

## Introduction

It is the goal of this paper to introduce Burke's concept of the sublime and utilize those guidelines as a theoretical framework in order to analyze Byron's poem *Darkness*. Although not much has been written about Byron in regard to his connection with the sublime, the poem *Darkness* can be viewed as something of a primer about the topic, with Byron exploring many of the hallmarks which Burke considered to be of primary relevance to the idea of the sublime. This paper will analyze the poem *Darkness* utilizing the guidelines for ascertaining the sublime which Edmund Burke outlined in his book, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. The poem *Darkness* was written in Geneva Switzerland in July, 1816. That year was known as, "The Year Without a Summer" due to the eruption of Mount Tambora, in the Dutch East Indies, which spewed enough volcanic ash into the atmosphere to cause disturbances in weather patterns worldwide, but particularly in Europe. The poem's cataclysmic subject matter is sprinkled with ominous Biblical references and is a good example of how Byron attempts to evoke the sublime through dark imagery.

Contrary to Morton Paley's assertion that Byron's Biblical references were cynical attempts to display his own disillusionment with religion, it seems likely that his real intent was to use these references to create an ambience of the sublime (Paley 1995 pg.7). The poem *Darkness* causes the reader to experience the sublime in a myriad of different ways. Among these were Byron's use of a horrifying subject matter, namely the destruction of the earth, his use of darkness as a setting and his description of vastness. It is also interesting to see how Byron deviates from Burke's theoretical framework by including the possibility of a feminine sublime.

## Edmund Burke

Edmund Burke was an influential aesthetic theorist and statesman during the eighteenth century. His theory of the sublime was highly influential on writers and philosophers of the romantic era. The son of an Irish lawyer, Burke received his baccalaureate degree from Dublin's Trinity College in 1749, and later studied for the bar in London. However, he abandoned the study of the law before actually becoming a lawyer himself and instead decided to become a member of London's literary society. He established himself among London's literary elite with the publication of *A Vindication of Natural Society* in 1756, and the *Philosophical Enquiry* in 1757. According to Adam Phillips, Burkes' choice to write about aesthetics may have been more of a calculated move to appease his father's desire to see Edmund become a member of the intellectual community than by any burning desire on Edmund's behalf to further the discourse on the sublime.

There was a certain degree of opportunism in Burke's choice of subject in the *Enquiry*. The nature of the passions and the idea of the sublime were suitably fashionable and grandiose subjects for a young man trying to find a place in literary London in the 1750s. In fact, by the early eighteenth century the sublime was what we might call a piece of jargon, a term that would identify, and could therefore be used to caricature, the modish or university educated (qtd. in Burke, 1757/1990 version, p. x).

Never the less, by the time Burke was in university; he had been at least nominally interested in the idea of the sublime for some time. In fact, while he was still an adolescent he described a flood that took place in Dublin. "It gives me pleasure to see nature in these great though terrible scenes. It fills the mind with grand ideas, and turns the soul in upon itself" (qtd. in Leitch et al. 2001, p.538). Whereas previous theorists saw harmony, proportion and order within nature, Burke was far more interested in those aspects of nature which were irrational, disordered and unbalanced (Leitch et al. 2001 p.538). Burke was essentially an

empiricist who believed that the sublime was experienced through the five senses. This idea that knowledge derives from simple sensory experience combined in increasingly complex configurations was part of the empirical tradition which was established by John Locke in his essay entitled, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* written in 1690 (Leitch et al. 2001, P. 537). Burke's insistence upon documenting physiological responses (such as eye strain) to stimuli which he labels as "Sublime" has been the source of derision by later literary critics who label his theory as being juvenile. As Adam Phillips puts it, "No other philosophical enquiry takes *stroking* as seriously" (qtd. in Burke, 1757/1990, p. x). However, it must be noted that Burke's theory is an important link in a long chain of Empirical theory seeking to provide quantifiable documentation for subjective experiences. Burke's theory was in many ways a harbinger of the Behaviorists school of psychology founded in the early part of the twentieth century by theorists such as Ivan Pavlov, B.F. Skinner and John Watson. Although, Burke's theory has a decidedly more philosophical bent, the basic underlying premise is the same.

Wilfred Sellars (1912–89), the distinguished philosopher, noted that a person may qualify as a behaviorist, loosely or attitudinally speaking, if they insist on confirming "hypotheses about psychological events in terms of behavioral criteria" (1963, p. 22). A behaviorist, so understood, is a psychological theorist who demands behavioral evidence for any psychological hypothesis. For such a person, there is no knowable difference between two states of mind unless there is a demonstrable difference in the behavior associated with each state (Graham 1984).

By definition, the behaviorist mind set requires that one must be able to explain the difference between two psychological states not based on subjective reports from the individual who experiences an event, but rather from observable behavior from the subject who experienced the event. Central to the psychological theory of

Behaviorism is the concept of conditioning. Conditioning occurs whenever a secondary stimulus is consistently paired with the primary stimulus and develops the power to elicit the same response as the primary stimulus. In the case of Classical Conditioning this behavior is physiological in nature and is not controlled by the subject, while in the case of operant conditioning the behaviors are both learned and controllable. A person who experiences an increased heart rate whenever a police car passes them while speeding on a busy highway is experiencing Classical Conditioning while a person who merely reduces the speed of his/her car in the same situation is experiencing operant conditioning. In Burke's theory, encounters with the sublime elicited both, physiological responses such as eye strain and increased heart rate and learned responses such as terror or sympathy (Burke, 1757/1990 pg.73). It should also be noted that in Burke's introduction on the topic of taste he indicates that taste is a sense which can be developed. In this way a person is likely to experience responses which are both operantly and classically conditioned (pg.14).

### **Beauty and the Sublime**

Burke's theory on the sublime evolved from, and according to many, was derivative of, the work of earlier theorists such as Joseph Addison, Anthony Ashley Cooper, third earl of Shaftsbury and John Dennis. Addison was a particularly important influence on Burke in that he was one of the first to propose that the discourse of the sublime should not be limited to literary text, but should also include nature, which was a newly discovered passion of the British Romantics. This shift of focus from literary text towards natural phenomena serves as the demarcation between the concepts of the rhetorical sublime and those of the natural sublime (Lee 2010, p. 78). Addison's series of essays entitled, *Pleasures of the Imagination*, which proposed a three-part aesthetic category including "the great", "the uncommon" and "the beautiful" is generally considered to be one of the

starting points for Burke's system of analysis (Trott, 1998, p.78). Burke revised Addison's three-part aesthetic categorization into the binary opposition of the "beautiful" and the "sublime." In his 1757 book entitled, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Burke argues that the concepts of beauty and the sublime are antithetical to each other in much the same way that light and darkness are. Burke felt that the term sublime should only be applied to enormous aspects of nature, such as mountain ranges and oceans while the smaller parts of nature like flowers and gardens, should be labeled beautiful.

On closing this general view of beauty, it naturally occurs, that we should compare it with the sublime; and in its comparison there appears a remarkable contrast. For sublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparatively small; beauty should be smooth, and polished; the great, rugged and negligent; beauty should shun a right line, yet deviate from it insensibly; the great in many cases loves the right line, and when it deviates, it often makes a strong deviation; beauty should not be obscure; the great ought to be dark and gloomy; beauty should be' light and delicate; the great ought to be solid, even massive. They are indeed ideas of a very different nature, one being founded on pain, the other on pleasure; and however they may vary afterwards from the direct nature of their causes, yet these causes keep up an eternal distinction between them, a distinction never to be forgotten by any whose business it is to affect the passions (Burke, 1757/1990, p. 113).

Within Burke's new system, beauty was classified as those things associated with attraction and love, while the sublime aroused feelings of fear and pain with the implication of the danger of death. However, Burke was quick to note that proper distance must be maintained in order to assure that that the sublime was experienced as delight and did not become deadly to the observer (Burke, 1757/1990, p.36).

Burke felt that even though beauty and the sublime were mutually exclusive, the experience of either could produce desirable sensations. Beauty produces the sensation of pleasure by reinforcing the harmony between the observed phenomena and the observer's perception of what the phenomena's properties should be. While the sublime may initially cause horror, that horror is ultimately replaced by a feeling of delight when the observer realizes that the observed phenomena will not cause harm to him/her. Imminent danger, the experience of utter darkness wherein one's safety is not assured, dismemberment and terror are all good sources of the sublime. According to Burke, these experiences rob the mind of reason and in this way cause an individual to experience the sublime. In Burke's opinion, the imagination is filled with awe and, to some extent, horror by what is confused, obscure and un-illuminated.

He says:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. I say the strongest emotion; because I am satisfied the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure (p. 36).

In much the same way that Burke considers the concept of pain to be more powerful than pleasure; Burke considers the sublime to be more powerful and ultimately more important than the concept of beauty. Burke uses the term 'negative pain' to describe the sensation caused by the sublime. In Burke's theory, this negative pain leads to delight; this is distinct from the feeling produced by positive pleasure. Burke refers to the feeling evoked by encounters with the sublime as delight and feelings aroused by beauty as pleasure. When dealing with the sublime delight is caused from the removal of the painful stimulus through a

confrontation of the sublime object. Twentieth century psychologists would call this experience negative reinforcement. An example of this phenomenon would be the type of relief that a patient feels when the doctor explains that what had been previously diagnosed as cancer was in fact only the flu. The opposite of negative reinforcement is positive reinforcement. In behavioral theory, positive reinforcement occurs when a subject receives a reward for positive behavior. In the same scenario, positive reinforcement occurs when a perfectly healthy patient is told by the doctor that he/she is not at risk for developing cancer (Michael, 1975). The idea of beauty could be likened to the modern concept of positive reinforcement. In Burke's opinion, the type of pleasure one receives from negative pain/negative reinforcement is more intense than the pleasure derived from positive pleasure/ beauty. Burke goes so far as to rename the sensation arising from exposure to the sublime as "delight," so as not to be confused with "pleasure" which is the sensation arising from beauty (p. 35).

### **The Sublime in Byron's *Darkness***

According to Burke, one of the ways in which the sublime is produced is when emotions like terror create "an unnatural tension and certain violent emotion of the nerves" (p.121). Throughout the poem *Darkness*, Byron creates unremitting tension and psychological gloom which creates feelings of hopelessness and terror within the reader. Byron's poem is written from the point of view of a person who is present during the collapse of society, the desecration of the sacred, the destruction of the earth and the darkening of the sun. In this poem Byron creates a vision of utter desolation. One of the ways that he does this is by using Biblical imagery in conjunction with contemporary events and vivid descriptions of a decimated environment to give the reader the impression that the end of the world is truly about to occur.

The poem starts with Byron explaining that the terrifying events which he describes within his poem occurred in a dream. “I had a dream, / which was not all a dream.” The idea of the dream is important, because in order to experience the sublime the observer must witness phenomena which has the power to harm or destroy the observer without being in actual danger from the phenomena which is being witnessed. The fact that the events which Byron describes occur within a dream provides a type of psychological distance and allows the sublime effect to be produced. It produces the desired effect of creating the sublime by allowing the reader to know that even though the events which Byron describes in his poem have the power to destroy the reader, the reader can rest assured that he or she will not actually be destroyed because of the fact that Byron’s poem takes place within the containment of a dream. However, Byron does modify the idea of a dream in the second line by stating that it was “not all a dream.” This phrase serves the purpose of creating more tension within the reader, forcing the reader to speculate on Byron’s precise meaning, wondering which part of the poem was a dream and which part was not. Perhaps the non-dream parts of the poem referenced the events which were actually happening around Europe due to the eruption of Mount Tambora and the strange weather caused by the volcanic ash which was spewed into the atmosphere. It is likely that Byron was capitalizing on the sense of desolation and impending doom that these events caused; especially in light of a prediction by an Italian astronomer which stated that the sun would be extinguished on July 18<sup>th</sup> 1816 (Vail, 1997, p.183). According to Vail, the strange weather caused so much consternation about the impending destruction of the world that there were crimes, riots and suicides throughout Europe. Perhaps by writing that the poem was “not all a dream” Byron was implying that the rest of the poem wherein he describes the decay of society and the destruction of the earth was not a dream but something else instead. In fact by saying that the poem was “not all a dream” it seems that Byron almost adopts the persona of a Biblical-style prophet, and is letting his readers know that the events which occur within the poem are



more than just a dream-they are a supernatural vision: and by extension, the poem is more than just a poem, it is a prophecy. Within the first two lines of the poem, Byron has already started the process of unsettling his readers and creating a sublime experience by indicating that the events which are described in the poem have not happened yet, but they may well be a prediction of events which are likely to occur in the near future.

As Jeffrey Vail is quick to point out, Byron's description of the sun being extinguished and the stars wandering through space not only referenced the actual environmental conditions being experienced by Europeans during the summer of 1816, but also referred to Biblical descriptions of the end times which states that the stars will fall from the skies prior to the destruction of the world. The contemporary discovery of dark spots on the surface of the sun which were so large that they were visible without the aid of advanced optical equipment probably heightened the tension that Byron's first readers felt.

Around this time the spots became so large that amateur observers (and anyone else curious enough about the phenomenon) were able to see the spots without the aid of telescopes, by looking through pieces of colored glass specially designed for the purpose (Hughes 35 qtd. in Vail). The American farmer Leonard Hill was able to record five groups of sunspots between April and August, apparently without using a telescope (Hill 62-4 qtd. in Vail).

Before scientists came to the conclusion that Mount Tambora's eruption was the culprit for the unseasonable weather, many scientists theorized that these sun-spots could be responsible for the darkness and cold that was experienced throughout Europe at that time. It is probable that other European readers looked for explanations which were more spiritual in nature.

Nineteenth century readers of Byron's poetry were likely to have been well versed with the Bible, and by drawing attention to the similarities between the dark,

cold summer of 1816, and the depiction of the end times found throughout the Bible, Byron heightened his readers' experience of the sublime by creating a psychological state similar to terror. The poem seems most similar to the description of the end times which is relayed in the book of Luke which in chapter 21 vs. 25 states: "And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring..." (King James Version). Byron continues this Biblical imagery as he describes men gnashing their teeth in clear reference to the Biblical description of Hell found in Matthew 8:12 Which states: "But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (KJV). Sprinkled throughout the poem there are also other Biblical references which can be found in both the old and New Testaments, but particularly in Isaiah 13:10 which states: "For the stars of heaven and the constellations thereof shall not give their light: the sun shall be darkened in his going forth, and the moon shall not cause her light to shine" (KJV). In Acts 2:20, the Bible again tells of the destruction of the Sun and the stars: The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and notable day of the Lord come (KJV). In two passages in the book of Revelations there are also vivid descriptions of the destruction of the sun and stars. Revelations 6:13 says: "And the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind" (KJV). Revelations 8:12, furthers this description by stating, "And the fourth angel sounded, and the third part of the sun was smitten, and the third part of the moon, and the third part of the stars; so as the third part of them was darkened, and the day shone not for a third part of it, and the night likewise" (KJV). An astute contemporary reader of Byron's poem would have been able to compare the actual environmental events occurring in Europe at the time *Darkness* was written to the Biblical description of the end times and come away with a feeling of delightful terror. This sublime feeling of barely contained terror would have also been reinforced by lines such as, "And War, which for a moment was no

more, /Did glut himself again.” these lines can be compared directly to Matthew 24:29 which states: “Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken” (KJV). This imagery would have capitalized on people’s fears that in spite of the recent defeat of Imperialist France and the end of the Napoleonic Wars, destruction and conflict were again on the horizon. This view would certainly have been strengthened by the fact that, contrary to the heightened expectation of peace and prosperity that came as a result of Napoleon’s defeat, political unrest and oppression were still being experienced by the masses throughout Europe and England (Day 1996, p.14). This period of brief peace followed closely by renewed oppression and suffering might have lead contemporary readers to wonder if they had just experienced what is described in Revelations 20:2-3 as the end of the time period when the righteous have been resurrected to reign with Christ and the beginning of the time when Satan has been loosed upon the Earth once again.

Byron also describes men using a church’s altar for purposes other than the worship of God, namely in order to burn for warmth for themselves in a cold and dark world which God has seemingly abandoned, enticing the reader to dwell upon the sacrilegious; adding another layer of horror to the already desperate situation depicted within Byron’s poem. “... [T]hey met beside/The dying embers of an altar-place/ Where had been heap'd a mass of holy things/ For an unholy usage; they rak'd up,/ And shivering scrap'd with their cold skeleton hands/ The feeble ashes, and their feeble breath/ Blew for a little life, and made a flame/ Which was a mockery;”. As Paley theorizes, it seems that whenever Byron set the scene for Biblical scenarios, he ultimately changed their results, and in the process removed hope from the Biblical story and left the reader with the bitter taste of cynicism.

In the Prophetic vision as well as in Revelation, apocalypse is  
associated with the millennium, as manifested in Isaiah’s

vision of a world in which “they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (2.4). In the New Testament, Revelation presents a thousand-year reign of the resurrected saints and climaxes in the descent of the New Jerusalem. In *Darkness* there remains a ghost of this universal peace, but it is brutally dissipated: “And War, which was no more/ Did glut himself again” (II.38-39). Another residue of millenarian prophecy is found when “vipers crawl’d/ And twined themselves among the multitude,/ hissing but, stingless” (II.35-37). One of the aspects of Isaiah’s messianic age is ‘And the suckling child shall play on the hole of the asp 911.5), and the characterization in *Darkness* of “the wildest brutes” as “tame and tremulous” (II.34-35) parallels “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid’ in Isaiah 11.6. However, Byron’s brutes and vipers are greedily devoured by the remaining humans in an orgiastic feast; associations of millennial imagery are consistently invoked in order to be bitterly frustrated (p. 6).

In Paley’s view Byron was attempting to express his own doubt in God as a benevolent and just being. However, since many of the phrases in Byron’s poem could be in reference to any of several Biblical passages, and each of these could be interpreted in many ways, it is difficult to determine if Byron is trying to express a dark cynicism toward the veracity of the prophetic images in the Bible, as Paley asserts, or merely a type of ambivalence about religious matters. An example of this difficulty occurs, in line 35 of the poem which says, “/serpents twined around each other. And vipers crawl’d/And twin’d themselves among the multitude, /Hissing, but stingless--they were slain for food.” In his article, Paley indicates that Byron’s line is a twisted rendering of the description of the millennium found in Isaiah 11: 8 which states: “And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice’ den” (KJV). However, the situation described in Byron’s *Darkness* is probably more similar to Numbers chapter 21: vs. 4-9 which states:

And they journeyed from mount Hor by the way of the Red sea, to compass the land of Edom: and the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way. And the people spake against God, and against Moses, Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, neither is there any water; and our soul loatheth this light bread. And the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died. Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD, and against thee; pray unto the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live. And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived (KJV).

One has to be careful about the interpretation of Biblical prophecy because if the Bible teaches us anything about the subject; it is that the fulfillment of these predictions usually come in unexpected forms. However, with this in mind, it is interesting to note that Byron's vision of the end times features serpents which writhe among the populous not as a punishment for a lack of gratitude, but as a reminder of God's unwillingness to intervene in the destruction of nature. It is especially ironic that Byron depicts the serpents as being *stingless* and ultimately used as a source of food, effectively becoming the manna which the Israelites complained about; while the Promised Land is juxtaposed with a hellish landscape.

In a discussion of the sublime it seems important to ascertain Byron's purpose in utilizing Biblical imagery. If Byron's purpose was, as Paley conjectures, to employ Biblical imagery only to frustrate it in order to express his own cynicism toward Christianity, the sublime effect may not have been as great as if he were actually comparing current events with the Biblical prophecy relayed in the book of Revelation and elsewhere throughout the Bible in a faithful and accurate manner.

Byron biographer Leslie Marchand points out that even though Byron was often cynical toward theological ideas, and even combative toward those of his friends with religious leanings, Byron never referred to himself as an atheist (p.111). In fact, he was appalled when his friend Percy Shelley signed his name in hotel registers across Europe as, “Percy Shelley Atheist.” Byron defaced his friend’s signature on more than one occasion during their travels, blotting it out, so that the term “Atheist” could not be read (p. 250). Byron is also famous for translating certain sections of the Bible into the Albanian language as well as for insisting that his daughter be raised by Catholic nuns: and even though Byron’s lifestyle and attitudes would certainly be considered by most religious people (then and now) to be non-orthodox at best, it is interesting to note that Byron never actually dismissed the idea of God or spiritual immortality. According to Harold Ray Stevens, “Byron also refers to an afterlife in conversations, letters, and journals; and occasionally includes speculations about the state of immortality in seemingly random fashion throughout his poetry--whether in the juvenilia or Don Juan. Byron’s attitude toward and belief about immortality varies, but he never dismissed the question as either insignificant or irrelevant to his worldview and writing” (p.333).

Perhaps Byron made his subtle changes to the Biblical texts within his poem *Darkness* not as a show of cynicism, but rather as indication of his understanding that prophecy does not always follow the exact course which one expects. If this were Byron’s intent, then the sublime effect would have been heightened, because his readers would have seen the similarities between what Byron was describing, what was happening in the world, and the Biblical predictions. In a near-contemporary letter entitled *Byron and the Bible* appeared in an 1828 issue of the *Imperial Magazine* (10, p. 699-70). The letter was written by a correspondent who signed himself as R.L.L. In his letter, the author made a list of Biblical passages which he felt that Byron was referencing in his poem *Darkness*. He used these Bible verses to create a Byronesque prose poem.

I beheld the earth and lo it was without form and void; and the heavens, they had no light. I beheld the mountains, and, lo, they trembled, and the hills moved lightly. I beheld, and, lo, there was no man, and all the birds of the heaven were fled. I beheld, and, lo, the fruitful place was a wilderness, and the cities thereof were broken down. For this shall the earth mourn, and the heavens above be black, the stars thereof shall be dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give her light. All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over thee, and set a darkness upon thy land. Every city shall be forsaken, and not a man dwell therein.' (Jer. 5:23-9; Is. 5:25, 30; 50:3; 61:6; Ezek. 28:20: KJV).

R.L.L. went on to say that, "this shows that even unbelievers [like Byron] are often indebted to that holy book for some of the brightest truths, and sublimest conceptions, which adorn the pages." In R.L.L.'s opinion, Byron was not subverting the text of the Bible by removing hope, but merely using Biblical imagery in order to heighten the sublime experience of the reader (qtd. in Paley, 1996, p.6). If this is the case, and the events which Byron described were consistent with the events predicted (and recorded) in the Bible, as well as being consistent with current events, then Byron's poem becomes much less cynical and much more sublime.

### **Vastness and the Sublime**

The fact that Byron uses the optimal amount of novel stimuli, by altering the Biblical account only slightly, adds emotional weight and an increased sense of validity to Byron's description of the end times. The world was void,/The populous and the powerful was a lump,/Seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless--/A lump of death--a chaos of hard clay. This part of the poem echoes Genesis 1:2 which reads: "Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters". But whereas the Biblical account tells of God creating order out of chaos, the Byronic

account tells of man creating chaos out of order, forcing the reader to contemplate the unimaginable. This verse of Byron's poem invokes the sublime in two ways: first, it causes the reader to contemplate vastness, and second it causes the reader to contemplate death. According to Burke, contemplating vastness is one of the most significant methods to encounter the Sublime. The fact that outer space is made up of unimaginable, (perhaps *infinite* to the mind of the romantic) distances and proportions brings the reader face to face with the sublime (p.66). Byron's poem reads: "The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars /Did wander darkling in the eternal space[.]" This clause depicts the sun going dark and the stars wandering without illumination throughout space. The mathematical calculations which predict orbits have been rendered useless, and the stars move in an unpredictable path. "Rayless, and pathless, and the icy earth /Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air; / Morn came and went--and came, and brought no day[.]" In this passage Byron is asking his readers to not only consider the incredibly vast distances and sizes represented by the sun and the stars, but also the vast horror of an Earth without warmth or light. Byron's use of the term 'blackness,' is probably not coincidental: Burke theorizes that the color black is also a source of the sublime (p.133). Even the concept of time is not left unexplored as Byron paints a planet earth where it is difficult to mark the passage of days due to the sun's darkness. According to Paley, Byron also gives the readers a sense of vastness by describing what was no longer present upon the earth. He says: "/Seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless/. The final lines of the poem continue this process by pronouncing inanimate natural forces and objects as dead-tides, moon, winds, clouds-and concluding that darkness had no need/ Of aid from them-She was the universe" ( p.22).

To Paley's observation one could also add the idea of vast silence. Burke postulates that the experience of absolute silence can invoke the sublime (p.76). Although the poem does not explicitly describe silence, the reader's mind is forced



to imagine an icy and darkened earth, devoid of life, wind and tides, and consider the eerie silence which would permeate the world.

### **Solitude and the Sublime**

Until recently, most critics classified Byron's poem as an example of "Last Man" genre which became extremely popular in Britain during the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The genre deals with the subject of a lone surviving male who witnesses the destruction of the earth. Modern critics have questioned whether or not the poem *Darkness* is a good example of this literary form due to the fact that there is no clearly identifiable "last man" within the poem (Schroeder, 1991, p.113-119). Byron's poem extends the concept of the "Last Man" by not only describing the destruction of the earth, but by also going into great detail about the destruction of human society. One section of the poem reads: 'a meal was bought/With blood, and each sate sullenly apart /Gorging himself in gloom: no love was left; /All earth was but one thought--and that was death/Immediate and inglorious; and the pang/Of famine fed upon all entrails--men/Died, and their bones were tombless as their flesh;' This passage shows a world where eating is done in solitude, and men's thoughts dwell only upon death and echoes the Biblical description of the end times found in the book of Revelation verses five and six. Which say: "When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, "Two pounds of wheat for a day's wages, and six pounds of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!" However in Byron's apocalypse food is not bought with labor, it is bought with murder, and even the bitter closure of a Christian burial, (the final dignity which Western society bestows upon its members) is denied to those unfortunate denizens of Byron's poem. From here, Byron's description of the end of the world

becomes even more specific and more intimate, moving from the global to the individual. Whereas previous passages dealt with the destruction of the natural environment, or the dissolution of human society, the next passage chronicles the fate of an individual dog.

The meagre by the meagre were devour'd,/Even dogs assail'd  
their masters, all save one,/And he was faithful to a corpse, and  
kept/The birds and beasts and famish'd men at bay,/Till hunger  
clung them, or the dropping dead/Lur'd their lank jaws; himself  
sought out no food,/But with a piteous and perpetual  
moan,/And a quick desolate cry, licking the hand/Which  
answer'd not with a caress--he died.

Byron compares the depravity of the humans left upon the earth during its final throes to the behavior of dogs and gives the reader the impression that dogs have retained their dignity and humanity slightly longer than their human counterparts, before finally succumbing to their own hunger and despair and turning upon their own masters. Perhaps as homage to his long-time canine companion “Boatswain,” Byron provides a glimmer of hope that the noble attributes, such as loyalty and goodness, upon which society was built may have perhaps survived within the heart of at least one dog. However, Byron continues to frustrate even that small bit of debased hope by ensuring that these human values will not be perpetuated due to the sad death of the brave dog by the side of his master’s unmarked grave. Byron’s inclusion of the stanza about dogs is also a sad foreshadowing of the fact that upon his death, Boatswain’s tomb was more elaborate than Byron’s own.

Byron’s poem then widens its focus to further discuss the destruction of society.

The crowd was famish'd by degrees; but two/Of an enormous  
city did survive,/And they were enemies: they met beside/The  
dying embers of an altar-place/Where had been heap'd a mass

of holy things/For an unholy usage; they rak'd up,/And  
shivering scrap'd with their cold skeleton hands/The feeble  
ashes, and their feeble breath/Blew for a little life, and made a  
flame/Which was a mockery.

This idea is particularly salient as it relates directly to Burke's idea that extended periods of solitude are a primary source of terror. In Burke's mind the absolute loss of human society without the possibility of reinstatement is a scenario which men fear almost as much as death itself. Burke says: "That an entire life of solitude contradicts the purposes of our being, since death itself is scarcely an idea of more terror" (p.40). Byron also describes men using a church's altar for purposes other than the worship of God, thus debasing the community and by extension, the *society* which is offered by the church. The fact that the poem tells of people who burn sacred items in order to provide warmth for themselves in a cold and dark world which God has seemingly abandoned, also entices the reader to dwell upon the sacrilegious; adding yet another layer of horror to the already desperate situation depicted within Byron's poem.

### **Darkness and the Sublime**

In a later part of the poem, Byron goes on to describe actual environmental darkness caused by the sun being extinguished. It reads: "The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars /Did wander darkling in the eternal space,/ Rayless, and pathless, and the icy earth /Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air;/ Morn came and went--and came, and brought no day. These lines must have had a strong impact on nineteenth century European readers who were experiencing the coldest and darkest summer in recorded history. "Byron himself remarked in 1822 when asked 'how he could have conceived such a scene as that described in his poem *Darkness*, that 'he wrote it in 1815 [sic] at Geneva, when there was a celebrated dark day when the fowls went to roost at noon and the candles were lighted as

midnight' (Lovell, 1954, p. 299). As part of his theory Burke argued that darkness was terrible, and as such, was a source of the sublime. He asserted that when surrounded by darkness a person may become lost, or injured or be unable to defend against unseen foes. According to Burke, when confronted by danger in the dark, the first thing a person prays for is light (p.130). In the poem *Darkness*, all natural light has been extinguished. And mankind is forced to burn down its cities and forests for warmth and light. The following lines from *Darkness* illustrate both the concept of environmental darkness as having the ability to evoke the sublime and how the lack of society has the ability to create the sublime.

Morn came and went--and came, and brought no day, /And  
men forgot their passions in the dread /Of this their desolation;  
and all hearts /Were chill'd into a selfish prayer for light: /And  
they did live by watchfires--and the thrones, /The palaces of  
crowned kings--the huts, /The habitations of all things which  
dwell, /Were burnt for beacons; cities were consum'd, /And  
men were gather'd round their blazing homes /To look once  
more into each other's face; /Happy were those who dwelt  
within the eye /Of the volcanos, and their mountain-torch: /A  
fearful hope was all the world contain'd; /Forests were set on  
fire--but hour by hour /They fell and faded--and the crackling  
trunks/Extinguish'd with a crash--and all was black.

The people who inhabit the world which Byron describes in his poem are willing to sacrifice everything to escape the terror of the darkness which surrounds them. The fact that Byron describes mankind destroying nature in a short-sighted attempt to provide comfort for humanity is a sentiment which is echoed in other books and poems from the Romantic era; most famously in Mary Shelley's book , *Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus*.

### **The Sublime and the Ugly**

The poem goes on to say: "then they lifted up/Their eyes as it grew lighter,

and beheld/Each other's aspects--saw, and shriek'd, and died--/Even of their mutual hideousness they died. Here again, Byron relates an encounter between two individuals. This time, between a pair of enemies who meet and die from sheer horror when exposed to the other's physical ugliness. Burke's conceptualization of ugliness marks a point of departure from the ideas of his philosophical predecessors in that he labeled the idea of the ugly, when combined with other terror inducing stimuli, as an attribute which had the power to instill the intense emotions associated with the sublime (p.108). The theorists who came before him (most notably St. Augustine) conceptualized the ugly as something which lacked form and therefore nonexistent. 'Beauty was, for St. Augustine, the consequence of the benevolence and goodness of God's creation and as a category had no opposite. The ugly, lacking any attributive value, was a formlessness in its absence of beauty and therefore non-existent (Stolnitz, 1973 p. 226). Byron's depiction of the two men who meet each and die due to the terror which their counterpart's ugly appearance elicits, is more in keeping with Burke's assessment of ugliness, and further shows Byron's ability to evoke the sublime as Burke conceptualized it.

The description of the encounter between the two enemies ends with this line: "/Unknowing who he was upon whose brow/Famine had written Fiend." Within this passage Byron sticks to his trend of creating a tense, yet plausible horror scenario by slightly altering Biblical imagery. In this instance he personifies the concept of *famine* in much the same way as the apostle John personifies the idea of *death* in the book of Revelations (6:8) which says: "I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth." Byron deviates from the Bible in that he personifies *famine* whereas in the Bible, *death* is personified and uses famine as a tool. In both instances the image is terrible and produces anxiety.

### The Sublime and the Feminine

The very last line of the poem is enigmatic because it uses the feminine personal pronoun for the first and only time throughout the poem. Byron's personification of both darkness and the universe as feminine is somewhat disquieting in that the traditional Romantic view (Burke's included) of the feminine was one of smallness, frailness and weakness. While meeting many, if not most, of the other qualifications for being viewed as sublime Byron chooses to label both darkness and the universe as "she". This is unusual in that within Burke's two part categorization of the sublime and the beautiful, the higher order, the sublime, is almost entirely masculine and the lower order the *beautiful* is almost entirely feminine. Aidan Day writes:

[T]he masculine gendering of the ultimate sublime object is, needless to say, no superficial convention. Burke defines the Beautiful in contrast with the sublime and while, in his definition, the term beautiful may be applied to physical objects, to animals and to men as well as to women, the characteristics of this phenomenon, which is of a lesser order than the sublime, are what have been conventionally thought of as 'feminine' characteristics, such as softness, smallness, smoothness and delicacy. Unlike the awesome, divine, spiritual power of the sublime, beauty is envisaged as a merely sensory phenomenon, something involved in generating feelings of love, a passion which is directed to the multiplication of the species (p.185).

By labeling those things which were typically considered to be feminine, as *beautiful* and those characteristics which were traditionally considered to be masculine as *sublime*, Burke contributed to, and reinforced, the contemporary Western European hegemony of male-dominated sexual politics. However, by concluding his poem *Darkness* by asserting that: "darkness had no need/ Of aid from them-She was the universe' Byron departs from Burke's ideas about beauty

and the sublime by assigning sublime attributes to a force which ultimately takes on a female persona. This self-sufficient Kali-esque feminine devourer of worlds which Byron describes is probably not an attempt by the poet to subvert the gender-role paradigm which prevailed in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain. In fact, Byron was both deeply misogynistic and deeply conservative in regard to maintaining the social order. These attitudes applied to his feeling about the place of the aristocracy as well as the place of women within British society. It is more likely that Byron's choice to label darkness with the feminine personal pronoun was an autobiographical attempt to express the anguish he felt at the dissolution of his marriage to Anne Milbanke. By most accounts, even though Byron made for an unlikely husband, he was truly emotionally devastated when his one year marriage to Anne fell apart amidst financial hardship and rumors of incest, insanity and sodomy. The letters which Byron wrote to Anne during the summer of 1816 probably tell the story best. He wrote:

All I can say seems useless-and all I could say might be no less unavailing-yet I still cling to the wreck of my hopes, before they sink forever. Were you, then, never happy with me? Did you never at any time or times express yourself so? Have no marks of affection of the warmest and most reciprocal attachment passed between us? [O]r did in fact hardly a day go down without some such on one side, and generally on both? Do not mistake me: I have not denied my state of mind - but you know its causes - and were those deviations from calmness never followed by acknowledgements and repentance? Was not the last that recurred more particularly so? And had I not - had we not the days before and on the day we parted - every reason to believe that we loved each other? [T]hat we were to meet again? Were not your letters kind? Had I not acknowledged to you all my faults and follies - and assured you that some had not and could not be repeated? I do not require these questions to be answered to me, but to your own heart. It is torture to correspond thus, and there are things to be settled and said which cannot be written.

You say it is my disposition to deem what I have

worthless? Did I deem *you* so? Did I ever so express myself to you, or of you to others? You are much changed within these twenty days or you would never have thus poisoned your own better feelings and trampled on mine (Marchand, 1973, p. 221).

When Byron's half-sister Augusta intimated to Anne that the announcement of their separation had caused Byron to become suicidal, Anne replied: "So much the better; it is not fit that such men should live" (qtd. in Marchand p. 218).

In the summer of 1816, the disgraced poet left England for good, and in a very real sense the universe which Byron had known-- was ending; his reputation was ruined, his hereditary estate was in disrepair, his finances were ruined, and the throngs of adoring female admirers which were always such a big part of Byron's existence, were nowhere to be found. It was as if the poet had truly experienced the apocalypse and been left as the last man standing as darkness enveloped everything.

Although Byron seems to be generally overlooked in discussions of Burke's sublime, it seems that his poem *Darkness* should be re-evaluated in light of its adherence to the specific guidelines for evoking the sublime which Burke outlined in his book, *A Philosophical Enquiry*. Of special interest, are Byron's usages of a frightening subject matter, his description of environmental darkness and the destruction of society, and his references to The Bible which he used to convey the idea that contemporary events signaled the destruction of the universe. It is also interesting to note that Byron deviates from Burke and other theorists on the subject of the sublime by assigning nearly all of Burke's criteria for achieving the sublime to a character within his poem that ultimately turns out to be feminine. Perhaps, by constantly keeping the reader unbalanced in this way, Byron proves himself to be the real master of the sublime.



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