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### THE SUBLIME AND GROTESQUE IN HOWARD BARKER'S *SCENES FROM AN EXECUTION*

#### *Howard Barker'ın Bir İnfazın Portresi Adlı Eserinde Yücelik ve Grotesk*

Fatih ÖZTÜRK<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Öğr. Gör., Firat Üniversitesi, Yabancı Diller Yüksekokulu, Elazığ, fozturk@firat.edu.tr, orcid.org/0000-0003-0116-4384

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#### ABSTRACT

In literature, it is not always easy to set clear boundaries to the denotations or connotations of certain concepts. In this direction, many genres and terms have been observed to undergo fundamental changes in terms of meaning and usage. Some concepts have even been associated with their seemingly opposites. The complex and ambiguous relationship between the concepts of the sublime and the grotesque is one of the most obvious examples of this inclination. Arguments on what the concept of sublimity means or should mean in literature have a long history. The common ground that almost all definitions meet is the potential of this concept to cause strong emotions such as pain and fear. Its difference from the concept of beauty has been explained by the fact of its being outside the realm of human senses. The concept of the grotesque, on the other hand, has often been used as an equivalent to the weird and ugly. However, the reason why so many Romantic poets point to Shakespeare as the beginning of the grotesque is the strange connection of this concept with compassion. In this context, these two concepts, which seem to be opposites at first glance, have had to intersect at some points. This study reveals how the difference between the sublime and the grotesque blurs in Howard Barker's *Scenes from an Execution* and the author's use of these concepts with similar connotations.

#### ÖZ

**Anahtar Kelimeler**  
Howard Barker, Bir İnfazın Portresi, yücelik, grotesk

Edebiyatta, bazı kavramların düz veya yan anlamlarına net sınırlar çizmek her zaman kolay değildir. Bu doğrultuda, birçok tür ve terimin anlam ve kullanım açısından köklü değişimler yaşadığı gözlemlenmiştir. Hatta bazı kavramlar, görünüşte karşıtlarıyla ilişkilendirilmiştir. Yücelik ve grotesk kavramları arasındaki karmaşık ve muğlak ilişki, bu eğilimin en bariz örneklerinden biridir. Edebiyatta yücelik kavramının ne anlama geldiği veya ne anlama gelmesi gerektiği konusundaki görüşler uzun bir geçmişe dayanmaktadır. Hemen hemen tüm tanımların bulunduğu ortak nokta ise bu kavramın acı ve korku gibi güçlü duygulara neden olma potansiyelidir. Güzellik kavramından farkı, insan duyuları alanının ötesinde olmasıyla açıklanmıştır. Grotesk kavramı ise çoğu zaman tuhaf ve çirkinin eş anlamlısı olarak kullanılmıştır. Ancak pek çok Romantik şairin Shakespeare'i groteskin başlangıcı olarak göstermesinin nedeni, bu kavramın şefkatle olan tuhaf bağlantısıdır. Bu bağlamda ilk bakışta zıt gibi görünen bu iki kavram, bazı noktalarda kesişmek zorunda kalmıştır. Bu çalışma, Howard Barker'ın *Bir İnfazın Portresi* adlı eserindeki yücelik ile grotesk arasındaki farkın nasıl bulanıklaştığını ve yazarın bu kavramları benzer çağrışımlarla kullanmasını ortaya koymaktadır.

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**Sorumlu yazar/Corresponding author:** Fatih ÖZTÜRK, fozturk@firat.edu.tr

## 1. Introduction

Almost all of the attempts to put literary terms into a certain mould and to define them with exactness and clarity have failed. This case should not be taken as a surprise since two times two is almost never four in this field. In this parallel, there have always been some concepts that are difficult to characterise by accurate words within the literary circles; a difficulty arising from the fact that there are some areas where such concepts transgress one another's territory. The sublime and the grotesque are the two concepts that can be handled within this context.

The first instance of referring to the sublime is usually ascribed to Longinus. Most renowned for his treatise on literary criticism, *On the Sublime*, which is believed to have been written in the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. as a response to the work of Caecilius of Calacte with the same name, Longinus was a Greek teacher of rhetoric and a literary critic who may have lived in the 1<sup>st</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. Although there is limited information about him, he is understood to have employed a different approach to literature from those of classical philosophers like Aristotle and Plato in that Longinus was more concerned with what makes a writing great and why humankind desires to read than the ethics or mechanics of literature because he tended to judge “a work more by its essence than by its form” (Singh, 2019: 315). When he attempts to explain the underlying reasons for people to feel the necessity for reading, he takes sublimity as an element with strong psychological influence over the reader. He puts forward the idea that people are fascinated and taken to a different world by means of a sense of exaltation created by the sublimity of the work. In this context, it is important to distinguish sublimity from rhetoric because Longinus takes sublimity as an artistic ability that ennobles readers' emotions without trying to convince them to a specific argument. Koçsoy clarifies the connection between the sublime and elevation of emotions by referring to the sublime as something which “denotes intense emotions in the face of power and infinity, elevating the mind and the imagination together” (Koçsoy, 2018: 142).

For Longinus, the sublime is an adjective that describes great, elevated, or lofty thought or language: “[T]he Sublime, wherever it occurs, consists in a certain loftiness and excellence of language” (Longinus, 1890: 1.3). As a result, the sublime evokes terror and admiration, along with stronger persuasive powers. At this point, however, there is a serious problem about his propositions because he blurs the line between the sublime and the beautiful.

When the French critic Nicolas Boileau translated Longinus's treatise in 1674, it became more accessible to the European public. Later on, Edmund Burke enlarged the ideas of Longinus in his *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) and brought a new approach to the concept as he made a difference between the sublime and the beautiful, arguing that there must be a rational reason for beauty. In his work, he defines the sublime in the following way:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. I say the strongest emotion, because I am satisfied the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure. (Burke, 1990: 36)

For Burke, the sublime is anything that gives way to pain in the audience because pain is the most powerful emotion that human being is capable of feeling. He claims that the sublime is the most powerful aesthetic experience: a mixture of fear and excitement, terror and awe. In this way, Burke saves sublimity from the borders of rhetoric, and adds a new dimension to it. On the other hand, Immanuel Kant in his *The Critique of Judgment* (1790) brings a philosophical perspective, employs a new approach to Burke's definition and mostly tends to explain it in contrast to the beautiful. For Kant, the sublime is a much more infinite concept and unlike the beautiful, it can be found even in an entity with no form at all:

The beautiful in nature is connected with the form of the object, which consists in having boundaries. The sublime, on the other hand, is to be found in a formless object, so far as in it or by occasion of it boundlessness is represented, and yet its totality is also present to thought. (Kant, 1951: 82)

One way or another, the sublime has mostly been tended to be associated with powerful feelings and ideas, and in that vein it has been defined as something beyond what is familiar and tangible in the general sense. An important critic in the field of drama, Erika Fischer-Lichte expresses the sublime as something that

“affords us an egress from the sensuous world in which the beautiful world gladly holds us forever captive” (Fischer, 2002: 196). In this way, she highlights the difference between the sublime and the beautiful, and apparently puts beautiful into the realm of sensuality and tangibility while putting the sublime into the realm of reason and the intangible. From this point of view, the sublime becomes to be something beyond human perception and human senses.

As for the grotesque, it is another concept that has had different and even contradictory definitions in time. Literally meaning ‘of a cave,’ the grotesque is usually associated with distortion, absurdity, ugliness, and caricature, which can be defined as anything “unnatural, strange, absurd, ludicrous, distorted, wildly fantastic, or bizarre” in the general sense (Abrams & Harpham, 2013: 157). Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, at the very least, grotesque has become a common word for unusual, bizarre, unpleasant, uncomfortable, or repulsive, and is frequently used to denote strange shapes and deformed forms.

It may sound interesting but alongside with all these negative connotations, the word can also be correlated with the notion of ‘pity’ because it can well be displayed as a concept, especially in drama, that simultaneously invokes a feeling of uncomfortable bizarreness as well as sympathetic pity in the audience. It is from this perspective that most of the Romantics tended to refer to Shakespeare when they tried to point at the basis of grotesque. An American literary critic, George Steiner explains this issue in his *The Death of Tragedy*:

The romantics appealed to the Shakespearean precedent when committing audacities which were already implicit in their own canons. They mingled the comic and the tragic in repudiation of the neo-classical doctrine of unity. They introduced grotesque and lowborn personages into the sphere of high drama in order to subvert the neo-classic principle of decorum. (Steiner, 1980: 153-154)

Although the sublime and grotesque seem to be completely distinct terms by their general meanings and definitions, it must be considered that they can easily come across at certain points. Behzad Ghaderi Sohi, a critic of dramatic literature, expresses this possibility of a junction point in the following way:

Yet romantic imagination, which identifies the mind as a cave, by letting some light break through from the fractures in this cave, or what Locke called “Camera Obscura,” substituted the material determinism of the natural world with split characters, demon-heroes, marginal ghosts who, in Gillespie’s words, all of which can be a variation of “the discovery of a mysterious linkage between modern liberated creativity and the shadow side of existence.” This “shadow side of existence” is sublime, yet because the characters or images appear “displaced”, “corrupted” or “absurd”, we can say that sublime has another side, the grotesque. (Sohi, 2001: 20)

In this sense, the sublime and the grotesque may not be as different as they have been thought to be. They are both undeniable realities of the existence and they represent the two seemingly conflicting aspects of the human being, the presence of which depends on each other.

## **2. Howard Barker’s Theatre of Catastrophe**

Even though the discussions regarding the sublime and grotesque reached their peak during the Romantic period, the popularity of these concepts has not waned within many disciplines from architecture to literature. Born in 1946, the contemporary British playwright Howard Barker is surely one of the best figures in drama in terms of his representation of the sublime and grotesque elements in his plays. In that vein, he explores violence, sexuality, the desire for power, and human motivation in most of his works. Ignoring the widely held belief that an audience should have a collective reaction to the happenings on stage, Barker appears to make an intentional attempt to split the audience’s response, pushing each viewer to deal with the play alone and personally. Where other playwrights might try to clarify a scene, he “seeks to complicate scenes, making them more ambiguous and unstable, in order to fragment the viewer’s responses” (Aldaoseri, 2021: 43). To make his dramaturgy clear, Barker uses the term “Theatre of Catastrophe,” which explicates his views on the sublime and grotesque. In his *Howard Barker’s Theatre of Seduction*, Charles Lamb clarifies the underlying motives of such a conceptualisation as follows:

The Theatre of Catastrophe addresses itself to those who suffer the maiming of the imagination. All mechanical art, all ideological art, (the entertaining, the informative) intensifies the pain but

simultaneously heightens the unarticulated desire for the restitution of moral speculation, which is the business of theatre. The Theatre of Catastrophe is therefore a theatre for the offended. (Lamb, 1997: 15)

The plot and setting of Barker's plays are also far from the classic norms. His plays usually place a set of characters in a dilemma which they must resolve later. Because such discontinuities move away from the comforting and culturally imposed codes of everyday experience accepted as truth, the sequence of events is almost always detached both from the audience and the characters themselves. Most of the time, these situations are potentially disastrous. His view of theatre and drama gets its power and energy from the idea of catastrophe and chaos rather than tranquillity and order. It is for this reason that 'death' itself suddenly becomes one of the most prominent themes that Barker deals with in his plays. As a playwright who tries to arouse anxiety rather than pleasure with drama, dealing with the issue of death is not a strange thing. In fact, his obsession with death has at the same time something to do with his struggle to evoke imagination in the reader and audience. In his *Death, the One and the Art of Theatre* (2005), he indicates this queer inter-connectedness: "Nothing said about death by the living can possibly relate to death as it will be experienced by the dying. Nothing known about death by the dead can be communicated to the living. Over this appalling chasm tragedy throws a frail bridge of imagination" (Barker, 2005: 1). Because of this kind of perspective, his plays inhabit a world where creativity, not utility, is the dominant consideration. His dealing with death as an attempt to arouse the power of imagination in the viewer is explained in the following way:

The Art of Theatre challenges the theatre (primarily) and the sociopolitical (secondarily) on the grounds of their inability (or hesitation, or refusal, or failure) to imagine the human individual as s/he who not only desires but actively seeks surprise, strangeness, passion, risk, mystery, excess, transgression, and (im)possibility – that is, beyond the sclerotic virtualization of these acts which strips them of their necessary counterpart: the ecstatic encounter with death. (Drury, 2009: 131)

In this context, he apparently challenges the audience to ascribe their own subjective meaning to the abstract being of death to fill the gap between what death is and what people understand from it by using their imagination.

### 3. The Juxtaposition of the Sublime and the Grotesque in *Scenes from an Execution*

Howard Barker's most famous play, *Scenes from an Execution* (1990) follows a fictitious female artist who is commissioned to produce a memorial artwork depicting the Venetian triumph over the Ottoman armada in the wake of the Battle of Lepanto (1571). Within the context of this play, it is necessary to internalise Barker's perception of the sublime and grotesque, and to understand this, it may be rather useful to analyse his views on the 'ideal.'

As a playwright of post-modern period, his idea of the ideal is unsurprisingly quite different from that of the preceding eras. While the Classicists or the Neo-classicists take 'beautiful' as their ideal since it presents a clear and understandable presentation, Barker takes the sublime and grotesque as his ideal since they create an obscure and infinite one. From this point of view, the ideal is a kind of 'pleasant pain' and 'delightful terror,' which means a togetherness of the sublime and grotesque. Jennings explains this seemingly unusual co-occurrence as follows: "The grotesque presents the terrible in harmless guise, and its playfulness is constantly on the verge of collapsing and giving way to the concealed horror" (1963: 16). In this way, anything that creates horror is an element of the grotesque. Furthermore, as it at the same time creates pleasure in the audience by emphasizing their own safety in front of the terror they witness, it gives birth to the sublime itself. In this way, the sublime and the grotesque become inseparable.

In *Scenes from an Execution*, a play where death and history meet, the sublime and grotesque elements are gathered under the same roof. In this parallel, Barker's presentation of Galactia herself comes to the surface as a perfect embodiment of the delightful terror, that is, a state of interdependence between the sublime and grotesque. The first line belonging to Galactia makes a clear initiation of her to the reader in terms of her role and function in the play: "Dead man float with their arses in the air" (Barker, 1990: 9). As discussed before, Barker gives a huge importance to death because he takes it as something first grotesque as it arouses terror and the uncanny, and then sublime as it is infinite and too obscure to understand. In that vein, the first line that he gives to Galactia is of great importance with regard to its implications about her position in the play.

When Prodo is introduced into the play as a survivor of the war, Galactia gets the chance to present the sublime and grotesque more directly as she states she will paint his pain for him (1990: 13). The idea of pain is a central theme for the grotesque. In this occasion, it is the grotesque on Prodo's part, but at the same time it is playful and pleasant for the viewer as they do not experience that deformity: they only witness it and get pleasure as they are safe from that dangerous and unpleasant state. Later on, Galactia states that she does not "trust beauty" because "it is an invention and lie" (1990: 15). In this manner, she turns out to be the spokesman of Barker. It must be remembered that for Barker, beauty is not the ideal state of being, and Galactia puts forward the same argument just at this point. A few lines later, she begins to disclose her understanding of the ideal, and she implies that 'violence' is the ideal for her: "I will paint your violence" (1990: 15). Having emphasized the idea of pain, expressed her dislike of beauty, which symbolises the Classicist perspective of the ideal, and stated her admiration of violence, it is high time to make the underlying purpose of drawing the painting of the so-called victory clear: The teleology of her art is creating terror in the seers since she draws to "make them breathless, make them pale" (1990: 19). Galactia's emphasis on imagination is another aspect to take into consideration: "I believe in observation, but to observation you must lend imagination" (1990: 22). This stress on the concept of imagination is undoubtedly an obvious reminder of Barker himself once more. After all, his very purpose of writing is to create the slightest sparkle of imagination in the audience.

In addition to the stated fundamental elements of the sublime and grotesque, Galactia employs a lot of underlying sublime and grotesque elements, and she is often associated with such elements by the others all through the play. In one of such instances, she says: "Can you think of anything more pitiful than a severed hand? Or eloquent I think it is the ultimate in pity" (1990: 28). After that, her emphasis on madness is another aspect in the same direction: "Someone's got to speak for dead man, not pain and pity, but abhorrence, fundamental and unqualified, blood down the paintbrush, madness in the gums" (1990: 39). As for the imagery that she creates in the minds of other people, Urgentino, the Doge of Venice, puts through one of the most effectual discourses in the work when he describes Galactia as someone who is "[c]leaving her way through dark spaces" (1990: 45). An admiral, Suffici, on the other hand, implies the 'deformity' that Galactia creates through her art: "My hands which are beautiful in fact, despite my age, are beautiful and not claws as she has painted" (1990: 51). Nevertheless, Suffici is just a representer of all the other characters in the play, and thus a metaphor for all the society which is obsessed with the clarity and comprehensibility of the 'beautiful' while protesting the obscurity and intangibility of 'deformity.' Another painter in the play, Lasagna points out Galactia's abnormality by referring to her employment of excess: "She can paint but it's excessive" (1990: 67). The fact that Galactia's art is frequently identified with such issues as madness and deformity places her within the realm of the sublime and grotesque, and this quality of her is observed in the overreactions of the other characters.

#### **4. Conclusion**

As specified with several instances, Galactia is associated with the sublime and grotesque all through the play; whether directly by the author himself or through the comments of the other characters in an indirect way. Her emphasis on pain, violence, and imagination on the one hand; her association with dark spaces, deformity, and excessiveness on the other make her an embodiment of the sublime and grotesque. In fact, she appears to be the voice of Barker himself, and in a way the play turns into a kind of manifesto of Barker's views of drama. He clearly employs Galactia to state his dramaturgy. In this parallel, he shows his idea of the 'ideal' as the sublimity and grotesque while he draws the other characters as foils to this argument, the advocates of Classical ideology. He once more clarifies this issue through Galactia when she talks to Rivera, a critic: "I am not meant to be understood. Don't you see? Oh, you miserable well-meaning, always-on-the-right-side, desperate little intellect. Death to be understood" (1990: 70). His idea of the ideal is not what is beautiful, clear and understandable; but rather it is the idea of the sublime and grotesque that belong to the margin, extreme and obscurity. From this perspective, Galactia becomes the 'truth' itself as she shows the dark existence of human being behind the deceptive beautiful. She has been sentenced to prison because of this. This act is a kind of social defence mechanism that is employed to distance the truth as far as possible because people do not want to see their true being, which includes the grotesque as much as the sublime. Galactia states this struggle to oppress the truth in the following way: "I must be tortured, obviously, it would

be inconsistent if I weren't tortured, driven mad and murdered in some corner. They hate truth . . ." (1990: 59). After a while, she openly refers to the way the prison functions: "Nothing is poly in prison, it's all mono, mono dinner, mono supper, mono stench" (1990: 65). In this way, the prison is presented as the secret corner of the world itself where oneness and sameness prevail and where the dark side of the being is tried to be suppressed. There is no place for plurality in that domain.

Considering these references, it can be claimed that Galactia stands for Barker's position with regards to the sublime and grotesque elements in drama, of which he is obviously in favour. The other characters, however, seem to defend an opposite argument, and so they symbolise the reaction of the society to the sublime and grotesque in the larger sense. This kind of antagonistic reaction is the outcome of the terror and uncanny that the sublime and grotesque create, and it is perfectly exemplified through Carpeta's reaction to Galactia's painting: "I have been displaced" (1990: 22). This feeling of 'displacement' in front of the dark existence of the being is the epitome of the social reaction towards the 'sublime' and 'grotesque' in general.

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