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LONGINUS: ON THE SUBLIME

Meaning of Sublime

Function of Poetry

Five Sources of Sublime

Longinus as the First Romantic Critic

Longinus as the Classical Critic

INTRODUCTION: Dionysius / Cassius / Pseudo Longinus lived during the 1st/3rd century was a rhetorician and philosophical critic. Not much biographical details are available about him in today's times. Longinus is one of the greatest Greek critics. He was once regarded by Dryden as the greatest critic after Aristotle. His position is only next to Aristotle. His 'On the Sublime' is an immortal critical document of great worth which



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discusses the principle of sublimity in poetry. Longinus explores the meaning, the nature and the sources of sublime in his critical treatise.

Longinus on the Function of Poetry: Before Longinus, Plato and Aristotle had discussed the nature and functions of poetry. Plato being a moralist believed that poetry must be moral and must deliver moral messages to the society. Aristotle on the other hand, believed that the primary function of poetry is to please the readers. But Longinus goes one step ahead by saying that teaching morals and pleasing the readers takes place only when the readers are first of all transported or moved to the world of the poets. So according to Longinus, the primary function of poetry is not to teach or to please, but to move, to transport or to uplift the readers. And for this, the work has to



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be a sublime in essence.

Sublimity in Poetry: Sublimity is a certain loftiness, distinction and consummation of excellence in language, expression and composition. It is the echo of a great soul. It raises style above the ordinary.

This sublimity comes in a work of art from the poet's genius and talent both / nature and art both. According to Longinus, 'Art is perfect when it seems to be nature, and nature hits the mark when she contains art hidden within her'.



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THE SOURCES OF THE SUBLIME: According to Longinus there are five principal sources of the sublime. These sources are -

- [1] Grandeur of thought;
- [2] Strong emotion;
- [3] The use of figures;
- [4] Noble diction;
- [5] Dignified composition.

The 'grandeur of thought' and 'strong emotion' are inborn gifts of nature. The rest three sources are the gifts of art.



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[1] GRANDEUR OF THOUGHT: 'Grandeur of thought' is one of the principal sources of the sublime. It is largely the gift of nature. It is essential for a sublime work. Men with mean and servile ideas can't attain sublimity. In fact, great thoughts spring from great souls. In short, it is the echo of a great soul. In the words of Longinus:

'their words are full of sublimity whose thoughts are full of majesty'.

[2] STRONG EMOTION: Strong and inspired passion is the second significant source of the



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sublime. The strong emotions are capable enough to arouse the emotions of the readers which leads to the psychological transportation of the readers which is the primary function of poetry.

Strong emotion is an inborn gift of a genius. According to Longinus nothing makes so much for grandeur as true emotion in the right place.

[3] THE USE OF FIGURES: The use of figures is the third principal source of the sublime. It can be acquired by art. It helps in the creation of the sublime. Figures of speech should be used in a natural manner. They should be employed in the right place, on the right occasion, in the right manner and with a right motive. Only such use strengthens the sublime



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and the sublime supports it. The chief figures like the rhetorical questions; adjuration, asyndeton, hyperbaton, periphrasis, anaphora and polyptota contribute much to the sublime and add greatly to the beauty of language.

[4] NOBLE DICTION: It is also a very important source of the sublime. It includes choice and arrangement of proper words and the use of metaphors and ornamental language. The choice of proper and striking words is essential for producing sublimity.

Longinus is of the view that beautiful words are the very light of lofty thought. Trivial subjects should not be treated in a grand



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manner. Imagine a great warrior riding a weak horse and a weak warrior riding a strong horse.

[5] DIGNIFIED COMPOSITION: Dignified or harmonious composition is the fifth source of the sublime. Great ideas need great composition. The poet must know as to which composition is the most suitable one for the type of ideas or emotions he is going to express in his poetry.

There must be proper harmony among the ideas, emotions, diction and figures of speech used in the poetry. It is the sense of harmony that gives charm and organic unity to a work of art. The lack of harmony spoils dignity and elevation and gives the composition an appearance of meanness.



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Longinus as a Classical and as a Romantic Critic:

Scott James hails him as the first romantic critic whereas prof. Atkins admires him as a great classical critic. In fact, Longinus is a classicist in taste, romantic in temper and an idealist at heart.

Longinus as a Romantic Critic: Longinus is a romanticist in temper. For him literature is not a mechanical work but a thing of the spirit of imagination, of feeling and the gift of communication. His emphasis on passion, ecstasy, beauty, transport, imagination, intensity, inspiration, exaltation, subjectivity and emotion. His love for beauty, for art, for



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violating the rules of the ancients makes him a romantic critic. He is really a romantic critic because he believes in the romantic function of literature and discards the moral function of literature. It is he who sowed the seeds of romanticism.

Longinus as a Classical Critic: Longinus is a classicist in taste. The classical qualities of Longinus as a critic are quite obvious. He shows a great reverence for the ancient Greek models, for tradition and advocates imitation. He laid emphasis on order and grandeur of thought and language. He believes in rules and regulations.

In his emphasis on the use of figures of



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speech, diction and proper harmonious composition, he emerges out as a classical critic.

CONCLUSION: Thus Longinus is one of the greatest masters of criticism. He is the pioneer in the field of literary appreciations. His 'On the sublime' is the first and a unique treatise on style. He was the first critic who went against the great masters of criticism like Plato and Aristotle while discussing the functions of poetry. Milton once claimed that Longinus was always the tutor he worshipped.

