’s Telegram.” In this Gothic depiction of God’s cosmic design, humanity’s helplessness, Christ’s indifference, and God’s cruelty form the basis for Dickinson’s narrative, departing from the mainstream of God’s people, Christ, and God himself working as allied forces to bring about cosmic culmination. In the Gothic Apocalypse, the cosmic scale and the alien, indifferent nature of the deity dwarf humanity’s significance.
Just as troubling as the indifferent bridegroom in Dickinson’s Gothic Apocalypse, is the consistent pattern wherein Dickinson’s brides have little choice in the matter of their marriage. Dickinson suggests that the marriage between the Lamb and his bride, between Christ and the church, is a forced union, and the church plays the role of the powerless bride. This power dynamic within the context of marriage suggests that the marriage of the Lamb is not a reward for God’s chosen; instead, the marriage foregrounds humanity’s helplessness and lack of agency within God’s cosmic plan. In this way, Dickinson characterizes God’s people as pawns rather than an active force in the narrative arc of the universe.

Poem 194 also illustrates this characterization:

Title divine, is mine.
The Wife without the Sign –
Acute Degree conferred on me –
Empress of Calvary –
Royal, all but the Crown –
Betrothed, without the Swoon
God gives us Women –
When You hold Garnet to Garnet –
Gold – to Gold –
Born – Bridalled – Shrouded –
In a Day –
Tri Victory –
“My Husband” – Women say
Stroking the Melody –
Is this the way –

The first line echoes another bride poem, “Mine – by the Right of the White Election!” (411), in which the bride lacks agency and volition. Both poems develop an apocalyptic framework through loaded terms like “White Election” in the case of poem 411, and “Title divine, is mine. / The Wife without the Sign” in the case of poem 194. These two first lines also establish the central comparison between the cosmic marriage of the Lamb and a traditional domestic
marriage. The “Wife without the Sign” can be read as a wife without a ring, but instead with a “Title divine”—the bride of the Lamb. As with poem 638, “Sign” is also an important allusion to the “signs and wonders” that herald the Apocalypse. Also, a key element of this marriage is again missing, both in a cosmic and domestic sense. This “Empress of Calvary” describes her title as an “Acute Degree” that is “conferred” upon her. The word “Acute” suggests that the degree is painful, severe, intense, sharp, or unpleasant; furthermore, it was “conferred” upon her and was not something she chose. Dickinson’s dictionary also defines “acute” as “Figuratively, applied to mental powers; penetrating; having nice discernment; perceiving or using minute distinction,” suggesting that this degree confers special knowledge upon the bride though that knowledge may be painful and unwanted.

Dickinson renews the comparison between the marriage of the Lamb and a domestic marriage beginning in line six: “Betrothed, without the Swoon / God gives us Women – / When You hold Garnet to Garnet – / Gold – to Gold – .” The comparison here is to the exchanging of rings and vows at a marriage ceremony. However, the bride of Christ is betrothed without the “Swoon God gives us Women,” or in other words, without the ecstasy of emotion, perhaps love, a typical bride feels on her wedding day. Dickinson’s Gothic image of the unwilling bride is even more disturbing when applied to the bride of Christ. Line 10 continues the sinister depiction when the speaker describes the nuptial ceremony as being “Born – Bridalled – Shrouded – / In a Day – .” “Born” alludes to John 3:7 in which Christ states that “Ye must be born again.” In Dickinson’s religious circles this meant baptism and conversion. “Bridalled,” in the context of poem 194, paints the image of a bride being adorned for matrimony and clothed in white, which also conjures the image of the Bride of Christ arrayed in white linen. However, “Bridalled” is
also a pun on the word “bridled”—being curbed or controlled, even imprisoned. A wife who is “bridled” with Christ is hugely problematic; rather than being ushered into the kingdom of Heaven by a groom of her choosing, Dickinson’s bride is tethered to the groom, undermining the entire beatific narrative of the union between the deity and the church in Revelation. Perhaps most troubling is the word “Shrouded.” “Veiled” would make more sense in the contexts of both marriage and Apocalypse. However, while “shroud” can mean to shelter, protect, or conceal, it is also the cover for a dead body and a symbol of death itself. Thus, Dickinson associates this marriage to the Lamb of God with imprisonment and death. To be married to the Lamb means one must first pass through death, and even after such passage, Dickinson offers no sign of relief, but rather endless imprisonment.

Dickinson goes on to characterize the traditional wedding ceremony as a moment when women enjoy the “Melody” of the phrase “My Husband,” thus forecasting domestic happiness as a bride, now a wife, enters into a new phase of life. However, this is not the case with the Bride of Christ. While women may enjoy their new relationships with their husbands and the new title of wife, the Bride of Christ is “Bridalled” / bridled and shrouded—imprisoned, controlled, and perhaps even dead. Her fate is starkly at odds with the certainty and celebration of the Lamb’s marriage in Revelation. The poem’s final lines again provide no reassurance or closure. Instead, Dickinson ends with a cryptic question: “Is this the way – .” An earlier version of the poem was even punctuated with a question mark though the widely accepted version ends with merely a dash, as if to remove any perception of ending or finality. The question expresses incredulity that the marriage of the bride to the Lamb could possibly be “the way,” especially when contrasted with the conventionally happy occasion of domestic marriages that do not require the destruction
of the earth and a passage through the realms of death. The phrase “the way” is also significant in that Christ describes himself as “the way” in John 14:6: “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.” Though Dickinson does not appear to refute this claim, the question at the end of poem 194 suggests astonishment and dismay that the “way” would be terrifying rather than joyous.

Dickinson’s resistance to accept a union between humanity and the deity in her poems is unsurprising given her own resistance to religious conversion. In Dickinson’s social circles, a dramatic conversion experience was not only an important confirmation of election, but also a significant social milestone and right of passage into membership with a community of believers. Conversion in both a religious and cultural sense was an initiation into the narrative of the righteous in the biblical Apocalypse. These members of the Elect would enjoy salvation on the Last Day, and also the assurance that they would be spared God’s vengeance on those who did not convert. For Dickinson, the pressure to convert was extraordinary, and almost all of her biographers point specifically to her time at Mount Holyoke Academy as a particularly intense period. After religious revivals, non-converts usually received a barrage of letters from recent converts expressing hope that in time, they would accept the call to Christ. This practice was engrained in the cultural landscape well before Dickinson’s time. In an 1821 publication in The Guardian, or Youth’s Religious Instructor, an article titled “Letter From a Mother to Her Daughter, During a Revival of Religion” relates the following representative sentiments:

My Dear Child,
With trembling anxiety, and deep solicitude, I have long observed your gay deportment, and your apparent indifference to the concerns of your immortal soul; unconscious that you are a sinner, exposed to the wrath of an angry God; that you are fast traveling to the grave, and to the final judgment; that you are soon to give an account of all things done in the flesh, whether good or bad, and be rewarded accordingly . . . Must I meet you at the
The culture of conversion represented a demarcation of good and evil before the Apocalypse was fully underway, and it was also related to the biblical separation of the wheat from the chaff and the goats from the lambs. The letter from a mother to her child demonstrates this relationship between conversion and one’s fate at the “final judgment” on the “last great day.” Family members and friends pleaded with those who had yet to convert, especially during the revival meetings that swept across the United States during this time. As the letter illustrates, the fear of damnation was only part of the anxiety for those who did not convert. The fear of separation after death, of not experiencing the reunion with loved ones in the hereafter, also contributed to the pressure surrounding conversion.

Mary Lyon, the evangelical leader of Mount Holyoke created an atmosphere of familial warmth at the school, where, according to Joan Burbick, the goal was “not a matter of causing conversion but of cultivating a receptive atmosphere for it. Persuasion, as a result, often followed the course of indirection, not of dramatic encounter” (64). However, this indirect form of encouraging conversion often developed into exclusion. According to Jay Leyda, after devotions, Mary Lyon would invite “all those willing thus to give up their hearts to the influence of the Holy Spirit” to attend a private meeting with her (132). It is unlikely that Dickinson was ever included in these meetings because she would never convert in her lifetime despite all her close friends and family members eventually choosing conversion and church membership. As Burbick points out, Dickinson appears to have been less concerned about retribution and hellfire than she was about being separated from her community of close friends.
Dickinson’s concern about conversion and exclusion is perhaps most evident in her letters to Abiah Root. In 1846 Root was on the verge of conversion and Dickinson wrote her a letter that express Dickinson’s sentiments “becoming a Christian” (L10):

I was almost persuaded to be a Christian. I thought I never again could be thoughtless and worldly—and I can say that I never enjoyed such perfect peace and happiness as the short time in which I felt I had found my savior. But I soon forgot my morning prayer or else it was irksome to me. One by one my old habits returned and I cared less for religion than ever . . . I hope at sometime the Heavenly gates will be opened to receive me and The angels will consent to call me sister. I am continually putting off becoming a Christian. Evil voices lisp in my ear—There is yet time enough. (L10).

Later in the same letter Dickinson writes, “I hope we may not be separated when the final decision is made, for how sad would it be for one of our number to go to the dark realms of wo, where is the never dying worm and the fire which no water can quench, and how happy if we may be one unbroken company in Heaven” (L10). Her correspondence with Root would continue in this vein for years, but in 1850, she seems to accept that she could never convert. She writes to Root of their mutual friend who had recently converted:

She has told you about things here, how the “still small voice” is calling, and how the people are listening, and believing, and truly obeying—how the place is very solemn, and sacred, and the bad ones slink away, and are sorrowful—not at their wicked lives—but at this strange time, great change. I am one of the lingering bad ones, and so do I slink away, and pause, and ponder, and ponder, and pause, and do work without knowing why—not surely for this brief world, and more sure it is not for Heaven—and I ask what this message means that they ask for so very eagerly, you know of this depth, and fullness, will you try to tell me about it? (L36).

For Dickinson, this exclusion from the righteous is less devastating for its religious implications, but more because it resulted in separation from friends and family members. This fear of separation is also evident in poems like “‘Twas just this time, last year, I died” and “Because I
could not stop for Death—” where the afterlife is characterized by dead speakers witnessing the seasons, holidays, and activities of the living but being excluded from taking part in them.

Many of Dickinson’s apocalyptic poems, such as “Of Tribulation—these are They,” (328), incorporate the narrative of those excluded from salvation. Poem 328 blurs the distinction between the Elect and the non-Elect, undermining the certainty of salvation common in mainstream religious thought and practices such as public conversion:

Of Tribulation – these are They,
Denoted by the White.
The Spangled Gowns, a lesser Rank
Of Victors, designate –

All these – did conquer –
But the Ones who overcame most times –
Wear nothing commoner than Snow –
No Ornament – but Palms –

“Surrender” – is a sort unknown
On this superior soil –
“Defeat”, an Outgrown Anguish,
Remembered, as the Mile

Our panting Ankle barely passed,
When Night devoured the Road –
But we stood – whispering in the House –
And all we said – was Saved! (328)

Like many of Dickinson’s poems, the first stanza of poem 328 establishes a biblical framework that refers directly to Revelation 7:13-14: “And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed in white robes? . . . And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” Nineteenth-century readers would have expected an optimistic narrative of Resurrection and salvation to follow. The first stanza generates expectations for a narrative of
inclusion, told from the perspective of those who are saved and thus included in God’s divine plan. However, the shift to a narrative of those who are excluded from God’s company of the righteous undermines these expectations and pushes the narrative into a Gothic realm of uncertainty. Dickinson inserts this Gothic uncertainty through her use of pronouns. The demonstrative pronoun “these” refers to those denoted by the white—those who are saved and among the Elect—the speaker’s use of “these” implies that she is not among those who have “washed their robes . . . in the blood of the Lamb.” Dickinson’s society would have understood the Book of Revelation as a narrative of martyrdom and persecution, a balm to those who suffer and a promise of comfort and reprieve to the persecuted—in other words, a world where suffering is redemptive. From the poem’s outset this traditional apocalyptic narrative shifts subtly to foreground a darker, parallel tale that imparts the experience of those excluded from the conventional narrative. The fate of Dickinson’s speakers is ambiguous and provisional. For people like Dickinson, who put off “becoming a Christian,” this uncertainty of salvation was surely common and a cause of great anxiety (L10). Dickinson’s poems are frightening because she shifts the focus from the traditional narrative of the saved, to explore the narrative of those whose spiritual fate remains uncertain.

Dickinson describes the unsaved others as those who “overcame most times,” and who wear only “Snow” and “No Ornament – but Palms – .” These lines are puzzling and are an example of one of Dickinson’s many riddles. Thomas Bridgman’s *Inscriptions on the Grave Stones in the Graveyards of Northampton, and of other Towns in the Valley of the Connecticut* provides some insight into these enigmatic lines. This book was part of the Dickinson library and contained Emily Dickinson’s signature with a date of 1851. This book also contains laid-in plant
material, which is another indication of Dickinson’s personal use, indicating her personal interest in gravestones. Inscriptions in the book feature several motifs and images from Dickinson’s poetry, such as the mouldering corpse, the grave as a house, the soul awaiting the Second Coming, and the soul flying to Heaven while the body awaits the Second Coming. The palm was another common motif on New England gravestones and signified victory over death.

According to Allen Ludwig,

The Palm of Victory [was] a variant on the tree of life symbol . . . signifying victory and it is strange that it should have survived intact upon the stones of New England when it seems to have gone out of fashion in Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque iconography in the form in which it appears in America (124).

Ludwig also connects the palm iconography on gravestones to Revelation 7:9: “After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands.” The second stanza ironically refers to the non-Elect as having palms that are mere “ornament,” and not the instruments of praise described in Revelation. In other words, those who are not saved remain within the confines of the grave with palms ornamenting their gravestones, and the only white that decorates the non-Elect is the snow that falls upon the gravesites.

Dickinson employs ambiguity to capture the nebulous question of salvation itself. The culture of conversion provided proof and reassurance that community members were among the saved. However, Dickinson resists this certainty by placing the fate of her speakers in a profoundly liminal state of not-knowing. This uncertainty is partially reinforced by the poem’s lack of closure, but it is also conveyed through ambiguous correlates such as the white robes and the white snow. The speakers are not included in the group who wear the white gowns. The
speakers also refer to a “lesser Rank/ of Victors” who wear “Spangled Gowns,” suggesting the existence of levels of merit. However, the speakers are not part of either group. The next line states that “All these – did conquer,” which seems to suggest that even those of “lesser rank” conquered or succeeded in obtaining salvation. Proceeding, the “But” in line six refers to those “who overcame most times – ,” indicating yet another merit rank. Those who overcame “most times” are in an entirely different category than those who wear gowns, whether white or spangled. This “But” suggests that the speakers are not among the greater martyrs mentioned in Revelation, nor those who washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb. However, even this reading is problematic because the white “snow” that decorates the graves suggests kinship with those who wear the white.

The third stanza further problematizes the fate of the speakers. When Dickinson speaks of the possibility of conversion it is always in terms of “Surrender.” A series of letters to Abiah Root reveal this sentiment. In a letter dated January 31, 1846 to Abiah Root, Dickinson writes, “I hope the golden opportunity is not far hence when my heart will willingly yield itself to Christ” (emphasis mine) (L10). In another letter dated march 28, 1846, she writes, “There is now a revival in College and many hearts have given way to the claims of God . . . I know that I ought now to give myself away to God . . .” (emphasis mine) (L11). Finally, she writes again on September 8, 1846: “I do not feel that I could give up all for Christ” (emphasis mine) (L13). In poem 328, when Dickinson writes “‘Surrender’ – is a sort unknown / On this superior soil,” the word “Surrender” suggests that the speakers are those who did not surrender to Christ’s call. These are the “lingering bad ones,” who did not devote their lives to God’s service. The reference to “soil” is significant because Dickinson so often depicts the dead remaining in the
grave, or in this case, beneath the “soil” during the Intermediate State. The adjective “superior” is also important within the context of Revelation. After Armageddon, a new earth and a New Jerusalem will replace the destroyed the previously sin-filled and now destroyed world.

“Superior soil” may represent this new “superior” earth. The speakers in poem 328 are not included in this superior earth, for they did not “Surrender” to Christ’s call. These speakers are defeated in death, which Dickinson emphasizes in the final stanza.

Dickinson sets a frightening scene in her closing stanza with the lines, “Our panting Ancle barely passed, / When Night devoured the Road – .” Dickinson’s dictionary defines “Night” as “the time after the close of life; death. John ix,” suggesting again that the subjects of this poem are among the dead. The poem ends with the troubling image of the speakers “whispering in the House” and exclaiming “Saved!” These final lines do not establish a clear resolution, nor do they clarify the fate of the speakers. Richard Sewell calls this poem a “paradox of victory in defeat,” a “way of thanking [God] for his saving hand in the dark” (557). However, Sewell’s interpretation is unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. First, there is a clear pronominal separation between those “Denoted by the White” earlier in the poem and the “we” of the final stanza, which casts doubt upon the presence of God’s “saving hand in the dark.”

Second, one of the definitions for “House” found in Webster’s dictionary is “The grave; as the house appointed for all living. Job xxx,” an image that Dickinson incorporates throughout her poetry when referring to the grave. For Dickinson, there is no victory for those kept within the confines of the grave after death. In poem 328, at the moment of death (“Night”) the speakers are located in a “House” (the grave). They manage to feebly whisper the word “Saved,” but from what are they saved? Do the concluding lines indicate a momentary reprieve from Hell (i.e. the
intermediate time of waiting before the Second Coming) or do the speakers somehow achieve salvation? The separation between the “They” and the “we” suggests that “Saved!” is an ironic exclamation. The speakers are not the saved, but rather obtain only that momentary reprieve from the greater torments of Hell, or worse, from an unknown, and devouring terror as suggested by the lines “When Night devoured the Road – .”

Despite these indications of darkness, the contradictions and ambiguity throughout the poem make a single interpretation nearly impossible. The emphasis of the final stanza is on the word “Saved!” punctuated by an exclamation mark, which, as Sewell points out, creates a paradox around the fate of the speakers. Despite its Gothic overtones of confinement, pursuit, and terror, the poem is not entirely without hope. The “Saved” at the end may not be the glorious, reassuring “Saved” of the mainstream narrative of the afterlife, but it does offer the slight possibility that God might yet take pity upon those who did not conform to expected rituals of religious conversion. However, even with this feeble ray of hope, Sewell’s interpretation remains problematic. The “victory” of the speakers is not entirely substantiated by the enigmatic “Saved” given the circumstances of the speakers in their grave-like “House” and the violent image of “Night” devouring the road. Taken as a whole, the poem is less a “paradox of victory in defeat” and more a question about the tenuous nature of salvation for those who did not demonstrate their faith in life. The poem captures the breathless, “panting” fear of those who are uncertain of salvation, and who may be left behind by converted friends and family members in “defeat” and “Anguish.” In this way, Dickinson explores the more troubling aspects of the apocalyptic narrative and how it affects those whose salvation remains uncertain.
This subversive perspective in Dickinson’s apocalyptic poetry also serves to examine the idea of cosmic order and teleological design. In traditional apocalyptic narratives, if God’s people are righteous and obey the words of the Lord, they shall not only have reward in Heaven, but will be spared the second death and will play a role in the realization of final apotheosis (Revelation 20:6). This message is repeated in the Psalms and other prophetic texts. The persecuted people of God will be avenged in a cataclysmic retribution upon those who rejected Christ. The reader, as an assumed Christian, is an integral character in this cosmic play. William Miller’s account of the Apocalypse from the perspective of a sinner describes the conventional characterization of the damned. Amidst worrying signs and wonders, the doomed narrator writes, “I am not shaken yet. . . . while these Christian fools are trembling under their vain imaginations of these sights and signs of the great last day, I stand” (Bliss 406). The narrator goes on to describe the glories of God, his host of angels, and the holy city, the New Jerusalem, lowering to earth, but he is ultimately excluded while those who obeyed Christ’s call are rewarded. This punishment for sinners and reward for the righteous is a confirmation of the accepted spiritual and cosmic order: there is a plan, and there is a good creator who is in control of that plan, possesses that plan, and embodies the progression of history. As Revelation states, “I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last” (Revelation 1:11).

Dickinson’s “Of Tribulation – these are They” (328) enacts this narrative of retribution, but does so by writing from the subversive perspective of those for whom salvation is dubious at best. Dickinson, like Poe, refuses to confirm the idea of a spiritual and cosmic order. Dickinson and Poe both omit the grand vision of the New Jerusalem. In Dickinson’s poetry, the goodness of the divine creator is called into question, not merely because of God’s retribution and violence,
but because from Dickinson’s narrative perspective, that violence is depicted as unjustified.
Dickinson’s speakers are not violent, nor are they the mad, unreliable narrators of Poe’s fiction.
They are characterized by their fear, their isolation, and their loss. Though flawed, they are
utterly human, having overcome “most times.” These meek and fearful narrators underscore the
subversive central question of Dickinson’s apocalyptic poetry—How can God’s people trust in
God’s perfect goodness when he is the executor of so much suffering?

Dickinson’s “Our journey had advanced –” (453) continues this line of questioning. In
poem 453, God is not a welcoming father at the gates of Heaven, the dead speakers are not
clearly among the saved, and there is no closure or reassurance of God’s mercy or the speakers’
salvation at the conclusion of the poem:

Our journey had advanced –
Our feet were almost come
To that odd Fork in Being’s Road –
Eternity – by Term –

Our pace took sudden awe –
Our feet – reluctant – led –
Before – were Cities – but Between –
The Forest of the Dead –

Retreat – was out of Hope –
Behind – a Sealed Route –
Eternity’s White Flag – Before –
And God – at every Gate – (453).

Like poem 328, the image of a “Road” and a “journey” serve as a metaphor for life and “Being.”
Dickinson’s narrative voice is once again a collective “Our,” indicating a group perspective. The
poem takes a sinister turn when the speakers come to a fork in “Being’s Road.” The fork in
Being’s Road is modified by the phrase, “Eternity – by Term –,” suggesting that after “Being”
or life, the “Term” for what comes after is called “Eternity.” “Term” also means a “limit or
boundary,” and Dickinson’s dictionary adds the additional example: “Corruption is a reciprocal to generation, and they two are as nature’s two terms or boundaries.” Thus, “Eternity—by Term” indicates the two forms eternity can take after “Being’s Road” comes to an end—corruption (Hell) and generation (Resurrection).

The second stanza introduces a surreal and nightmarish landscape. The speakers are reluctant to continue and are full of fear and dread as they survey the landscape around them. “Before” the speakers, or ahead of them, are “Cities,” but “Between” the speakers and the cities is “The Forest of the Dead,” which suggests the image of a graveyard with headstones protruding through the earth like barren trees. If Dickinson’s vision of the afterlife, especially for the unsaved, remains consistent, then this “Forest of the Dead,” which exists “Between” life and the City of God is representative of the Intermediate State. In this poem, the Intermediate State takes on particularly sinister significance as a barrier that prevents the dead from entering Heaven.

The twenty-first chapter of Revelation describes God’s holy city as having twelve gates and where “there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb’s book of life” (Revelation 21: 27). For Dickinson’s speakers, arriving at the gates of Heaven is not the joyful occasion normally depicted in mainstream narratives. The speakers approach reluctantly and with awe, and most importantly they are not welcomed into the city, which indicates that they are not among the names written in the Lamb’s book of life. Instead, they arrive at the city and discover that they cannot retreat, for behind them lies a “Sealed Route,” a meaningful choice of words that alludes to the seven seals spoken of in Revelation, chapters 5-8. If the world of the living lies behind the speakers and the gates of Heaven (the city) lie before the speakers, all of which are
guarded by God, then the speakers are left in a terrible, isolated stasis. The speakers’ isolation and liminal stasis prevent closure, which again illustrates Dickinson’s resistance to the conventional narrative. Within a mainstream version of the apocalyptic narrative, readers would finish the poem with knowledge about the speakers’ fate; the speakers would either enjoy the glories of salvation or be punished with the rest of the sinful world. Furthermore, the narrative should end with the replacement of the old earth and old bodies with the New Jerusalem and Resurrection bodies. Dickinson complies with none of these standard elements and instead leaves readers with more questions than answers about the speakers’ futures. She recognizes the limits of human knowledge by refusing to grant her readers the satisfying optimistic closure typical in mainstream narratives.

Poem 453 was written in 1862 in the midst of the Civil War, a time when, in the minds of the American people, the battle between the North and South paralleled the great battle on the Last Day. Dickinson would have been aware of this popular belief from a number of sources. *Harper’s Weekly* included coverage of the conflict in almost every issue during the span of the war years. Dickinson also read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* shortly after its publication in March, 1852 (Mamunes 22). Stowe’s novel provides perhaps the clearest linkages between nineteenth-century beliefs about Apocalypse and the war. As Jane Tomkins states, “The novel reaches out into the reader’s world and colonizes it for its own eschatology . . . The totalizing effect of the novel’s iterative organization and its doctrine of spiritual redemption are inseparably bound to its political purpose: to bring in the day when the meek . . . will inherit the earth” (Tompkins 139). Tompkins goes on to quote the novel, writing, “[Stowe] speaks to her audience directly in the way the Old Testament prophets spoke to Israel, exhorting, praising, blaming, warning of the
wrath to come. ‘This is an age of the world when nations are trembling and convulsed. A mighty influence is abroad, surging and heaving the world, as with an earthquake. And is America safe? . . . O, Church of Christ, read the signs of the times!’ (XLV, 519)” (Tompkins 139). Dickinson would have been aware of the apocalyptic significance of the war through sources like Stowe and Harper’s, which is clear from the way Dickinson incorporates the language of battle into poems like “Our journey had advanced – ” (453).15 Dickinson recruits the martial term “advanced” to describe the movement of the speakers. By the third stanza, she adds military terminology like “Retreat,” “Route,” and “White Flag.” As Drew Gilpin Faust notes in This Republic of Suffering, Dickinson’s “work is filled with the language of battle—the very vocabulary of war that she would have encountered in the four newspapers regularly delivered to the Dickinson house . . . half of her oeuvre, at a rate of four poems a week” comes from the years of the Civil War. Faust also asserts that the very ubiquity of death during the Civil War is what caused Dickinson’s proclivity during these years, stating that the war “provided Dickinson with inexhaustible material” (205).

Shira Wolosky also recognizes Dickinson as a Civil War poet and most strikingly, places Dickinson’s war poetry within the context of the apocalyptic rhetoric of the time. Wolosky writes that “Dickinson’s work should . . . be placed not only within the intellectual and literary currents of her period, but also into the realm of concrete historical events. Hers can be seen as part of the range of response to the Civil War offered by other contemporary writers” (Wolosky 24). Wolosky also notes that Dickinson’s father gave her F.D. Huntington’s sermons, which were published in 1860. One particularly important passage reads,

> Woes, famines, and pestilences, in the spirit if not the flesh, are but the beginning of sorrows; see that ye be not troubled. The sun of your inward world shall be darkened, the
moon not give her light, the stars fall from that Heaven; but it is because the Son of Man cometh with power and glory in your soul. ‘Ye shall have tribulation;’ for it is through much tribulation that any soul entereth into the kingdom of Heaven. (Huntington 276)

Wolosky focuses on the apocalyptic retribution in this passage to establish the ties between the Civil War and Armageddon, noting in particular the apocalyptic imagery in “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” a popular anthem of the era, and several articles in publications like Harper’s Monthly and The Springfield Republican. The war certainly influenced Dickinson’s poetry as both Faust and Wolosky recognize, but more importantly, it intensified her refusal to accept the biblical and mainstream narratives of apocalypse. The sweeping casualties of the war solidify Dickinson’s image from poem 124, in which the “Midnight in Marble – / Refutes – the Suns – .”

This variation of the second stanza was sent to Susan Dickinson sometime during the second half of 1861, and its exact date of origin is unknown. When the letter was sent to Susan, it is impossible to know how much the war had begun to influence Dickinson, but the image of death refuting the Resurrection is nonetheless an appropriate articulation of Dickinson’s later writings about the war.

One example of Dickinson’s resistance to the conventional apocalyptic mythology in American culture, including the projection of that narrative onto the conflict between The North and the South, is Poem 1212. Dickinson writes of the dead after battle:

My Triumph lasted till the Drums
Had left the Dead alone
And then I dropped my Victory
And chastened stole along
To where the finished Faces
Conclusion turned on me
And then I hated Glory
And wished myself were They.

What is to be is best described
When it has also been –
Could Prospect taste of Retrospect
The Tyrannies of Men
Were Tenderer, diviner
The Transitive toward –
A Bayonet’s contrition
Is nothing to the Dead –

For Dickinson, the human cost of battle, whether cosmic or worldly, transformed “Glory” into something terrible. Dickinson’s dictionary defines “Glory” as almost synonymous with God. The dictionary lists twelve definitions of “glory” and seven of those definitions connect the word directly to the deity. For example, the first definition of “glory” quotes 2 Peter:1: “‘For he received from God the Father honor and glory, when there came such a voice to him from the excellent glory.’ In this passage from Peter, the latter word glory refers to the visible splendor or bright cloud that overshadowed Christ at his transfiguration. The former word glory though the same in the original is to be understood in the figuration of sense.” Nineteenth-century society fervently believed that the Civil War was the cosmic battle between good and evil. Even before 1861, the mere possibility of war was tied to the idea of the Millennium. For the optimistic Postmillennialists, the idea of war was anathema, an obstacle to bringing about the Millennium. In an 1857 article titled “Peace Before the Millennium,” an anonymous author wrote of the evils of war:

I regard the age, which precedes the millennium like the time of the building of the Temple. It must be built by men of peace, in a peaceful age. David must not build it, because he had been a man of blood. He might prepare the materials, and see the pattern. Men of blood may not do the work of the world’s conversion; they never will, never can. They may print and navigate and work steam, and make railroads, and cross the oceans and continents with telegraphs, and improve the earth’s cultivation. When the peaceful policy of nations begins to be secured, then the Holy One and his people will commence the work in earnest. (281)
For Dickinson, the war seemed merely an agent of death and destruction. As depicted in poem 1212, the “Triumph” of “Victory” caused only grief when “finished Faces” were the result of such a battle.

The word “glory” in poem 1212 is also problematic because of the ambiguity surrounding its usage. The speaker expresses the sentiments of the victors of battle when speaking about “My Triumph” and “my Victory.” When the speaker, after seeing the aftermath of battle states, “I hated Glory,” he may only be referring to his own “glory,” the glory given to the victors of battle. However, given the connotations of the word, as listed in Dickinson’s lexicon as well as the cultural understanding of the war between the North and South as an extension of the great cosmic battle, Dickinson is more likely using “glory” as a metonymic replacement for God. The resulting translation, “I hated God,” illustrates the speaker’s anger at an unjust Providence who allows the suffering and violence that results in the “finished Faces” upon the battlefield. Dickinson does not end her condemnation with an indictment of God. Her second stanza condemns humanity’s presumption in believing in its ability to interpret providential design. When Dickinson writes, “What is to be is best descried/ When it has also been,” she recognizes the war and its aftermath as “Tyrannies of Men” and hardly a part of God’s plan or cosmic battle. So long as “Prospect” and “Retrospect” are separate, the cost of humanity’s lack of knowledge is the realization that the violence and suffering of the Civil War will not bring about a new millennium or cosmic victory. For the dead, the country’s “contrition,” comes too late.

With very few exceptions, the Dickinson poems featured in this study were written during the war years, including her Gothic fascicle. The Gothic lens through which she frames
narratives of death and Apocalypse thus encapsulates what Drew Gilpin Faust describes as Dickinson’s interrogation of the “war’s carnage, the price of victory and defeat, and the implications of Civil War.” Where mainstream religious culture viewed the war as an epic conclusion to God’s divine plan, the great and glorious battle when good triumphs over evil, Dickinson recognized the jarring reality of the “finished Faces.” The features and effects of the Gothic genre enabled Dickinson to articulate the frightening and disorienting reality of death and also provided a means of subverting the optimistic mainstream narrative of a glorious Apocalypse.

Dickinson’s inclusion of Gothic conventions like pursuit, lack of personal agency, darkness, chaos, and unwilling brides captures the breathless anxiety that results from exploring the darker implications surrounding death, Resurrection, and Apocalypse. The mainstream narrative glosses over these troubling considerations. Poe, Hawthorne, and Dickinson consistently refute this vision of America. Their works confront the ever-present tension between faith and doubt, salvation and judgment, and the tenuous boundary between life and death. Contradicting the mainstream narrative, these works posit the disturbing notion that neither the individual soul nor the nation as a whole can be made new. The horrors of history as well as human error perpetually contaminate the present and the possibility of deliverance in the future. Dickinson’s incorporation of Gothic ambiguity consistently reframes the mainstream apocalyptic narrative to foreground God’s inscrutability, his absence, and his alien nature. She, more than Poe or Hawthorne, leaves room for God’s grace. The God of Dickinson’s corpus may be inscrutable, absent, and alien, but through the unlikely element of Gothic indeterminacy, she invites the possibility of salvation and grace, even for the most undeserving, even for the
“lingering bad ones.” That said, God’s grace is never guaranteed and Dickinson’s characteristic ambiguity refuses to provide the reader with the optimistic certainty of mainstream narratives of death, Resurrection, and Apocalypse.

Given the rich point of intersection between Gothic and Apocalypse demonstrated by the representative authors in this study, it is important that scholars recognize Apocalypse as integral to the Gothic genre in America. The Gothic, perhaps especially the American Gothic, remains an unstable phenomenon with notoriously nebulous features. When scholars define the American Gothic they rely on a standard set of themes and tend to focus on specific topics: the Puritan past, issues of race connected to slavery and Native American genocide, the perils, isolation, and unknown of the frontier, and the false ideal of political utopianism. Religious subject matter like what Poe, Hawthorne, and Dickinson explore, is rarely identified as a primary component of the American Gothic unless subsumed under the Puritan legacy. Even more conspicuous is the general lack of recognition for Apocalypse as a primary feature of the American Gothic, especially considering how often references to the biblical Apocalypse appear in nineteenth-century works of Gothic literature. Poe, Hawthorne, and Dickinson’s pairings of Gothic and apocalyptic frameworks exemplify a larger phenomenon in American letters, in which authors used this dual framework to explore and express America’s collective cultural anxieties about national identity. Adding the subject of Apocalypse to the current definition of the American Gothic, contributes to a more comprehensive definition of American Gothic and facilitates a better understanding of a genre that resists definition.

By adding Apocalypse to the definition of American Gothic, the field also gains a better understanding of American culture and history from the nation’s inception to the present day.
Leslie Fiedler’s writes that all American literature is “bewilderingly and embarrassingly, a gothic fiction” (29). While this claim is perhaps an exaggeration, since the nation’s inception, it is nonetheless accurate that much of America’s greatest literature has been self-consciously Gothic. The writings of Charles Brockden Brown and Washington Irving illustrate the beginnings of this phenomenon. In the same way that American literature is unrelentingly Gothic, it is also unrelentingly apocalyptic. It is telling that the first American best-seller was Michael Wigglesworth’s poem, The Day of Doom (1662), a poetic jeremiad of 224 eight-line stanzas that recounts the Puritan conception of the Day of Judgment. From the early days of nationhood, Apocalypse captured the American imagination. As Arthur Redding observes in “Apocalyptic Gothic,” America’s preoccupation with Apocalypse is ultimately a “powerful strain of American exceptionalism—the idea that this country is in some way freed from the tragedy of history and endowed with the task of bringing light into a darkened world” (450).

However, the specific pairing of Gothic and Apocalypse undermines the beloved ideal of American exceptionalism inherent in Apocalyptic narratives. The Gothic captures the darker side of the American imagination in a way other genres do not, giving voice to societal fears that may not be openly acknowledged by mainstream society. As the works and cultural contexts of the authors in this study demonstrate, the subject of Apocalypse is not only integral to the American Gothic genre, but also to a study of the mid-nineteenth century, American national identity, and the history of the nation itself. However, this study is far from comprehensive. The “Gothic Apocalypse” in American literature continues to develop through the mid-nineteenth century and to the present day, though the narrative becomes progressively more secularized in later works.
Both Gothic and apocalyptic literature tend to emerge out of times of social and political crisis. Both Hawthorne and Poe wrestled with revivalism and Millennialism. During the years leading up to the Civil War, rapid changes in theological beliefs signaled drastic cultural shifts. Largely as a result of the inconceivable carnage and devastation throughout the country, the Puritan belief in America as a city on a hill—a land and a people that would bring about the culmination of God’s divine plan—slowly ceded its hold on the American imagination and national identity. Dickinson was influenced by the war’s carnage, and later authors like Ambrose Bierce would also use elements of the Gothic to explore the war’s devastation. This trend continued into the twentieth century with works like Kurt Vonnegut’s *Cat’s Cradle* (1963), which explores the terrors of nuclear warfare. The popularity of modern television series like *The Walking Dead* blend the Gothic monster—zombies—with Apocalypse, depicted as the complete breakdown of society and civilization. *The Walking Dead* specifically addresses modern anxieties about pandemic, mob mentality, technological dependence, and other crises specific to the present age.

The repeated resurgence of Gothic literature suggests that aspects of this narrative pairing are peculiarly American. Further inquiry might provide both a historical record of America’s preoccupation, even obsession, with its role in the Apocalypse, and a record of the collective fears of a nation that yearns for an impossible ideal—a city on a hill, a government founded on principles of equality and freedom, and a nation divinely delivered from the burden and horrors of history. The American Gothic Apocalypse may be a unique vehicle for the nation—authors and audiences alike—to process the failure of these institutions and to explore the human failings and inner demons that prevented their achievement.
This book was inscribed with Edward Dickinson’s name and the date, 1850.


The variations of this poem represent what R.W. Franklin calls a “literary exchange” between Emily and Susan Dickinson c. 1861. Susan offered multiple criticisms, to which Emily would respond with a new second stanza, resulting in these several variations (161). Franklin notes, “In the second half of 1861, ED copied the revised portions of the poem onto a sheet of stationary, which she bound up as part of Fascicle 10. It was a complete record of the new attempts, including the stanza she had not sent to Susan” (162).

This short description of the Resurrection morn can be found in multiple publications during the early 1850s. It was included in *The Reformed Presbyterian and Covenanter*, vol. 16, Ed. Rev. M. Roney, 1852.

See Mario D’Avanzo’s “‘Came a Wind Like a Bugle’: Dickinson’s Poetic Apocalypse.” D’Avanzo makes note of Dickinson’s allusions to Revelation in this poem and also claims that “Barring the windows and the doors is an act of human fear in the face of this half-apprehended visitation bringing destruction to the land . . . the beholders are . . . not prepared to confront (or perhaps even acknowledge) the ominous force which is a reminder to all the immensity of death and the personal Doomsday every individual soul must eventually experience” (30-31).

See for example Mario D’Avanzo’s “‘Came a Wind Like a Bugle’: Dickinson’s Poetic Apocalypse” and Lisa Day-Lindsey’s “Emily Dickinson’s ‘There Came a Wind Like a Bugle’.”

See Cynthia Griffin Wolff’s *Emily Dickinson*. Wolff writes, Dickinson “reckoned all human life as scarred by the God Who had withdrawn from us to prowl behind the veil of the visible
world. Her belief could extend to the fact of His existence, but search as she might, she could never know His nature save by indirection—and all the ills of human life pointed to some inscrutable force of destruction and annihilation” (Emily Dickinson 147-148).

8 Wolff notes that the “conjunction of ‘Madness,’ ‘King,’ and ‘Clown’ recalls Shakespeare’s King Lear, summoning up the faint memory of that drama’s tumultuous world, a raging scenery of storms and devastation. The nihilistic vision of Shakespeare’s play affirmed that tragedy is not personal but universal—that it inheres in nature’s impassive violence, death inflicted upon all in some random order” (Emily Dickinson 352).

9 See Wolff’s Emily Dickinson. According to Wolff, the poem dramatizes “mankind’s inescapable progress toward death. . . . Death comes near, threatens the worst; inexplicably, death retreats. Over and over the ritual is enacted . . . The array of forces at work within the poem is relatively simple; the antagonists are time and mortality, God’s ubiquitous instruments, and the protagonist is the speaker . . . [who] can never win: the conflict has already been defined as one in which eventually she must lose self to God in Death” (355).

10 Webster’s provides a lengthy definition of the word “Doom”: “To judge . . . To condemn to any punishment . . . to destine; to fix irrevocably the fate or direction of; as, we are doomed to suffer for our sins and errors . . . Hence the final doom is the last judgment.”

11 See Alfred Habegger’s My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson, where he describes the tremendous pressure placed upon Dickinson and others who did not display the expected signs of Christian conversion (240-242). See also Joan Burbick’s “‘One Unbroken Company’: Religion and Emily Dickinson” for a more complete summary of Dickinson’s biographers and their representation of her time spent at Mount Holyoke.
See inscriptions such as “Corruption, earth and worms,/ Shall but refine this flesh/ Till my triumphant spirit comes,/ To put it on afresh./ Hark from the tombs/ A doleful sound,/ Mine ears attend the cry./Ye living men come view the ground/ Where you must shortly lie” (30) and “Man’s home is in the grave,/ Here dwells the multitude,/ We gaze around, we read their monuments,/ We sigh, and while we sigh, we sink” (48).

Cynthia Griffin Wolff also notes this isolation, remarking that though the speakers exist in a group, they provided “no company for one another, offered no comfort or reassurance to one another, neither rejoiced with others nor sorrowed for others” (Wolff, Emily Dickinson 338).

For further information on Dickinson’s reading of Uncle Tom’s Cabin see George Mamunes “So has a Daisy vanished”: Emily Dickinson and Tuberculosis.

For further treatment of Dickinson as war poet, see Leigh-Anne Urbanowicz Marcellin’s “Emily Dickinson’s Civil War Poetry” (1996) and “‘Singing off the Charnel Steps’: Soldiers and Mourners in Emily Dickinson’s War Poetry” (2000).

Wolosky also references James Moorhead’s American Apocalypse in order to demonstrate that the Civil War “was seen as the crisis in an apocalyptic drama. It was believed that good and evil would finally clash on the fields of Armageddon, in an ultimate test not only of the nation but of the world. The Civil War was to be the turning point in the providential plan” (Wolosky 30).

See, for example, Allan Lloyd-Smith’s “Nineteenth-Century American Gothic,” pp. 109.


“It is a Fearful Thing to Fall into the Hands of a Angry God.” *Western Recorder* (Aug 1830): 1.


Mamunes, George. “*So has a Daisy vanished*: Emily Dickinson and Tuberculosis.” *Jefferson:*


