

Transgression of the Sublime

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Kamila Vránková. 2019. *Metamorphoses of the Sublime: From Ballads and Gothic Novels to Contemporary Anglo-American Children's Literature*. České Budějovice: Pedagogická fakulta JU.

The scholar who studies the sublime, after a time, is likely to realise that several domains of humanity—in arts and in the humanities—are linked to the abundance of the aesthetic quality. Kamila Vránková has done intensive research and in her highbrow work, she presents the multiplicity of the theoretical approaches. In the thorough historical introduction on the development of the concept, in five subchapters, she highlights the origins of the term; its classical, Longinian understanding; then the 18th-century readings of the sublime (Dennis, Addison, Shaftesbury, Lowth, Baillie); in a separate part, the connections of the English Gothic fiction and the Burkean treatise titled *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*; the Kantian and the Romantic notions; finally, the modern and postmodern questions of the representation of the sublime in Derrida's, Lyotard's, Žižek's, and Jean-Luc Nancy's works. Reading the thirty-five-page introduction, the reviewer wonders whether and in what ways the results of her research will be applicable in the analytical parts: in the five chapters discussing Romantic and Victorian literary works, and in the four parts on children fantasy literature. Her analyses do not simply and cleverly rely on the interpretations of the sublime but they move beyond the theoretical framework—in accordance with the transgressive character of the presented quality.

In the chapter titled “Variations and Transformations of the ‘Lenore’ Motif in European Ballads,” the figure of the demon lover, the revenant, is presented and the phases of the luminal-spectral passage are displayed in several groups of works from Scottish folk ballads to selected English, German, Polish, Czech and Serbian romantic poems. The author pays special attention to the sublime auditory and visual images while, unfortunately, she does not quote too many lines from the analysed lyrics. The reviewer thinks that in the whole book, the readers could be happier to receive more textual evidence supporting the sophisticated ideas of the interpretations. In the case of the Lenore motif, in addition to E. A. Poe's

“The Raven”, Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s “The Blessed Damozel” could have been referred to, mainly due to its emblematic imagery, though it is the topic that is worth amplification and refinement in the future. In the next chapter, different elements of the Gothic masterpiece, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* are focused on, for instance, the roots of the monster figure, the intertextual allusions, the creature’s self-education and even pop cultural connections, except one thing—the sublime quality of the work. The possible ethical and Kantian connotations of the novel are thematised only in the last paragraph while the Burkean ones already appear in the introduction (24–25).

Still in the Romantic block, the fourth chapter presents the temporary and spatial perspectives of Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, where the “subliminal” (borrowed from J. B. Twitchell, 62) atmosphere is portrayed to mirror the characters’ mind and the threshold state of their existence. It is time to call attention to the brilliant footnotes attached to the main text of analysis that provide further tracks of ideas; in this chapter, for instance, with Todorov’s notion of the fantastic (66) and Bakhtin’s “chronotypes” (71); the latter will be explored in detail in children’s fantasies. Moving to American literature, the author examines Nathaniel Hawthorne’s works, namely in *Wonder-Book for Girls and Boys*, *Tanglewood Tales* and *The Marble Faun* and her main concern is about the rites of passage the characters undergo. The process of maturation—from the preliminal to the postliminal via the liminal stages—is based on Arnold van Gennep’s theory, while in the sublime reading the Burkean fearful and the Kantian moral implications are pointed out. The explication is made more stratified with the Greek and Roman mythological allusions (here, even the stories of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* are recalled), which together with the other cultural and artistic hints present the sublimity of the examined texts. It is the longest chapter of the book and it links the first, “Romantic part” with the second on Gothic children literature. But, as a strange intermezzo, the comparative analysis of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* follows, in which the questions of the voyage, self-quest, and otherness are discussed. Here, in addition to the recall of Deleuze’s theory of sensation, Gadamer’s and Lévinas’s (and even Bakhtin’s) emphasis on dialogicity/dialogism, the sublime terror of otherness is mentioned (107). The reviewer misses the elaboration on the sublimity of excess—a topic being thematised in the introduction and neglected later—since the Rhys novel *sensationally* provides examples of the “too much” quality of otherness.

In the second part, where children’s fantasy works are explored, the author entangles the lines of her previous theorising on the sublime. In the introductory and contextualising chapter titled “Searching for the Other: Ethical Aspects of Fantasy Adventure in Contemporary Anglo-American Fiction for Children,” Vránková

says that “the notion of the sublime in modern fantasy stories draws on [...] the desire for harmony between the visible and the invisible, between the physical and spiritual experience. The feeling of the sublime, following an encounter with the higher forces, acquires a moral significance, in which the anxiety inspired by the inexplicable is accompanied by pleasure” (109–110). The morality of the fantasy works is claimed to be in accordance with the Kantian sublime while the acceptance of the other and its call hints at the Levinasian understanding of sublimity. In addition to the history In this chapter, the classification of children’s fantasies is provided (after Goldthwaite), which is beneficial, regarding the plenitude of the narratives. In the chapter on the exposition of children’s time-travel fantasies, so many time-slip stories are commented on that the argumentation is hardly possible to follow.

The most elaborate analysis of the fantasy stories is given in the last two chapters, especially the concluding one, “The Formless and the Unspeakable in J.K. Rowling, Chris Priestley and Lemony Snicket.” Here several quotations assist the reader to find the way in the labyrinth of the selected novels—as if the reader were to explore the Gothic revival of the sublime theories. The reading of Rowling’s *Harry Potter*, Priestley’s *Tales of Terror* and Snicket’s *Series of Unfortunate Events* shows the author’s best: due to her skill of accenting even minor details and, together with her concentration on the recurrent features of the sublime (namely, fear of the unknown, crossing the boundaries and transcendental experience), she manages not only to elucidate the studied works but also to arrange them in the original theoretical framework of her book. The reviewer is impressed by the bibliography that would be even more useful to researchers, scholars and students if an index of the frequently cited authors and concepts had been added.

Kamila Vránková’s *Metamorphoses of the Sublime* is an exhaustive monograph with fruitful insights into the immense amount of the examined works; moreover, it exhibits the monstrosity of the concept and offers new paths for its future interpretation.