

Foundation English Literature of the Romantic Period, 1798-1832

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Romantic Poetry 3

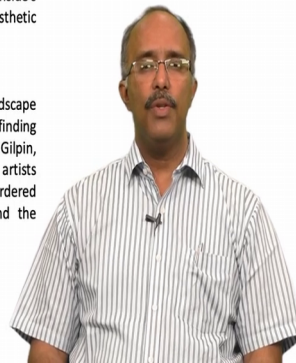
Aesthetics Introduction- Sublime and Picturesque Aesthetics

Hello everybody as we continue our exploration of romantic poetry, we have already looked at nature, environment and other concerns, we now turn to aesthetics and in today's session we will be looking at by way of an interaction that 2 key aesthetic strategies of the period sublime and picturesque aesthetics.

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Translations of the Greek Longinus' *On the Sublime* (English translation in 1680), Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), tracts on aesthetics and philosophy by Immanuel Kant, John Dennis, the (third) Earl of Shaftesbury, poetic explorations such as Mark Akenside's *The Pleasures of Imagination* (1744) helped generate an interest in aesthetic models. Burke elaborated two key models: the sublime and beautiful.

From gardening, landscaping and paintings, which sought to render the landscape 'pretty as a picture' emerged the theory of picturesque painting, eventually finding its resonance in the poetry of the era as well. Commentators like William Gilpin, Uvedale Price, and others working with (or in antagonism to!) landscape artists such as Humphrey Repton and 'Capability' Brown theorized ruins, the ordered landscape, the intrusion of exotic objects like the Chinese pagoda, and the aesthetics of poverty.



Translations of the Greek Longinus on the sublime 1st appeared in English translation in 1680 but the major traitors that popularises the theory of the sublime appears in 1757. Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. They are tracts on aesthetics and philosophy by Immanuel Kant, John Dennis, the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, poetic exploration such as Mark Akenside's *The Pleasures of the Imagination* 1744. All of these together contributed to generate an interest in aesthetics models and Burke elaborated 2 key models the sublime and the beautiful.

However these 2 mutually contract... Or should we say opposing aesthetic devices the sublime and the beautiful had a 3rd category that emerges in the same period that you looking at and that is the category of the picturesque aesthetics. From gardening, landscaping and painting, which sought to render the landscape 'pretty as a picture' emerged the theory of picturesque painting, eventually finding its resonance in the poetry of the area as well.

Commentator such as William Gilpin, Uvedale Price and others working with or in antagonism to landscape artists such as Humphrey Repton and ‘Capability’ Brown theorised ruins, the very systematically ordered landscape, the availability and placing of very careful exotic objects like the Chinese temple and of course the aesthetic of poverty, a politically problematic aesthetic.

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The Sublime

An aesthetic of fear, awe and wonder at the sight of things that are very often beyond human cognition, comprehension and frames of understanding – things which have ill-defined borders, for instance, such as vast seas, mountains, and landscapes.

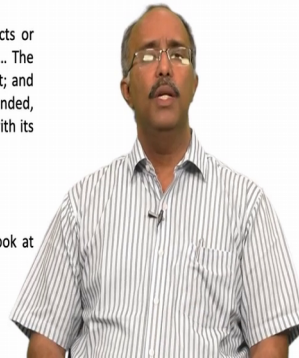
Burke's definition

‘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 ... The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature . . . is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other’

The sublime unsettles the mind, disturbs and terrifies us.

The best way to understand the effects of sublime aesthetics is to look at paintings from the 1750-1850 period.

Slides 1-4



We will take these in turn, let us 1st turn to the sublime, the sublime is an aesthetic of fear, of awe and of wonder. It is generated at the site of things that are very often beyond human cognition, beyond human comprehension and frames of understandings. Things which have ill-defined borders, for instance, vast seas, mountains and landscapes where when we look at something you cannot discern the boundary, you cannot discern a very clear cut bounded nature or natural settings and that in many ways defeats our abilities of comprehension.

Edmund Burke’s definition was this quote ‘Whatever is in any sort terrible or in conversant about terrible objects or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime... The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature... is astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its objects, that it cannot entertain any other’ end quote. In another words the sublime unsettles the mind, it disturbs, it terrifies us. The best way to understand the effects of the sublime aesthetic is perhaps not in poetry but to look at paintings from this period. Coming up next on a series of slides are examples of the sublime in painting.

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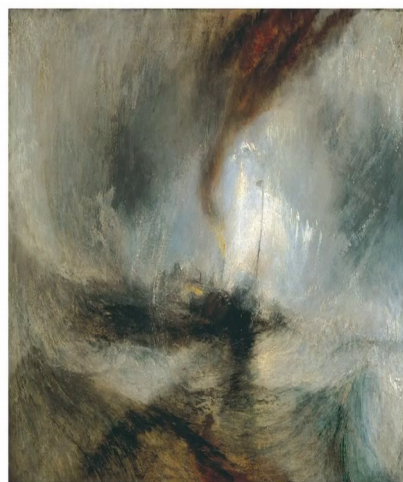


Philip James De Loutherbourg
An Avalanche in the Alps
(1803)



A very famous one Phillips James De Loutherbourg, *An Avalanche in the Alps*. If you pay attention to the image, the people are swaying away from whatever is happening, so they are... this way protecting themselves, slanted towards safety and slanted away from danger and if you look at the all the craggy, desolate landscape and the Alps behind the avalanche coming down upon these people, you will notice that the human figures are very insignificant and that is the key, so what you notice is in this whole expanse, this panoramic nature man occupies very small space, that is a sublime. The recognition that we as humans are insignificant before what we see around us is the cause for the production of a sublime aesthetics, terror is what is at stake.

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JMW. Turner, *Snow Storm –
Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth*
(exhibited 1842)



The next one is JMW Turner, Snow Storm- Steam-Boats off a Harbour's Mouth, 1st exhibited in 1842. Now if you pay attention to this one, it is difficult to discern with any degree of clarity, the outlines of a ship because the ship which is a man-made product, which is a cultural product is swathed in the snowstorm. Nature's fury continuing unabated perhaps or sometimes more or less demolishes any outline of the ship.

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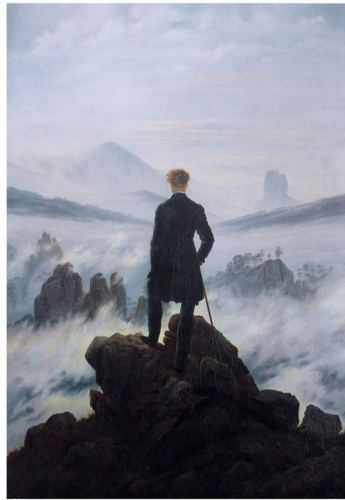


John Martin,
The Great Day of His Wrath (1851–3)



Then there is John Martin 1851- 53, a little beyond the conventional frame of the romantic. The Great Day of His Wrath and here again if you pay attention in Heaven seems to be splitting, the horizon is on fire, there is lightning slashing right across the top of the painting, the flames somewhere, rocks, lava whatever they are... But what you are looking at is Earth exploding more or less and again if you pay attention like in the Louthembourg image, the humans are quite insignificant.

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Caspar David Friedrich,
Wanderer above the Sea of Fog (1818)



This is an interesting image Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* 1818, this well clad, well costumed man looks out on the horizon and if you again pay attention to this, the boundaries are not very clear, the frame of the landscape is vast, drifting and here is the man staring at it.

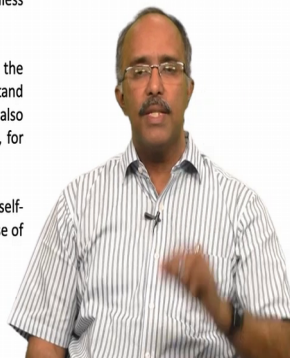
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In each case what we see is the human reduced in size, and Nature scaled up, as fog, as storm, as climactic conditions.

The sublime inspires fear when we can no longer compute the expanse, it is an aesthetic that spills over borders. There is a sublimity of endless repetition as well.

When we look at texts like Shelley's *Mont Blanc* we encounter the sublime: of mountains so vast and so towering that we understand human insignificance. Gothic texts of the 18th and 19th centuries also made use of the sublime. Descriptions of the moors in the Brontës, for instance, are also literary representations of the sublime.

This means, the sublime is connected to a strong sense of self-preservation, the sublime has to be overcome in order to gain a sense of self.



In each case what we see is a human mind reduced in size and nature scaled up, as fog, as storm, as climatic conditions or as geology the sublime inspires fear and we can no longer compute the expanse, it is an aesthetic that spills over borders and there is a sublimity of endless repetition as well. When we look at poetic text like Shelley's *Mont Blanc* we have

had reasons discussed this before, we encounter the sublime of mountain so vast and so towering that we understand human insignificance.

So you look at the mountain, you look up at the mountain this way, the mountain is scaled up like in the slide the man looking at the sea of fog, he is looking at it but it does not stop, I mean the vision does not stop her, the land is stretching far out when you encounter something like this what you see is the insignificance of humanity in the face of nature. Gothic text of the 18th and 19th century also made much use of the sublime. Description of the Moors in the Brontë's for instance literally representation of the sublime or what you can think of as literally sublime. So sublime is connected to a strong sense of self-preservation that humanity is under threat.

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Shifting the ground away from Nature, painters like William Havell developed an industrial sublime: showing the human working classes in the midst of very large machinery.



William Havell,
Parys mountain copper mine (1803)



Shifting the ground away from nature, painters like William Havell developed an industrial sublime showing the human working classes in the midst of very large machinery. Here is William Havell coming up on your Slide now, Parys mountain copper mine 1803, now here if you pay attention nature in the form of the geological structure which is the rock has been curved and there is industrial machinery operating but you still pay...if you pay continuous attention what you discover is even with the machinery, even with all these technological apparatus human beings are (())(8:05) by what nature is.

These aesthetic theories such as sublime have had influence across Europe and America. As a result scholars have examined the American sublime, the Imperial sublime and several other variants. Psychoanalytic and other studies have also been a part of the theoretical approach for obvious reasons, since the sublime is an aesthetic fear and incomprehension.

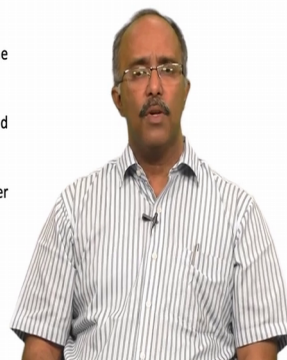
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As a result of this emphasis on comprehension, control and overcoming of obstacles, the sublime has been seen by feminist critics in particular as embodying yet again a masculine and patriarchal ethos disguised as aesthetics.

Numerous feminist critics have discerned a feminine feminist sublime as well.

In the 20th century, we have theorizations in the aesthetic and philosophical analyses of the sublime, from Lyotard to Derrida.

We also have the technological sublime, the digital sublime and other models for the contemporary era.



As a result of this emphasis on comprehension, control and overcoming of obstacles, the sublime has been seen by feminist critics in particular as embodying yet again masculine and patriarchal ethos, so the sublime is something that challenges you and you have to overcome it which is typical patriarchal masculinist ideology. Numerous feminist critics have discerned a feminist and sometimes feminine sublime as well. In the 20th century, theorisation of the sublime has occurred extensively in philosophical text from Jean-françois Lyotard to Jacques Derrida. We also have the technological sublime, the digital sublime and other models for the contemporary but like I said, the sublime is (())(9:10) on terror but there was also an aesthetic of organized land which gives it a kind of pleasing aesthetically satisfying image.

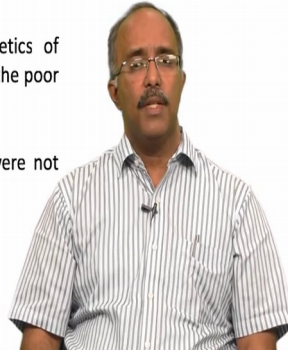
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The Picturesque

The term literally meant 'as a picture'. It was an aesthetic that sought to equate, so to speak, the manicured, ordered landscape and the painting of these landscapes.

There was also a tangential interest in 'the aesthetics of poverty', where the poor hovels, cottages and lands of the poor deemed to be picturesque.

Theorists like Gilpin believed that perfect buildings were not picturesque, and some imperfection was necessary.



This is the aesthetic of picturesque, the term literally meant pretty as a picture. It was an aesthetic that sort to equate so to speak the manicured ordered landscape and the painting of these landscapes. There was also tangential interest in 'the aesthetic of poverty', where the poor hovels, cottages and lands of the poor deemed to be picturesque. In other words they said the land with poor cottages, hut in the corner is aesthetic this is what is often called aesthetics of poverty which is clearly a political aesthetic. Theorist like Gilpin believed that perfect buildings were not picturesque and some imperfection was necessary.

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The picturesque had a particular politics, linked to property, class, gender and social relations.

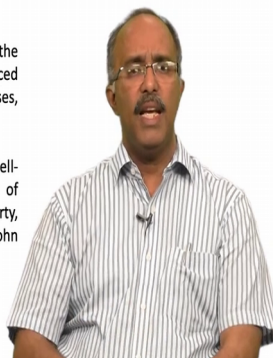
The landscaping of property was something only a landowner could do. The 'improvement', a favourite term for picturesque advocates, was about the right to alter the land.

The picturesque insisted on variety, but variety ordered.

In an attempt to present ideal landscapes that would fit the picture, the picturesque often erased human presence (especially of labour) and replaced it with rocks, trees and fauna/flora even some signs of the wild. In other cases, it showcased labour serving the land to make it beautiful.

Very often it had a 'prospect view', of the landowner gazing out over his well-ordered and productive fields. So the rural remained the mainstay of picturesque aesthetics. We see the emphasis on labour, land, poverty, organized lands and some wilderness in Thomas Gainsborough, John Constable, JMW Turner, and others.

Slides 5-8



The picturesque like I just said had a particular politics, linked to poverty, class, gender and social relations. The landscaping of poverty was something only a land owner could do, so if

this land is mine, I changed, I modify it, so the aesthetic appeal of the land adds to my social stature as a land owner. In an attempt to present ideal landscape that would fit the picture, the picturesque often erased human presence especially of labor and replace it with rocks, trees and fauna, flora, so the labor was not particularly appealing part of the landscape, so you removed the presence of labor.

Instead what you did was to say oh look at the pretty rocks, the pretty plans or the pretty animals. Very often the picturesque had a prospect view, a prospect view is when the land owner stands gazing over his well-ordered and productive fields, the prospect view is an ownership, so the rural remain the mainstay of picturesque aesthetic. We see an emphasis on labor, land, poverty, organise lands and some wilderness in Thomas Gainsborough, John Constable, Turner and others coming up next on several slides instances of the picturesque.

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Thomas Gainsborough, *Mr and Mrs Andrews* (1750)



This is Thomas Gainsborough famous painting Mr and Mrs Andrews 1750. Now if you look at land depicted here it is a very ordered land. There is hedge, there is productive, harvested material here, in the background you can see sheep or some cattle grazing, the landscape stretches there is a house that you can see in the distance but 2 or 3 things here. The man is clearly the owner, he has a gun to protect his woman, his animal and his land, so there is the aesthetic of the picturesque which ties in with questions of ownership and the masculine ethos of being a land owner.

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Thomas Gainsborough
The Market Cart (1786)



John Constable,
The Haywain (1821)



J.M.W. Turner,
Crossing the Brook
(1815)



The picturesque in sharp contrast to the sublime was primarily about a peaceful landscape, but one which had a clear controlling authority.

The rural scenes in these paintings sought to make English countryside more attractive than the city – a sensibility and ideology endorsed by writers such as Wordsworth.

It was an aesthetic, as contemporary scholars note, of landownership disguised as disinterested observation of the land.

The picturesque influenced painters such as William Hodges and the Daniells, famous for their picturesque Indian paintings, commissioned by the East India Company and others.



Thomas Gainsborough other image, The Market Cart 1786 a glorification of the rural ideal, John Constable 1821, The Haywain another very famous painting, Turner's Crossing the Brook 1815 also depiction of a rural ideal. So the picturesque is in sharp contrast to the sublime and it is primarily about a peaceful landscape but one which had a very clear controlling authority.

The rural scenes in these paintings sought to make English countryside more attractive than the city - a sensibility and ideology and doorstep by writers such as Wordsworth. It was an aesthetic as contemporary scholars have noted of land ownership disguised as disinterested observation. The picturesque influenced painters such as William Hodges and the Daniells. These are 2 important names because both Hodges and Daniells are commissioned by the East India company to travel through India and documented.

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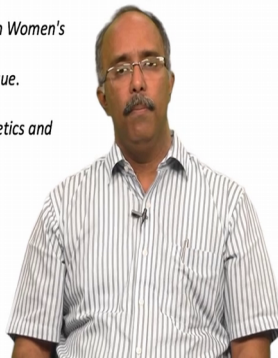
<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime>

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/picturesque>



Additional/Recommended Reading

Philip Shaw, *The Sublime*. Routledge, 2005.
Barbara Claire Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction*. U of California P, 1997.
Stephen Copley and Peter Garside (eds), *The Politics of the Picturesque*.
Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.
Malcolm Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque: Landscape Aesthetics and Tourism in Britain, 1760-1800*. Stanford UP, 1989.



You can see more images and the paintings from the Tate galleries collection on sublime and the picturesque. Why are these aesthetics important? Several reasons, one these aesthetic moved between forms and joiners, painting to literature, literature back to painting. The aesthetics were very useful political devices, they enabled the poets or the writers or painters to code social relations as aesthetics, so instead of saying oh it is terrible to see those poor people there, you would say how beautiful that the poor appear in these paintings.

So you converted questions of social relations, economic relations, power relations into aesthetic strategies as Terry Eagleton has repeatedly warned us through the ideology of the aesthetic work, aesthetic would never be neutral depictions of beauty. Aesthetics have very clear politics, those politics are central to social relations, gender relations and questions of

power. So is important for us to understand that when we are reading Wordsworth description of say Tintern Abbey or looking at Gainsborough images of the country house and the rural aristocrats, we need to be able to caution ourselves that these are critical aesthetics. Thank you.