FIRES OF EDEN

Dan Simmons

Analysis by Valérie Tosi

Horror Novel, Mystery

In *Fires of Eden* (1994), a horror novel by Dan Simmons, volcanic eruptions of the Hawaiian volcanoes Mauna Loa and Kīlauea symbolise nature’s revenge against civilizing missions, (neo)colonial greed and environmental exploitation. In both of the novel's timelines (1990s and 1866), the eruptions embody Goddess Pele’s wrath, the return of suppressed indigenous voices, and the failure of Western neocapitalism to respect sacred land.

Year of Publication	1994
Publication Place	New York
Editor	G.P. Putnam and Sons
Entity	Eruptions of Kīlauea and Mauna Loa

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Volcanic eruption Eruptions of Kīlauea and Mauna Loa

LITERARY EVENT

Time	1980s [1980-1990]
Location	Hawai'i - Ka'u USA
Coordinates	19.471480, -155.592523
Impacted Areas	South Kona
Emphasis Phase	Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics)
Base/Complex	Hawaiian–Emperor Seamount Chain
Volcanic Risk Ref.	Referenced

Typology	Emission Of Lava, Ash Rainfall, Gases
Volcano/Eruption Typology	Terrestrial
Anthropization Level	Tourist Places, Cultural Heritage Sites, Towns, Villages
Ecological Impacts	Changes In The Volcano's Shape, Physical Landscape Changes
Social Impacts	Conflict

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	Byron Trumbo
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Usa
Nationality	American
Reactions	Awareness, Disregard, Distrust In Authorities, Underestimation

Name	Will Bryant
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Usa
Nationality	American
Reactions	Awareness, Underestimation

Name	Stephen Carter
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Usa
Nationality	American
Reactions	Awareness, Underestimation

Name	Eleanor Perry
Age	Adult
Gender	Female
Native Place	Usa
Nationality	American
Reactions	Unawareness, Underestimation

Name	Cordie Stumpf

Age	Adult
Gender	Female
Native Place	Usa
Nationality	American
Reactions	Unawareness, Underestimation

Name	Dr Hastings
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Usa
Nationality	American
Reactions	Awareness, Caution, Rationality

Name	Paul Kukali
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Hawaii
Nationality	Hawaiian
Reactions	Awareness, Awe, Caution

Reactions

Name	Byron Trumbo
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Usa
Nationality	American
Reactions	Rage, Self-Absorption, Underestimation, Concealment Of Information

Name	Will Bryant
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Usa
Nationality	American
Reactions	Self-Absorption, Underestimation, Concealment Of Information

Name	Eleanor Perry
Age	Adult
Gender	Female

Native Place	Usa
Nationality	American
Reactions	Terror, Fight For Survival, Cooperation, Escape

Name	Cordie Stumpf
Age	Adult
Gender	Female
Native Place	Usa
Nationality	American
Reactions	Terror, Fight For Survival, Cooperation, Escape

Name	Paul Kukali
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Hawaii
Nationality	Hawaiian
Reactions	Terror, Fight For Survival, Cooperation, Intervention

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	White people
Reactions	Disregard, Underestimation

Name	Indigenous people
Reactions	Awe, Awareness, Caution, Apprehension, Anxiety

Affects/Reactions

Name	White people
Reactions	Fight For Survival, Escape, Terror, Survival Instinct

Name	Indigenous people
Reactions	Prayer, Fight For Survival, Terror, Survival Instinct

Volcanic eruption 1866 Eruption of Kīlauea

LITERARY EVENT

Time	June 1866
Location	Ka'u Kingdom of Hawai'i
Coordinates	19.413497, 204.724045
Impacted Areas	The volcano's base
Emphasis Phase	Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics)
Base/Complex	Kīlauea (Hawaiian–Emperor Seamount Chain)
Volcanic Risk Ref.	Referenced

Typology	Emission Of Lava
Volcano/Eruption Typology	Terrestrial
Anthropization Level	Remote Dwellings, Villages
Ecological Impacts	Changes In The Volcano's Shape, Physical Landscape Changes

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	Lorena Stewart ‘kidder’
Age	Adult
Gender	Female
Native Place	Usa
Nationality	American
Reactions	Underestimation, Wonder, Curiosity, Fascination, Fear

Name	Samuel Clemens (mark Twain)
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Usa
Nationality	American
Reactions	Awareness, Caution, Fascination, Wonder, Fear

Name	Rev. Haymark
Age	Old
Gender	Male
Native Place	Usa
Nationality	American

Reactions	Fascination, Curiosity, Caution, Wonder, Fear

Reactions

Name	Lorena Stewart ‘kidder’
Age	Adult
Gender	Female
Native Place	Usa
Nationality	American
Reactions	Order, Cooperation, Fear, Survival Instinct

Name	Samuel Clemens (mark Twain)
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Usa
Nationality	American
Reactions	Order, Cooperation, Fear, Survival Instinct, Pragmatism

Name	Rev. Haymark
Age	Old
Gender	Male
Native Place	Usa
Nationality	American
Reactions	Fear, Order, Cooperation, Survival Instinct

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	White people
Reactions	Underestimation, Fascination, Curiosity

Name	Indigenous people
Reactions	Caution, Awe, Awareness, Fear

Affects/Reactions

Name	White people

Reactions	Escape, Fear, Survival Instinct

Name	Indigenous people
Reactions	Terror, Escape, Prayer

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords	Hawaiian Volcanoes, Goddess Pele, Mauna Loa, Kīlauea, Environmental Exploitation, Volcano Tourism, Neoimperialism, Civilizing Mission
Similes	"as indifferent to our intrusion as some great Vulcan god would be to the timorous presence of three fleas in his fiery furnace" (131)
Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	Locus Horridus, Hell, Apocalypse, Supernatural, Colonisers, Colonised People, Prophecy, Corrupted Civilisation, Superstition
Syntax	Parataxis, High frequency of phenomena of the spoken language
Punctuation	No Peculiarities
Morphology	Preference For Nouns Adjectives, High frequency of phenomena of the spoken language

Dan Simmons' novel *Fires of Eden* (1994) is a horror novel set in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Hawaii, consisting in two timelines running in parallel. The first involves American teacher Eleanor Perry, who has come to Big Island - Hawaii on a pilgrimage following in the footsteps of her great-aunt Lorena Stewart, and using her 1866 travel journal as a guidebook. On Big Island, a ruthless Donald Trump-like millionaire named Byron Trumbo aims to sell the Mauna Pele resort to a group of Japanese investors, but the mysterious disappearance of some guests and the eruptions of Mauna Loa and Kilauea are likely to upset his business plans. The second timeline revolves around the Hawaiian adventure of Miss Stewart (based on the travel writer Isabella Bird Bishop) and Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) in 1866. The dramatic climax in both plots is represented by the eruption of Big Island's volcanoes, caused by the ongoing fight between the goddess Pele and her enemies. The mythology of Hawaii overlaps with (neo)colonial history, as the evil spirits that arouse Pele's rage are brought about by Hawaiian shamans in a bid to fight against the invasion and exploitation of their land and people.

In the opening chapter of the novel, Simmons uses figurative language to shape evocative images of Hawaii's volcanic landscape on the Kona coast, where Trumbo's resort Mauna Pele is located, and to characterise the presence of tourist sites on the island as a form of ecological and cultural violation. A third person omniscient narrator offers geographical and geological details of the area surrounding the Mauna Pele, describing the setting as an "artificial oasis of palm trees within the jumble of black lava" (Simmons 9). The 'jumble' of black lava represents the creative chaos of the natural world, in stark contrast with the artificial oasis created by capitalist Trumbo. The narrator uses Hawaiian native

language to distinguish between two types of lava: the *pahoehoe*, which is smooth and older, and *a'a*, new, jagged and dangerous. *A'a* is described through similes that pertain to the Gothic world and the semantic field of war: "its edges knife-sharp, its forms moulded into grotesque towers and tumbled gargoyle figures […] like tier upon tier of razor-edged warriors frozen into black stone" (10). Building on Gothic images, Simmons evokes a sense of alert and defence in the depiction of the physical landscape of South Kona, paving the way for a dramatization of the cultural clash between Big Island's Indigenous communities and the tourists, businesspeople, and investors from the Global North. Furthermore, Simmons modernises the "Imperial Gothic" (Bratlinger 227) tradition by representing the far reaches of America's tourism empire, "where strange gods and 'unspeakable rites' still ha[ve] their […] devotees" (228). As Justin D. Edwards et al. observe, Gothic forms may help us to imagine a world "based on what we have done in the past, whether it be excessive consumption, exploitation of resources, murder, or other kinds of transgression" (Edwards et. al. ix). In *Fires of Eden*, characters like Trumbo, his personal assistant Will Bryant, the resort's manager Stephen Carter, and the Japanese investors see Big Island as a mere exotic and sensational place they can exploit for profit maximization. They embody a commercial and predatory touristic industry that ignores ecological balance and geohazards, and disregards the preservation of Indigenous heritage sites. Trumbo's resort has caused multiple damage to local environment and culture: due to clearcutting, there are only "few palm trees along the fairways" (Simmons 10) of the Mauna Pele's golf course; Trumbo's employees have imported mongeese from abroad to kill local snakes; his workers have bulldozed ancient Hawaiian fishponds; the petroglyph area is threatened by overbuilding. From these premises, the simultaneous eruptions of Kilauea and Mauna Loa, the apparitions of demonic creatures such as giant boars and snakes, the hellish voices in lava tubes, and the mysterious disappearances of tourists symbolize cosmic vengeance against human ignorance, greed, and arrogance.

Concerning risk perception and mitigation, chapter IV dramatizes the disconnection between scientific expertise, embodied by volcanologist Dr. Hastings, and the economic interests of entrepreneurs from the Western world. This chapter is introduced by an excerpt from a real document, namely the *Hawaiian Riviera Resort KAHUKU, KA'U, HAWAII. Final Impact Statement, December 1987*, which sheds light on how tourism investors have always tended to underestimate geological risks in the name of profit. While Trumbo demands certainty, Hastings maintains that "Nothing is for sure [and it's a matter of] low-order probability" (42). His description of the 1984 eruption of Mauna Loa seems to build on Michael J. Rhodes 1988 account on the *Journal of Geophysical Research*, showing Simmons' attention to scientific sources in his rewriting of Mauna Loa's history. These intertextual references are not merely decorative, but reinforce the novel's ecological message, exposing the deficiencies of risk management in complex touristic environments like Hawaii. Despite clear evidence that the resort's site has been and may still be subject to landslides, earthquakes, and lava flows, Trumbo dismisses these as "low-order probability" (42) events and mocks scientific explanations as annoying technicalities. Also Stephen Carter considers eruptions "minor risks" (227) even if "the world's greatest volcano authorities" (227) are suggesting immediate evacuation of the Mauna Pele. Here, Simmons focuses on the communication gap between scientists and business owners, which stems from their use of fundamentally different languages. While the volcanologist relies on technical terminology – "underwater slopes" and "fault block slumps" (42) – to describe volcanic activity on the Mauna Loa, businesspeople like Trumbo tend to speak in terms shaped by market-driven discourse.

On a cultural level, the use of foul language by tourists, Trumbo, and his comrades reflects their ecophobic condition. As Estok observes, "ecophobia exists on a spectrum and can embody fear, contempt, indifference, or lack of mindfulness (or some combination of these) toward the natural environment [and] has also greatly serviced growth economies and ideological interests" (Estok 1). Expressions such as "fucking rock" (Simmons 11), "fucking island" (15), "fucking volcano" (25), and "fucking tsunami" (42) express an idea of nature as a "hostile enemy" (Estok 72) that persistently tries to hinder the *homo oeconomicus's* plans. Trumbo's response to the unpredictability of natural disasters is to turn them into something profitable, through a commodification of natural entities and phenomena. Indeed, Trumbo and his entourage view volcanic eruptions not as a risk to avoid, but as a kind of tourist attraction, as "Thousands of people will pay premium prices to come see an eruption like this…risk tidal wave and being buried in lava to catch the show" (Simmons 43).

In this context, Eleanor Perry and her friend Cordie Stumpf are representative of naive American tourists who have a limited knowledge of Hawaiian cosmogony and who are scarcely aware of the risk posed by the volcanoes Mauna Loa and Kilauea. In the first chapters, Eleanor is portrayed as a historian and academic who engages with the past through an analytical and distanced approach, grounded in Western rationalism. However, as the narrative progresses, she becomes increasingly involved in the mythology of Big Island, beginning to perceive this volcanic land not only as a backdrop for an exotic experience, but also as a living entity endowed with character, memory and agency. Eleanor's shift is presented as an expansion of cognition and perception through an immersion in Hawaiian myth, history, and nature. In this immersive process, she is guided by Paul Kukali, the curator of art and archaeology at the Mauna Pele. Kukali, for example, explains that the petroglyph area is full of "*mana*–[a] spiritual power that flow[s] from the earth and the gods and each other" (106, emphasis in original). Kukali is a spokesman for environmental ethics, asserting that Trumbo and many people like him usually build their touristic structures "in foolish places" (153) without any awareness of risks. He also tells the stories of Pana-ew, Nanaue, Ku, and other monsters that the Volcano's Goddess Pele banished to the subterranean world, pointing out how thirst for "power over the individual […] the others [and] the environment" (175) has not changed much over millennia. Eleanor's evolution is both cultural and moral, as she becomes more critical of the exploitative actions of the resort developers and more empathetic toward Big Island's communities and natural environment. She realises that the Mauna Pele resort is "too much of a violation" (342) both in ecological and cultural terms. By dramatizing the clash between respect for the land and economic greed, Simmons deconstructs the capitalist and touristic dream embodied by the Mauna Pele resort, and offers a powerful critique of the profit-driven logic that disregards environmental realities and cultural identities in (neo)colonial Paradises.

Also in the 1866 timeline there is a reference to a naive perception of volcanic risks by foreign explorers and writers like Miss Stewart and Mr Clemens, while the civilising mission in the Hawaii, embodied by Reverend Haymark, is presented as a form of invasion and colonisation of the imagination, with detrimental effects on local environment and Indigenous communities. In chapter X, when Miss Stuart starts her journey to the volcano Kilauea, she is enchanted by "the most spectacular few square miles on our surprising Earth" (120). She finds it difficult to describe "the wonders of a volcano in the midst of its activity" (131). Her description of the eruption evokes William Turner's paintings of Vesuvius, with their grainy brushstrokes and bright colour: "a red-lit void, a rocky absence of texture or detail" (131).

The volcano is characterised as a fantastic, mighty entity endowed with life, and apparently unconcerned with the presence of 'tiny' humans:

Kilauea leapt and frolicked and breathed and gasped and spewed its fiery venom all about us, oblivious of us, as indifferent to our intrusion as some great Vulcan god would be to the timorous presence of three fleas in his fiery furnace. (131)

Rev. Haymark feels a "religious awe" (133) before the spectacle of nature, while Miss Stewart admits that "words [like] fountains, sprays, fire, jets, explosions […] simply do nothing to convey the total and overwhelming otherworldness, the sheer power and terrifying grandeur of [the eruption]" (132). In this passage, coherently with the historical context, and the characters' cultural identity, Simmons presents a key principle of the aesthetics of sublime, that is the inexpressibility and emotional excess brought on by encounters with forces far beyond human comprehension. Indeed, the phrase "terrifying grandeur" directly evokes Edmund Burke's definition of the sublime as a mix of awe and fear. The following chapter is introduced by an excerpt from Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Kapiolani* (1892), a poem that celebrates a pivotal moment in Hawaiian history when High Chiefess Kapi'olani defied traditional religious taboos by descending into the Kilauea crater – believed to be the home of the volcano goddess Pele – to assert the supremacy of Christianity. The use of this epigraph underscores a major theme of *Fires of Eden*: the fraught encounter between indigenous spirituality and Western civilisation. Simmons uses Tennyson's verses to satirize colonial and neocolonial attitudes, opening the chapter with a celebration of the Christian heroine Kapi'olani and ending it with the depiction of Miss Stewart, Mr Clemens, and Rev. Haymark as survivors escaped from "the terrors of Hale-mau-mau" (145), naming Kilauea's caldera. This shift is reflected by the sudden transformation of the volcanic landscape into a *locus horridus*, represented on a linguistic level

through the repetition of the adjective “hellish”: “hellish pit” (131); “hellish shore”; “hellish glow” (144); “hellish darkness” (144).

When, during the eruptions of Mauna Loa and Kilauea, some missionaries on the Kona coast disappear, Miss Stewart, Mr Clemens, and Reverend Haymark roam the jungle to investigate what happened and realise that infernal creatures called ‘the marchers of the night’ have escaped the subterranean world of Milu to chase white people. A local Indigenous boy named Halemanu explains that his grandfather and other *kahuna* (shamans) opened the door to the Underworld “to rid [themselves] of the *haole* holy men” (Simmons 256, emphasis in original). The awakening of the volcano is a reaction of Goddess Pele to the appearance of such hellish creatures on the island.

In Fires of Eden, Simmons builds on the Gothic mode also to shape a neocolonial reality in the Anthropocene/Capitalocene, where “transgression, excess, and monstrosity” (Edwards et. al. xi) are inextricable parts of human life. Here, the ecological uncanny is embraced to criticize “the cultural practices that contribute to environmental crises” (xiii). The aggressive tourism industry embodied by Trumbo’s resort pushes Big Island’s elders to invoke demonic creatures from the Underworld of Milu. In this scenario, Eleanor’s ability to interpret the past through her aunt’s journal becomes crucial in understanding the present danger and the cultural meaning of the volcanic eruptions. What she finally acknowledges is the process of *slow violence* that has afflicted Big Island since 1866. *Slow violence* is described by Rob Nixon as “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed along time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (Nixon 2). In Simmon’s novel *slow violence* manifests itself as a combination of deforestation, overbuilding, and cultural assimilation of Indigenous people over the centuries, while capitalist profit is associated with masculine domination over feminine nature. The Mauna Pele resort itself becomes a metaphor for environmental and cultural violation, representing the colonization of sacred land, an act of desecration comparable to the rapes suffered by Pele in Hawaiian mythology.

Simmons combines scientific knowledge and myth by describing “Pele’s hair” (298) as a form of “spun glass” (296) created during the eruptions of Mauna Loa and Kilauea, and using the attribute “hellish” (325) to define its reflective quality. Pele’s hair is beautiful, and deceptively fine, yet it originates from explosive volcanic force. This duality mirrors the novel’s portrayal of Hawaii as a paradise that can easily turn into hell. Pele’s hair frequently appears during moments of intense supernatural activity or just before a volcanic eruption, identifying locations that are holy or undergoing transformation. It serves as a reminder of the goddess’ enduring power, particularly in areas where alien forces – such as American tourism industry – attempt to suppress or commercialize indigenous spiritual traditions.

In the XX century timeline, Hawaiian traditional knowledge, preserved in the past by the *Pele kahuna* (female shamans), is either ignored or commodified by businesspeople like Trumbo. Also in this case the Indigenous elders make ancient chants to get rid of their invaders and exploiters, but decades of colonization and loss of ancestral practices have weakened their power. Leonard and Leopold, two elders interviewed by Eleanor, assert that “[they] have lost the old ways. [They] have lost [their] pride” (263) and are therefore unable to propitiate Madame Pele. The inability to control the forces they have unleashed and to read Pele’s intentions reflects both a spiritual and ecocultural disconnect from their land and ancestral heritage, showing the consequences of colonization and cultural erosion on Indigenous systems of knowledge and beliefs. In this context, Pele – as well as its feminised body – can be read as a symbol of the Earth’s resilience over centuries of patriarchal exploitation and slow violence. From this perspective, “Sisterhood of Pele” (388) evoked near the novel’s end suggests that only a return to a feminist ecological thinking, consisting in reverence for natural and spiritual forces, can restore ecological balance.

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Created: 2025-09-14 | Last Updated: 2025-11-21