

LONGINUS "ON THE SUBLIME"

On the Sublime is a work of literary criticism that belongs to the Graeco-Roman period. It dates back to the 1st century AD.

Its author is unknown but is conventionally referred to as **Longinus or Pseudo-Longinus**.

Very little is known about Longinus.

It is normally seen as a classic work on aesthetics and the effects of good writing.

It is calculated that as much as one-third of the original text is missing, but what we have is sufficient to make plain the intention of the author.

Before Longinus, critics believed that the function of poetry was to **instruct or to delight** or both and if it is prose, its function was to **persuade also**. **But Longinus was not satisfied** with this formula.

Longinus believes that great work of art aims to transport the reader out of himself. It can move the reader to divine joy. This is the quality of the divine.

So a great work of art does **not only please or instruct, but it also moves, transports, and elevates**. It pleases all and it pleases all the time.

He believes nothing is poetry unless it transports. A work of art becomes excellent, only when it sublimates.

On the Sublime is both a treatise on aesthetics and a work of literary criticism. It is written in an epistolary form and the final part, possibly dealing with public speaking, has been lost.

“On the Sublime” tackles the question “what is good writing, and how it may be achieved?”

The answer Longinus gives to this question is that: “good writing partakes of what he calls the Sublime.”

WHAT IS THE SUBLIME?

The sublime is a certain loftiness and distinction in the style of writing. The effect of the sublime takes place on the reader and moves him/her from one psychological state to another.

- **He says it “sways every reader whether he is willing or not”**

SOURCES OF THE TRUE SUBLIME

The true sublime pleases all and pleases always.

Sources of the true sublime:

1. **Greatness of thought.** [*Capacity for great thought and a firm grasp of ideas*]
2. **Passion.** [A vigorous and spirited treatment of the passions].

3. **Figurative language.** [A certain artifice in the employment of figures, which are of two kinds, figures of thought and figures of speech]
4. **Diction.** [Dignified expression, which is sub-divided into two aspects ;
 - (a) The proper choice of words
 - (b) The use of metaphors and other ornaments of diction]
5. **Dignified composition.** [Majesty and elevation of the structure].

ASPECTS OF FALSE SUBLIME

Longinus warns against the false sublime. That is to say when a writer intends to produce a good style but achieves bad writing.

1. Bombastic use of language. (Tumidity)
2. Childish use of language. (Puerility)
3. Cheap display of passion. (Parenthyrsus)
4. Frigidity.

FINAL REMARKS

- On the Sublime was a letter written to a friend.
- It is also a profound, insightful literary treatise.
- The writer put forward the definition of Sublime on an aesthetic level.
- Many British and German men of letters were also influenced by “On the Sublime”.
- Milton once claimed that Longinus was always the tutor he worshipped.

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