

On the Sublime

Longinus

Longinus defines sublime as a kind of loftiness and excellence in language raising the style of the ordinary language. Sublimity springs from a great and lofty soul, thereby becoming "one echo of a great soul". It should not only be distinct and excellent in composition but also move the readers along with the effects of pleasure and persuasion.

Such effects should be subtle, flashing at the right moment, scattering everything before it like a thunder bolt and at once displaying the power of plentitude. In this sense, sublime is lofty and excellent poetic creation with power to please, persuade and move the readers through the upliftment of their souls. Sublimity is thus the aesthetic upliftment of the soul through the reconciliation of the poetic inspiration and rhetorical mastery of the writers. Longinus believes that sublimity is achieved by a deft handling of Nature and Art, which is inborn genius and learned skills. The five sources he mentions for the sublime are either related to author or poem. In the course of dealing with the sources of the sublime, Longinus even differentiates true sublime between false sublime.

Power of forming great conceptions: It is concerned with the grandeur of thought in writers and is the first essential source of sublime. Lofty and natural expression is possible when there are noble and lofty thoughts. Such elevating thoughts that remain as the "echo of great soul" are possible when the author has power of forming great conceptions. Mean and ignorable thoughts can never energize a lofty utterance. The great thoughts come from the imagination of a great creative genius and from a sound interpretation of the imitation of nature and of the great predecessors. The details of the conceptions should be so chosen to form an organic whole being heightened by amplification of all the details of a given subject through the vivid use of imagery and rhetoric.

Vehement and inspired passion: The second source of sublime is the genuine emotion. The emotion should be strong and natural expressed in lofty and elevated language so that it can move the readers with pleasure and persuasion. It should match with the grandeur of subject, thought and lofty style.

The due formation and use of figures of speech: The third source of sublime is the poetic use of language. The formation and use of figures boost the elevated expression if they are properly used. Such a use of figures should not be mechanical and forceful. They should be used genuinely and as per the demands of the contextual environment. Longinus deals with some major figures of speech- to him; the proper use of rhetorical question makes an immediate appeal to the emotions. It is a statement in question form that suggests its own answer. An apostrophe is a direct address to a person, thing, or abstraction, or readers that helps to move readers. Asyndeton is a figure of speech in which clauses are left unconnected. The omission of conjunctions gives a quick movement of feelings and emotions; Hyperbaton is an intentional inversion of word designed for special emphasis or climatic effect. Anaphora, polybaton, periphrasis etc. give ballast to the lofty and natural expression of the language. In short, the use of figures must be physical and intimately connected with thoughts and emotions.

Noble diction: The fourth source of sublime is diction that includes choice and arrangement of words. Longinus says that the use of proper and striking words enthrall (hold attention) the hearers. The words, to him, should be noble corresponding to the subject matter and emotion, so as to impart grandeur and beauty, giving breath in to dead things.

Dignified and elevated composition: The last source of sublime is the dignified and elevated arrangement of the diction for the grandeur of composition. The verbal order should be rhythmic and harmonious which helps pull off persuasion and pleasure. Such a composition appeals to the soul and enables the readers to participate in the emotions of the author. Similarly, while discussing the sources of true sublime, Longinus also deals with the factors of the false sublime. To him, the

On the Sublime is written in epistolary form. An epistolary work is usually written through letters, journal entries, or a combination of the two. There is a missing part to this treatise—the final part—which reportedly handles the topic of public speaking. Longinus dedicated the work to one Posthumius Terentianus, a public figure in Ancient Rome known for being cultured. *On the Sublime* includes works by roughly fifty authors including Homer, the famed blind poet of Ancient Greek culture. Longinus also mentions Genesis, a book in Hebrew Bible. Because of this, many have assumed that Longinus was either knowledgeable about Jewish culture, or possibly even a Hellenized (Greek) Jew.

One of Longinus' assertions is that in order for one's writing to reach the sublime, the writer must possess and exhibit what he refers to as "moral excellence." Theories abound that Longinus avoided publishing his writings in order to preserve his modesty and therefore moral excellence. This might be another reason why the authorship of *On the Sublime* is uncertain. Another main point that Longinus makes is that a writer who transgresses social mores may not necessarily be a fool or shameless. For Longinus, social subjectivity is also important. He writes that in order to support spirit and hope, freedom is necessary. That said, too much freedom can lead to a decline in eloquence, which according to Longinus, which can hamper one's ability to write in the sublime.

To go into sublimity in more depth, Longinus provides five sources that can lead to this goal: great thoughts, noble diction, dignified word arrangement strong emotions and particular figures of speech or thoughts. The sublime also has a number of specific effects, for which Longinus calls upon readers to search: the loss of rationality, deep emotion combined with pleasure, and alienation. That alienation should lead to identifying the creative process in order to be considered sublime. Longinus simplifies these effects by stating that a strong writer will not focus on his own emotions, or trying to convey emotions, but rather to cause the reader to feel those emotions.

In addition, Longinus admires genius in writing. He mentions specific writers in addition to Homer, including Sappho, Plato, and Aristophanes. Longinus talks about these writers' ability to create the sublime by causing readers to feel pleasure. Other writers on his list are Apollonius of Rhodes and Theocritus for their sophisticated poetry; however, Longinus says they fail to measure up to classic writers like Homer because they lack the bravery. Bravery is necessary to take risks, and taking risks is necessary to reach the sublime. After making his points about the sublime, Longinus laments the decline of the oratory arts. The reason for this is two-fold: it comes from the absence of freedom as well as moral corruption. These two phenomena, Longinus reminds readers, damages the high spirit which creates the sublime.

It's important to note that the use of the English word "sublime" and all its philosophical associations that accompany arise from multiple translations, but the word truly means "the essentials of a noble and impressive style." Longinus' own writing is rarely described as perfect or even sublime in part because of his overzealous enthusiasm. This leads to an overuse of hyperbole, or overstatement, on his part. Longinus is also criticized for writing tediously in *On the Sublime*.

By the 10th century, *On the Sublime* was copied into a medieval manuscript where it was incorrectly attributed to Dionysius or Longinus, which was misread or mistranslated as Dionysius Longinus, and therefore confused with Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who also lived during the first century. The work was also attributed to Cassius Longinus, but as he lived from 213-273 C.E., he cannot be the same Longinus who wrote *On the Sublime*. Three hundred years later, references were made by a Byzantine rhetorician to text that might be *On the Sublime*. In the 16th century, the treatise was published by Francis Robortello in Basel, and six years later by Niccolò da Falgano. In the 1600s, the concept of reaching the sublime becomes a major goal of Baroque literature, and the treatise is rediscovered. Since then, *On the Sublime* has received more attention with each passing century.

A Short Summary of Aristotle's Poetics

An introduction to the first great work of literary criticism

Aristotle was the first theorist of theatre – so his *Poetics* is the origin and basis of all subsequent theatre criticism. His *Poetics* was written in the 4th century BC, some time after 335 BC. The important thing is that when Aristotle's writing his *Poetics*, Greek theatre was not in its heyday, but was already past its peak, and Aristotle was writing a good 100 years after the Golden Age of Greek tragic theatre – so in many ways it's like a contemporary critic writing about the plays of Chekhov or Oscar Wilde. It's past, the writers of the plays are already long dead, but they've survived and Aristotle is writing about them and highlighting their importance. What follows are some notes towards a summary of, and introduction to, Aristotle's *Poetics* – the first great work of literary criticism in the Western world.

So, what does Aristotle say? 'Tragedy imitates the actions of the best people in society, and comedy the worst sorts of people in society'. His *Poetics* is really an attempt to analyze those features that make some tragedies more successful than others. What makes a *great* tragedy? His essay is an early example of Empiricism – a philosophical tradition which regards observation of sense experience as the basis of knowledge. Observation: we need to remember the *theoros* of both 'theory' and 'theatre': the act of adopting the role of the spectator in order to analyse something. So he's not just going to sit at home and think about theatre, he's going to go and watch it to get a sense of how it works. Aristotle is very concerned with the knowledge gained by the spectator via his experience of theatre.

Aristotle's definition of tragedy might be summed up as: an imitation of an action which has serious and far reaching consequences. Nothing trivial, in other words, which is the domain of comedy. Comedy deals in the trivial and the inconsequential. For this reason, tragedy must deal with the lives of great men because only their actions will be of consequence to the larger community. (Arthur Miller **would later disagree**, arguing that modern tragedy can and should depict the lives of ordinary

people.) Misfortune versus tragedy – there is unsurprisingly a very big gap between the way we view life and the viewpoint of the ancient Greeks. We place a great deal more value on the individual, but to the ancient Greeks, individuality was seen as a negative thing because it was anti-social, which they believed would lead to social breakdown. So it's all about joining people, but also sort of trying to make them all the same, with the same ideas and adherence to the city-state, so they'd behave themselves.

Plot is the most important element of a tragedy: the sequence of events and actions in a play. A tragedy should have only one plot and all of its action should relate to this plot. Aristotle uses the analogy of painting to show how, in theatre, plot is far more important than character: 'It is much the same case as with painting: the most beautiful pigments smeared on at random will not give as much pleasure as a black-and-white outline picture.'

Character is second to plot in terms of its importance. Tragedy imitates an action performed by a person primarily for the sake of the actions they perform, rather than out of any interest in the psychology of character: 'For tragedy is an imitation not of men but of a life, an action, and they have moral quality in accordance with their characters but are happy or unhappy in accordance with their actions; hence they are not active in order to imitate their characters, but they include the characters along with the actions for the sake of the latter. Thus the structure of events, the plot, is the goal of tragedy, and the goal is the greatest thing of all.' What Aristotle is saying here is, essentially, that the actions of the character *influence* the character, so action – plot – comes first because it *colours* the character.

A character's aims must be good; they must be appropriate; there should be a likeness to human nature in general. They should be consistent. Even if the person being imitated is inconsistent, Aristotle says, he must be inconsistent in a consistent fashion. So if a character is mad and so behaves in a disordered fashion, that's fine – but he can't be mad in one scene and then sane in the next.

The protagonist is, of course, the main character. His actions are most significant to the plot (remember plot is primary over character). All of the protagonist's or tragic hero's habits must tend toward the good, except for one – the hero's *hamartia* or tragic flaw. That's not going to tend towards the good: indeed, that's got to mess everything up for the hero.

The Unities of time, place, and action were of central importance in Greek theatre. All action is interconnected. Tragedy will represent a complete action – a clear beginning, middle and end. The protagonist's *hamartia* is the only impurity that exists in his (or, in the case of Sophocles' Antigone, her) make-up. The protagonist should be written in such a way that the audience is motivated to empathize or identify with him because the overall aim of tragedy as a genre is to excite pity and fear in the spectator. Pity and fear will be provoked only if the protagonist's fortunes go from good to bad.

A change in fortune should come about as a direct result of an action motivated by the protagonist's tragic flaw. This is frequently hubris or pride. The change needs to be logical and to have a clear cause, rather than be accidental.

Oedipus Rex is Aristotle's example of a great tragedy. It's arguably one of a handful of the most influential literary texts ever written, **along with *Hamlet*** and certain passages from the Bible. And yet to give you an idea of how much great Greek drama we have lost – that has *not* survived down the ages – *Oedipus Rex* only came second at that year's City Dionysia. First prize went to a play by the nephew of Aeschylus. We've offered a short **recap of the plot of *Oedipus Rex*** here.

The play is bound up with the idea of fate. It's out of Oedipus' control that he will kill his father and marry his mother, as this has already been decreed by the gods. Therefore it's a little unfair to describe his 'tragic flaw' as his own fault. So, that deepens our sympathy for Oedipus, since what happens came about thanks to accident, or to fate – neither of which was ever in his control.

However, it's possible to argue that Oedipus' tragic flaw is his *pride*. Pride has led Oedipus to kill his father, albeit without realising the man he kills *is* his father.

This results in his mother, Jocasta, being widowed and free to remarry. This is the moment of his reversal in fortune, which leads Oedipus to recognize his error or flaw: this happens when Oedipus discovers he killed his father, which led to him unwittingly marrying his mother. This precipitates the hero's fall.

Following this reversal of fortune, we have the *reparation*: in the best of tragedy, the character suffers the consequences of his mistake. In *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus blinds himself and is ostracized from the state; Jocasta, even though the fault was Oedipus', hangs herself. Tragedy must end on a note of equilibrium. The social order must be restored and reaffirmed.

This isn't the happiest of endings; so, what's the aim of tragedy? To teach you how to be a better person. This means being a good (Greek) citizen. Because the spectator empathizes with the protagonist, he will be led to recognize his own tragic flaw whatever that may be – and he will want to root it out so that he does not end in the same way as the fallen hero. Aristotle's term for this is *catharsis*: the spectator should be purged of undesirable elements that prevent his happiness. The flaw is both individual and social – an undesirable element that would lead a person to go against the laws of land. The spectator can still empathize with the hero because he is not an unregenerate figure. We pity Oedipus' decline because, except for one or two faults, he is basically a good man. Thus, what happens to him is tragic. The tragic element also arises from his status in society – because he is the king and what happens to him will have wide social repercussions.

We might summarise the structure of tragedy as follows: beginning = prosperity of hero. Middle = stimulation of Hamartia – tragic flaw; Peripeteia – reversal of fortune; Anagnorisis – moment of realization. End = catastrophe – hero suffers consequences. Catharsis – spectator motivated to purge his own tragic flaw.