

## The Romantic sensibility: the Sublime

**The sublime** is a feeling associated with the strong emotion we feel in front of intense natural phenomena (storms, hurricanes, waterfalls). It generates fear but also attraction.

**Origin:** the term has Latin origins and refers to any literary or artistic form that expresses noble, elevated feelings.

**Distinction between the beautiful and the sublime:** first made by Addison and then by Burke (*A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*). The beautiful refers to the qualities of the object (the work of art) and is related to the classical ideas of harmony and perfection, while the sublime is the sensation felt by the perceiver.

**Different effects of the sublime:** minor effects: admiration, respect;  
major effects: terror, fear.

- **What causes the sublime:** fear of pain, vastness of the ocean, obscurity, powerful sources, the infinite, the unfinished, magnificence and colour (sad, dark colours). The sublime is caused either by what is great and immeasurable or by natural phenomena which underline the frailty of man.
- **Influence on late 18th century literature:** this feeling is central in the works of Romantic poets and Gothic novelists, and is linked to a passion for extreme sensations.
- **Influence on painting:** painters like Turner and Constable wanted to express the sublime in visual art. They were landscape painters and, although in different ways, they emphasized the strength of natural elements and studied the effects of different weather conditions on the landscape. For some aspects, they influenced the French impressionists.

## Romanticism in English painting

- Nature and rural life were key-elements of English Romanticism and they were well represented in **landscape painting**. The rediscovery of simple countryside life was also a reaction against industrialization and against the artificial society associated with the French Revolution.
- John **Constable** and William **Turner** were the two major landscape painters of the 19th century. They both started from the English landscape tradition but their works, though very different, mark an important shift in the tradition of landscape art.
- They explored the changing weather conditions and their effect on light and movement. Constable was mainly interested in the English countryside, and the sky became a predominant element in his paintings. Turner, on the other hand, very often focused on particular conditions of the sky and the sea, painting storms and raging seas, thus expressing the feeling of ***the sublime***.
- Together they invented and explored a new kind of painting that anticipated French Impressionism.

# William Turner

William Turner (1775-1851) was the son of a barber in Covent Garden, London.

After little formal education, he was admitted to the Royal Academy Schools at the age of 14, and soon began to exhibit his works.

The sea is one of the elemental images of Romanticism. It compelled many artists to paint it, and even Turner was obsessed by it in all its forms, though most of all by its more violent aspects.

*The Shipwreck*, 1805. Oil on Canvas. Tate Gallery, London



- In this painting there is a rough, foamy sea because of the storm and wind and some boats are in danger. The lifeboat on the left is pushed by the waves and the wind, while the ship is going to be overturned.  
The sky is characterized by moving masses of dark, stormy clouds.
- The structure of the picture is vortex-like; in this way the seascape is perceived as three-dimensional.
- Turner rendered the stormy sea by employing minute touches of a fine brush.
- He emphasized the energy and power of the natural world, which can be highly destructive, and the frailty of man in front of it, thus expressing the feeling of the **sublime**. For this reason we can associate him with Coleridge's *Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner*.



*Rain, steam and Speed* , 1844. National Gallery, London



Turner had an ambivalent attitude towards the **Industrial Revolution**, but in this painting he made evident his excitement over the machine age.

In the painting we can see the locomotive of a train running on a railway bridge. On the left we can see a bridge running across a river, and a little rowing boat on the river.

The real protagonists of the painting, however, are **light and colour** (the main primary colours present are red, yellow and blue). Turner wanted to express the sense of speed, mixed with the elements of nature (rain and clouds).

This painting, like many others, is characterized by an «**indistinctness**», the land and the sky are not clearly separated. This quality was the cause of hostile reviews at Turner's times.



# John Constable (1776-1837)

John Constable was born in 1776 in Suffolk, where his father's family owned some properties.

In 1796 he went to London and met John Thomas Smith, an engraver, drawing master and antiquarian, who encouraged his interest in art. In 1799 he was admitted to the Royal Academy as a student.

He was not interested in imaginative subject matter or exotic scenes, but he was inspired by the region of the river Stour, where he had grown up.

*The Hay Wain*, 1821, Oil on canvas, National Gallery, London.



It is a rural scene: on the left margin of the canvas there is a cottage. In the background there are consistent masses of trees, especially on the left. In the middle we can see the meadows, a horizontal line linking the sky and the water. In the foreground there is a stream and the cloudy sky takes up almost half of the painting.

Differently from Turner, Constable likes to show the **human presence** in nature. Here we notice the man on the cart in the middle, a washer-woman on the left, the hay mowers in the field and a fisherman in the river. There is also a dog on the left bank who seems to observe the scene.

Constable's sparkling quality of **light** derives from laying dabs of pure white paint on the surface. Here they can be identified on the water, on the house and on the leaves of the trees. Constable also used a varied tone of green.

Constable's landscape is not an objective recreation of what he observed but it contains deep **emotional involvement**, and wants to convey this feeling to the perceiver.

This painting represents a **typical romantic theme: the routine of rural, domestic life**. It points out the simplicity of work and the serenity connected with it, it highlights the link between man and nature. For this reason, Constable is often associated with the romantic poet Wordsworth.

*Hadley Castle*, 1829. Tate Gallery, London

Constable's later years were saddened by the death of his wife. So his works became more «expressionist», he wanted to communicate the emotional reality of the situation and he emphasized the dynamism of the natural world. Thus his landscapes appear more sinister and turbulent, expressing the feeling of **the sublime**.



This is Hadleigh, on the Thames estuary.

This landscape contains another **typical Romantic theme: the ruin.**

Here the ruin appears to be a continuation of the landscape, in fact in the heart of the ruin there is a wind-blown tree. The sky is turbulent, grey and cloudy, and there is a human presence: a shepherd with his dog.

The turbulence of the sky, the uniform tone of green, the use of chiaroscuro express the range of human emotions. In particular, this picture conveys a sense of **desolation and despair**, though the use of **light** seems to disperse darkness and introduce a gleam of hope.