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SUBLIME IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Sublime, which is of High quality causes great admiration, it also has great beauty and excellence. The literary concept of sublime became into the limelight during Eighteenth Century. This idea was taken up by Immanuel Kant and the Romantic Poets including especially William Wordsworth. In the aspect of aesthetic notion, sublime is a striking of thought and emotion. The writers like Longinus, Boileau and Edmund Burke used sublime in their works.

John Baillie describes sublime effect in his essay on vast object, vast occasion, vast sensation, higher ideas of their own powers. John Milton is the most sublime writer, who has expressed sublimity in his famous epic Paradise Lost. The most important work of Edmund Burke's "Philosophical Inquiry into the origin of our ideas of the Sublime and beautiful. According to William Wordsworth "the mind tries to grasp at something towards which it can make approaches but it is incapable of attaining"

In modern and contemporary literature some of the writers like John Mullan, Gilbert and Turner have given importance for sublimity. In Turner's point of view, sublime is the greatest stretch and test of the figurative imagination.

The art of Sublime is striking grandeur of thought and emotion. It has been attracted by the ancient, modern and contemporary writers.

**Key words:** Sublime, Beauty, Excellence, Aesthetic, sensations.

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INTRODUCTION

Literal meaning of Sublime is of high quality and causing great admiration. It has great beauty and excellence. It is considered as one of the Literary Elements.

The word sublime is part of the discourse of philosophical aesthetics and literary criticism and for many centuries its meanings have been debated and contested. In addition, beyond academic circles, generations of artists, writers, poets and musicians have sought to evoke or respond to the term. As we shall see, 'the sublime' is of many things: a judgment, a feeling, a state of mind and a kind of response to art or nature. The origins of the word in English are curious. It derives from a conjunction of two Latin terms, the preposition 'sub', meaning below or up to and the noun limen, meaning limit, boundary or threshold. Limen is

also the word for 'intel', the heavy wooden or stone beam that holds the weight of a wall up above a doorway or a window. This sense of striving or pushing upwards against an overbearing force is an important connotation for the word sublime. By the seventeenth century, the word in English was in use both as an adjective and as a noun (the sublime) with many shades of meaning but invariably referring to things that are raised aloft, set high up and exalted, whether they be buildings, ideas, people, language, style or other aspects of or responses to art and nature.

Keywords: Sublime, aesthetics, limen.

#### **Literary meaning for sublime in different authors' point of views:**

The **literary** concept of the **sublime** became important in the eighteenth century. It is associated with the 1757 treatise by Edmund Burke, though it has earlier roots. The idea of the sublime was taken up by Immanuel Kant and the Romantic poets including especially William Wordsworth.

Longinus defines the literary sublime as "excellence in language", the "expression of a great spirit" and the power to provoke "ecstasy" in one's readers. Longinus holds that the goal of a writer should be to produce a form of ecstasy.

Boileau introduced the sublime into modern critical discourse in the Preface to his translation of Longinus: *Traite du Sublime de Longin* (1674).

Most scholars pointed to Edmund Burke's 'A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful' (1757) as the landmark treatise on the sublime. Burke defines the sublime as "whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger... Whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror." Burke believed that the sublime was something that could provoke terror in the audience, for terror and pain were the strongest of emotions.

Immanuel Kant further clarifies in his work 'The Critique of Judgment' (1790) Burke's definition of the sublime, mostly in contrast to the beautiful. He says that the beautiful in nature is not quantifiable, but rather focused only in color, form, surface, etc. of an object. However, to Kant, the sublime is more infinite and can be found even in an object that has no form. The sublime should be regarded as a "presentation of an indeterminate concept of reason." He claims that the sublime in itself is so great that anything compared to it must necessarily be considered small.

#### **Sublime in English Romantic Poetry**

The fascination with the sublime in Romanticism first began in landscaping; however, Romantic poets soon began experimenting on it as well. But the innovations made to the sublime in landscaping also translated into the poetry of the time. So the English Romantics began to view the sublime as referring to a "realm of experience beyond the measurable" that is beyond rational thought that arises chiefly from the terrors and awe-inspiring natural phenomena. Others agreed with Kant's definition of the sublime: that it had everything to do with mankind's rational thought and perceptions. But all Romantics agreed that the sublime was something to be studied and contemplated.

#### **William Wordsworth**

William Wordsworth is the Romantic best known for working with the sublime. Many scholars actually place Wordsworth's idea of the sublime as the standard of the romantic sublime. In his essay on the sublime, Wordsworth says that the "mind tries to grasp at something towards which it can make approaches but which it is incapable of attaining." In trying to "grasp" at this sublime idea, the mind loses consciousness, and the spirit is able to grasp the sublime - but it is only temporary.

#### **Samuel Taylor Coleridge**

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was a poet, critic and scholar, and he was very concerned with the sublime, especially in contrast to the beautiful. Coleridge argues his view best when he says that: 'I meet, I find the Beautiful - but I give, contribute or rather attribute the Sublime. No object of the Sense is sublime in itself; but only as far as I make it a symbol of some Idea'. The circle is a beautiful figure in itself; it becomes sublime.

#### **The Sublime as an aesthetic notion**

The sublime, a notion in aesthetic and literary theory, is a striking grandeur of thought and emotion. Longinus's conception of the sublime had its heyday in English criticism in the late seventeenth through the

middle eighteenth century- that produced sensations of awe or even of pain in its audience. John Baillie describes this effect in his *Essay on the Sublime* (1747), "Vast Objects occasion vast Sensations, and vast Sensations give the Mind a higher Idea of her own Powers."

The most important English work on the sublime is Edmund Burke's 'Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful' (1756).

Critics found examples of the literary sublime in the Bible and in Shakespeare, but for most of the eighteenth century, Milton was the author who best embodied sublime, especially in *Paradise Lost*: as Joseph Addison put it in *Spectator* 279, "Milton's chief Talent, and indeed his distinguishing Excellence, lies in the Sublime of his Thoughts."

Sublime became a central concern not only in eighteenth-century criticism, but in eighteenth-century literature, especially in the works of the so-called pre-Romantic poets -- Thomas Gray, William Collins -- and in the works of Gothic novelists -- Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis.

#### **Analyses of Sublime**

Although the theory of the sublime was discussed across many western cultures, it was especially important in eighteenth-century Britain, mainly because of the increasing importance of landscape as a subject category for artists and critics and because of the impact in the eighteenth century of the best-known theory of the sublime in English, which is found in the Irishman Edmund Burke's 'A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful', published in 1757. Edmund Burke was not the first philosopher to be intrigued by the power and complexity of the idea of the sublime but his account of it was exceedingly influential. He broke the idea of the sublime down into seven aspects, all of which he argued were discernible in the natural world and in natural phenomena:

#### **Dawning Realization**

This enquiry had a deeply spiritual dimension – a search for a higher truth – and a sublime aspect is demonstrated most clearly in Thomas Seddon's *Jerusalem* (1854–5). Landscape painting in the mode adopted by Seddon was aimed at a new aspect of sublime, one quite different to earlier traditions of Burkean obscurity and the titanic pandemonium of John Martin. By studying the people and natural landscapes around Jerusalem, which were assumed to have remained unchanged since the time of Jesus Christ, Seddon combined an almost forensic attention to the specifics of the location with powerful biblical allegory. For example, the painting shows the Mount of Olives as an element in the landscape although anyone aware of the Gospel narrative would recognize it as the site of Christ's temptation and despair after the Last Supper.

#### **Sublime in Modern and Contemporary Literature**

John Mullan on the history of wonder, charted in *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime and The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime*

"sublime" is one of those diminished words (like "fantastic" or "terrific") used to exclaim at anything from the delights of a certain kind of ice cream to the skills of a foreign footballer. It seems, banally, just to mean, "much better than usual". But if we can rescue its older, deeper meanings, "the sublime" catches an experience that we still recognize in a post-modern world, glimpsed in the dizzying reaches of interplanetary space or the vertiginous spirals of the human genome.

The most sublime writer was Milton in *Paradise Lost*, especially in those hellish passages where "all is dark, uncertain, confused, terrible, and sublime to the last degree". One of literature's most sublime characters was Milton's Satan, fascinating despite one's better instincts, the frightening pleasure of sublimity being apparently amoral.

Turner's sublime - the greatest stretch and test of the figurative imagination. Ever since, even if it has faded from literature, it has stayed as an idea in art, especially in American art. 19th-century American painting was dominated by huge landscapes that attempted to catch what Walt Whitman called "that vast Something, stretching out on its own unbounded scale, unconfined" - in other words, America.

Gilbert-Rolfe expresses sublime as enjoyable perhaps, but easily fabricated. Beauty is what we get from fashion and design. Theorists of art need something grander: a sublime art of "limitlessness and

indeterminacy". For Gilbert-Rolfe, this produces a kind of elevating befuddlement, obliging the earnest student of art to turn to a high priest like himself.

Dizzy post-structuralizes like this have a shrunken version of the Romantic sublime. Depressingly, the sublime for them is when our imagination is defeated. Sublimity now describes moments when we recognize that any of our ways of comprehending the world are illusions.

Gilbert-Rolfe would like us to believe in a "techno-sublime". A geographical idea of limitlessness has given way to a technological one. This is a paradox, for the sublime is precisely what we cannot master, while technology is supposedly what allows us to control nature.

As neither of these theoreticians of sublimity acknowledges, it has for a long time been pure science, not technology, that has given us a sense of the sublime. Now the voids into which we are invited to gaze in amazement are the unimaginably huge ones of Godless space and time.

In some ways all this is not new. Shelley made poetry out of the temporal sublime, most famously in "Ozymandias", where the ancients are makers of huge abandoned ruins, mysterious markers of human smallness. If there is no providence, history can be a vast expanse that mocks our self-regard. And the Victorians were given an idea of time that was even more diminishing, even more sublime. They had geological time, in the span of which any person's life is nearly nothing. Down the tunnel of those millions of years we have since had to gaze, making a Darwinian world possible.

Science, at least as popularized, can be beautiful as well as sublime. The beautiful is science in its shapely reductiveness; the sublime is science in its incomprehensibility. Popularizers of science sometimes seem worried about the imputation of reductiveness, and are often keen to assert that the world still inspires awe after science.

As Dawkins did not see, the poetical or artistic sublime is often close to the ridiculous. As the sublime was becoming fashionable, Alexander Pope produced a brilliant guide to this tendency, his "Art of Sinking in Poetry". It was a compendium of the failed sublimities of other poets, many of them contemporaries, and it introduced the word "bathos" to the English language. Those who reach for the sublime can fall on their faces.

The art of Sublime is highlighted as beautifully and terrifically by the ancient, modern and Contemporary writer.

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