The Sublime

The literary concept of the **sublime** became important in the eighteenth century. It is associated with the 1757 treatise by [Edmund Burke](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edmund_Burke), though it has earlier roots. The idea of the sublime was taken up by [Immanuel Kant](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immanuel_Kant) and the [Romantic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romanticism) poets including especially [William Wordsworth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Wordsworth).

Longinus

The earliest text on the sublime was written sometime in the first or third century AD by the Greek writer [Longinus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Longinus_(literature)) in his work *On the Sublime.* Longinus defines the literary sublime as "excellence in language", the "expression of a great spirit" and the power to provoke "ecstasy" in one's readers.[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sublime_(literary)#cite_note-1)Longinus holds that the goal of a writer should be to produce a form of ecstasy.

Burke

Most scholars point to [Edmund Burke](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edmund_Burke)'s [*A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Philosophical_Inquiry_into_the_Origin_of_Our_Ideas_of_the_Sublime_and_Beautiful) (1757) as the landmark treatise on the sublime. Burke defines the sublime as "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." Burke believed that the sublime was something that could provoke terror in the audience, for terror and pain were the strongest of emotions. However, he also believed there was an inherent "pleasure" in this emotion. Anything that is great, infinite or obscure could be an object of terror and the sublime, for there was an element of the unknown about them. Burke finds more than a few instances of terror and the sublime in [John Milton](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Milton)'s [*Paradise Lost*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paradise_Lost), in which the figures of Death and Satan are considered sublime.[[2]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sublime_(literary)#cite_note-2)

Kant

[Immanuel Kant](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immanuel_Kant) in his [*The Critique of Judgment*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Critique_of_Judgment) (1790) further clarifies Burke's definition of the sublime, mostly in contrast to the beautiful. He says that the beautiful in nature is not quantifiable, but rather focused only in color, form, surface, etc. of an object. Therefore, the beautiful is to be "regarded as a presentation of an indeterminate concept of understanding." However, to Kant, the sublime is more infinite and can be found even in an object that has no form. The sublime should be regarded as a "presentation of an indeterminate concept of reason." Basically, Kant argues that beauty is a temporary response of understanding, but the sublime goes beyond the aesthetics into a realm of reason. Whereas Burke argues that the sublime arises from an object that incites terror, Kant says that an object can be terrifying and thus, sublime, without the beholder actually being afraid *of* it. But there is much more to Kant's definition of the sublime. He claims that the sublime in itself is so great that anything compared to it must necessarily be considered small. And, because of that, an important aspect of the sublime is the work of one's imagination to comprehend something so great that it seems inconceivable; thus, one major aspect of the sublime is the power of mankind's mind to recognize it. Kant transforms the sublime from a terrifying object of nature to something intricately connected to the rational mind, and hence to morality.[[3]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sublime_(literary)#cite_note-3)

The literary sublime, as well as the philosophical, aesthetic sublimes, is inherently connected to nature but, as with most literary terms, the sublime evolved alongside literature. More authors began to connect the natural sublime to an internalized emotion of terror. Authors began to see the sublime, with its inherent contradictions (pain and pleasure, terror and awe) as representative of the changing political and cultural climate of the times. They began to incorporate more aspects of the sublime into their literary works as a way of externalizing their inner conflicts. In this way, the sublime particularly appealed to the Romantics.

In English romantic poetry

The fascination with the sublime in [Romanticism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romanticism) first began in landscaping; however, Romantic poets soon began experimenting on it as well. But the innovations made to the sublime in landscaping also translated into the poetry of the time. Thus, what Christian Hirschfeld wrote in his *Theory of Gardening* (1779–1780) can be applied to the literary world as well. On the sublime, Hirschfeld argues that Man sees his own potential in the grandeur of nature and in the boundless landscapes therein. He also believed that this applied to both man's freedom and lack thereof, and moving from restriction to freedom results in an inner elevation. In this way, the sublime becomes internalized, and "physical grandeur {becomes} transformed into spiritual grandeur." Hirschfeld further believed that the sublime of the nature then becomes a symbol of inner human realities.[[4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sublime_(literary)#cite_note-4)

So the English Romantics began to view the sublime as referring to a "realm of experience beyond the measurable" that is beyond rational thought, that arises chiefly from the terrors and awe-inspiring natural phenomena.[[5]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sublime_(literary)#cite_note-Norton-5)(pA54) Others agreed with Kant's definition of the sublime: that it had everything to do with mankind's rational thought and perceptions. But all Romantics agreed that the sublime was something to be studied and contemplated. And in doing so, the Romantics internalized their thoughts of the sublime and attempted to understand it. Although the moment may have been fleeting, the Romantics believed one could find enlightenment in the sublime.

However, each of the Romantics did have a slightly different interpretation on the sublime.

**William Wordsworth**

[William Wordsworth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Wordsworth) is the Romantic best known for working with the sublime. Many scholars actually place Wordsworth's idea of the sublime as the standard of the romantic sublime. In his essay on the sublime, Wordsworth says that the "mind {tries} to grasp at something towards which it can make approaches but which it is incapable of attaining."[[6]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sublime_(literary)#cite_note-Brennan-6) In trying to "grasp" at this sublime idea, the mind loses consciousness, and the spirit is able to grasp the sublime - but it is only temporary. Wordsworth expresses the emotion that this elicits in his poem "[Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lines_Composed_a_Few_Miles_above_Tintern_Abbey)":

Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,  
In which the burden of the mystery  
In which the heavy and weary weight  
Of all this unintelligible world,  
Is lightened (37-41).[[5]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sublime_(literary)#cite_note-Norton-5)(p258)

Here Wordsworth expresses that in the mood of the sublime, the burden of the world is lifted. In a lot of these cases, Wordsworth finds the sublime in Nature. He finds the awe in the beautiful forms of nature, but he also finds terror. Wordsworth experiences both aspects of the sublime. However, he does go beyond Burke or Kant's definition of the literary sublime, for his ultimate goal is to find Enlightenment within the sublime.

**Samuel Taylor Coleridge**

[Samuel Taylor Coleridge](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Taylor_Coleridge) was a poet, critic and scholar, and he was very concerned with the sublime, especially in contrast to the beautiful. Coleridge argues his view best when he says that:

I meet, I *find* the Beautiful - but I give, contribute or rather attribute the Sublime. No object of the Sense is sublime in itself; but only as far as I make it a symbol of some Idea. the circle is a beautiful figure in itself; it becomes sublime, when I contemplate eternity under that figure.[[7]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sublime_(literary)#cite_note-Twitchell-7)(p21)

Therefore, the speaker must contemplate more than just the object itself; it is sublime in its greater context. Now, Coleridge's views on the sublime are unique because Coleridge believed that Nature was only occasionally sublime, that is, only in the sky, the sea and the desert, because those are the only objects in nature that are boundless. For this reason, Coleridge's "[Rime of the Ancient Mariner](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rime_of_the_Ancient_Mariner)" is often considered sublime, though it is one of the few works in which Coleridge expresses the natural world as being sublime. In most of Coleridge's other works, he focuses on the "metaphysical sublime," which is found in the 'in between's of the world (earth and sea, sky and sea, etc.). But Coleridge didn't demand the sensation of terror or awe within the sight, rather, he focused on the element of infinity.[[7]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sublime_(literary)#cite_note-Twitchell-7)(p89–90)

Later aspects

The so-called "second generation" Romantics employed the sublime as well, but as the early Romantics had different interpretations of the literary sublime, so too did [Percy Bysshe Shelley](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Percy_Bysshe_Shelley), [Lord Byron](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord_Byron), and [John Keats](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Keats). In many instances, they reflected the desire for Enlightenment that their predecessor showed, but they also tended to stick closer to the definition of the sublime given by Longinus and Kant. They tended to focus on the terror in the sublime, and the ecstasy found there.[[7]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sublime_(literary)#cite_note-Twitchell-7)(p145)