



STUDYDADDY

**Get Homework Help
From Expert Tutor**

Get Help

EDMUND BURKE

from *The Sublime and Beautiful*

[1757]

EDMUND BURKE (1729–1797) was an Irish philosopher and politician in the British Parliament during the eighteenth century. In the 1770s, he gained notoriety in Great Britain for his public support of the American Revolution in conflict with England. In later years, he became even better known for his response to the French Revolution, which he outlined in his most famous work, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). In *Reflections*, Burke argued that change, when necessary, should occur gradually in a way that does not destroy the fabric of a society—an argument that has become central to modern political thought in Europe and the United States.

Before entering politics, Burke made his living by writing works of literary and philosophical criticism. It was during this time that he wrote his most famous work, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, a sustained meditation on human aesthetic responses. For the purpose of his argument, Burke divided aesthetic objects into two kinds: the beautiful, which provides emotional pleasure by evoking positive feelings; and the sublime, which overwhelms our consciousness with their largeness, power, and capacity for terror.

For Burke, sublime objects have a greater potential to move us because they are based on our primal instinct to fear what can harm us. When fear-inspiring phenomena are contained at a safe distance, they can thrill us without to overwhelm our emotions even though we know intellectually that there is no real danger. This is why we derive such pleasure from things like roller coasters, horror movies, and dangerous animals at the zoo.

Burke's idea of the sublime had a tremendous influence on later

and horror movies designed to frighten their audiences from the relative safety of living rooms and movie theaters.

The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, 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, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that, far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force. Astonishment, as I have said, is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence, and respect.

No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as *fear*. For fear being an apprehension of pain or death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain. Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too, whether this cause of terror be endued with greatness of dimensions or not; for it is impossible to look on anything as trifling, or contemptible, that may be dangerous. There are many animals, who though far from being large, are yet capable of raising ideas of the sublime, because they are considered as objects of terror. As serpents and poisonous animals of almost all kinds. And to things of great dimensions, if we annex an adventitious idea of terror, they become without comparison greater. A level plain of a vast extent on land, is certainly no mean idea; the prospect of such a plain may be as extensive as a prospect of the ocean: but can it ever fill the mind with anything so great as the ocean itself? This is owing to several causes; but it is owing to none more than this, that the ocean is an object of no small terror. Indeed, terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime. Several languages bear a strong testimony to the affinity of these ideas. They frequently use the same word, to signify indifferently the modes of astonishment or admiration, and those of terror.

To make anything very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes. Every one will be sensible of this, who considers how greatly night adds to our dread, in all cases of danger, and how much the notions of ghosts and goblins, of which none can form clear ideas, affect minds which give

the Druids¹ performed all their ceremonies in the bosom of the darkest woods, and in the shade of the oldest and most spreading oaks. . . .

It is one thing to make an idea clear, and another to make it *affecting* to the imagination. If I make a drawing of a palace, or a temple, or a landscape, I present a very clear idea of those objects; but then (allowing for the effect of imitation, which is something) my picture can at most affect only as the palace, temple, or landscape would have affected in the reality. On the other hand, the most lively and spirited verbal description I can give raises a very obscure and imperfect *idea* of such objects; but then it is in my power to raise a stronger *emotion* by the description than I could do by the best painting. This experience constantly evinces. The proper manner of conveying the *affections* of the mind from one to another, is by words; there is a great insufficiency in all other methods of communication; and so far is a clearness of imagery from being absolutely necessary to an influence upon the passions, that they may be considerably operated upon, without presenting any image at all, by certain sounds adapted to that purpose; of which we have a sufficient proof in the acknowledged and powerful effects of instrumental music. In reality, a great clearness helps but little towards affecting the passions, as it is in some sort an enemy to all enthusiasms whatsoever. . . .

Besides those things which *directly* suggest the idea of danger, and those which produce a similar effect from a mechanical cause,² I know of nothing sublime, which is not some modification of power. And this branch rises, as naturally as the other two branches, from terror, the common stock of everything that is sublime. The idea of power, at first view, seems of the class of those indifferent ones, which may equally belong to pain or to pleasure. But in reality, the affection, arising from the idea of vast power, is extremely remote from that neutral character.

For first, we must remember, that the idea of pain, in its highest degree, is much stronger than the highest degree of pleasure; and that it preserves the same superiority through all the subordinate gradations. From hence it is, that where the chances for equal degrees of suffering or enjoyment are in any sort equal, the idea of the suffering must always be prevalent. And indeed the ideas of pain, and, above all, of death, are so very affecting, that whilst we remain in the presence of whatever is supposed to have the power of inflicting either, it is impossible to be perfectly free from terror. Again, we know by experience, that, for the enjoyment of pleasure, no great efforts of power are at all necessary; nay, we know, that such efforts would go a great way towards destroying our satisfaction: for pleasure must be stolen, and not forced upon

rush in upon the mind together. Look at a man, or any other animal, of great strength, and what is your idea before reflection? Is it that this strength is subservient to you, to your ease, to your pleasure, to your interest in any particular emotion you feel is, lest this enormous strength should be employed in acts of rapine and destruction. That power derives all its sublimity from the weakness which it is generally accompanied, will appear evidently from its effects in a few cases, in which it may be possible to strip a considerable part of its ability to hurt. When you do this, you spoil it of everything that makes it sublime, and immediately becomes contemptible.

An ox is a creature of vast strength; but he is an innocent creature, and serviceable, and not at all dangerous; for which reason the idea of his strength means grand. A bull is strong too: but his strength is of another kind, and destructive, seldom (at least amongst us) of any use in our business, and is therefore great, and it has frequently a place in sublime descriptions and comparisons. Let us look at another strong animal, in the two distinct lights in which we may consider him. The horse in the light of a useful beast, and in the light of the road, the draft; in every social, useful light, the horse has no grandeur, and is it thus that we are affected with him, *whose neck is clothed with scales, whose nostrils is terrible, who swalloweth the ground with fierceness, and believeth that it is the sound of the trumpet?*³ In this description, the utility of the horse entirely disappears, and the terrible and sublime blackness remains.

We have continually about us animals of a strength that is not pernicious. Amongst these we never look for the sublime; it is in the gloomy forest, and in the howling wilderness, in the form of the panther, or rhinoceros. Whenever strength is only useful, and subservient to our benefit or our pleasure, then it is never sublime: for nothing can be sublime that does not act in conformity to our will; but to act agreeably to our will, to be subject to us, and therefore can never be the cause of a grand conception. . . .

from a precipice, than looking up at an object of equal height; but of that I am not very positive.

A perpendicular has more force in forming the sublime, than an inclined plane; and the effects of a rugged and broken surface seem stronger than where it is smooth and polished. It would carry us out of our way to enter in this place into the cause of these appearances; but certain it is they afford a large and fruitful field of speculation. However, it may not be amiss to add to these remarks upon magnitude, that, as the great extreme of dimension is sublime, so the last extreme of littleness is in some measure sublime likewise: when we attend to the infinite divisibility of matter, when we pursue animal life into these excessively small, and yet organized beings, that escape the nicest inquisition of the sense; when we push our discoveries yet downward, and consider those creatures so many degrees yet smaller, and the still diminishing scale of existence, in tracing which the imagination is lost as well as the sense; we become amazed and confounded at the wonders of minuteness; nor can we distinguish in its effects this extreme of littleness from the vast itself. For division must be infinite as well as addition; because the idea of a perfect unity can no more be arrived at, than that of a complete whole, to which nothing may be added.

Another source of the sublime is infinity; if it does not rather belong to the last. Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect and truest test of the sublime. There are scarce any things which can become the objects of our senses, that are really and in their own nature infinite. But the eye not being able to perceive the bounds of many things, they seem to be infinite, and they produce the same effects as if they were really so. We are deceived in the like manner, if the parts of some large object are so continued to any indefinite number, that the imagination meets no check which may hinder its extending them at pleasure.

Whenever we repeat any idea frequently, the mind, by a sort of mechanism, repeats it long after the first cause has ceased to operate. After whirling about, when we sit down, the objects about us still seem to whirl. After a long succession of noises, as the fall of waters, or the beating of forge-hammers, the hammers beat and the water roars in the imagination long after the first sounds have ceased to affect it; and they die away at last by gradations which are scarcely perceptible. If you hold up a straight pole, with your eye to one end, it will seem extended to a length almost incredible. Place a number of uniform and equi-distant marks on this pole, they will cause the same deception, and seem multiplied without end. The senses, strongly affected in some one manner, cannot quickly change their tenor, or adapt themselves to other things; but they continue in their old channel until the strength of the first mover decays. This is the reason of an appearance very frequent in madmen; that they remain whole days and nights, sometimes whole years, in the constant repetition of some remark, some complaint, or song; which having struck powerfully on their disordered imagination in the beginning of their frenzy, every repetition reinforces it with new strength; and the hurry of their spirits, unrestrained by the curb of reason, continues it to the end of their lives.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

1. What sublime aspects of nature does Burke describe to begin this passage? Why does he begin by writing about nature in a work that is supposedly about art?
2. What does Burke see as the emotional effect of fear? How does our mind react when presented with something immediately dangerous? In what way is this an aesthetic feeling?
3. Why does Burke point out the way that different languages equate fear and astonishment? How does this linguistic analysis count as evidence of a claim about the sublime?
4. What is the emotional effect of obscurity? Why do people tend to be more affected by what they can't see than of what they can see? How might an awareness of this be useful to an artist or writer?
5. Why does Burke point out that the idea of pain is stronger than the idea of pleasure? How is this relevant to his overall argument?
6. What does Burke see as the difference between powerful animals that have been domesticated and equally powerful animals that have not? What does he see as the fundamental difference between an ox and a bull?
7. How do the concepts of vastness and infinity produce the sublime? How are these concepts related to fear or power?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

1. How might you use Burke's idea of the sublime to describe William Blake's poem "The Tyger" (p. 262)? Are there specific references to the sublime in Blake's poem?
2. Does Burke see the natural world in the same way that Bashō (p. 300) does? How do the objects of Bashō's haiku appear to be the kinds of things that Burke would describe as "sublime"?
3. In what ways are the images in Carl Jung's *The Red Book* (p. 108) sublime? How do they relate to Burke's ideas about the sublime?



STUDYDADDY

**Get Homework Help
From Expert Tutor**

Get Help