



The Reflection of Edmund Burke's Sublime in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Selected Poetry

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Abstract

This paper explores Edmund Burke's concept 'the sublime' in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poetry. Coupled with his concept of 'the beautiful', Burke's the sublime features conspicuous in creative arts. While beauty is an integral constituent or rather product of art, the sublime is no less desirable in amplifying a given piece of art. Unlike the beautiful, reflection of the sublime is considerably rare in poetry specifically the romantic. Coleridge is an exception in creating sublime effect in his poetry. His major poems especially *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Kubla Khan* not only reflect but almost embody the sublime as shown in this analysis. The secret of Coleridge's fame as a supernatural poet owes largely to his use of the sublime. While the thematic critiques of Coleridge's poetry are overshadowed by the supernatural, this brief textual analysis is an improvement in being different, entailing the sublime

Introduction

Edmund Burke's aesthetic treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (hereafter called *Enquiry*) investigates aesthetic differences between things sublime as well as beautiful. Burke distinguishes the two by depicting their distinct features. Of the two, the beautiful connotes love; it is pleasing and intelligible. The sublime, on the contrary, is linked to primal passions. It is unruly, terrifiable and never fully understandable. The byproducts of beauty and sublime, in a sense, are pleasure and pain respectively. In Coleridge's poems the elements of sublime seem dominant.

As this study deals with the sublime, therefore, the beautiful is not taken into consideration. The sublime is given some space. Burke asserts the sublime is that it postulates reasoning and pushes us through forces appealing and engaging. Burke's *Enquiry*, especially, its first part explicitly dedicated to the sublime is Part I, Section VII: Of The Sublime. The introductory sentence accurately defines the term: "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." (110)

This statement is significant because it explains that the sublime largely is irresistible. In a sense, it resists the ability to comprehend an experience logically. Sublime is an irrational and violent aesthetic experience. Similarly, there are many factors that lend themselves to the sublime: obscurity, power, vastness, infinity, magnitude, darkness, solitude, and silence among other. All these produce an overwhelming experience with little room for clarity and comprehension.

Edmund Burke preceded the romantic period and is considered one of its thinkers. If he was not fully romantic, he was not classical either. However, he rejected classical features of maintaining decorum and restraints.

He also did away with the classical idea of proportion in beauty. Harold Lasky upholds “no man was more deeply hostile to the early politics of the romantic movement... than was Burke; yet, on the whole, it is with the romantics that Burkes’ fundamental influence remains” (181). Romantics like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and the rest were inspired by his aesthetic and philosophical insights. At times they admired and criticized him on philosophical and political grounds. Coleridge, for example, respected him as a genius and mentioned him in his writing. However, he equally disagreed with Burke on political and ethical grounds and wrote a sonnet, *To Burke*. Burke and the romantic writers were no alien to one another.

This account is intended to show that Burke was the immediate predecessor of the romantic age, and his philosophy might have been reflected through its writers and poets. This paper sets out to shed light on the area concerning the relationship between Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s selected poems and Burk’s theory of the sublime. The central question to be examined is to what extent Burk’s theory of the sublime is reflected in these poems. For analysis, two of his well-known poems namely *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (hereafter *The Rime*) and *Kubla Khan* have been selected to the exploration of sublimity.

Analysis

The Rime

Coleridge’s intention in this poem seems to bring emotions under the cover of fear as an effect of sublime. With magic and supernaturalism, the poet evokes sublime experience. It appears in many events, such as the strangeness of the weather, the killing of “Albatross”, phenomenon like “Death”, “Life-in-Death”, ‘the spirit the Mariner hears’, ‘the angelic spirits which move bodies of dead men’, and ‘the madness of the Pilot and his boy’.

Right from the very beginning, the poet creates a special effect of sublime. As stated earlier, the sublime is a source of terror and obscurity. Sublime, for Burke, arouses above all unlimited, exclusive passionate reactions, embodying the appeals of the sublime. Context seems one of mystery and terror by the time the Mariner holds the guest’s arm and forces him listen to his story. He tells about the strange weather wherein the ship is driven by a storm towards a land of ice devoid of any living being. Meanwhile, a sea bird, the Albatross, flies through the snow-fog, which the speaker compares to a Christian soul. The readers feel sublime by the narration of the fearful story though the guest seems to be somewhat disinterested.

The Sailors consider Albatross to be a being that brings something good. It follows the sailors through fog as well as floating ice. However, the Mariner, mercilessly and without any reason, kills it. The situation turns more terrible as they spend considerable time wandering in the water having no breeze and water. Later, the Mariner looks at the ship approaching eastward. It is here that Coleridge offers an intricate and fearful appearance for demonstrating as to why the boat turns ghostly: it glides towards the sun appearing as a skeleton. Horrible still is the sight of the crew consisting of two persons only: “Death and Life-in-Death”. Thus here, the scenes of death, terror pain, obscurity, difficulty, and darkness evoke sublime as a stimulus which obviously reflects Burke’s concept as stated in his *Enquiry*.

The sublime, for Burke, is characterized by something like a sense of bewilderment as a condition, “in which all [the mind’s] motions are suspended,” since “the mind is so entirely filled with its object that it cannot entertain any other” (1757). A beholder is frozen the moment he is confronted with something sublime specifically in nature. Such a beholder fails to think of anything other than the one that having an overwhelming experience or presence of that object. As a result of the guilt and the bird around his neck, the Mariner sees some slimy things with legs crawling on the sea. Suddenly, there is a big fire resulting from rotten things in the sea. The Mariner is in a real pain and in an anti-sublime position as all bad things happen around him. The remote readers are excited by the mysterious ideas of danger and uncertainty. According to Burke, the pain in the sublime is not the actual and the near one. The obscurity and confusion created by the supernatural power is reflected in the following lines:

About, about, in reel and rout
 The Death-fires danced at night ;

 Nine fathom deep he had follow'd us
 From the land of Mist and Snow. (189)

Besides, other terrible objects appear from the land of mist and snow. The Mariner and the sailors see something in the sky, at first, as a little spot but later, it seems a haze. It moves and takes a certain shape. While getting nearer, it seems to be a ship; rather skeleton of the ship. Moreover, its ribs are seen as bars on the face of the sitting sun. He can see the sunlight appearing through its ribs. But, it may be the specter of woman. He cannot see any one on the board of the ship, just the woman with her death mare. He describes the woman saying her lips are red, her looks are free and her hair is yellow as the gold. In the end she cries saying that she wins the game that means that she wins the death game. The problems do not end; all men on the ship turn their faces painfully and curse the old Mariner with their eyes. The dreadful situations that the crew faced were not delightful and sublime for those real sufferers as Burke says that real pain does not give any delight but it is simply terrible.

The mariner shipmates drop down dead. He does not hear any sound because fifty men drop down one after another. However, after some moments, by the lights of the moon, he can notice God's creatures; he can see the water snakes moving in circles, and are beautiful and happy. He blesses them in his heart. At the same moment, the Albatross fell of his neck that means that the spell begins to break. As an effect of sublime, the wedding guest, after listening to the fearful gothic story, gets confused, and turns from the bridegroom's door. He finds the painful fearful story more delightful than the wedding party.

“Kubla Khan”

Perhaps the best way to talk about this poem in term of the sublime necessitates a look at the poet's peculiar notions of the sublime in the book of David Vallins. Herein most of his thoughts seem quite like his poem *Kubla Khan*, despite being produced quite after this poem was initially written. In his written correspondence with fellow romantic poet, Coleridge recalls his walking experience through mountains recounted as “most sublimely terrible!” It shows how he associates “sublime with a sense of awe-inspiring fear (Vallins 37).” Coleridge often linked this sense of sublime to some astonishingly awe-inspiring natural features.

Nevertheless, most often, Coleridge while talking about sceneries seems to suggest running water as sublime. Thus, in another letter, the poet observes “a most splendid waterfall” (Vallins 49), which markedly resembles phrasing in his great poem. This seems accurate in so far, the description of water body in his poems is concerned: in *The Rime*, his depiction of salty sea seems quite horrible, while in *Kubla Khan*, the description of the river and the ‘sunless sea’ is beyond comprehension. Moreover, nature was not the only area of his sublime concern. His concerns with the sublime can be seen elsewhere and even in his private life. Most pertinent to his poetry are his comments wherein the poet asserts that “Gothic art is sublime. On entering a cathedral, I am filled with devotion and with awe; I am lost to the actualities that surround me, and my whole being expands into the infinite; earth and air, nature and art, all swell up into eternity, and the only sensible impression left is, ‘that I am nothing!’” (Vallins 87).

Similarly, while the poet afterward comments “that sublime faculty, by which a great mind becomes that which it meditates on” (Vallins 100), the very observations seem obviously sublime and, in this sense, recognized as “majesty.” Vallins argues that not only for Coleridge but for the rest of his contemporaries “the feeling of the sublime is the feeling of life itself” (5). In reacting to sublime backdrops, the poet time and again stresses “grandeur, remoteness, wildness, and savagery of mountain regions” (Vallins 6). Besides, in similar sublime context, the poet intuitively accentuates a presence that transcends the physical objects which is beyond human comprehension. This treatment of the sublime is in perfect accord with the kind of sublimity the poet not only defines but also accomplishes in poem like *Kubla Khan*-something undeniably, beautifully, and powerfully sublime, nonetheless.

The poem's sublime potential could be seen in the very first description “In Xanadu did Kubla Khan”), that conveys mystery, remoteness, as well as power. This sublime sense intensifies further (“A stately pleasure dome decree”), wherein these words imply a sense of loftiness and potency. The idea that Kubla Khan has only to “decree” anything that should happen or be made itself reveals his superhuman power. It is not less overwhelming and controlling in the context of the poem. Also, descriptions like “Alph, the sacred river” (l. 3) once more adds to an elevated and commanding sense of the occasion. The description of the sacred river passing through “caverns” apparently “measureless to man” appears no less strange and striking. At the same time, its running “Down to a sunless sea” (l. 5) gives a similar impression: gigantic as well as extremely gloomy that is beyond human understanding.

The expression “twice five miles” and the “walls and towers” demarcate his dominion as an area of completely personal authority and imposing his control on nature. Indeed, a sublime occurrence characterizing *Kubla Khan* seems to be an abrupt change in attitude expressed like this “But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted ...!” Such expressions could not be made in normal syntax and punctuation given the intense feelings of the narrator.

Similarly, expression like, “A savage place!” carries forward the broken sentence structure, but equally warns the readers that the narrator’s involvement of this magic could hardly be expressed in day-to-day language or logical coherent structure. The poet would hardly agree with Wordsworth’s linguistic and poetic formula of being simple and mundane. The element of horror characterizing romantic notion of the sublime can be seen in the usage “savage”. However, aptly, words like “holy” and “enchanted” equally connote the sublime meanings relevant to things mysterious, divine, and in these terms supernatural. The poet turns to the darker sense of the supernatural; intense emotion is accompanied in pursuit of the demonic lover. Similarly, the “mighty fountain momentarily was forced” (l. 19), sounds no less nervous and ferocious. The readers come across a sight at once terrific, colossal, and gigantic; but one that wields death-defying power. The special use (or misuse) of words, sentences, devices, and recurrent imageries enables the poet to create a virtually mesmerizing effect in the poem that adds to its overall sublimity. *Kubla Khan* abounds not only in aesthetic, sensual expressions but also in threatening expressions like “ancestral voices prophesying war!”(l. 30).

Having intensified the sublime effects, the focus in the poem is turned from the lordly figure of Kubla Khan to the poetic power of the poet in recalling how “A damsel with a dulcimer / In a vision once I saw” (ll. 37–38). Not only are his senses elated but also his “vision” broadened to a transcendental level. It is this mood that best defines what sublimity should look like. The usage of language at this moment further alienates the poet from the ordinary, mundane, and humanly experiences in order to “...build that dome in air... those caves of ice!” (ll. 46–47).

It appears as if the poem has reached the zenith of sublimity which the poet seems to have desired. His intensity of thoughts and language implies his sublime state. The last stanza specifically assures him of this promise as his sublimity makes him somewhat terrifying and threatening. It is at this stage that the readers feel the height of a sublime poem couched in an equally sublime language. Both the creation and the creator appear imposing and impressive, the latter being more since the former is the product of his no less devilish imagination.

Conclusion

In almost all but specifically these two poems Coleridge engaged gothic and mysterious language to explore the sublime which could not be expressed otherwise. Coleridge stood true to his promise of dealing with things dark, mysterious, and supernatural. He is one of the pioneer romantic poets who should be credited for excelling in supernatural treatment of his subject and therein by creating the sublime effect. Coleridge seems to have been influenced by Burke’s theories of sublime. Clearly, Coleridge transcends from the ordinary to create sublimity from natural vastness and its mystery. As pictured in these two poems, Coleridge’s art is purely his own, at once majestic, strange and sublime.

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