

Edmund Burke and the Sublime

The sublime is a concept associated with vastness, awe, natural magnificence and strong emotion – ideas which fascinated artists and critics during the 18th century. Its development, with its emphasis on feeling and imagination, signals the movement towards Romanticism.

One of the key texts is Edmund Burke's essay *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757-59), which examines the experience of natural phenomena, an experience which Burke argues goes beyond rational understanding, inspiring strong passions that can neither be explained nor controlled. He contrasts the dangers of the sublime with the virtues of the beautiful.

Burke associates the sublime with obscurity, power, darkness, solitude, vastness and uniformity in comparison with the beautiful, which is connected with notions of smallness and variegation.

His theory was extremely popular and contributed to a passion for extreme sensations that culminated in the Gothic novel and influenced several Romantic painters like Johann Heinrich Füssli (1741-1825), also known as Henry Fuseli. By the 1760s picturesque journeys were popular, and the pre-Romantic poet Thomas Gray was among those who searched the English countryside for rushing torrents, remote mountains and dark forests. However, more significant descriptions of the sublime, inspired by their Alpine travels, appear in poems by Wordsworth and Shelley.

In this extract, Burke defines his idea of the 'sublime':

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 about¹ 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. I say the strongest emotion, because I am satisfied² the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure. Without all doubt, the torments which we may be made to suffer are much greater in their effect on the body and mind than any pleasures which the most learned voluptuary³ could suggest, or than the liveliest imagination and the most sound and exquisitely sensitive body could enjoy. [...] But as pain is stronger in its operation than pleasure, so death is in general a much more affecting idea than pain, because there are very few pains, however exquisite, which are not preferred to death; nay, what generally makes pain itself, if I may say so, more painful, is, that it is considered as an emissary of this king of terrors.⁴ When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience.

1 conversant about: familiar with.

2 I am satisfied: I believe that.

3 voluptuary: person devoted to luxury and sensual pleasure.

4 king of terrors: (here) death.

TIME IN MOTION

- 1 Your turn!** Think of something you find 'sublime' according to Burke's definition. It could be a particular type of landscape, like the Alpine peaks, or a face or even an object. Discuss your choice with the class.
- 2 Lab** Find out about the Italian painter Salvator Rosa (1615-73), whose landscapes were much admired by lovers of the 'sublime'. Look for some of his paintings on the Internet and write a short description.