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Romanticism and critical theory

Percy Shelley, *Mont Blanc* & Edmond Burke, *The sublime and the beautiful*

Across all literary periods especially romanticism, the greatest authors such as Percy Shelley have been inspired by nature's power, creating stories and poetry leading the reader through the speaker's journey, discovering nature's secret wonders and in the process discovering themselves. Shelley describes his inspiration of nature using sublime connotations, he is in fact intertwined with nature. There is no differentiation between where nature ends and he begins. Shelley shows there is a sense of sublimity in our connection with nature and our minds. Within his poems he implies his imagination creates the sublime world he sees and believes this shows his imagination is beyond comprehension so is therefore sublime. These ideas closely link with alternative definitions of the sublime by Burke and advocates for the philosophical theory of sceptical empiricism by Locke.

My first point will be based upon Shelley's view of the sublime. Burke describes the sublime as the combination of terror and delight; "the strongest emotions the mind is capable of feeling" (Burke, 1757). Often Romantic writing focuses on this concept of the sublime. Shelley demonstrates to the reader, the sublime is really about our interaction with nature and the mind. Through the text *Mont Blanc* Shelley brings an intimate spiritual experience of the sublime within nature and our minds. "The everlasting universe of things Flows through the mind and it rolls its rapid waves". (Shelley, 1817) This quote is the opening of *Mont Blanc* and instantly presents this idea of the mind and nature being something sublime in its own right. Shelley here suggests the possibilities of nature and our mind are endless in the word "everlasting" Also the magnitude of these possibilities is implied in using the word "universe" "as the universe comprises everything that exists even beyond earth. The connection between Shelley's mind and nature are too closely related for Shelley to not make a connection between the two. Nature not only gives him knowledge but reflects his own mind. This is depicted through Shelley's use of a metaphor. Describing his flow of thoughts as "rapid waves" (Shelley, 1817). The adjective rapid shows the expanse of knowledge entering Shelley's mind almost overpowering him. In correspondence with my topic this shows his ability to become one with nature and feel strengthened by this connection. Burke takes on a more negative approach of the sublime suggesting Pain and terror are stronger than pleasure. Shelley sees more of the pleasures in the sublime than the terrors this is reflected in his work. The sublime is described by Burke as something masculine and powerful beyond our comprehension. Although Shelley does express the sublime to be seen in immaterial things like our imagination. He does not fail to stress nature's "unfathomable" depths and powers in physical things "Bursting through these dark mountains like the flame of lightning through the tempest" (Shelley, 1817). This passage uses gothic imagery, firstly the reference to the mountain refers to the Alps a common gothic location. Combining this with two parallels of darkness and light from flames, creates an image in the reader's mind that is conflicting as it has both the mystery and terror of the darkness but the light created from the flame, which can also be seen as both dangerous and beautiful. The speaker is so in awe of the view he personifies it to understand it in his own mind.

Leading on from the idea of the sublime I will look at the Philosophical idea that we create our own reality. Philosopher and theorist Locke suggests we are born with a blank slate also known as (*tabula Rasa*). This concept goes on the notion we are in complete solitude within our own minds and nothing actually exists beyond our minds. This is known as sceptical empiricism. "And what were thou, and earth and stars and sea, if to the human mind's imaginations silence and solitude were vacancy" (Shelley, 1817) This quote from *Mont Blanc*

suggests the earth and stars do not exist without the human mind and the experiences we have with nature should be had in solitude. This relates to the critical theory essay by Iser. He discusses the reading process explaining through quotes from Laing we have a need for interpretation as our experiences are invisible to each other.

Shelley's poem displays how powerful our minds are and presents himself to be a self-aware person through his literature. He focuses on nature which some may take to be contrary to self-awareness. Shelley connects the two proving you can become more self-aware by observing the world around you. This philosophy of living is how I feel we should all aim to live like.

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