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### **Delving Into The Intricacy Of Romantic Sublime: A Succinct Insight Of Romantic Poets' Works In Poetry And Prose.**

#### **Abstract**

Sublime as an idea in the Romantic era has always been looked at as something enigmatic. The prominent poets of the Romantic age have come up with their distinctive idea of the sublime and how it is reflected in their prose and poetry. We see Wordsworth coming up with his thoughts on the matter under the shadow of the Horacian tradition of endeavour and struggle in poetry (Preface to Lyrical Ballads). Coleridge follows the path of Longinus not to mention other influences for his supernatural flights in poetry (Biographia Literaria). Keats acts as a spiritualist to the extreme in the spotlight of the sublime for his poetry. Shelley advocates every element of poetry to contribute to the sublime (Defence of Poetry). The current paper discusses the idea of the Romantic Sublime and how it is reflected in the works of Romantic poets in question.

**Keywords:** Sublime, Romantics, Wordsworth, Keats, Coleridge, Shelley

In literary terminology, Sublime refers to the use of language and description to elicit ideas and feelings that go beyond ordinary experience. The word can also apply to the grotesque or other unusual events that push us beyond our existence. As a term in aesthetics, it is used to describe an emotion or experience that goes beyond the normal bounds of an individual's abilities. Sublimity is a type of discourse of grandeur or quality. A source of the distinctiveness of the greatest poets and prose authors is the method by which they have given their reputations immortal life. For magnificence generates joy in the listener rather than persuasion. The mix of amazement and awe always outperforms the merely convincing and pleasant.

Greatness is a natural thing that cannot be taught. Genuine sublimity can elevate and exalt us. True sublimity provides abundant fodder for thought. It is tough, if not impossible, to resist. It leaves a lasting and indelible imprint on the mind. When it comes to the sublime, the name Longinus holds indispensable importance. His work, On The Sublime, is considered the earliest treatise on the subject, composed somewhere between the first and third century AD. The literary sublime, according to Longinus, is quality in language, the expression of a noble spirit, and the ability to elicit ecstasy in one's readers. Longinus believes that a writer's objective should be to generate a sort of ecstasy. Despite the evident lack of shape, the treatise has a distinct structure. It is directed to Terentianus, who might be a friend or a student. It outlines the five origins of the sublime as well as the treatment required to achieve it. These origins are claimed to be the grandeur of thought and the intensity of emotion, both of which are said to be the product

of natural genius. The remaining three are the right usage style, the majesty of language and elegance, and the uplift of word order.

Boileau translated Longinus' work into French, and it rapidly made its way into English. Longinus, according to Alexander Pope, "is himself the great Sublime he draws" (An Essay on Criticism 1711). In *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Edmund Burke tackled the consequences of the sublime in language, arguing that the sublime and the beautiful are mutually incompatible (Hirsch). He mentions terror as an important aspect asserting that what is fit in any way to excite the ideas of suffering and danger, which means that whatever is in any way terrible, or able to engage about horrific images, or works in a manner conducive to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is constructive of the strongest feeling that the mind can feel.

The Romantic writers were enthralled with sublimity, or the concept of transcendence, of potential crossings between the individual and nature, and the infinity of the universe. Each had a unique perspective on transcendence, such as when John Keats distinguished the true poetical nature, selfless, from the Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime and imbued with the ego. The ascent of the sublime was described by William Wordsworth as a spiritual glow. Classical Romantics, like Wordsworth, establish a direct link to the sublime with nature. The artist, poet, or simply the Romantic feels the sublime firsthand experiencing the aesthetic elements of nature. However, it is crucial not to mistake or limit the sublime to mere beauty; rather, Romantics are fascinated with encounters that completely absorb them, sometimes bringing a person to tears, and giving a humble sense of the natural world's grandeur and majesty.

Romantic poets strive to instil in their readers a sense of grandeur, by elevating their language to be very expressive, and by adopting the irrational (Web Pages). This second aspect is exemplified by Keats' concept of Negative Capability; one can evoke the sublime in readers by presenting concepts that can only be understood immediately and emotionally, such as uniting the irrational contrasts of love and death.

A distinctive understanding of the sublime is observed in different poets and prose writers of the Romantic era. Turning to Wordsworth, Professor Philip Shaw in his article, *Wordsworth and the Sublime* explains how the sublime is reflected in Wordsworth's poetic works. Reflecting on *The Prelude*, he asserts that Wordsworth's sublime combines multiple definitions of the term (2014). As mentioned above, Longinus advocated excellent language and a noble human spirit. Burke associated it with objects and events which albeit threatening or horrific, are a source of delight and grandeur. He further uses the idea in connection with obscure and abstract images. Shaw quotes the following verses in this vein:

A meditation rose on me that night  
Upon the lonely mountain when the scene  
Had passed away, and it appeared to me  
The perfect image of a mighty mind,  
Of one that feeds upon infinity,  
That is exalted by an under-presence,  
The sense of God, or whatso'er is dim  
Or vast in its own being ... (1805 *Prelude*, lines 66-73)

However, this sublimity is shadowed by his perception of poetry, which he stipulates in his *Lyrical Ballads* to be "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity" (Good Reads). Coleridge here strongly argues to the extent of persecution that the 'recollection' in question, a prime apple of discord between him and Wordsworth, would remove the language from its intensity and magnificence. For Coleridge

recollection in such a vein was a filtration process. Moreover, he even went on to question whether Wordsworth's stance of deriving the sublime from rustic images as a generalized notion was the right one. On the grounds of recollection, he refuted Wordsworth's perspective that sublimity should derive from natural sensibility and suitable education. The recollection in tranquillity removed the majestic element from poetry.

Wordsworth and Coleridge, key figures of the Romantic movement, shared a profound interest in the Sublime, but their approaches in poetry and prose differed significantly. Wordsworth, in his poetry, often celebrated the Sublime in the ordinary and commonplace, finding transcendence in the everyday experiences of nature and human emotions. His focus on the 'egotistical sublime' emphasized the individual's emotional response to the sublime elements in nature. On the other hand, Coleridge, particularly in his prose work *Biographia Literaria*, delved into a more intellectual and metaphysical exploration of the Sublime. Coleridge's engagement with the Sublime was characterized by a fusion of philosophical inquiry and poetic expression, weaving complex ideas into his literary reflections. While Wordsworth sought the Sublime in the simplicity of life, Coleridge pursued it through a more intricate and speculative lens, demonstrating the diverse ways in which the concept manifested in both their poetry and prose.

It was Coleridge who advocated supernatural flights in terms of sublimity. Coleridge, who had a lifelong obsession with the sublime, as seen by his poetry and autobiographical writing, distinguished between the sublime and the Beautiful by using a circle as a metaphor. In his *Biographia Literaria*, he claims that the circle is lovely in itself; it takes the shape of sublime when he fathoms infinity underneath it. When confronted with the sublime, this comparison emphasizes the need for additional investigation and thought. As Coleridge points out, there is no easy description or comprehension of the sublime since the sensation it evokes is so profound that putting it into words is difficult. So, why is sublime so prevalent in Romantic literature, a movement founded entirely on the written word?

As Coleridge suggests the solution is, as his treatise implies that the sublime asks for investigation and reflection, for which Romantic poetry is the ideal vehicle. The sublime is found through natural images in Romantic literature. Romantic poetry is usually self-expression, it may serve as a kind of written reflection, and Romantic poets can utilize sublime environs as a tool for further contemplation and knowledge of the Self, then exercise it by going to the written word. Analyzing nature becomes similar to analyzing the Self and one is with nature and is left to his thoughts if the surroundings also contribute to this deep reflection, it displays a profound bond with sublimity. In such turmoil, it elevates the individual to another level.

Coleridge in *Kubla Khan* employs powerful language approaches to portray the sublime's overpowering discomfort. He conjures surpassing images and underlines the paradoxical character of the sublime by using verses like 'Enfolding sunny spots of greenery' and 'Through caverns measureless to man/Down to a sunless sea' (lines 3-4). Coleridge creates dwarfing imagery and highlights the contradictory nature of the sublime. The fact that the sublime in nature is unlimited in comparison to human existence, while sometimes threatening it, provides context. The *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is considered sublime, for the reason that the elements of nature which are generally beautified for their infinity, are depicted under the shadow of horror as something dark and frightening. Coleridge discusses such an experience by recalling that his entire existence ventured forth to infinity; all the faculties of nature swell up into eternity, and the only rational expression behind the nullification of Self, can be asserted that his

sole revelation of the sublime was of his human insignificance, whether it is pleasant or terrifying.

Keats likes to dive deep below the sublime's veil and closer to the essence of it; the everlasting emptiness that represents mortality. His poem *On Seeing the Elgin Marbles* sheds awareness of his mortality and equates it to a "pinnacle and steep of godlike hardship tells me I must die/Like a sick eagle looking at the sky"(lines 8-9). Keats imagines himself as a strong, though undoubtedly mortal and fading eagle, gazing up into an immense and sublime sky and man in contrast.

When it comes to sublimity, Keats is considered to be a spiritualist to an extreme degree. Perhaps one can say that his condition of tuberculosis and the pain he felt, acted as a ladder in attaining sublimity in his poetry. He was the first to coin the word, 'negative capability', where the poet can soar high above in his imagination beyond the limit of sensual faculties to attain illumination. His spiritual flights are that of an escapist, while his spirituality plays a vital role in reaching the pulpit of the sublime. Telling his friend Benjamin Bailey in a letter he expresses his yearning for a "life of sensations than of thoughts!" (1817). In the very same letter, he deems sublimity as a necessary element which should be present in poetry. He emphasizes that he feels nothing of certainty other than the divine emotions of the heart and the reality of imaginative flights, regardless of whether they are present before or not. He inquires in this vein whether a philosopher had ever arrived at his conclusions without objecting to anything. He perceives that his seizing of beauty can be termed as truth. It must be remembered here that although Keats does not use directly the word sublime nor has he presented a poetic theory, this does not mean that he did not have his notions about poetry.

In his letter to John and Tom Keats, he discusses the perceiving of negative capability, where according to him a person can be in ambiguities, supernatural happenings and doubts and advocates the point the sense of beauty overcomes all considerations or rather removes them. Keats raises an important question regarding the imaginative flights to attain the sublime while writing to J.H. Reynolds, "...why should we kick against the pricks when we can walk on Roses? Why should we be owls when we can be Eagles?"(1818).

The above-mentioned questions are widely addressed in terms of attaining sublimity in his poems. *La Belle Dams Sans Merci* and *Ode on a Grecian Urn* are among some of his prominent ones in this matter where he suspends Negative Capability to reach the elevation of imaginative spiritual flights. It must be remembered here that while he is on these flights he does not forget that as a mortal he has to come back to this world, fraught and fest of problems.

In the first poem, he narrates the spectacle of a knight who has lost his beloved. Keats loses himself to completely embody the inner mood of his knight. For a fantastical ballad whose scenario appears so far removed from reality, it is immersed in the intensity of pain symbolically reflecting what Keats was going through in his love life and his health. The intellectual and emotional influences affecting Keats when he composed *La Belle Dame sans Merci* were severe. It was penned in the throes of his love which he shared for Fanny Brawne, with the possibility of death looming over him. He was in the fire of passion from a poetic angle, feeling ill and depressed.

The second poem addresses the urn as a symbol of mortality, which is eternalized by the images imprinted on it, making it a time capsule. The ode in question, not only shows how time is immortalized but also the nature of exalted sublimity which is attained by Keats in terms of how high he has transcended as a poet to draw the silent symphony out of an urn. As a spiritualist, exercising negative capability, he engrosses himself in the world of imagination, to

even find that grandeur even exists in the silent images of an empty urn which can be expressed in words.

Shelley unlike others does not address or theorize about the sublime in the literal sense. Leuenberger in his thesis for the partial fulfilment of a Masters degree at the University of Nebraska entitled *A study of the Sublime in English Romantic Aesthetics* sheds a vivid spotlight on the traces of the sublime which seems evident in his *Defence of Poetry*. Shelley in his treatise proposes universal unity of thought which acts as the centre and circumference of knowledge (Leuenberger). In terms of the sublime, the researcher informs that Shelley sees reality and aestheticism in a word, a perception which is denied by Kant and Coleridge in the *Defence*. For him, sublimity rests in all the attributes of poetry. Poetry according to him endeavours to convey the “indestructible order” of human experiences as a way of reaching the Absolute (p.70). The excellence in poetry, according to Shelley, is not bound up in specifics of time and place, but in its portrayal of the Absolute.

Percy Bysshe Shelley, a prominent Romantic poet, was deeply influenced by the concept of the Sublime, a central theme in Romantic literature and art. For Shelley, the Sublime went beyond mere aesthetic appreciation; it was a powerful force that stirred the soul and inspired a sense of awe and wonder in the face of nature's grandeur. In his poetic works, such as *Mont Blanc* and *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* Shelley grappled with the vastness and the transcendent aspects of the natural world, exploring the Sublime as a conduit for spiritual and intellectual revelation. Shelley's perspective on the Sublime was not only a reaction to the awe-inspiring landscapes he encountered but also a reflection of his philosophical and political beliefs. He saw the Sublime as a force capable of liberating the human spirit, challenging established norms, and fostering a sense of individual and collective transformation. In Shelley's exploration of the Sublime, one finds not only a poetic engagement with the beauty of the natural world but also a profound meditation on the potential of the Sublime to ignite the fires of imagination and revolution in the human psyche.

To conclude, the above Romantic poets under discussion though interlinking in certain respects, present distinctive yet varying views about the sublime in their poetry and prose. Each of these poets has gathered influences from different elements. Despite that, each of them has their pick in the Eden of poetry in terms of original ideas regarding Sublimity. Even Coleridge's stance in this vein is similar to Longinus' and had instilled an impact on German philosophy, and is sometimes reputed to be a plagiarist who comes up with his perception of supernatural flights in attaining the sublime.

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