I Will Be Myself": Finding the Feminine Sublime in *Jane Eyre*

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Introduction

The "sublime" is an aesthetic characterized by powerful, dramatic scenery, colossal objects, and extremes of natural phenomena. The concept of the sublime originated with Longinus, a Greek writer in the 1st or 3rd century A.D., who wrote, *On the Sublime*. Put simply, the sublime was a quality of expression that aroused emotion in the reader or listener. It gives speech an invincible power; it leads the listeners not to persuasion, but to ecstasy. For European artists and philosophers in the 18th- and 19th- centuries, the sublime often existed in landscape but could also be embodied in a person. Edmund Burke, the first English author and philosopher to write extensively on the sublime, asserted in his 1757 treatise, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, that encounters with the sublime move the imagination to awe, pleasure, horror and terror. The English Romantic poet William Wordsworth portrayed the sublime in Nature as producing awe and wonder. In fact, it is through encounters with nature that one's spirit is able to grasp the sublime. This idea is consistent with the Romantic philosophy that nature is a manifestation of the divine, and the sublime in nature reflects God's grandeur, omnipotence, and omnipresence.

It is important to note that the Sublime has a gendered nature dating back to Longinus, who wrote that sublime speech 'ravishes' or rapes the listener. Immanuel Kant, an 18th-century German philosopher, contrasted the depth and profundity of the 'masculine' sublime with the shallow, slight nature of the 'feminine' beautiful. Edmund Burke describes the sublime as a virile masculine power and asserts that, as embodied in living creatures, the sublime must be "a man, or any other animal of prodigious strength" (Burke 69) whose superior power elicits the same quality of fear and awe. Therefore, the sublime in both nature and humans is essentially masculine. In fact, Edmund Burke associates the sublime with the authority of the father, an association that underscores the religious roots of the European aesthetic of the sublime – i.e. the infinitude of the sacred inspires reverence and awe. So, put very simply, the concept of the sublime expressed by writers, poets, and philosophers was of a superior masculine force in nature – and possibly embodied in individuals – that has an echo of God's omnipotence.

Arising as it did out of a patriarchal society and religious environment, this gendered designation is unsurprising, yet in Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*, published in 1847, Brontë repudiates the conception of the masculine sublime by creating a heroine whose personal and spiritual development allows her to discover and commune with a feminine incarnation of the sublime. This paper will illuminate Jane's struggles with three men who try to act as moral authorities and who seek to define Jane. Charlotte Brontë describes these men using

overtly sublime imagery, but significantly, she also describes Jane's spiritual and emotional development in sublime terms as well. Brontë shows that as Jane develops strength and a spirituality unmediated by male authority, she is able to apprehend the sublime as an emotional, spiritual force that transcends gender.

Mr. Brocklehurst

Jane's first encounter with a human embodiment of the masculine sublime is the Reverend Mr. Brocklehurst, the cruel master of Lowood School, a Spartan boarding school that Charlotte Brontë modeled on the school she and her sisters attended. The terror he inspires in the inmates of Lowood is allied with the power of his religious authority, but Brontë also uses physical description to emphasize his dominance. Edmund Burke asserted that "greatness of dimension is a powerful cause of the sublime" (74); Brontë describes Mr. Brocklehurst as tall and dark, like a "black pillar" and a "black column," the phallic imagery underscoring his patriarchal authority. Mr. Brocklehurst labels Jane as an ungrateful liar in front of the school and forces her to stand for an hour on a stool as punishment. However, in the midst of this humiliation, Jane experiences a force that counteracts the cruelty. It doesn't appear to be much: a fellow student, Helen Burns, walks past Jane twice, looks her in the eyes, and smiles. This has a dramatic effect on Jane. She marvels, "What a strange light inspired" Helen's eyes, and "What an extraordinary sensation that ray sent through me!" Helen, with "the aspect of an angel," has a spiritual influence that far outstrips

Brocklehurst's. Jane feels strength imparted to her and conquers her "rising hysteria" (Brontë 57).

The imagery Jane uses to describe Helen is significant, for it infuses Helen with sublime power: Helen is compared to "the disc of the clearest planet" (57), a celestial body like the feminine moon giving light and guidance and drawing Jane's spirit out of the temporal. Helen becomes Jane's spiritual guide, testifying of God as a "universal Parent" who loves her, rather than a stern, masculine Judge who finds her inadequate. This new perspective is essential to Jane's spiritual development. Helen's strength steels Jane's heart against Brocklehurst's effort to stamp it with his warped impression of Jane's character. Ultimately, Helen's strength, like the "full brightness of the orb" (57) is stronger than Brocklehurst's "dark column" and sustains Jane long after his shadow has faded. This friendship provides the foundation for Jane's ability to separate patriarchal religious authority from spirituality, and eventually experience the sublime as a divine feminine force.

Mr. Rochester

The next stage of Jane's development comes when she is employed as a governess in the home of Mr. Rochester. He is an embodiment of the masculine sublime whose power almost overwhelms Jane, engulfing her identity. Bronte describes Mr. Rochester as "dark," "stern," and "broad-chested" with "fire" in his eyes. His character also associates him with the sublime. He has "battled

through a varied experience with many men of many nations" and has "roamed over half the globe," and his exploits have taken place on a "great scale" and are characterized by "strange novelty" (114).

Jane falls in love with Mr. Rochester, and, interestingly, as her love for him grows, so does his association with the sublime. Although he is "moody" and "harsh," the "strange fire in his look" (129) captivates her almost to the point of obsession. The sublime landscape of his features, "deep," "strong," and "grim," exert a magnetic pull on Jane. The power of her love for him grows until the force of it almost obscures her own identity:

My future husband was becoming to me my whole world; and more than the world: almost my hope of heaven. He stood between me and every thought of religion, as an eclipse intervenes between man and the broad sun. I could not, in those days, see God for his creature: of whom I had made an idol (234).

Jane's love for Rochester, who is conflated with the sublime, threatens to overpower her sense of self and her religious values.

A crisis comes when it is revealed that he is married, and his wife is still alive. Bigamy is not an option, so Rochester attempts to make Jane his mistress – a situation wholly unacceptable to Jane. Mr. Rochester almost overwhelms her sense of reason by the power of his emotion. But more importantly, he hurls unjust and manipulative accusations: "Then you condemn me to live wretched, and to die accursed?" "You fling me back on lust for a passion—vice for an occupation?" (270). These accusations are reminiscent of Mr. Brocklehurst's

attempts to define Jane as an ingrate and a liar. Here, instead, Rochester tries to characterize her as uncaring and irresponsible. He tries to force on Jane a role that is not hers – the keeper of his morality.

In resisting this assault on her will and also on her identity, Jane does not rely solely on her own strength; she receives help from a transcendent source. She dreams that she's back in her childhood home and "the roof resolved to clouds, high and dim; the gleam was such as the moon imparts to vapours she is about to sever" (272). The moon bursts through the clouds as a hand, the gleam transforming into the form of a woman who speaks to Jane's spirit. It "whispered in [her] heart—'My daughter, flee temptation!'" Jane awakes from her "trance-like dream" and responds, "Mother, I will" (272). Brontë personifies the feminine moon as a supernatural entity, a source of strength whose power comforts Jane much like the loving glow from Helen Burns' eyes.

Jane flees Mr. Rochester's home, and alone on the vast expanse of the moors, she turns to nature, "the universal mother," and seeks "her breast" (275) for repose. She looks up at the night sky and sees God's "infinitude, His omnipotence, His omnipresence." The great Milky Way in its infinite space makes Jane feel "the might and strength of God" (275), and she is comforted. Jane views nature as her "mother" just as she is "her child," knowing nature loves her, outcast though she is. This moment of faith-affirming strength comes from the feminine embrace of Mother Earth. As a result, the grandeur of God's creations is not a manifestation of ultimate, awe-inspiring glory, it is the comforting

assurance that God is "everywhere" and will "save what He had made" (276). Jane's spiritual strength results from her ability to experience the sublime as a feminine manifestation of a loving God.

St. John Rivers

The greatest test of Jane's strength comes from St. John Rivers. In some ways he is physically the opposite of Rochester, blonde to Rochester's dark, marble-featured and handsome to Rochester's ugliness. Brontë also describes St. John using sublime imagery: he has a sort of "heroic grandeur," yet he is also "formidable," "commanding," and "imposing." Like Brocklehurst, he is a "cold cumbrous column," yet unlike Brocklehurst, he is no hypocrite, demanding of himself rigid control and absolute devotion. However, this is what makes him dangerously compelling. While Rochester's fiery nature evokes burning physical passion and turns him into an "idol" in Jane's eyes, St. John is icy, Arctic, and "inexorable as death" (311). Soon Jane falls "under a freezing spell," her will paralyzed by his force of character, for St. John's allegiance to God makes her daily wish "more to please him" (339). Burke's treatise asserts that "Those virtues which cause admiration, and are of the sublime kind, produce terror rather than love; such as fortitude, justice, wisdom, and the like" (Burke 77). St. John exemplifies many of those sublime qualities. He, too, wants to marry Jane and have her accompany him on his mission to Africa. Jane respects the idea of devoting her life to missionary service, but she recognizes that if she married him

she would be drowned in the "torrent of his will" (Brontë 356) and would lose her own will in "the gulf of his existence" (299). She offers to accompany him to Africa as a sister, but he refuses.

Significantly, it's partly Jane's understanding of nature – its spiritual, sublime aspects – that helps her resist St. John by showing her his spiritual inadequacies. Jane notes that "nature was not to him that treasury of delight it was to his sisters . . . never did he seem to roam the moors for the sake of their soothing silence" (300). In his stature and force of character, St. John seems to exemplify the sublime, yet he does not embrace it in the natural world. St. John's lack of connection to nature – which also inspires awe, reverence, terror and joy – indicates his disconnection from normal human emotion. His spirituality is incomplete; it is as though, in Romantic terms, he leapt over a fundamental step in his development and sought only spiritual transcendence without the visceral connection that nature provides as a prerequisite.

In contrast, Jane has experienced the sublime manifested both in the natural world and in the supernatural, and therefore she is more attuned to every aspect of it than the cold, patriarchal, inexorable St. John. Jane knows that spiritual guidance cannot come through the medium of masculine will – it must come directly to her through her own communion with nature and her own ability to sense inspiration.

Jane's desire to do what's right and her strength of character unite to resist St. John. Instead of submitting to his will, she prays for guidance. The room

in which she prays is full of moonlight, the feminine entity, the conduit of motherly guidance. Suddenly Jane experiences "an inexpressible feeling that thrilled [her heart] through, and passed at once to [her] head and extremities. The feeling was not like an electric shock; but it was quite as sharp, as strange, as startling" (357). Her senses are awakened, ready for inspiration.

Incredibly, the answer comes in the form of Mr. Rochester's voice distinctly calling her name. Jane views this psychic communication as "the work of nature. She was roused…and did her best" (358). Once again, the answer to Jane's prayer comes through the feminine sublime. The most remarkable aspect of this communication is that Mr. Rochester, too, is included in it. At the same time a chastened, repentant, and widowed Rochester also felt "the presence of a moon" and in the depths of anguish and humility pleads with God. His prayer appears to be answered through the feminine sublime as well, for he hears Jane's voice "whispering on the wind" (381), as though Nature is acting as a medium for their souls' communication.

Conclusion

Charlotte Brontë seems to suggest that the aesthetic of the sublime as implicitly masculine is an artificial paradigm: Jane's sense of self, her will, and her spiritual connection are feminine in origin and manifestation. By accessing a feminine sublime, Jane experiences divine inspiration directly, and she is able to exercise her moral agency independent of male control. Jane's personal

growth – her identity, independence, and force of will – develop in tandem with her understanding of a divine feminine force. What begins as an inexplicable light from Helen Burns develops into a spiritual energy radiating from the moon and coming forth from Mother Earth that is essentially feminine in nature. It allows Jane to see clearly and act decisively in order to establish her own identity and fulfill her own destiny.

Works Cited

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