

The Destructive Sublime in *Tamburlaine the Great*

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Abstract

This paper delves into an unconventional exploration of *Tamburlaine's* character, steering away from the typical religious or moral critiques. Instead, it focuses on a vision that resonates with the destructive sublime within *Tamburlaine*, evoking a unique form of sublimity through depictions of feminine forms. The call for a precise societal understanding emanates from the 'new immaterial' world, epitomized by the blood-stained *Tamburlaine*, who, in his pursuit of destructive sublimity, finds himself desecrated in the 'human' realm—a theme to be examined further. In Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*, the essay will scrutinize how the sublime, embodying destructiveness and violence, takes shape amid a discontent with the external world and within the self. Additionally, it will argue that the female figure in the play serves as the 'object petit,' introducing a sense of lack and otherness in femininity that ultimately undermines the male protagonist.

1. INTRODUCTION

...the affection arising from the idea of vast power, is extremely remote from the neutral character. For first, we must remember, that the idea of pain, in its highest degree, is much stronger than the highest degree of pleasure; and that it preserves the same superiority through all the subordinate gradations. From hence..., the idea of the suffering or enjoyment must always be prevalent'.

(Edmund Burke, *A philosophical*

Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, 137).

What is beauty, saith my sufferings, then?

If all the pens that ever poets held

Had fed the feeling of their masters' thoughts,

And every sweetness that inspired their hearts,

Their minds, and muses on admired themes;

If all the heavenly quintessence they still

From their immortal flowers of poesy,

Wherein, as in a mirror, we perceive

The highest reaches of a human wit;

(Tamburlaine the Great, V. I. 267).

The study will focus on the paradoxical elements within Tamburlaine the Great, utilizing it as a lens to explore the sublime theory. It delves into Tamburlaine's method of conquering both his inner self and the external society, a conquest that transforms him into a despot despite his awareness of its disturbing implications. This dynamic creates numerous instances of sublimity. The research also scrutinizes how Tamburlaine elevates the stimulus embodied by the female character 'Zenocrate' to transcend the confines of the material world.

This paper also revisits Immanuel Kant's theory of the sublime as outlined in the Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment. It explores how a significant portion of Tamburlaine's paradoxical nature arises from his introspective reflections, shaped by a societal yearning for despotic authority, akin to a 'God.' In this context, the sublime takes on a formless and Kantian quality, as Steve Vine (2013) aptly references in *Reinventing the Sublime*: it is "characteristically a scene of struggle between forces of aggrandizement and diminishment, elevation and prostration, expansion and reduction, jubilation and loss—whether in the self or the self's relationship to power and magnitude" (p.3). Consequently, the focus of this analysis is to examine, drawing from sublime theories, how Tamburlaine grapples with the internal struggle to conquer himself, seeking inner peace by addressing the inherent paradoxes within human nature.

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The context of the sublime in this research echoes aesthetically what is meant as a state of mind which is related with lofty emotions, exceeding the realms of the limitedness towards the infinity. It is a term that refers to many meanings; however, the most relative one to my discussion is that of the critic Philip Shaw (2006). According to Shaw, “the sublime marks the limits of reason and expression together with a sense of what might lie beyond these limits” (p.2). Although the sublime is mostly evoked by the nineteenth century Romantic poets, it is also referred to and used by dramatists and artists in their works. For example, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* arouses lofty emotions by a monster, while William Shakespeare’s *King Lear* fills the audience with the idea of infinity that is beyond words. These kinds of monstrous and idealistic sublime form only a part of many sublime kinds that could be emerged in various literary works. Hence, I would argue how *Tamburlaine the Great* is identified in a parallel with this sublime definition, but in a kind that raises mankind to the level of the divine. The idea of what is *Great*, or *Unlimited* stands at the centre of Marlowe’s play.

First, and in the historical context, one can scarcely discuss *Tamburlaine* without first discussing the modern Elizabethan England. In horrific manners, punishment and public executions embodied a practice of entertaining during Tamburlaine’s play time. This example echoes those who are represented through Tamburlaine’s executed victims. The city walls were used to hang their heads after their executions. The topics of war and well-known historic protagonists were the domain of many plays at that time. So that, their storylines were combined with outrageous and appalling episodes of violence. Apparently, an example of this can be shown through the bloodiest play of *Titus Andronicus* by William Shakespeare (1584). As Bruce E. Brandt (2009) contended that “Marlowe’s dramatic innovations opened Shakespeare’s own imagination to new possibilities.”(p.755). Taking in consideration the intelligence of Marlowe and his work which was famous and commonly acted at his life time before his untimely death at the age of 29, while Shakespeare was not be celebrated as a well-known playwright until his later life.

Going back in the history of England and its influence upon its people at that time, one can strikingly parallel the lust of Tamburlaine for wars that England required from the citizens, as preparing them for their forthcoming war with Spain. In showing such a desire for expansion and exaltation, I would initially suggest that both Tamburlaine and Queen Elizabeth were reluctant to face their *inner thought for transcendence and surpassing the realms of this material world*. It is the sublime sense, as it will be referred to later, which drives them away, generated from within themselves to be acted physically outside. Tamburlaine displays determination but with an intention to go beyond the infinity. He cannot believe that he is a normal man with limited powers, forgetting his being as a subject to God, although he wickedly believes himself to be greater.

In the 16th century, the idea of a strong and aggressive leader was the central thought for all Elizabethans. The reigns of Mary Tudor and Edward VI reflect examples of weaker rulers in the authority and control abilities. On the opposite, Henry VIII and the later Elizabeth I reflect examples of strong dynamic leaders that is to provide their people with secure and peace. Hence, the play of *Tamburlaine* gets its fame somewhat as a result of people's ability to celebrate him and his activities without fear of being thought disloyal.

Moreover, the importance of the Elizabethan England and its drama is derived from the reliance on not only societal situations and prehistoric rituals but also on the materials represented on a stage of performing, an organization, and an audience. As Michael J. Kelly (2008) argued in her insightful article "Christopher Marlowe and the Golden Age of England" that 'The wish, the hope, the yearning for mimic representation of life is impotent in the national thought until these outward forces are summoned to body it forth in physical form and make it live and move and speak before us" (p.5). These physical merging into psychological conditions, embodied by the atheism of Christopher Marlowe, as it will be presented shortly, establishes a state that finds its response in sublime context.

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As a young adult out of school, Marlowe began to show a wild and recalcitrant behaviour in public places and he was arrested on charge of ‘atheism and immorality, May, 1593’, (British Authors before 1800). Roger E. Moore referred in his article to this point as a popular tradition in ‘the heated religious milieu of mid-seventeenth-century London’ there were “many people claimed to be visited by God and instructed to accomplish some religious sign or undertaking” (p.123). Yet, according to the Elizabethan doctrine at that time, the atheist was a person who not necessarily disbelieves in God, but also a bad person who may appear as an insane in terms of conduct, ‘daredevil figure of desperation’ (Battenhouse, pp. 41,42). Thus, in the representative view of Marlowe’s contradictory character, which began his life as a genius and ended with arresting and torturing out of atheism charge and his struggle with the English society rejection at that time, there is a parallel Tamburlaine’s personality and productive sublimity. Thus, in terms of sublime explanation and according to Edmund Burke’s account of the sublime, this outcome paradoxical experience of both Tamburlaine and Marlowe is dominated by a kind of ‘pain and danger’ which is ‘the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling’ (Furniss 25). In the following two passages, I am going to illustrate the premise of the sublime and how it is connected to Tamburlaine.

As Burke notes in his *Philosophical Enquiry*, “the mind is hurried out of itself, by a crowd of great and confused images; which affect because they are crowded and confused” (p.136). It is therefore an aesthetic correlative of political emancipation, reinstating the limits within the outer world, and gesturing towards the infinite. The main principle of the aesthetical sublime depends on representing the ideas of eternity and infinity within the self, within the subject, and his physical or psychological reaction to overcome or transcend its sense of limitedness and subjection, ‘transforming potential annihilation into a sense of elevation’ (Furniss 27). This is what happened in relation to Tamburlaine when the lowly shepherd crashing down on kingdoms and their absolute codes of classicism and perhaps reflecting Marlowe’s recalcitrance and determination to rise above the subjugation of his commoner birth

which then allows him to mingle with the knighted and break free of the rigid Elizabethan traditions. It can be said that they found in the dark, confused, and uncertain disposition of the outer world superiority on the material world. That is to access the lofty emotions than those which are more limited. All of which, of course, leads us directly to the central topic of the play, 'ambition', and also leads us to believe that Marlowe, as well as, his protagonist, has more than his fair share of these tendencies. On one hand, the sublime experience is seen as principal to an overwhelming the self, while on the other hand, to an elevated existence and exaltation, at times even to self-surpassing. The crucial request, then, is not to figure out the extent to which the sublime is positioned in the subject, but to define the way in which the experience of the sublime disturbs the perceiving subject: Is it an enlargement process or a diminishment one? Is it an overwhelming action over our sense of the self, or is it affirming and heightening our sense of identity? The dichotomy viewpoints of the influence of the sublime on the self can be interpreted differently between Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant.

While Burke's conception of the sublime is identified as the experience of the self being overpowered by the 'object', Kant's dynamical sublime is constructed upon the reciprocal process between mind and matter. That is, it is the self-capacity to measure itself against the apparent powerful images of the outside world. In other words, the object, arousing fear, which is a necessary condition in Burke's sublime to affect the subject is diminished in Kant's sublimity. It is rather the sublime that must only be sought in the *mind* which 'Surpasses every standard of sense' (Kant 128).

According to Moore (2002), in *Tamburlaine*, 'Marlowe presents an individual whose belief in his possession of a spiritual *gnosis* leads to an antinomian disregard for all laws.' (126). This quotation can be interpreted through the previous sublime discussion that when a subject faces an object that arouses fear in himself, he starts to defend this 'fear', through his internal labour to transcend it forward to the magnitude, to the infinity. The idea of conquering

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the self is presented through the play's text. There will be shifting in the tone from the sublime towards destructiveness throughout the text. This paradoxical vision which is built on sublimity echoes the tensions in the play as reflections of Tamburlaine's transcendent thought.

The source of fear for Tamburlaine was his thought of not being an 'emperor of the earth' (V. I. 255), or a God. This is clearly expressed in his speech, 'And makes my deeds infamous through the world/ But, as the gods, to end the Trojans' toil'. He is struggling with his appetites, encouraged by his ambition, which in this text can be translated as a part of his destructive sublime. According to Kant, the reciprocal process between Tamburlaine and the outside world is an expression of the mutual sublime between mind and matter. Burke referred to this sublimity as 'the mind is so entirely filled with its object that it cannot entertain any other, nor reason on that object which fills it' (NP, *Outline of Great Books*. com). His mind is looking for something which exceeds the limits of the object with which he is trying to be overwhelmed. However, the passion of this attempt to be overwhelmed by the object, according to Burke, requires arousing a sense of magnificent in the subject. It is, thus, a sublime that is aroused by the vast, great objects in nature. In *Tamburlaine the Great*, this is expressed by the violent passion of ambitions to be a God and King of the world, which eventually leads to a struggle within the self. It is a struggle that is controlled by the limitedness of the object and the sense of being diminished in the subject.

It is obvious from the previous discussion how the sublime is recognized as a response to the struggle between two opposites, mind and matter, internal and external, divine and humble, God and man. Thus, as we see how the destructive sublime in the play is a result of Tamburlaine's internal thought which is triggered by his ambitions, there is another kind of sublime, that is the gendered sublime. Unlike the confusion that the subject of the sublime feels towards the object, in the gendered sublime, there is no place for a mastery notion or possession – which is exemplified by Tamburlaine's ambition to rule the whole world. Rather, it is a

sublime that looks for a harmony between the subject and object. The major theme for such sublime is 'Love', where the two lovers are looking for a unity rather than fragmentation or loss. Hence, I would argue how Tamburlaine's love to Zenocrate is based on this kind of sublimity. That is, a sublime which depends on gender, love and temptation. In her critical essay, 'The Feminine Sublime', Barbara Claire Freeman suggests that the sublime theories can be evaluated and explained on the basis of gender, and not only differentiating between male and female, but also excluding the feminine. She pointed out that the sublime is 'gendered as feminine.'(3). Edmund Burke also allocates an extreme difference between the masculine sublime and the feminine beautiful, matching the former with everything vast and the latter with small,

sublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparatively small...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, and even massive.
(140)

Thus, the association of the femininity with the beautiful echoes the gender approach that depends on exempting the female from sublimity, giving the masculine the perpetual right to contemplate upon this femininity. In the play text, Zenocrate seems to be aware of such two separate themes, life and heaven, mortal and immortal, in relation to her body:

Ah, life and soul, still hover in his breast,
And leave my body senseless as the earth,
Or else unite you to his life and soul, (*One* III. I. 143-144)

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It seems as if the sublime is divided between the feminine matter and the masculine mind. It is an expression of Tamburlaine's overreaching imagination to praise her elusive beauty, but not as a part of her body, as she died by the end, but rather her idealistic soul, which can be seen as a mirror of his transcendent mind, of his sublimity. Thus, in terms of gender, *Tamburlaine the Great* is regarded as showing the contrast between the sublime and the beautiful. The expression of such view is clearly presented in the play, when Tamburlaine melancholy addresses his beloved Zenocrate:

Behold Zenocrate, the cursed object
Whose fortunes never mastered her griefs;
Behold her wounded in thee,
As much as thy fair body is for me! (*One V. I. 301*)

Here, it seems that Tamburlaine attempts to find his soul mirrored in Zenocrate's beauty. It is like a mutual process between spirituality and materiality that is expanded to transcend the limitedness of the 'cursed object', as Tamburlaine refers to. Spirituality in its affiliation with materiality forms the main chore in the sublime, according to the philosopher Frederick Schiller in his *Aesthetical and Philosophical Essays* 'On the Sublime'. He points out that the sublime dwells not only in the rational labour, but also in the sensuous, which I would argue is represented through Zenocrate's beauty. Shiller claims that:

man finds here not only in his rational nature a moral aptitude that can be developed by the understanding, but also in his reasonable and sensible nature—that is, in his human nature—an aesthetic tendency which seems to have been placed there expressly: *a faculty awakens of itself in the presence of certain sensuous objects*, and which, after our feelings are purified, can be cultivated to

such a point as to become a powerful ideal development. (para. 6) (emphasis added).

This connection of rational and sensual compiles with Kant's and Burke's sublime as a reciprocal process between internal and external in a way that never comes back on itself, but rather extends to the infinitude. However, in Schiller's explanation of the sublime there is a physical need, a sensuous desire. Hence, I suppose that the sublime of Tamburlaine's towards Zenocrate is awakened by the presence of love. It seems that the sublime in this form, is a love story that relates the mind of Tamburlaine with the body of Zenocrate.

In conclusion, this essay discussed the sublime theory in relation to its representation in Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*. Certainly, the central role of the sublime in this context is not just to explain the rational labour of Tamburlaine, but also to interrelate it with its performance in the external world, appearing in the destructiveness of Tamburlaine's actions. Yet, providing a clear definition of the sublime as it is exhibited in this first part of this text reflects a pure image of how the lofty emotions that emerged from the paradoxical character of Tamburlaine could be destructive and violent. On one hand, he is the ordinary man that has limited potentials as any other man. On the hand, it is his *internal thought* that he should have a despot power, an unlimited power that relates him to the position of God. In this regard and as a result, Tamburlaine, as a subject of the sublime, fills out the reader with much of his mind labour that is reflected in his words and actions. He is a strong leader, an executer and warrior who looks for more and more power. His extreme mind labour is halted by the limitedness of the object in the material world, which eventually leads to this destructiveness throughout the play. He constantly appears as a victim of his magnificent contemplation that never comes back on itself, but rather aims towards the infinity. Thus, we always see such a clash between Tamburlaine's humanity and his ambitions.

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There is next a historical survey in which I focus on how both the time of the play and the character of Christopher Marlowe go in parallel with Tamburlaine's paradoxical character. These conditions, I suggest, affect in a way or another the subject of the sublime in the play. That is, the personality of Queen Elizabeth as a strong, dynamic leader, opposing to the previous weak leaders, besides Marlowe's background as a person started his life as a genius and ended as a prisoner figure out much of the struggle which Tamburlaine experiences and results in his horrific deeds.

Furthermore, the sublime has many philosophical readings in literature. Yet, its reading in this play has a specific attitude. It is the attitude which gathers Burke's, Kant's and Schiller's premises of the sublime in one play. As we refer to the *rational labour*, being *halted* by the limitedness of the material world, we are discussing the Burkean and Kantian sublimity. Yet, when we add the Schillerean element of how this blockage state starts a process of reciprocity between mind and matter, rational and sensuous, we will be leading to another kind of sublimity, that is the gendered sublime. In relation to Zenocrate, I investigated how Tamburlaine celebrates his beloved as an icon of sublimity, drawing on Barabrah Freeman's and Burke's approach of sublime and gender. It is a Sublime that approaches Zenocrate's beauty as a trigger of 'lofty emotions' that cannot be existed in limit material world, but rather expands to the infinitude.

As this paper starts with an indication of what the sublime is and its practice on the character of Tamburlaine, it will be concluded with an assertion that *Tamburlaine the Great* is a play with lots of sublimity where the protagonist's vision of perfection keeps him 'restless striving ... forward in all his endeavours, from love to poetry to war.' (Emphasis added) (Leggatt 28). It is the vision that fills out with lots of horror and destructive sublimity.

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