

---

---

THE ETHICAL ASPECTS OF THE SUBLIME IN MODERN  
ENGLISH FANTASY  
(ROWLING, PULLMAN, HIGGINS)

Kamila Vránková

As an aesthetic category, the sublime has a rich and complex cultural heritage. On the one hand, it reflects desires and anxieties of particular cultures, and different periods involve different approaches to and concepts of the sublime experience. On the other hand, various definitions share an important uniting element: the emphasis on a strong impression and intense feelings, as well as on the idea of a threshold.

The idea of a boundary dividing the knowable, familiar world and the spheres of the unknown, the incomprehensible and the uncontrollable remains a significant attribute of the sublime from the ancient periods through the 18<sup>th</sup>-century revival till the theories of postmodernism. This boundary, despite the significant subjective aspect of the sublime experience, can be discussed with respect to a distinct ethical concern. Longinus, for example, describes the sublime as a state of being carried away from the everyday reality to the world of noble ideas and feelings, transcending the common experience. This excited state of mind, inspired by the power of art, is morally desirable as it leads man from superficial material concerns to the search for true and lasting values.

The ethical aspect of the sublime is given a religious context in the work of John Dennis, pointing out the healing function of art (and religious poetry in particular) which can reconcile the conflicting tendencies of human nature, symbolised by the biblical image of the Fall. His emphasis on passion as a crucial element of the sublime corresponds with Longinus's emotional experience of nobility and moral truth, and it anticipates Addison's concern with admiration and astonishment, Shaftesbury's employment of enthusiasm as a synonym of the sublime, as well as the Romantic concept of higher, elevated consciousness.

In Edmund Burke's analysis of the sublime, there is another concept of the threshold, connecting the idea of the sublime with the fear of the unknown, which involves a threat of destruction. Burke's theory deals with the terrifying aspects of absence and excess, the opposites that dramatise the plots of the Gothic novels. As Fred Botting points out, the Gothic sublime draws on the theme transgression (embodied by the villainous figures), which turns the reader's attention to the role of moral boundaries. Evil deeds both distort and reaffirm these limits by exciting fears of social disintegration.<sup>1</sup>

The Gothic tales, in accordance with Burke's ideas, suggest the paradox of the sublime in describing its effects on self-preservation, as well as on social relationships. According to Burke, the experience of the sublime involves feelings of sympathy and pity,<sup>2</sup> making the individual imagine himself in the position of a person in distress, and (by instinct or impulse, not by reasoning) seek relief in "relieving those who suffer."<sup>3</sup> In this respect, the sublime can become a life-giving force as it leads the individual from indolence to activity, and even to a moral action (cf. in Rowling's *Harry Potter*).

Ethical aspects of the sublime are emphasised in Immanuel Kant's concern with the moral will, by which man can elevate himself above his natural impulses (e.g. the feeling of fear). It is through the sublime that the nature of man (and around man) can be defeated by the supremacy of reason. According to John Zammito, the Kantian sublime is the aesthetic experience which par excellence symbolises the "moral dimension of human existence."<sup>4</sup> In Kant, with the emphasis on unhumiliated humanity during an encounter with higher forces, the recognition of helplessness becomes a presupposition of greatness.

The inclusion of the moral meaning in the experience of the sublime is closely connected with Kant's concept of imagination. As it is implied in *The Critique of Judgment*, it is the faculty of imagination that produces the

1 See Fred Botting, *Gothic*, London, New York: Routledge, 1996, 8.

2 Cf. W.P. Albrecht's *The Sublime Pleasures of Tragedy*, Kansas: The University Press of Kansas, 1975. As Albrecht points out, Burke "identified the sublime with the tragic" by his emphasis on the "strong excitement," on "emotional impact and moral force" (7–8).

3 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, ed. Adam Phillips, Oxford: O.U.P., 1998, 38–43.

4 John Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant's Critique of Judgement*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, 279.

unimaginable, which is, for Kant, just another term for the sublime. In other words, it is the recognition of the limits that may inspire the idea of the unlimited. In the Kantian play of imagination and reason there is a mutual dependence of pleasure and pain: “the feeling of momentary checking of the vital powers” initiates a “consequent stronger outflow of them”<sup>5</sup> and results in what Jean-Francois Lyotard describes as an “increase of being.”<sup>6</sup>

In Levinas’s concept of “ethics as first philosophy,”<sup>7</sup> the sublime experience is described as a desire for the invisible and the unknowable, which corresponds with Levinas’s new, ethical way of looking at human being: the being is not based on the individual’s subjectivity but on the individual’s relationship with other individuals. In this respect, Lyotard, dealing with the presentation of the unrepresentable, finds a correspondence between Levinasian ethics and Kantian aesthetics. As Will Slocombe observes, the “postmodern obsession with unrepresentability”<sup>8</sup> is a product of the ethical response towards the other.

It is the idea of unrepresentability as an ethical demand from the other that permeates through the postmodern effort to avoid categorisation. According to Levinas, the search for knowledge that allows presentation is concerned with the totalising incorporations of the other into the self, with the dismissal of the boundary between the familiar and the incomprehensible, in other words, with the disappearance of the sublime. In *Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard connects the sublime with “‘lack of reality’ of reality,” (77) with the fear of “nothing further happening,” and with the invention of other realities as a challenge to the notion of absence and emptiness.

In the Latin roots of the word “sublime” (sublimis / lofty), the prefix “sub” means “under,” “up from underneath,” “below,” while the meaning of the root, “-lime/-liminal” includes both threshold (limen) and a boundary (limes). Moreover, the link between “limen” and “limus” refers to a “sidelong vision,” thus, the term refers both to the vertical movement “up to a threshold” and to a horizontal movement “out to the margin.”<sup>9</sup> With

5 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J.H.Bernard, London: Macmillan, 1914, 102.

6 J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, 75.

7 “Ethics as First Philosophy” is the title of Levinas’s study, transl. by Seán Hand and Michael Temple and published in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand, Oxford: Blackwell, 1989, 75–87.

8 Will Slocombe, *Nihilism and the Sublime Postmodern*, Routledge: New York and London, 2006, 63.

9 Twitchell, J.B., *Romantic Horizons*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1983, 2.

respect to the meaning of the morpheme “sub,” “up and out” allows an opposite direction, “down and in.” A correspondence with the Greek word “lekhrios” further suggests the “process of slanting, of being diagonal.” It is the contradiction between the ‘upward and outward’ movement and the movement ‘down and in’ that gives the essence of sublimity. It involves “the process of physically transcending external limits while simultaneously crossing a psychological boundary of the consciousness” (Twitchell 3).

The discussion of “sub-liminal” experience as a mode of perception and a purification of awareness leads Twitchell to consider it as a “rite of passage,” in which the human mind moves to a new level through a disturbing tension between the inner and the outer worlds, between the physical and the spiritual, between the individual and his surroundings. In this suggestive comparison, Victor Turner’s idea of an “ordeal” (Twitchell 25)<sup>10</sup> as an inevitable part of the passage is employed, and the “in-between” experience of the sublime can be viewed as an “initiation” into the questions of human identity.

In children’s fantasy fiction, this initiation (and especially its liminal phase) becomes a crucial theme drawing on the Kantian idea that virtue (and moral resistance) must be tested by adversity.<sup>11</sup> In this respect, the child protagonists experience their limitations (concerning both physical capacities and spiritual experience) face to face with overwhelming external vastness and power (corresponding, in fact, with Kant’s description of mathematical and dynamic types of the sublime). At the same time, the experience of fear and terror leads the young heroes to realise their true power, i.e. the ability to defend not just their own life, but particular social relationships, which allows them to fulfil the passage by the reunion with their fellows during the final, post-liminal phase of the initiation.

As Anna Jackson points out, contemporary children’s literature draws in many ways on the Gothic tradition, and children’s books become a new and suitable location for Gothic imagery.<sup>12</sup> Particular Gothic themes, deal-

10 Twitchell draws on Turner’s study *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors, Symbolic Action in Human Society* (1974). Arnold Van Gennep’s *Rites of Passage* (1909) should be remembered here because of his influential analysis of the three phases of the initiation process: the pre-liminal, the liminal and the post-liminal.

11 Cf. Paul H. Fry’s “The Possession of the Sublime”, *Studies in Romanticism*, 26.2, 1987, 194.

12 *The Gothic in Children’s Literature. Haunting the Borders*, eds. Anna Jackson, Karen Coats and Roderick McGillis, London and New York: Routledge, 2008, 1–9.

ing with the experience of the sublime as a life-threatening force (and with the traditional antinomy of the villains and their victims), frequently take the form of children's fantasy.

In fact, the imagery of fantasy tends to be similar to the imagery of Gothic fiction. In both cases, authors draw on the notion of a mysterious world and unimaginable powers surrounding our reality and exceeding our understanding. Like Gothic novels, children's books are concerned with transgressing the bounds of possibility, they indulge in fanciful ideas and flights into imagination and they focus on the play on contradiction (good – evil, natural – supernatural, past – present, real – fantastic, etc). Moreover, child readers, like the readers of Gothic tales, like to be frightened and enjoy the feeling of fear. According to Freud, their tendency to imagine themselves in the position of orphans or persecuted heroes corresponds with the process of their liberation from the world of adults.

The popularity of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997–2007) reveals a remarkable potential of the sublime experience and its literary employment for the development of the fantasy genre. Rowling's work, both in its subject and form, conforms to the typical criteria of the traditional Gothic novel and the Burkean concept of the sublime. The title hero's struggle to renew a sense of self and social value through the experience of otherness follows the traditional theme of the test (or ordeal) described by Bakhtin in his *Dialogic Imagination*. The hero's true nature is concealed, being linked to the secret of his origin. In this respect, Harry Potter is a descendant of the noble heroes searching for their identity, such as Theodore in Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* or Edmund in Reeve's *Old English Baron*.

Furthermore, the hero is haunted both by his past and the future. J.K. Rowling draws on distorted family relationships (murdered parents, hateful relatives) and her story focuses on the motif of a secret task. As in Gothic novels (especially those of Ann Radcliffe), the uncanny notion of mystery and terror is intensified by a number of hints, half-uttered messages, the images of labyrinths, supernatural phenomena, doubles and disguises, increasing the feeling of uncertainty and the hidden anxieties of the unconscious: "There were a hundred and forty-two staircases at Hogwarts: wide, sweeping ones; narrow, rickety ones; some that led somewhere different on a Friday; some with a vanishing step halfway up that you had to remember to jump" (Rowling 99).

It is the personal experience of otherness (the metaphorical motif of the scar, which makes him abandoned but also superior and special) that allows Harry Potter to feel a kind of fulfilment and reassurance only in the world of the other, represented by Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. In its depiction of the uncanny, Rowling's novel follows the rules of the Gothic tale with its performative mode and the use of exaggeration. Echoing the image of Gothic castles, Hogwarts can never become a real home. Its inhabitants get repeatedly lost, ghosts flash through the doors, sinister creatures and threats are hidden within its walls, which increases the subliminal effect. At the same time, the supernatural appears against the backdrop of the natural, which is in accordance with Tzvetan Todorov's idea of the fantastic.

Like Clara Reeve, J.K. Rowling employs the theme of dreams and desire as a response to the feeling of loss and sadness following separation (the motif of the magical mirror, bringing the image of Harry's parents and, at the same time, of Harry's hidden self). In dreams, according to Donald Winnicott, "there are no brakes on fantasy, and love and hate cause alarming effects".<sup>13</sup>

The central dream of the series, which is built into the very plot of Harry Potter's story, is the dream of power and omnipotence, represented by the theme of magic, and also by the popular Gothic theme of alchemy, as the title image of the first sequel suggests.<sup>14</sup> It may remind the reader of the traditional meaning of the sublime, connected with the term sublimation, i.e., the transformation of matter into purer forms. An object like the philosopher's stone represents the ultimate extension of human will, giving the hero, in the words of L.D. Rossi, "a kind of immortality, but also a dangerous power."<sup>15</sup> The motifs of the magic wand or the invisibility cloak can be remembered as other examples of this idea.<sup>16</sup> Experiencing this dream, or, in other words, the desire to possess distinctive strength of extraordinary proportion, initiates an inevitable inner struggle between good and evil. Dumbledore's ambition, for instance, only seems to be the opposite of that of Voldemort.

13 Donald Winnicott, *Home is Where We Start From*, London: Pelican, 1987, 85.

14 In particular, in alchemy the term sublimation describes the process of converting matter by fire.

15 Rossi, Lee D., "The Politics of Fantasy: C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien" (Ann Arbor: UMI Research, 1984), as quoted by J. Robertson, *ChLA Quarterly* (Winter 2001–2002), 202.

16 Throughout the novel, however, there are reminders of the limitations of magic: the use of magic cannot rescue the murdered victims from death (Sirius, Cedric, Dumbledore, Snape).

However, the desire for absolute power may get split and made representable as something primitive and evil, which is also suggested by the etymological meaning of the name Voldemort (the word “vol,” from the Latin “volo,” expresses wish, intention or determination, and “mort” means death). *Harry Potter* follows the traditional Gothic theme of the divided personality as a result of an evil act and a cause of unavoidable destruction. Thus Voldemort’s desire for immortality, accompanied with his crimes including patricide, results in the multiplied split of his personality (the motif of horcruxes), finally leading to his death.

In this respect, there is an interesting relationship between Harry Potter and Voldemort: the motif of the sibling wands (the two-tail feather of the phoenix) or Voldemort’s unintentional placing a part of his soul into Harry as a horcrux suggests the idea of duality and the sharing of a hidden bond. According to J.P. Robertson, the symbolic displacement provides fantastic expression of hidden anxiety, jealousy and aggression, the emotions that may accompany human thirst for love, attention and need.<sup>17</sup>

Within Rowling’s fantasy projection all protagonists are confronted with the unconscious instincts of envy and hate. It is the ethical demand to overcome these feelings that becomes, in fact, the main (liminal) test and the most difficult (and sublime) task of the characters in their particular encounters (Harry – Voldemort, Harry – Snape, Voldemort – Voldemort’s father, Snape – Harry’s father, etc.). Accordingly, life is supported by unselfish love (Harry’s mother and Snape) and Harry is finally saved by his decision not to attack his enemy but rather to defend himself.

In the *Harry Potter* series, even humorous, relaxing scenes imply ethical questions, e.g. the motif of the talking chess figures: “Don’t send me there, can’t you see his knight? Send HIM, we can afford to lose HIM” (Rowling 147). In the connection with the image of the chess game as a part of Harry’s, Ron’s and Hermione’s dramatic passage in *The Philosopher’s Stone*, it anticipates the polarity between sacrifice and self-sacrifice, between the power relations and the Levinasian responsibility for the life of the other (embodied by Snape and finally also by Harry Potter), which reaches its climax at the end of the series.

Harry’s constant concern with the world of the unknown may be viewed as a symbolic expression of his initiation: his effort to overcome separation

---

17 J.P. Robertson, “What Happens to our Wishes,” *ChLA Quarterly* (Winter 2001–2002), 206.

(the pre-liminal phase of the rites of passage) and find the way to the others (the post-liminal phase) through exploring the other around, as well as within himself (the liminal phase). At the same time, he must learn to manage his capacity for the dark arts (in other words, his hidden power) in a way that is in accordance with the demands of justice and morality. It is through the transformative effect of the sublime that this aim can be achieved. Harry Potter's adventures may be thus interpreted as the painful challenges of growing up when the young hero has to find harmony between his independence and particular social relationships.

A similar fantasy context for the same struggle is developed in Philip Pullman's trilogy *His Dark Materials* (1995–2000), which draws on the model text of C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* (1950–56), dealing with the relation to the unknown through the experience of religious faith. Pullman uses Lewis's concept of other worlds as imaginative alternatives to the everyday reality to challenge Lewis's ethical ideal of the religious authority; in other words, he rejects the representation of the moral truth in terms of power. Lewis's sublime is, in fact, suppressed by his effort to make the idea of the inexpressible (God) understandable to young readers: the sensuous images of the invisible reality clash with the biblical emphasis on the impossibility to create a picture of the divine, which is, for Kant, as well as for Levinas, a unique example of sublimity.

In accordance with the demands of fantasy genre, however, Pullman employs almost identical visual images in Lyra's and Will's passage to other worlds (various fantastic creatures, talking animals, ghosts and spectres). In contrast to Lewis he points out the feelings of uncertainty and confusion, which intensifies the Burkean notion of helplessness in the encounter with the unknown.

Pullman's ethics draws on the intensification of the sublime by the young heroes' inability to achieve the knowledge that could explain or solve the conflicts. Pullman's children, like Rowling's heroes, gradually realise that they are repeatedly mistaken in their believing (or disbelieving) in the external examples of authority. This loss of certainties, together with the end of the unity and stability of meaning corresponds, in a way, with Lyotard's analysis of the postmodern culture. Paradoxically, it is this anxiety that can lead to the liberating notion of infinity (the motif of other worlds): the meaning may be lost or doubted or denied but such a failure opens space for a new search, and for the intensification for the feeling of life.

In this respect, adversity can counteract (as in the Gothic novels) the threat of impending emptiness. In Pullman, moreover, there are accumulated examples of violence and horror from which there is no rescue (the motif of spectres), including human evil (the mad-scientist figures). A moral strength is closely linked to the emphasis on the individual freedom and the harmony between body and soul (or, in Pullman's terms, the man and his daimon). Pullman also employs the motif of the divided self, which anticipates the death of the individual; the split personality is a result of cruel scientific experiments, connected with the search for absolute power and immortality.

In Pullman's fantasy, Lyra's moral resistance is not supported by any higher force but by her own faculty of imagination, echoing the Kantian concept of the sublime. She can touch the truth by deciphering the messages of the alethiomether (or, the golden compass<sup>18</sup>), which works against the dependence on definite knowledge or ultimate explanations by offering a number of various answers to any question. In contrast to the university scholars, failing to grasp the suggested information, Lyra is like an artist who can transgress "the limits of experience" in conceiving things that "lie beyond the confines" of this experience with the completeness of which physical nature affords no parallel.<sup>19</sup> As a child, she moves on the threshold of the visible and the invisible, the finite and the infinite,<sup>20</sup> where imagination can become a "productive faculty of cognition," (Kant 2008, 143) as well as of the process of creation: it can re-model experience in producing the image which can surpass the familiar reality. In the end, however, imagination must sacrifice itself for the sake of the return to this reality, and the entrances to other worlds (in contrast to Lewis) must be closed.

Lyra's passage towards adulthood results in the encounter with the mystery that is implied by the title of the trilogy. The dark matter is an intertextual Miltonic image, referring to the original sin (the Fall) through the motif of

---

18 This is, in fact, one of the numerous allusions to Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In Milton, the "golden compasses" are prepared by God to "circumscribe the universe" and "all created things". (Book VII, lines 224–226).

19 See Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Judgment*, § 49 / 314, 2008, trans. J.C. Meredith, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 143.

20 The liminal character of childhood is symbolised by the changeability of Lyra's 'daimon,' representing her inner self, unconscious instincts and emotions.

dust as a physical reminder of human weakness and the transitoriness of physical existence. For Pullman, paradoxically, this “Fall” becomes an entrance into life,<sup>21</sup> and in the acceptance of one’s limitations there is a source of the moral strength.

A constant concern with human weakness and the feeling of guilt permeates through Fiona E. Higgins’s *The Black Book of Secrets* (2007), in which the young hero’s passage confronts him with the disquieting presence of the unspeakable and the inexpressible. Ludlow Fitch, reminding the reader of Dickens’s young characters, escapes from the escalated physical violence imposed by his parents to become an apprentice of a stranger Joe Zabbidou, a secret pawnbroker, whose Black Book records the stories of transgression and crime. People who narrate these stories try to liberate themselves (like Hilda from Hawthorne’s *Marble Faun*) from the oppression of their experience of evil.

Ludlow, as a listener and a reader of these grotesque ‘Gothic’ texts, encounters the sublime from the position of safety, which can be described in Burke’s terms as the “tranquility shadowed with horror,” (32) inspiring the feelings of fear, pity and social affection. The function of the Black Book is not only to remove pain and anxiety (by pronouncing them), it gradually appears to be a mirror of the hero’s hidden self, and it provides an opportunity for him to approach the “inaccessible parts” of his nature (Burke 48).

According to Edmund Burke, there is a significant ethical aspect in realising one’s passions as a result of the sublime experience: it has an important practical value for understanding and regulating distorted emotions, which can finally contribute to the elevation of the mind. This transformation of terror into the “sublime delight” allows Ludlow to accept a dark side of his past and of his self, the physical conflict with his father, which he blames himself for, and which is not fully described by him but at the end of the novel. The importance of this confession is supported by the fact that Higgins’s narrative is written in the first person, and in the introductory passages the crucial information concerning the hero’s traumatic experience is missing.

The Black Book represents a liminal knowledge, which initiates the hero into dangerous recesses of human nature and of his own destructive force.

---

21 A similar interpretation is partly implied by *Paradise Lost* itself and it repeatedly appears, for example, in the work of Nathaniel Hawthorne.

The traditional theme of the Fall is employed as a beginning (the pre-liminal phase) of the hero's rite of passage, and it is repeatedly referred to in the whole story (e.g. the motif of curiosity). The fulfilment of the passage can be found in the experience of reconciliation, and in the hero's decision to use his knowledge for helping and encouraging other people.

In conclusion, the above children's fantasy adventures deal with the ethical aspects of the sublime experience, dramatising the initiation into maturity as a struggle for self-improvement and a rediscovery of one's moral identity, which is in sharp contradiction to the so called "ethical nihilism" of the postmodern sublime (Slocombe 147).

### **Bibliography**

- Albrecht, W. P. *The Sublime Pleasures of Tragedy*. Kansas: The University Press of Kansas, 1975.
- Botting, Fred. *Gothic*. London – New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Enquiry*. Ed. Adam Phillips. Oxford: O.U.P., 1998.
- Fry, Paul, H. "The Possession of the Sublime." *Studies in Romanticism*. 26.2 (1987). 187–207.
- Higgins, Fiona E. *The Black Book of Secrets*. Macmillan Children's Books. 2010.
- Jackson, Anne. Karen Coats and Roderick McGillis (eds.). *The Gothic in Children's Literature. Haunting the Borders*. London and New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgement*. Trans. J.H.Bernard. London: Macmillan, 1914.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment*. Trans. J.C. Meredith. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. "Ethics as First Philosophy." Transl. by Seán Hand and Michael Temple. *The Levinas Reader*. Ed. Seán Hand. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989, pp.75–87.
- Liotard, J.-F. *The Postmodern Condition*. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. Ed. Christopher Ricks. Penguin Books, 1989.
- Pullman, Philip. *His Dark Materials*. Everyman, 2011.

- Rossi, Lee D. "The Politics of Fantasy: C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien." (Ann Arbor: UMI Research, 1984) J.P. Robertson's "What Happens to our Wishes." *ChLA Quarterly* (Winter 2001–2002).
- Robertson, J.P. "What Happens to our Wishes," *ChLA Quarterly* (Winter 2001–2002).
- Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. Bloomsbury, 2013.
- Slocombe, Will. *Nihilism and the Sublime Postmodern*. Routledge: New York and London, 2006.
- Twitchell, J.B. *Romantic Horizons*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1983.
- Winnicott, Donald. *Home is Where We Start From*. London: Pelican, 1987.
- Zammito, John. *The Genesis of Kant's Critique of Judgement*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.