

Sublimity Deals in Turn with The Threat to The Self and A Consolidation of The Self

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Abstract

As Edmund Burke mentions in his book *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 'This choice creeping and flying announces the dilemma of the Sublime: does it bring us down to earth or link us with the divinity of the skies?'. This duality underscores how the sublime navigates between the material and the metaphysical, engaging with our deepest fears while simultaneously expanding our spiritual horizons.

Keywords

Sublimity; Frankenstein; Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark.

1. Introduction

In this essay, I will examine the function of sublimity, which is concerned with the threat to the self and the consolidation of the self. The literature works that I have chosen are Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*. To begin with, I will present an analysis of the concept of sublimity, accompanied by theoretical frameworks that will assist readers in comprehending this complex idea. In addition, I will focus on Wollstonecraft's *Letters* to identify examples that align with the essay's subject matter. Furthermore, I will examine the same subject in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. In conclusion, I hope to make comparisons and contrasts between their literary works, not only because of their special relationships but also because both have descriptions of nature and society which have some effects on the self.

2. Romantic sublime in Mary Wollstonecraft's Letters

When it comes to the sublimity, on the one hand, sublime refers to a kind of 'greatness beyond all possibility of calculation, measurement, or imitation that can inspire people in aesthetics.' [1] On the other hand, according to Patrick C. Hogan in *Beauty and Sublimity*, he offers another response to sublimity, describing it as a kind of grief or loneliness that arises from the recognition of our ineradicable isolation from others. [2] Therefore, in considering the subject of this essay, it is evident that sublimity has both beneficial and detrimental effects on the self. It has the capacity to foster growth and development, yet it can also have the opposite effect, leading to the destruction of the self. As noted by Edmund Burke, '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, is a source of sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.' [1] Anything that arouses the emotions of fear and distress, whether real or imagined, can evoke a sublime experience. This is because the sublime is defined as the strongest emotional response the mind can feel.

In this paragraph, the analysis delves into how Mary Wollstonecraft utilizes the concept of the sublime to articulate a dual process, the threat to the self and a subsequent consolidation of the self. Through her *Letters*, Wollstonecraft presents the sublime landscapes not only as

overwhelming but also as catalysts for personal introspection and existential crises. These natural scenes provoke a sense of vulnerability and smallness in the face of vast and uncontrollable forces, reflecting the external threats to her personal and emotional stability. In *Letter 2*, she sighs, "The more I see of the world, the more I am convinced that civilization is a blessing not sufficiently estimated by those who have not traced its progress." [3] This sentence reflects her belief in the transformative power of civilization. This is also a part of the effects that sublimity expressed to Wollstonecraft. Because only when someone has already realized his or her smallness before nature or civilization, can someone convey a sense of appreciation for the positive aspects of society. Whilst Mary Wollstonecraft seems to admire natural landscapes rather than artificial ones. In *Letter 17*, she once has a journey to see the cascade and a canal through the rocks. When she gazed at them for a long time, she writes "There were so many appearances to excite the idea of chaos, that, instead of admiring the canal and the works, great as they are termed, and little as they appear, I could not help regretting that such a noble scene had not been left in all its solitary sublimity." [3] Mary Wollstonecraft highlights a sublime power that originates from nature. Her emphasis lies in the contrast between the cascade and the canal. In her mind, such a tranquil scenery should be left in all its solitary sublimity which never be adapted by any man-made environment. Although how great that canal is, it is still so little before the natural environment. Besides, the regretful emotions reflect her self-construction which comes from pure nature instead of 'those noisy human instruments resembled the insignificant sport of children.' [3] In one aspect, she seeks a form of self-construction that is rooted in the purity of the natural world. The connection to nature allows her to grow in a natural sublime. Mary Wollstonecraft can enjoy such an enlightenment like "The waters murmur, and fall with more than mortal music, and spirits of peace walk abroad to calm the agitated breast." [3]

In another aspect, she may not embrace the progress of science and technology development. In addition, if she constantly remains in natural solitude, she may find herself trapped by a sense of loneliness and overwhelming greatness. This description expresses her feelings vividly. 'I dreaded the solitariness of my apartment and wished for night to hide the starting tears, or to shed them on my pillow, and close my eyes on a world where I was destined to wander alone.' [3] These aspects clearly embody the sublime threat to the self as well. However, this confrontation with the sublime also leads to a profound strengthening of the self. Wollstonecraft's narrative weaves through these experiences of the sublime to arrive at a renewed sense of identity. Engaging deeply with her surroundings and reflecting on her reactions to them reasserts her sense of agency and her philosophical stances.

This part explores how Wollstonecraft uses the sublime to negotiate her fears and uncertainties, ultimately using it as a framework to assert stronger and more resilient self-aligned radical ideals of independence and liberty. Just as Wollstonecraft writes in her *Letters*, 'Eternity is in these moments. Worldly cares melt into the airy stuff that dreams are made of, and reveries, mild and enchanting as the first hopes of love or the recollection of lost enjoyment, carry the hapless wight into futurity, who in bustling life has vainly strove to throw off the grief which lies heavy at the heart.' [3] In her mind, the waters and the crescent represent the sublimity that is the tool to get rid of her fears and uncertainties. Thus, for Wollstonecraft, sublimity acts as a bridge between her present state of anxiety and a future of emotional liberation and inner peace. Mary Wollstonecraft was a female writer in the 18th century, unlike other male writers such as William Wordsworth, De Quincey, and Charles Lamb. She was the representative of female Romanticism who questioned the dominance of male Romanticism. Just as Meena Alexander illustrated in *Women in Romanticism*, the Romantic sublime is something between mind and nature that can help women get free. [4] To further explain this concept, Meena Alexander elaborates on versions of the sublime, she demonstrates that the Romantic sublime was characterised by 'the simultaneous loss of self and fusion with a transcendent power sustained by a void in the soul.' [4] Critically, Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters* clearly identify 'how the feminine consciousness reaches out for

rich and humane reasons for withdrawing from the Romantic sublime.' [4] Perhaps this withdrawal can be seen as a deliberate choice driven by the complex realities and mainly focus on social justice and personal responsibility. In describing the social conditions in Denmark, Wollstonecraft criticised those regulations in the arbitrary government. She addressed it as 'the most absolute monarch in Europe.' [4] For instance, as she wrote 'I have several times had occasion to observe that, fearing to appear tyrannical, laws are allowed to become obsolete which ought to be put in force or better substituted in their stead; for this mistaken moderation, which borders on timidity, favours the least respectable part of the people.' [3] In essence, this opinion recalls the title of my essay that reveals sublimity in turn involves both a challenge to the self and a reinforcement of the self. Hence, it evidently examines sublimity's duality by further exploring Wollstonecraft's Letters in Romantic sublime.

3. Sublimity in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

Sublimity also plays a crucial role in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. At the front parts of this novel, Captain R. Walton has written four letters to his sister, Mrs. Saville. These four letters of *Frankenstein* represent the meaning of sublimity as well. Because in romanticism, sublimity always be described as 'an unforgettable experience that was caused by feeling the enormous natural power.' [1] This kind of experience can help people understand how small they are as well as how great nature is. In these letters, the ambitious dreams of Captain R. Walton and his pursuit of the unknown future fully show people's warmest pursuit towards sublimity during the romantic period. To further elaborate this opinion, two aspects can improve Captain R. Walton and Victor Frankenstein's ambitions in sublimity. The first one is his challenge towards nature. Through the setting of Arctic expeditions, the author emphasises the magnificence and grandness of nature. Another character expresses the same emotion as well. As Victor Frankenstein recalls in the novel, 'These sublime and magnificent scenes afforded me the greatness consolation that I was capable of receiving. They elevated me from all littleness of feeling, and although they did not remove my grief, they subdued and tranquillised it.' [5] Therefore, it is clear to know that people can reap benefits from sublimity, and sublimity is a consolidation of the self. The second focuses on spiritual sublimity, especially in terms of science and knowledge. R. Walton's exploitation not only lies in geography but also the exploration of human potential. For instance, the third letter mentions a description towards Victor Frankenstein, 'Even broken in spirit as he is, no one can feel more deeply than he does the beauties of nature.' [5] Even though Victor Frankenstein acknowledged that he could not start a new life, he still gets beautiful emotions from nature. 'The starry sky, the sea, and every sight afforded by these wonderful regions seem still to have the power of elevating his soul from earth.' [5] From this point of view, sublimity truly consolidates Victor himself using the sky, the sea, and the afforded sight. However, the crazy experiments that Dr. Frankenstein delved into destroyed him in the same way.

As Marshall Brown has suggested in *A Philosophical View of the Gothic Novel*, 'The gothic substance is a thing whose materiality has been sublimated into a freedom from all conditioning factors, making it at once madness, dream, and play.' [6] Victor Frankenstein has been trapped by the sublimity from this perspective. Sublimity poses a threat to the self when Victor Frankenstein makes attempts to create a man-made creature. The science enslaved him and finally suffered a backlash from his experiments. What's more, just like Meena Alexander demonstrates that the unnatural creation never received a name and became a fatal secret that dominates Victor's life. [4] According to John M. Steadman, 'Like Addison, several of the romantics perceived the underlying duality of Satan's character; they recognised its depravity as well as its sublimity.' [7] The monster itself is much like Satan from the Romantics' point of view. Victor's downfall is a personal tragedy and a broader commentary on the dangers inherent in pursuing the sublime without adequate consideration. Steadman's insight into the dual nature of sublimity

and depravity in characters like Satan offers a lens through which to view Victor and his creation. This duality serves as a warning of the need for balance between the pursuit of knowledge and the ethical responsibilities that come with it. It reminds people if they cannot control their ambitions, they will be destroyed by the sublimity in the end.

In addition, when it comes to the Romantic sublime in *Frankenstein*, there are two aspects that I wish to discuss. To begin with, Victor hopes to be a god who commands unlimited power, as Paul A. Cantor mentioned in *Creature and Creator*, he described 'Mary Shelley portrays the sympathetic reaching out to other human beings as well as creates a merciless and brutal turning in upon the self.' [8] It is similar to the Romantic poets who attempt to regenerate the spirits of humans which shows the duality of the Romantic soul. [8] Therefore, from the perspective of the creature and creator, Victor's solitary exploration in pursuit of the unknown can be regarded as part of his romantic sublime, and his tragic date also includes the romantic notion of the sublime. That is to say, the duality of sublimity is clear enough to be understood. When it comes to another female character Elizabeth Lavenza, she is more than an angel and is regarded as the opposite of that ugly monster. While Victor addressed her as 'my more than sister' [5] and hoped till death she was to be his own only. [5] Similarly, this represents Victor's violent sublimity just as he abandoned his poor creature. And he rejected the monster's request to have a female one, it seems a female awakening that says no towards the male authority. Critically, Victor's creativity showcases a sense of the sublime, and the act of creation itself carries humanity's exploration of the unknown. However, his creation results in the deaths of several innocent people, reflecting the dark side of the sublimity as well.

After analysing these two literary works, I need to mention that their contributions had a profound impact. As Steve Vine suggested, 'Aesthetics in the Romantic period deployed the sublime and its corollary, the beautiful, in a gendered hierarchy. In both Burke and the early, pre-critical Kant, the natural or proper domain of woman is the beautiful, not the sublime.' [9] I absolutely disagree with those points of view. However, it gives me some inspiration that both Mary Shelley and Mary Wollstonecraft are like the national heroines of that time. Their contributions challenged the gender rules as well as developed females' edge towards analysing sublimity. Their works explored an approach to how women of the Romantic period could transcend the restrictive aesthetic categories imposed upon them. Indeed, they challenge the gendered hierarchy suggested by Burke and Kant, asserting that women's intellectual and creative potential is boundless.

4. Comparisons and Contrasts between Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters*

There are some similarities and differences between Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and her mother Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters*. Here I hope to divide it into two aspects, the first aspect is related to the natural landscapes. In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, she describes several magnificent natural landscapes, especially the glaciers and mountains of the Alps that show nature's beauty and magnificence. For example, chapter ten describes such amazing scenery, 'The abrupt sides of vast mountain were before me; the icy wall of the glacier overhung me; a few shattered pines were scattered around.' [5] These unforgettable sceneries have cheered Victor a lot, he said 'It had then filled me with a sublime ecstasy that gave wings to the soul and allowed it to soar from the obscure world to light and joy. The sight of the awful and majestic in nature had indeed always the effect of solemnising my mind and causing me to forget the passing cares of life.' [5] The mountain, icy wall, and shattered pines entertained and energised him. Similarly, in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters*, she depicts natural landscapes and emphasises their beauty and emotional impact. For instance, as she wrote at the end of the sixth letter, 'And if a light shower has chanced to fall with the sun, the juniper, the underwood of the forest, exhales a wild perfume,

mixed with a thousand nameless sweets that, smoothing the heart, leave images in the memory which the imagination will ever hold dear.' [3] In terms of the beauty and quietness of the nature, she receives the great happiness and inner peace from such sublimely environment. They have consolidated the self. The other major similarity focuses on the women in Romanticism. Mary Shelley and Mary Wollstonecraft can be seen as the representative of Romantic females who fought against masculine Romanticism in the 18th and 19th centuries. As Jane Aaron reviewed, 'Women in Romanticism reads the writing of Mary Wollstonecraft, Dorothy Wordsworth, and Mary Shelley against the backdrop of their male contemporaries' preoccupation with establishing a central self, and argues that, given the social subordination of women and the consequent difficulties in establishing a strong female ego, this conventional route to Romantic sublimity was inappropriate and inaccessible to them.' [10] Combining with the opinions as I previously mentioned, both of them challenged the dominant masculine Romanticism of their time. Their literary works were not only responding to their romantic identities but also reshaping the literary and cultural landscape of their time. Thus, it also illustrates that sublimity strengthens the self from this point of view.

The second aspect will discuss some different characteristics between them. On the one hand, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* focuses on the reflections to the technology more than Wollstonecraft. Moreover, she explores the characters' inner conflicts which highlights these landscapes typically recall the conflicts between Victor Frankenstein and his creature, manifesting a kind of fear that passes through people's understandings. Whilst the monster itself can also represent sublimity, Matthew Gumpert has suggested that 'The monster, as well as Frankenstein's creature, is also called, as the sublime itself, perhaps because the sublime, at least since Immanuel Kant, has been equated with the unseeable.' [11] The Frankenstein's creature itself is beyond human's cognitive category, although he is ugly and never accepted by anyone, 'The creature is our shepherd, leading us to the promised land of the sublime, a place where Mary Shelley's narrative can claim to be a kind of "writing degree zero".' [11] I agree with the opinion that Matthew Gumpert has mentioned in a same essay, because in contrast, the extreme ugliness is an abstract sublimity as well. The monster was expelled by the whole society due to his appearance and originality which shows extreme loneliness and alienation. However, his existence reflects a kind of human creativity and potential. If it can be used as a means of consolidation of the self, people would transcend their limitations. On the contrary, Victor Frankenstein felt horrible and regretful when his creature woke up. Meanwhile, because the monster was discarded by his creator and society, he chose to revenge with severe grief and fury. The threat of the sublime to the self begins to emerge. On the other hand, Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters* is an epistolary travelogue which focuses on the description of the natural world and explores societal themes. In her letters, Wollstonecraft paints vivid pictures of stunning natural landscapes, like glaciers and the sea, highlighting nature's immense power and the smallness of humanity, which makes her feel vulnerable. The criticisms towards societal injustice and gender inequality helped her to think about how social status and character she is, which made some inspiration in spirit. Through keeping in touch with nature and reflecting on societal issues, she gained adequate self-awareness and enriched her inner world.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the literary works of Mary Shelley and Mary Wollstonecraft use different meaningful approaches to exploring the subject of sublimity. *Frankenstein* and *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* highlights the double sides of the sublime, which can threaten and strengthen the self. Although there are some differences in the methodologies, both of them use sublimity to discuss human struggles and individual growth, enriching the literature in Romanticism and providing some valuable interpretations about self-

understanding. Their literary works showcase how sublimity can evoke awe and fear which lead to a profound personal transformation. Mary Shelley wrote about sublimity from the view of scientific ambitions, while Mary Wollstonecraft emphasised the natural world and social criticisms. Their contributions stressed the complexity of the sublime in Romantic literature, highlighting its functions in shaping human's romantic identities and literary constructions. Furthermore, their interpretations are profoundly beneficial to Romanticism from 1789 to 1821, strengthening our appreciation towards sublimity.

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