

# THE VOLCANO LOVER

Susan Sontag

Analysis by Valérie Tosi

Biographical Novel, Historical Novel

Susan Sontag’s *The Volcano Lover* (1992) is a biographical novel dealing with the life of Sir William Hamilton between 1772 and 1800, when he was Ambassador to the court of Ferdinand I in Naples. In his novel, Sontag portrays Vesuvius as a living symbol of passion, destruction, revolution, and Nature's powers. The volcano’s eruptions embody uncontrollable desire and political upheaval, mirroring the characters’ emotional turmoil and the Zeitgeist of the second half of the Eighteenth century.

Year of Publication	1992
Publication Place	London
Editor	Jonathan Cape Ltd
Entity	1779 Eruption of Mount Vesuvius

## GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

### Volcanic eruption 1779 Eruption of Mount Vesuvius

REAL EVENT

Time	29 July - 30 August 1779
Location	Campania Italy
Coordinates	40.821360, 14.426208
Impacted Areas	the volcano's base and the surrounding areas within 2-3 miles; Somma; Ottaviano; Cacciabella
Base/Complex	Volcanic Complex Somma-Vesuvius

Typology

Explosive

“the smoke and smell of Sulphur was [...] intolerable” (Hamilton 1779, 4); “a white, and sulphureous smoke issued continually” (Hamilton 1779, 6)

Explosive

“an emission of red hot Scoriae, and ashes” (Hamilton 1779, 5)

#### Explosive

“an immense quantity of stones, Scoriae, and ashes were shot up to a wonderful height” (Hamilton 1779, 6); “volcanick bombs” (Hamilton 1779, 14)

#### Effusive

“the Lava [...] spread itself in the valley” (3); “a quantity of liquid lava seemingly very weighty, just heaved up high enough to clear the rim of the crater” (Hamilton 1779, 6)

#### Explosive

“small stones fell at Ottaiano” (Hamilton 1779, 8)

Volcano/Eruption Typology	Terrestrial	Stratovolcano		
Anthropization Level	Cities	Villages	Remote Dwellings	Agriculture Areas
Ecological Impacts	Changes In The Volcano's Shape			
	<p>“the mouth of the Vesuvius was widened” (Hamilton 1779, 7); “a portion of the little Mountain within the crater had fall’n in” (Hamilton 1779, 8); “The crater seemed much enlarged [...] and the little Mountain no longer existed” (Hamilton 1779, 9); “The conical part of Vesuvius is now cover’d with fragments of lava, and scoriae” (Hamilton 1779, 22); “a stratum of hard scoriae, on the side next to the Mountain of Somma [...] forming a high ridge” (Hamilton 1779, 23); “the curious channels in which the lava run in the month of May last are all buried, the Volcano appears to have likewise increased in height, the form of the crater is changed, a great piece of its rim towards Somma being wanting, and on the side towards the sea it is also broken, There are some very large cracks towards the point of the cone of the Volcano [...] The ridge of fresh Volcanick matter on the cone of Vesuvius towards Somma, and the thick stratum in the valley are likewise full of cracks” (Hamilton 1779, 23)</p>			
	Atmospheric Changes			
	<p>“minute ashes [...] darkened the air” (Hamilton 1779, 6)</p>			
	Landscape Changes			
	<p>“the valley between Vesuvius, and Somma has received such a prodigious quantity of lava, and other volcanik matter [...] that it is raised, as is imagined 250 feet, or more” (Hamilton 1779, 23)</p>			
	Destruction Of Plants			
	<p>“the leaves of the trees in the neighbourhood of Somma and Ottaïano were cover’d with white salts very corrosive” (Hamilton 1779, 7); “the brush wood on the Mountain of Somma was soon in a blaze” (Hamilton 1779, 10); “blasted trees” (Hamilton 1779, 17)</p>			
	Destruction Of Animal Species			
	<p>“several birds in cages were suffocated” (Hamilton 1779, 7); “many foxes, hare, and other game were destroy’d by the fiery shower in the district of Somma, and Ottaiano” (Hamilton 1779, 21)</p>			
	Other			
	<p>“a loud report, which shook the houses at Portici” (Hamilton 1779, 9); “we had a slight shock of an earthquake” (Hamilton 1779, 28).</p>			
Social Impacts	Injuries			
	<p>“many were wounded” (Hamilton 1779, 19)</p>			

#### Destruction Of Goods/Commodities

“the leaves, and fruit were entirely stripped from the trees” (Hamilton 1779, 17); “a great magazine of wood in the heart of the town was all in blaze” (Hamilton 1779, 19)

#### Destruction Of Dwellings

“ruin’d houses” (Hamilton 1779, 17); [Ottaiano was] unroof’d, half buried under black scoriae, and ashes, all the windows towards the Mountain broken, and some of the houses themselves burnt” (Hamilton 1779, 18); “straw huts [...] erected for the watch men of the grapes [...] were burnt” (Hamilton 1779, 19); “The roof of the Palace [of Ottaiano] was totally destroy’d and the windows were broken” (Hamilton 1779, 19)

#### Deaths

“a poor labourer who was making fagots on the Mountain of Somma lost his life” (Hamilton 1779, 7); “only two persons have died of the wounds they received from this dreadfull volcanick shower” (Hamilton 1779, 19)

## Volcanic eruption 1779 Eruption of Mount Vesuvius

LITERARY EVENT

Time	29 July - 30 August 1779		
Location	Campania Italy		
Impacted Areas	the volcano's base and surroundings		
Emphasis Phase	Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics)		
Base/Complex	Volcanic Complex Somma-Vesuvius		
Volcanic Risk Ref.	Referenced		
Typology	Emission Of Lava	Volcanic Bombs	Gases
Volcano/Eruption Typology	Stratovolcano		
Anthropization Level	Cities	Villages	
Ecological Impacts	Other		
Social Impacts	Deaths	Injuries	Destruction Of Dwellings

## INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

### Attitudes

Name	William Hamilton			
Age	Adult			
Gender	Male			
Native Place	England			
Nationality	English			
Reactions	Curiosity	Wonder	Fascination	Awareness
	Adaptation			Acceptance

Name	Bartolomeo
Age	Young Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Campania, Italy
Nationality	Italian
Reactions	<div>Awareness</div> <div>Caution</div> <div>Acceptance</div> <div>Adaptation</div>

Reactions

Name	William Hamilton
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	England
Nationality	English
Reactions	<div>Wonder</div> <div>Fascination</div> <div>Curiosity</div> <div>Fear</div> <div>Trust</div>

Name	Bartolomeo
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Campania, Italy
Nationality	Italian
Reactions	<div>Fear</div> <div>Heroism</div> <div>Solidarity</div>

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	The population
Reactions	<div>Awareness</div> <div>Adaptation</div> <div>Acceptance</div>

Affects/Reactions

Name	The population
Reactions	<div>Terror</div> <div>Survival Instinct</div>

Volcanic eruption 1794 Eruption of Vesuvius [1794]

REAL EVENT

Time	16 June - 15 July 1794
------	------------------------

Location	Campania Italy
Coordinates	40.821360, 14.426208
Impacted Areas	the volcano's base and the surrounding areas; Torre del Greco; Somma; Ottaviano; S. Anastasia
Base/Complex	Volcanic complex Somma-Vesuvius
Typology	<div>Effusive</div> <p>“the lavas ran in abundance freely, and with great velocity” (Hamilton 1795, 80)</p> <div>Explosive</div> <p>“the fiery vapours” (Hamilton 1795, 80)</p> <div>Explosive</div> <p>“the frequent falling of the huge stones and scoriae, which were thrown up to an incredible height” (Hamilton 1795, 79)</p> <div>Explosive</div> <div>Other</div> <p>"electric fire" (Hamilton 1795, 81)</p>
Volcano/Eruption Typology	<div>Terrestrial</div> <div>Stratovolcano</div>
Anthropization Level	<div>Cities</div> <div>Villages</div>
Ecological Impacts	<div>Changes In The Volcano's Shape</div> <p>“the now widely extended mouth of Vesuvius” (Hamilton 1795, 90); “the top fell in” (Hamilton 1795, 91); “The horrid chasms [...] formed valleys more than two hundred feet deep” (Hamilton 1795, 96)</p> <div>Landscape Changes</div> <p>“where the fountains of fiery matter existed during the eruption, are little mountains with deep craters” (Hamilton 1795, 96)</p> <div>Atmospheric Changes</div> <p>“the sky [...] began to be obscured” (Hamilton 1795, 79); “The darkness occasioned by the fall of the ashes in the Campagna Felice extended itself, and varied, according to the prevailing winds” (Hamilton 1795, 103)</p> <div>Destruction Of Plants</div> <p>the burning of the trees that supported the vines” (Hamilton 1795, 84); “vines [...] burnt by the ashes” (Hamilton 1795, 95)</p> <div>Other</div> <p>“About 11 o'clock of the 12th of June, at Naples we a violent shock of an earthquake” (Hamilton 1795, 77); “on Sunday the 15th of june, soon after 10 o'clock at night, another shock of an earthquake was felt at Naples” (Hamilton 1779, 78)</p>
Social Impacts	<div>Destruction Of Dwellings</div> <p>The lava “ran like a torrent of the town of Torre del Greco” (Hamilton 1795, 86)</p> <div>Destruction Of Public Buildings</div>

# Volcanic eruption 1794 Eruption of Mount Vesuvius

LITERARY EVENT

Time	June 1794
Location	Campania Italy
Impacted Areas	the volcano's base and the surrounding area
Emphasis Phase	Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics), Post-disaster (consequences)
Base/Complex	Volcanic complex Somma-Vesuvius
Volcanic Risk Ref.	Referenced
Typology	Emission Of LavaGases
Volcano/Eruption Typology	TerrestrialStratovolcano
Anthropization Level	CitiesVillages
Ecological Impacts	Changes In The Volcano's ShapeDestruction Of Plants

## INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

### Attitudes

Name	William Hamilton
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	England
Nationality	English
Reactions	AwarenessAcceptanceAdaptationCuriosityFascinationCaution

Name	Bartolomeo Pumo
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Campania, Italy
Nationality	Italian
Reactions	AwarenessAcceptanceAdaptationCaution

### Reactions

Name	William Hamilton
------	------------------

Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	England
Nationality	English
Reactions	CuriosityWonderFascinationEuphoria

Name	Bartolomeo Pumo
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Campania, Italy
Nationality	Italian
Reactions	Cooperation

### COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

#### Attitudes

Name	The population
Reactions	AdaptationAwareness

### LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords	VesuviusWilliam HamiltonBiofictionSublimeCollecting DesireRevolutionSusan Sontag
Metaphors	"the graveyard of its own violence" (Sontag 5) "a constant menace" (Sontag 6) "the legendary menace" (Sontag 28) "a great ruin" (Sontag 57) "a stimulus for contemplation" (Sontag 82) "an emblem of all the forms of wholesale death" (Sontag 112) "the very principle of destruction" (Sontag 187)
Similes	"we attend to a volcano for its elevation, like ballet" (Sontag 32)
Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	Locus HorridusLocus AmoenusApocalypseRuinsDeath FireworksFire
Syntax	High Frequency Connectives
Punctuation	No Peculiarities
Morphology	Preference For Nouns Adjectives

---

Susan Sontag's *The Volcano Lover: A Romance* (1992) is a historical, biographical novel that narrates the lives of Sir William Hamilton and his domestic circle between 1772 and 1803, a period marked by the French Revolutionary Wars (1792-1802). It offers a vivid portrait of Naples, a major cultural center in the 18th century, and delves into the dramatic events of the Neapolitan Revolution (1799). Hosted at the court of the Bourbon monarch Ferdinand IV of Naples as the British ambassador to the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, Hamilton lived in Naples from 1764 to 1799. Besides his office as a diplomat, he was also a collector of antiquities, and a self-taught geologist and naturalist. Hamilton's work on the Italian volcanoes, targeted to the travellers of the Grand Tour, was published in Naples in 1776 with the title *Campi Phlegræi. Observations on the Volcanoes of the Two Sicilies as They Have Been Communicated to the Royal Society by Sir William Hamilton*.

The creative trigger for Sontag's novel was a copy of Hamilton's *Observations* that she found in a print shop near the British Museum in the early 1980s (Blume 2000). *The Volcano Lover* deals with the lives of Hamilton, his first wife Catherine, his second wife Emma, and her renowned lover, Admiral Lord Nelson. Regarding the genre, Stacey Olster sees the novel as an example of Linda Hutcheon's "historiographic metafiction" (119) because it intertwines the narration of historical facts with fictional elements, and with Sontag's reflections on art, collecting and writing.

Noam Andrews maintains that in travelogues from the Grand Tour onwards, "Vesuvius persistently functions as a metaphor for desire, for romantic and sexual adventures liberated from the entanglements of social restrictions" (14) occupying a space where it intertwined with "antiquity, sexuality, and the southern climate" (14). In *The Volcano Lover*, this *topos* manifests itself in the love triangle between Hamilton, Emma, and Lord Nelson. Furthermore, Mount Vesuvius is the central, ever-visible metaphor for uncontrollable forces of love, violence, and revolution, always threatening to erupt and wreak ruin. Alessa Johns points out how in her historical novel Sontag used Vesuvius "to weave together images of eighteenth-century political, scientific, affective, aesthetic, and military eruptions" (89), echoing Madame de Stäel's metaphorical use of the volcano in *Corinne, ou l'Italie* (1807).

In the Prologue, the author-narrator summarises the symbolical value of volcanoes in the cultural imagination. First, she describes the volcano as a living being, with a mouth and a "lava tongue" (5). Every volcano is

a monstrous living body, both male and female [...] Something alive, that can die [...] Existing only intermittently, a constant menace [...] Capricious, untameable, malodorous [...] The slumbering giant that wakes [...] The lumbering giant who turns his attentions to you. King Kong. Vomiting destruction, and then sinking back into somnolence. (5–6).

In this excerpt, marked by several personifications, the volcano's feminine nature may refer to its capacity to produce fertile land, while its masculine character can be read in terms of destructiveness. Sontag also draws on Greek mythology, in which volcanoes and volcanic activity were often associated with Titans and Giants, particularly Typhon and Enceladus. A volcano can also be perceived "as a grand pyrotechnical show" (6); this comparison refers to the great interest in public pyrotechnic displays of 'firework' volcanoes in late eighteenth century London. Finally, referring to the volcano as an emblem of passion (7), the narrator compares it to a violent feeling that can rekindle after being extinguished.

The 'Cavaliere' William Hamilton is the volcano lover of the book's title, who climbed Vesuvius on more than 60 excursions during his 35-year stay in Italy. Sontag underlines how Hamilton, in contrast to the 18th century wave of theological conjectures on the age of the Earth and on the nature of volcanoes, confined his research to direct observation. He hired various artists and assistants to collect volcanic samples, document the lava flows, record the changing shapes of Mount Vesuvius, and draw the atmospheric changes caused by its eruptions. However, she also characterises Hamilton as a Romantic wanderer, wanting for sublime experiences and willing to be memorialised as a direct witness of the eruptions. "At a safe distance it is the ultimate spectacle, instructive as well as thrilling" (6) says the narrator in the Prologue, expressing her biofictional subject's point of view, which in turn



draws on Burke and Kant's aesthetics of sublime. In Part 1, chapter 2, we read that Hamilton had a passion for "what always surprised, alarmed" (28); however, in chapter 5, Hamilton contemplates an eruption of Mount Vesuvius "from the safety of the observatory room" (83).

As a collector, Hamilton sees Vesuvius as a repository for hidden treasures from the geological past. He makes culture of nature by gathering up "specimens of cooling lava [...] of the salts and sulphurs (deep yellow, red, orange)" (27). His passion for the volcano is ignited by both scientific and aesthetic interests, but it also unveils a reifying attitude, because "Of the volcano he could only make a gift, to his glory and the glory of the volcano" (27). Furthermore, he thinks he can possess the volcano, make it his object of desire, even though he is conscious of the eccentricity of this passion, as suggested by the rhetorical questions: "A mountain for a beloved? A monster?" (28).

For Hamilton, Vesuvius' eruptions are first and foremost a sublime spectacle:

If the mountain spat fire, hurled itself into the air, turned to flame and a moving wall of ash, that was an invitation to look. The mountain was exhibiting itself [...] Even in the most pacified souls the volcano inspires a lust to see destructiveness. (32)

When the volcano is not erupting, when it just emits dirty white vapours, it makes "a very melancholy impression" (32) on the observers. It is just "[p]ure massiveness—grey, inert" (32). By contrast, eruptions turn inorganic mass into something thrilling, vibrating with life and art. What fascinates the spectator is the volcano's "defiance of the law of gravity" (32): an eruption is "like ballet" (32). The volcano is a "stimulus for contemplation" (82), offering alternatively noise and "islands of silence" (82). Hamilton climbs the mountain and, once on the top, he has "Fantasies of omnipotence" (58): like the rear of an orchestra, he imagines himself amplifying and muffling the nature's sounds. In these examples, natural phenomena are perceived as the greatest show for everyone to see and hear: by producing "girandoles of red-hot stone, far surpassing the most astonishing fireworks, [Vesuvius offers] Entertainment and apocalypse" (129). Finally, the mountain is personified: compared to an actor, it has its own "poses and performances" (158).

The narrator's description of the eruption of August 1779 is like an ekphrasis of Fabris's illustrations for Hamilton's *Observations*:

a column of liquid fire began to rise and quickly reached an amazing height, twice that of the mountain, a fiery pillar ten thousand feet high, mottled with puffs of black smoke, scored by flashing zigzag lines of lightning. The sun went out. Black clouds descended over Naples. (83–84)

The narrator uses the following designations to characterise Mount Vesuvius: "the graveyard of its own violence" (7), "the exterminator" (28), "the legendary menace, double-humped" (28), "a great ruin [...] which could come alive and cause further ruin" (57), "an emblem of all the forms of wholesale death" (112). Such expressions draw on the *topoi* of cruel nature, death, war, apocalypse and ruin; regarding this latter aspect, not only does the volcano cause ruin, but it is a blackened ruin itself. Using this metaphor, Sontag highlights an analogy between nature and culture: both can be reshaped by unpredictable events that cause destruction and renewal. Furthermore, she suggests how the Romantic aesthetics implied a conceptual 'domestication' of nature, which was seen less as 'pure matter' than a recognisable "matter shaped by its observer" (Giordanetti and Mazzocut-Mis 164), in this case, an instance of 'ruin'. In *Mont Blanc: Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni* (1816), Percy B. Shelley considered Mont Blanc not as a mere geological conformation but as an agential force with "a plan for humanity" (Giordanetti and Mazzocut-Mis 164). Sontag's protagonist seems to share this view, pushing it to the extreme when he sees eruptions and other natural catastrophes as makers of culture: "nature run amok also makes culture, makes artifacts, by murdering, petrifying history. In such disasters there is much to appreciate" (112). In this excerpt, the narrator unveils how natural disasters, despite their inherent link with material and sociocultural annihilation, may encourage historical research and lead to scientific progress. In Hamilton's view, petrified history can be used not only as an archaeological archive for the study of past civilisations, but also as a tool for scientific investigation, involving the reconstruction of eruptive dynamics through the analysis of volcanic stratigraphy. Recent studies underline how "the geological and geomorphological records are important resources for understanding past and future hazards and disaster events" (Tilley et al. 3), because "the stratigraphy [is] fundamental [also] for the set up, along with surveillance, of statistical

models for probabilistic volcanic hazard assessment” (Doronzo et al. 3). In Hamilton’s *Observations* – which feature various plates describing and analysing volcanic deposit – and in Sontag’s novel, Hamilton is a pioneer of volcanic stratigraphy, collecting stones and minerals while keeping in mind that the mountain might suddenly come alive and cause further ruin.

In the final passages of the novel, the narrator draws connections between geological and social history to reflect on the extraordinariness of human resilience in the face of destructive powers:

Like Vesuvius, the French Revolution was also a phenomenon. But a volcanic eruption is something perennial. While the French Revolution was perceived as unprecedented, Vesuvius has been erupting for a long time, is erupting now, and will erupt again: the continuity and repetitiveness of nature. To treat the force of history as a force of nature was reassuring as well as distracting. It suggests that though this may be only the beginning, the beginning of an age of revolutions, this too will pass. (161)

Later, she adds that

To love volcanoes was to put the revolution in its place. To live in proximity to the memory of a disaster, to live among ruins—Naples, or Berlin today—is to be reassured that one can survive any disaster, even the greatest. (162)

These passages shift the focus from the danger and destruction associated with natural and social catastrophes to the human capacity to overcome trauma and rebuild a whole world from its ruins.

---

## Bibliography

Sontag, Susan. *The Volcano Lover. A Romance*. Vintage, 1992.

Andrews, Noam. “Volcanic Rhythms: Sir William Hamilton’s Love Affair with Vesuvius.” *AA FILES*, no. 60, 2010, pp. 9–15. *JSTOR*, <http://hdl.handle.net/1854/LU-8564437>.

Blume, Harvey. “Susan Sontag—whose new novel, in America, has just been published—doesn’t feel at home in New York, or anywhere else. And that’s the way she likes it.” *Atlantic Unbound, The Atlantic’s Online Journal*, April 13, 2000. *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/unbound/interviews/ba2000-04-13.htm>. Accessed 26 May 2025.

Doronzo, Domenico et al. “The 79 CE Eruption of Vesuvius: A Lesson From the Past and the Need of a Multidisciplinary Approach for Developments in Volcanology.” *Earth-Science Reviews*, vol. 231, 2022. *Sciencedirect*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.earscirev.2022.104072>. Accessed 26 May 2025.

Giordanetti, Piero, and Maddalena Mazzocut-Mis, editors. *Introduzione. I luoghi del sublime moderno. Percorso Antologico-Critico*, LED, Edizioni Universitarie di Lettere Economia Diritto, 2005.

Hamilton, William. *Supplement to ‘Campi Phlegraei’: Being an Account of the Great Eruption of Mount Vesuvius in the Month of August 1779*, Forgotten Books, 2018.

Hamilton, William. IV. “An Account of the Late Eruption of Mount Vesuvius.” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society London*, no. 85, 1795, pp. 73–116.

Johns, Alessa. “Representing Vesuvius: Northern European Tourists and the Napoleonic Culture of War.” *Bluestocking Feminism and British-German Cultural Transfer, 1750-1837*, University of Michigan Press, 2014, pp. 88–120. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv3znzj1.8>. Accessed 26 May 2025.

Olster, Stacey. “Remakes, Outtakes, and Updates in Susan Sontag’s ‘The Volcano Lover.’” *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 41, no. 1, 1995, pp. 117–39. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26285770>. Accessed 26 May 2025.

Peucker, Brigitte. "Looking and Touching: Spectacle and Collection in Sontag's *Volcano Lover*." *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 11 no. 1, 1998, pp. 159-165. *Project MUSE*, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/yale.1998.0018>. Accessed 26 May 2025.

Tilley Laura J. et al. "Hazards and Disasters in the Geological and Geomorphological Record: A Key to Understanding Past and Future Hazards and Disasters." *Research Ideas and Outcomes*, no. 5, 2019. *RIO*, <https://doi.org/10.3897/rio.5.e34087>. Accessed 26 May 2025.

Created: 2025-05-04 | Last Updated: 2026-01-09