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English III

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Nature's Sublime

In Mieko Kawakami's short story *Golden Slumbers*, she encourages her readers to continue to question societal norms in times of dramatic change, remaining engaged instead of becoming complacent. Kawakami prefaces her story with a reaction to COVID-19 in Japan that she happened to witness; many people gathered around the blooming cherry blossoms in Japan, enjoying nature's beauty while disregarding the global pandemic amidst them. After providing this context, the setting changes to a wedding attended by many artists, where the age gap between the groom and bride, 54 years, went unquestioned. The story introduces a young woman who is sick of the conformity and apathy towards societal issues, wishing to live in a better world. Looking at the context of the story and the short story itself, Kawakami explores the feelings of complacency and conformity felt by many in times of crisis, dismissing the other problems in society.

Kawakami's message can be compared to the work of the German romantic landscaper, Caspar David Friedrich: *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818), *The Stages of Life* (1835), and *The Sea of Ice* (1824). More specifically, the ideas presented in the short story can be connected to Friedrich's sublime landscapes that represent the power dynamic between the human and nature.

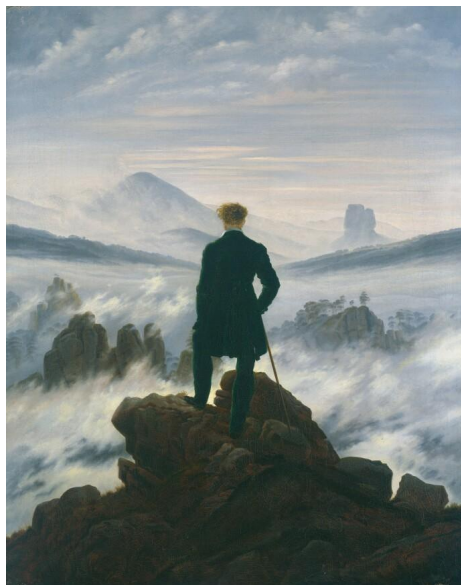


Fig 1. Friedrich, Caspar: *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*. 1818. Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wanderer_above_the_Sea_of_Fog

In *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (see fig. 1), Friedrich presents a man standing on a rock, gazing out on a seemingly never-ending mountainous landscape covered in a sea of fog. This grandeur type of landscape is a common theme in Caspar's work as it portrays the idea of the sublime, meaning of such excellence as to inspire great admiration or awe. The painting centralizes the main figure as he looks out on an extensive space of mountains and fog, capturing a sense of mystery and depth, as the fog gets thicker as the distance from the man increases. Furthermore, the contrast between the man, or the wanderer in this instance, and the awe inspiring landscape shows the difference in scale and significance when comparing a human to nature. By having the man have his back turned away from the audience, it draws the viewer's eye towards the backdrop as it follows the eyes of the wanderer. Additionally, the colors used in the painting are a muted and atmospheric color palette, mainly using colors like gray/white, brown, and blue. The cool and soft hues help create a sense of contemplation and calm, helping to describe the feelings the man may be

experiencing. The themes and techniques used in this piece of art can connect back to Kawakami's short story as the man in the painting shows a sense of detachment from the rest of the world, similar to the people described at the wedding who choose to ignore certain societal norms.



Fig. 2. Friedrich, Caspar: *The Stages of Life*. 1835. Fine Art America, <https://fineartamerica.com/featured/the-stages-of-life-1834-caspar-david-friedrich.html>

While *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* calls attention to the sublimity of nature and where humans stand in comparison through the depiction of a singular man, Caspar focuses on the position of humans in comparison to nature in a different way in *The Stages of Life* (see fig. 2.), focusing on the mortality of humans. The people in the foreground represent the various stages of life, hence the name, showing people of all different ages. In concordance with the five individuals in the foreground, the five ships in the background represent the ages of these people and how close or far they are from disappearing in the distance, meant to show their eventual death. This link between the people and the boats helps illustrate the meaning that we are merely mortal beings in comparison to nature's

immortality. One technique that Friedrich uses in this painting is the use of a line, in this case the horizon, that is used to separate the land from the sea. The composition of painting causes the readers eye to move from left to right as the depth of the painting changes from the people and smaller boats close to the shore to the larger boats that are sailing away in the distance. Additionally, the space between the boats and the difference in size represents the development and growth humans experience over the course of a life, while the landscape and nature hardly wavers. And just like the humans on the shore have no control over stopping the ships from sailing further away, the people in Japan had no control over how a global pandemic would impact their lives, choosing to live on by soaking in the beauty of the blooming cherry blossoms instead.



Fig. 3. Friedrich, Caspar. *The Sea of Ice*. 1824. Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Sea_of_Ice

Both *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* and *The Stages of Life* highlight the disconnect between the figures and the landscape, whereas *The Sea of Ice* (see fig. 3.) further explores the sublime. Once again, the sublime refers to the awe and terrifying grandeur of nature. We

see both the awe and terror in the image as we see the sublime power of the natural world, and how insignificant and little in comparison. The shipwreck can be interpreted as representing the consequences of overconfidence of challenging nature. The complete destruction of the boat shows the powerlessness humans have when facing the overwhelming force of nature. To add on, the triangular collision that takes place in the center of the painting creates a feeling of movement as the ice converges on that one spot, drawing attention to the ship wreck. The icy blue and white colors of the ice show the cold and unforgiving nature of the arctic, ultimately connecting back to that recurring theme of nature's sublime power. This portrayal of a shipwreck amongst the beautiful landscape can connect back to the wedding described in Kawakami's work as the wedding appears to be an idyllic setting, but there is underlying sense of unease as the age gap goes unquestioned.

This sample of Friedrich's work demonstrates his use of romanticist techniques to create his sublime landscapes and later inspire expressionist, surrealist, and existentialist artwork. Friedrich's life experiences, specifically being very familiar with death, influenced his work as a painter as it proved to him that humans have no control over the force of nature. In each of the three paintings examined, different symbols present and themes and techniques used connected back to Kawakami's ideas on how many people disconnect from the rest of the world in response to crisis, and overall, the lack of power and control we humans have in comparison to nature. Through Friedrich, we are able to recognize and acknowledge our place in this imposing world, and how we can only control what we can control when facing the sublimity of the natural world.

Works Cited

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Note about artworks: Since I provided full source information about each artwork with each figure caption, I do not need to provide this information on the Works Cited page.

Note on the use of generative AI:

I used ChatGPT in the process of writing this paper. While I did not borrow directly from the results, I used the following prompts to better understand how to analyze and draw meaning from the various techniques used by the artist. The results helped me further understand the artwork, and also draw deeper meaning in my analysis.

- Analyze Caspar Friedrich's "Wanderer above the Sea of Fog"
- Analyze Caspar Friedrich's "The Stages of Life"
- Analyze Caspar Friedrich's "The Sea of Ice"