

## "BEAUTY SLEEPING IN THE LAP OF HORROR"

Searching for the Sublime in Regency Culture

Sublime: "A feature of nature or art: that fills the mind with a sense of overwhelming grandeur or irresistible power; that inspires awe, great reverence, or other high emotion, by reason of its beauty, vastness, or grandeur."

Oxford English Dictionary

The taste for the sublime goes back to the Ancient Greeks, but it was Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) that took hold of the British imagination. According to Burke, the sublime was produced when someone was confronted with danger or greatness without the fear of pain or injury. In particular, Burke associated the sublime with darkness, decay, roughness, obscurity, and immensity.

The concept of the sublime would continue to develop throughout the later century. While Burke believed that beauty and sublime were opposing concepts, other writers argued that beauty could be found within the sublime.

Writers of gothic novels incorporated elements of the sublime by transporting their heroes and heroines to distant landscapes with rugged terrain, violent storms, and ruined castles. They also played on the sublime by incorporating hints of the supernatural, hoping that the reader would use their imagination to fill in the blanks with terrifying results.

"Groves of orange and lemon perfumed the air, their ripe fruit glowing among the foliage; while, sloping to the plains, extensive vineyards spread their treasures. Beyond these, woods and pastures, and mingled towns and hamlets stretched towards the sea, on whose bright surface gleamed many a distant sail; while, over the whole scene, was diffused the purple glow of evening. This landscape with the surrounding alps did, indeed, present a perfect picture of the lovely and the sublime, of 'beauty sleeping in the lap of horror.'"

Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, 1794



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

**Question 1:** In Gothic literature, the sublime is often exoticized, located within foreign landscapes like the Alps or Pyrenees, and never the English countryside. In *Northanger Abbey*, Henry Tilney even censures Catherine for imagining such a horrific story about his father. In Chapter 24, he urges her to “remember that we are English, remember that we are Christian” (p. 145). Catherine later reflects that the gothic might be representative of European countries but not of the midlands of England (p. 147).

- With this in mind, is it possible for the sublime to exist within Austen’s England? If so, how does Austen play with the sublime within the settings of Bath and Northanger Abbey?
- Consider Catherine’s first night at the abbey in Chapter 21, when she investigates the chest during the storm (pp. 118-124). How does Austen make the ordinary settings extraordinary?
- What about in *Frankenstein*? How do the settings of *Frankenstein* enhance or influence the sublime in the novel compared to that of *Northanger Abbey*?

## THE SUBLIME

**Longinus (~ 1st cent):**

“A lofty passage does not convince the reason of the reader, but takes him out of himself...To believe or not is usually in our own power; but the Sublime, acting with an imperious and irresistible force, sways every reader whether he will or no.”

**Edmund Burke (1757):**

“Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.”

**Immanuel Kant (1790):**

“The Beautiful in nature is connected with the form of the object, which consists in having boundaries. The Sublime, on the other hand, is to be found in a formless object, so far as in it or by occasion of its boundlessness is represented, and yet its totality is also present to thought.”

**Question 2:** Burke associates “sublime virtues,” like fortitude, wisdom, and justice as masculine traits. Some female writers, like Ann Radcliffe, however, appropriated these virtues for their heroines in their gothic novels (Howard 122). Similarly, the gothic novel has been associated with a female readership, so much so that Catherine is surprised that Henry Tilney reads novels.

- Why might women like Catherine and Isabella be attracted to gothic novels?
- Henry Tilney likes novels like the *Mysteries of Udolpho* while John Thorpe only enjoys the more salacious *The Monk*. What might their choices of gothic novel say about them?
- In *Frankenstein*, the monster reads sublime literature like *Paradise Lost* and *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (p. 104). How does the creature’s reading affect his perception of the world?

**Question 3:** Some scholars have argued that the sublime in gothic novels arises from the confinement and powerlessness of the heroines. Kristin Girtten argues that “gothic edifices allegorize ‘domestic imprisonment,’” in that they trap the heroine within patriarchal social structures (722). The core conflict of the gothic novel thus arises from the heroine’s attempts to escape both her physical and social prisons.

- Who or what imprisons Catherine in *Northanger Abbey*? What about Eleanor? How do they each search for freedom?
- What power do the creature and Victor Frankenstein exert on each other?



**Question 4:** According to Burke, people enjoy the misfortunes, tragedies and ruin of others, as long as they themselves are not in imminent danger. Burke also claims that while fiction and poetry can play on this element of the sublime, people prefer these stories when they are real (or at least, when they appear real). In fact, according to Burke, “The nearer [literature] approaches the reality, and the farther it removes us from all idea of fiction, the more perfect is its power.”

- What are Catherine’s intentions when she imagines General Tilney as a murderer? Does she really believe in the story that she has created? Or is she trying to purposely emulate her favorite gothic novels?
- Does the novel *Frankenstein* emulate any type of realism? If so, what elements in the novel help create the sense of reality?

**Question 5:** Natasha Duquette argues that Eleanor Tilney serves as a foil to Catherine by stating that Eleanor embraces the “contemplative sublime” whereas Catherine searches for the Burkean sublime. Unlike the Burkean sublime, in which the observer understands they are not in danger, the contemplative sublime recognizes the inherent mortality in one’s own self, causing “quiet wonder” instead of dramatic or lofty feelings.

- Look at the scene where Eleanor and Catherine discuss Mrs. Tilney’s death. (pp. 136-137). How do the different perceptions of the sublime affect this scene? How might this scene have been written from Eleanor’s perspective?

**Burkean Sublime:** caused by dramatic or violent scenes of nature, art, or other disturbances. The observer understands, however, that they are not in immediate danger.

**Contemplative sublime:** caused by pondering one’s own past suffering or the death of loved ones. The observer quietly contemplates their own eventual death.

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