

Exploring the sublime: burke and frankenstein's monster



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Nate Ragolia Professor Jones English 45647 December 2003 Exploring the Sublime: Burke and Frankenstein's Monster

Wholly defining the sublime seems to lead to a near endless compilation of puzzle pieces, all of which fill in only a small portion of the final picture. Edmund Burke attempts to assemble an authoritative definition of the sublime-and the human experience that accompanies it-in A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful. Burke's definition proclaims that "whatever is in any sort terrible" (Burke 499) invokes the sublime, which he considers "the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (Burke 499). In Mary Shelley's Frankenstein the monster exemplifies the Burkian sublime. Shelley's descriptions of the monster and his actions cohere with Burke's definitions and his categories of Obscurity, Power, Terror, Difficulty and Vastness, each of which facilitate sublime experiences. Also, the monster elicits feelings of extreme fear, astonishment and terror (each necessary for Burke) in Victor, Walton, and the De Lacey family, but in no case harms or kills any of them. By not enacting direct physical harm on the above characters, the monster holds his power and dangerousness at a "certain distance" (Burke 500), which fulfills Burke's requirement for the delightful astonishment of sublimity. The monster further embodies the sublime because of his perpetual liminal state. The monster is elementarily human, but remains an inhuman creation; physically immense, yet recounts his experience learning to read and speak as a child would. The liminality contributes to Burke's concept of the Obscurity that causes the sublime experience. Even the monster's ultimate end maintains an air of sublimity, as Shelley never clearly states what happens beyond Walton's view. In A Philosophical Enquiry (from Difficulty) Burke states, "When any work seems

<https://assignbuster.com/exploring-the-sublime-burke-and-frankensteins-monster/>

to have required immense force and labour to effect it, the idea is grand” (503). The great effort Victor puts forth in assembling and bringing the monster to life in Chapter IV of Frankenstein falls nothing short of the difficulty Burke deems sufficient to create a sublime experience. Victor ruminates on the process by which he created the monster and the emotional experience. Shelley writes, “ No one can conceive the variety of feelings which bore me onwards, like a hurricane, in the first enthusiasm of success” (32). Victor cannot adequately describe the emotional attachment he holds for his creation and the difficulty of the endeavor, and defaults to a metaphorical hurricane. The power and force of a hurricane seems to adhere to Burke’s notion of feeling the strongest emotion possible as the outcome of the sublime, which alludes to the monster’s inherent sublimity. As the monster comes to life, the sublime effect on Victor becomes apparent in the following lines: I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body [...] but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart (Shelley 34). The monster’s appearance overwhelms Victor, reminding him of the incredible effort-“ worked hard for nearly two years”-he invested in something he does not see as beautiful. Victor’s disappointment in the monster’s form fills him with a nearly painful fear that resembles the sublime astonishment Burke postulates in the section: Of the passion caused by the Sublime. Even as the monster lies motionless on the table, Victor overflows with a disheartening and powerful emotion that is nothing short of sublime. The monster’s physical construction further fulfills Burke’s image of the sublime from Difficulty because “ His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath” (Shelley 34) corresponds to the concept <https://assignbuster.com/exploring-the-sublime-burke-and-frankensteins-monster/>

that “ the rudeness of the work increases [the] cause of grandeur” (Burke 503). Although the monster lives his incomplete form with uncovered muscles removes any semblance of perfection, and thereby makes its creation even more Burkian sublime. Imperfection seems to be a precept of the horror genre, making a single frightening flaw or eccentricity the root of the danger. Obscurity stands as another of Burke’s sources of sublime events. His definition stretches beyond the unknown, citing the natural apprehension that comes with the unclear. The monster is ultimately the “ dark, confused, uncertain image” (Burke 501) that has “ greater power” according to Burke. The monster’s body, made of several different bodies sewn together and reanimated, remains an obscure example of humanity. He is both a living being and the undead combination of other beings. How can the question of his true state be reconciled without considering the importance of obscurity? In Volume II, Chapter IV of Frankenstein the monster recounts his first months of life in the hovel amidst the cottagers and his experience learning about the world: “ I discovered the names that were given to some of the most familiar objects of discourse: I learned and applied the words fire, milk, bread, and wood” (Shelley 75). This quote is relevant to Burke’s notion of Obscurity in two ways. Firstly, considering the monster’s size, “ about eight feet in height, and proportionably large” (Shelley 32) the idea that he still needed to learn the basic tenets of language seems problematic. The sort of elementary learning the monster in which the monster describes taking part indicates that at the point described in the quote, he would have had the intellect of an infant and the form of a giant man. This confusion of outside appearance and inner reality seems representative of obscurity in the Burkian sense. Another important aspect of <https://assignbuster.com/exploring-the-sublime-burke-and-frankensteins-monster/>

the quotation from page 75 revolves around the diction. Including the words “discovered,” “discourse,” and “applied” indicates an eloquence that readers do not normally associate with monsters. Arguably, the disparity between a monstrous form and an eloquent tongue fulfills the example Burke lays out of obscurity. The true nature of the monster is uncertain and confused because it straddles the line between human and inhuman. Also, the monster is literally nameless. Throughout the novel, he is referred to only as “the monster.” His nameless nature compliments his obscurity of form, and makes him difficult-if not impossible-to completely discern. Due to the obscurity of the monster, he wields great power (as Burke might say) from the inability of others to discern and understand him, which leads to the fearful thoughts that accompany the sublime. Another Burkian facet of the sublime is Vastness. Burke states, “Greatness of dimension is a powerful cause of the sublime [...] greatness of dimension, vastness of extent, or quantity, has the most striking effect” (502), which applies intuitively to Victor’s monster and his physical form. As stated before, the monster’s size, close to eight feet tall and proportionally large, a “being of gigantic stature” (Shelley 32), clearly demonstrates the monster’s vastness. Besides being obviously intimidating in size, the monster’s proportional largeness indicates an even greater mass. Merely the monster’s dimensions demand attention and embody an undeniable vastness. Imagining any human or creature of that size, the reader must accept that such a creation would evoke an intense admiration and astonishment. Throughout the novel Shelley returns to descriptions of the monster’s extent and a notable example occurs near the end of the novel when Walton-a ship captain trapped in the arctic and new acquaintance of Victor’s-first sees the monster himself. “Over [Victor]

<https://assignbuster.com/exploring-the-sublime-burke-and-frankensteins-monster/>

hung a form which I cannot find words to describe; gigantic in stature, yet uncouth and distorted in its proportions" (Shelley 152). After acknowledging the great size of the creature, Walton " shut [his] eyes involuntarily" (152), and attempts to recollect himself. The intense physical reaction to the monster that Walton describes parallels the sort of powerful emotional response Burke derives from sublime incidence. Through his appearance, the monster exemplifies the concept of Vastness and attends well to Burke's definition for the sublime. In studying the Power and Terror qualities of the sublime which Burke describes, the monster seems, almost elementary, to typify both. Victor's monster is unquestionably terrible, eliciting extreme fear in Victor and Walton as quoted above. The " breathless horror and disgust" (Shelley 34) that Victor feels at first gazing upon the living monster clearly equates to fear, or for Burke's sake terror. Walton calls the monster's appearance " appalling hideousness" (152) and his reaction cannot be considered anything but terrible fear. The terror the monster educes in those people who see him stays to Burke's belief that fear can induce the sublime. Also, Burke maintains, " Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too" (501). Considering the monster's horrific, gigantic and disturbing appearance he easily fits with Burke's idea of something visually terrible, which makes the monster inherently sublime. The monster is also the ultimate " modification of power" (Burke 501) and that intensifies the danger and fear, which lead to the sublime. The ease at which the monster snuffs out the lives of Victor's friends and loved ones shows the power the monster possesses. In Volume II, Chapter VII of Frankenstein, the monster describes his encounter and murder of Victor's brother William, The child still struggled, and loaded me with epithets which carried despair to my heart: I

<https://assignbuster.com/exploring-the-sublime-burke-and-frankensteins-monster/>

grasped his throat to silence him, and in a moment he lay dead at my feet (Shelley 97). The monster grabs the William's throat only in an attempt to quiet him, but because of the great power he possesses the child dies. Although the monster reacts strongly to his murderous work, the way in which his attempt to hush William went wrong seems to indicate that even the monster cannot foresee the power he boasts. The monster moves quickly and powerfully too, as he pursues Victor, and Shelley describes him, "advancing towards [Victor] with superhuman speed. [The monster] bounded over the crevices in the ice, among which [Victor] had walked with caution" (65). The diction "superhuman" seems especially relevant in reference to the power the monster possesses. By exceeding the abilities normally attributed to humans the monster demonstrates a sublime might. Imagining such an occurrence evokes astonishment almost instantly and begs the question of how a creature so amazingly robust could exist. Superhuman speed is the sort that would also bring terror and fear to the viewer who may wonder if such speed would be used against them. For Burke, the fear intrinsic to the sublime occurs "wheresoever we find strength, and in what light soever we look upon power" (502) that is "the concomitant of terror" (502). So, any strength that causes fear for the observer is sublime in nature. The monster bears immense power that intimidates and frightens Victor and thereby brings about the sublime. Burke emphasizes early in *A Philosophical Enquiry* that the sublime occurs only when the pain, danger and fear are viewed or experienced from a distance. Experiencing pain first hand renders it "incapable of giving any delight" (Burke 500), but when the pain and danger is implied by Terror, Obscurity, Power, Difficulty and Vastness then the sublime occurs bringing with it feelings of astonishment. Although Victor

<https://assignbuster.com/exploring-the-sublime-burke-and-frankensteins-monster/>

perceives himself to be in imminent danger throughout the Frankenstein, the monster never attacks or harms him-Victor dies before the monster finally reaches him. Instead, the monster converses with Victor, relating to him his life experiences. In practice, the monster is eloquent, polite and unthreatening to Victor, and this creates the distance that Burke believes must exist for sublime fear. This distance asserts again in the danger the De Lacey family and Walton perceive during their respective encounters with the monster. When Walton first beholds the monster he is struck by the creature's terrible appearance, but once the monster turns to him miserably Walton has a change of heart: His voice seemed suffocated; and my first impulses, which had suggested to me the duty of obeying the dying request of my friend, in destroying his enemy, were now suspended by a mixture of curiosity and compassion (Shelley 153). Walton's perception of true danger abates in the above passage because he realizes that the monster means him no real harm or pain, and that creates the "certain distance" (Burke 500), that allows him to feel a sublime delight and empathy. Interestingly, once the distance appears Walton's entire thought process becomes "suspended" by new powerful emotions that overwhelm his original vengeful hatred for the monster. A similar scene occurs between the monster and De Lacey as the monster attempts to make a connection with the old man, hoping that his disturbing appearance will not prejudice a blind man. Without his vision, De Lacey cannot perceive the monster through any means beyond conversation and that works in the monster's favor. De Lacey calls the monster his "best and only benefactor" (Shelley 91) clearly showing that blindness creates the distance between the terrible monster and the man.

De Lacey delights in his discourse with the monster, and continues to until <https://assignbuster.com/exploring-the-sublime-burke-and-frankensteins-monster/>

his housemate, Felix, returns and sees the monster's form, effectively collapsing the distance and the sublime delight that accompanies it. In the above scenes, the monster never hurts the character with whom he interacts. His power and terrible nature sit at a distance that allows them to be perceived as astonishing, delightful and subsequently sublime. Through Edmund Burke's definition of the sublime he posits the causes and requirements and lead to such an obscure and emotional experience. Burke considers fear, Power, Vastness, Obscurity, Terror, and Vastness as key qualities of the sublime. Having applied these concepts to Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, the monster emerges as an example of Burkian sublime. The monster possesses great power and size, but is wrought with contradictions, confusions and uncertainties. He instills great terror in the human character he encounters, but also evokes feelings of astonishment, empathy, and caring. Even as the monster threatens and harms some of the novel's secondary characters, he creates a distance between himself and Victor, Walden and De Lacey that allows him to be primarily dangerous in perception only. Shelley creates a monster that fulfills Burke's requirements, and gives readers a character that embodies the sublime. Works Cited Burke, Edmund. A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful. 1757, 1759. The Longman Anthology of British Literature. Vol. 2A. Ed. David Damrosch. New York: Longman 2003. 499-505. Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft. Frankenstein. 1818. Ed. J. Paul Hunter. New York: Norton, 1996.