

## The Sublime by Longinus

**Longinus** defines literary sublimity as "excellence in language," the "expression of a great spirit," and the power to provoke "ecstasy." The sublime, a notion in aesthetic and literary theory, is a striking grandeur of thought and emotion.

Longinus's conception of the sublime had its heyday in English criticism in the late seventeenth through the middle eighteenth century, and over time its meaning expanded to include not only literature, but any aesthetic phenomenon -- even including nature itself, particularly mountains or desolate and striking landscapes -- that produced sensations of awe or even of pain in its audience. John Baillie describes this effect in his *Essay on the Sublime* (1747), "Vast Objects occasion vast Sensations, and vast Sensations give the Mind a higher Idea of her own Powers."

The most important English work on the sublime is [Edmund Burke's](#) *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756).

Burke writes: Whatever is in any sort terrible ... is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.

Critics found examples of the literary sublime in the Bible and in Shakespeare, but for most of the eighteenth century, [Milton](#) was the author who best embodied sublimity, especially in *Paradise Lost*: as Joseph Addison put it in *Spectator* 279, "Milton's chief Talent, and indeed his distinguishing Excellence, lies in the Sublimity of his Thoughts." [Johnson](#) concurs: Milton's power is the product of an imagination in the highest degree fervid and active, to which materials were supplied by incessant study and unlimited curiosity. The heat of Milton's mind might be said to sublimate his learning, to throw off into his work the spirit of science, unmingled with its grosser parts. ... The characteristic quality of his poem is sublimity.

Sublimity became a central concern not only in eighteenth-century criticism, but in eighteenth-century literature, especially in the works of the so-called pre-Romantic poets -- [Thomas Gray](#), William Collins -- and in the works of [Gothic](#) novelists -- [Ann Radcliffe](#), [Matthew Lewis](#).

The most important late eighteenth-century work on the sublime is Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790), which influenced early nineteenth-century English thought on the subject.

The author of the *Sublime* defines sublimity (*hypsos*) in literature as "the echo of greatness of spirit"—that is, the moral and imaginative power of the writer that pervades his work. This is the first known instance in which greatness in literature is ascribed to qualities innate in the writer rather than his art. The author further suggests that greatness of thought, if not inborn, may be acquired by emulating great authors such as [Homer](#), [Demosthenes](#), and [Plato](#). Illustrative quotations recorded in *On the Sublime* occasionally preserved work that would otherwise now be lost—for example, one of [Sappho](#)'s odes.

The **sublime** in literature refers to use of language and description that excites thoughts and emotions beyond ordinary experience. Though often associated with *grandeur*, the

sublime may also refer to the [grotesque](#) or other extraordinary experiences that "take[s] us beyond ourselves."<sup>[1]</sup>

The literary concept of the **sublime** became important in the eighteenth century. It is associated with the 1757 treatise by [Edmund Burke](#), though it has earlier roots. The idea of the sublime was taken up by [Immanuel Kant](#) and the [Romantic](#) poets including especially [William Wordsworth](#).

The earliest text on the sublime was written sometime in the first or third century AD by the Greek writer (pseudo-) [Longinus](#) in his work [On the Sublime](#) (Περὶ ὕψους, *Peri hýpsous*). 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.<sup>[2]</sup> Longinus holds that the goal of a writer should be to produce a form of ecstasy.

He in other words elucidates sublime: "Sublimity refers to a certain type of elevated language that strikes its listener with the mighty and irresistible power of a thunderbolt. A sublime passage can be heard again and again with equal pleasure." However, Longinus goes beyond this to define the ideal kind of audience.

1. The best audience for the sublime is a refined, cultivated one.
2. Only such an audience is able to judge the relative sublimity of a work.
3. This attitude (central to neoclassicism) is somewhat aristocratic and elitist, because the audience Longinus desires must be free from the low and vulgar thoughts that generally accompany rustic toil.
4. This attitude will not be seriously challenged until the Romantic Age.