

## **Graduate Research Proposal – Sample**

Effective, well-thought out (but still exploratory), inventive, engages with the texts

**KH Comments:** This is an interesting beginning to your paper. You set up MW's sublime experience through nature, but in the beginning you don't contrast it against the tradition from which you draw. That would be beneficial. You do get to Wordsworth later with "...Tintern Abbey" but you don't indicate that you'll do a reading to compare MW to WW. This would be helpful in setting up your definition rather than relying so heavily on Mellor.

Mary Wollstonecraft's Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark repeatedly demonstrates female sublime transcendence. In this work, the sublime experience is illustrated by the female author/speaker's emotional and intellectual interactions with nature. The communion between self and landscape allows her to mentally transcend her physical surroundings and achieve feelings of peace and empowerment. My term paper will investigate how the female sublime experience is being imagined in this work. I will analyze how Wollstonecraft's descriptions of the sublime relate to Anne Mellor's explanation of the masculine and feminine sublime. Finally, my paper will examine why Wollstonecraft endows herself with sublime transcendence. By claiming this intellectual and emotional capability, Wollstonecraft makes strong assertions regarding women's abilities and needs. Female sublime transcendence allows Wollstonecraft, and therefore women to escape from societal restrictions, to achieve psychological healing, and to assert their full humanity.

Anne Mellor's explanation of the gendered Romantic sublime provides a context for analyzing Wollstonecraft's sublime portrayal. In "Domesticating the Sublime," Mellor differentially defines the feminine and the masculine sublime. The masculine sublime, demonstrated by Burke, Kant, Coleridge, and Wordsworth, contends that the sublime experience is instigated when "the fully conscious poetic mind grasps a nature that is entirely unmediated by language – or wholly constructed by its own linguistic tropes" (Mellor 85). The potent mind views, interprets, and comprehends the landscape. Ultimately, the observer "achieves intellectual mastery over the power of nature" and his or her "reason can transcend the realm of bodily sensation and physical nature" (Mellor 87-88). Because the mind can rise above physical reality, the "sublime is associated with an experience of masculine empowerment" (Mellor 85). In

Wordsworth and Coleridge's works, the "male poet" "speaks of, for and in the place of a nature originally gendered as female" (Mellor 90). Consequently, the masculine sublime "experience" engenders "masculine empowerment" over the feminine.

Mellor argues that feminine Romanticism reinterpreted the sublime and created "two distinct, but related forms" (Mellor 90-91). Female Gothic fiction writers, such as Radcliffe, demonstrate one form. They identify the sublime with negative, immoral "masculine empowerment" that results in "patriarchal tyranny" and "paternal transgression" (Mellor 91). Interestingly, these writers also express a positive, pleasurable sublime experience that "elevates the perceiving self to a sense of her or his own integrity and worth as a unique product of divine creation" (Mellor 95). The individual recognizes his or her inherent value as a human. Furthermore, the sublime produces "a sympathy or love that connects the self with other people" (Mellor 95). Connection between people is a characteristic of both forms of the feminine sublime. In the second form, Irish, Welsh, and Scottish female writers view the sublime as an "ecstatic experience of co-participation" with "nature," which is imagined as "*a female friend*, a sister" (Mellor 97). The sublime experience is not a "solitary, visionary transcendence . . . but an experience of communion between two different people" (Mellor 103). For these writers, the sublime enables an intimate engagement with nature and between people.

An analysis of Wollstonecraft's expression of the sublime in conjunction with Mellor's ideas reveals that Wollstonecraft utilizes both masculine and feminine sublime elements in her portrayal. In letter five, Wollstonecraft writes, "I contemplated, fearless of idle questions, a night such as I had never before seen or felt to charm the senses, and calm the heart. . . . A vague pleasurable sentiment absorbed me, as I opened my bosom to the embraces of nature; and my soul rose to its Author" (51). Here, Wollstonecraft firmly asserts female participation in the masculine sublime. The female "I" "contemplate[s]" nature, leading to a heightening of her emotions and mental transcendence of her material surroundings. This is similar to the sublime experience articulated by Wordsworth in "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey." Both Wordsworth and Wollstonecraft illustrate the sublime as an intense, "pleasurable" experience that allows the mind to reach past one's physical reality.

Furthermore, both of their speakers claim superiority above their companions. Wollstonecraft speaks condescendingly of her male companions “idle questions.” She has a superior mental and emotional ability to understand and transcend nature.

**KH Comment:** Regarding the last 3 sentences above: You relate MW's impatience with her ability to transcend and understand nature. I don't see the connection in these last two sentences. Be careful of making the kinds of jumps; connect the argument for your reader. And, how will you define nature? What aspect of her Letters points you toward this? What about the absolute quotidian of her writing? How do you account for that in her Letters? What about the fact that she was writing in prose and not poetry? After all, you compare her to Wordsworth's "Tintern." Is there a difference in the format? How can the sublime be reached through prose? Doesn't WW set up poetry as the end-all-be-all for accessing the sublime? Is the sublime part of a higher faculty of the mind? Who has access to it? What inspires it?

Wollstonecraft's explanation of the sublime is not restricted to a mirroring of Wordsworth's and in certain elements she diverges from the masculine sublime. In Wordsworth's sublime, nature plays an inferior role to the imagination. In contrast, Wollstonecraft poses the mind and nature as equals working in conjunction to produce the sublime experience. The speaker's “bosom,” denoting the location of both her female breasts and her feelings, is open “to the embraces of nature.” This evokes the feminine sublime contention that nature is an “embrac[ing]” friend. The speaker relates, “my soul rose to its Author,” asserting that she is a “product of divine creation,” and thereby establishing her value (Mellor 95). The female “soul” communes with its creator, emphasizing feminine sublime ideas of equality and community.

Wollstonecraft imagines a sublime experience that mixes Mellor's masculine and feminine sublime definitions. Her unique depiction of the sublime strongly asserts female reason and emotional depth, and affirms female “spiritual transcendence of the body which, Simone de Beauvoir has argued, is what makes humanity distinctively human” (Gilbert and Gubar 261). Wollstonecraft demonstrates her own, and symbolically all females, humanness. Furthermore, her sublime transcendence is an empowering escape from her socially restricted female body, and gives her a “calm,” emotionally-healed “heart.” In this way, Wollstonecraft serves as a thematic “foremother” to the nineteenth-century female writers discussed by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in The Mad Woman in the Attic.

In my term paper, I will further develop my understanding of the sublime experience portrayed by Wollstonecraft. I will look at multiple moments when she illustrates female sublime transcendence and discuss how the sublime is being imagined, how it compares to her other portrayals, and what conclusions can be drawn. My secondary sources will be used to set up my argument (Mellor), support my feminist conclusions (Fetterley, Gilbert and Gubar), and extend my ideas regarding Wollstonecraft's sublime (Kautz, Chaney). I plan on looking at criticism by Gary Kelley and Julie Ellison, and the essays in Mary Wollstonecraft's Journey to Scandinavia in order to augment my understanding of the sublime in Wollstonecraft's Letters.

**KH Comments:** In your annotated bibliography, you end some with "this will push my argument further." How? Be specific and brief in this annotation. With the Fetterley article, she refers to images of women. But you're writing about MW's creation of a "self" and a writing self and a woman writing self in your essay. How will you use these images in literature from Fetterley's essay in your essay if MW is herself the author? Are you saying that MW creates an image of herself through this transcendence?

### **Annotated Bibliography**

Chaney, Christine. "The Rhetorical Strategies of 'Tumultuous Emotions:'

Wollstonecraft's Letters Written in Sweden." Journal of Narrative Theory. 34.3 (2004): 227- .

Project Muse. San Jose State University Lib. 19 March 2006

<<http://muse.jhu.edu.libaccess.sjlibrary.org>>. Chaney demonstrates that Wollstonecraft's letters bring together a confessional self-portrait, a discussion of the emotional effects of sublime nature, and an argument for societal change. Wollstonecraft's description of the impact of sublime landscapes allows her to simultaneously reveal and define herself. This engenders her argument that female minds are as capable as male minds. Chaney provides an interesting and in-depth discussion of Wollstonecraft's use of the sublime. Her article helps support my conclusions regarding Wollstonecraft's feminist arguments and pushes my ideas further.

Fetterley, Judith. The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction.

Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1978. Judith Fetterley strongly argues for the necessity and value of feminist criticism. She contends that one should become a “resisting” reader, a reader who transcends the authorial and textual perspectives, and embraces an external, feminist perspective. From this viewpoint, the reader examines how women are being portrayed and the implications of their portrayal. Fetterley gives a practical demonstration of her ideas by interpreting American canonical texts, and highlighting how women are imagined. She finds that the American canonical literature, which we champion as universal and comprehensive, actually expresses and legitimizes a male perspective. Fetterley provides a forceful argument for feminist criticism and clearly explains how to achieve the feminist perspective. While her argument focuses on American literature, many negative female images she reveals are also prevalent in English Romantic literature. In relation to my paper, Fetterley illustrates the traditional, patriarchal view of women that Wollstonecraft rebels against. Wollstonecraft’s images of female sublime transcendence counteract and redeem stereotypical visions of the female “Other.”

Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. The Madwoman in the Attic. New Haven: Yale

UP, 1979: 85-92. Rpt. in “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Contexts for Criticism. Ed. Donald Keesey. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2003. 259-263. This excerpt from the book The Madwoman in the Attic illustrates how nineteenth-century female authors portray women. Gilbert and Gubar find that many female writers show women being confined, and attempting and achieving escape. The images of imprisoned women highlight the social reality of restrictive female gender confinement. Consequently, escape images promote female spiritual transcendence and healing, and assert female humanity. They use Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s treatment of her protagonist in “The Yellow Wallpaper” to exemplify their arguments. Gilbert and Gubar’s examination of female images in female-authored texts is convincing and rich with contentions. Their argument provides a feminist analytical approach that is useful for my interpretation of Wollstonecraft’s images of female sublime transcendence. Similarly, their feminist conclusions are consistent with

my reading of Wollstonecraft's work. Wollstonecraft's sublime experience functions as a predecessor to nineteenth-century female author's escape images.

**KH Comment:** For the Gilbert & Gubar, go to the original. Don't use an excerpt from the Keeseey text. (This is generally not acceptable for graduate work.) In using the excerpt, you don't know what's been left out -- which could ultimately be dangerous. Also, again, *G&G* refer to "images" or representations of women in literature. With *MW*, you are ostensibly working on an autobiographical representation. If you were to look at images of women in her writing, you would look at *MW*'s descriptions of the local women.

Kautz, Beth Dolan. "Mary Wollstonecraft's Salutory Picturesque: Curing Melancholia in the Landscape." European Romantic Review 13 (2002): 35-48. EBSCO. San Jose State University Lib. 19 March 2006 <<http://ejournals.ebsco.com>>. Kautz argues that Wollstonecraft claims to suffer from melancholia, a disease associated with male intellectuals. This challenges contemporary ideas regarding female minds and allows Wollstonecraft to assert her rationality and sensibility. Wollstonecraft's trip takes the form of health travel as her communion with sublime nature restores her mind and gives her feelings of pleasure and hope. Through interaction with nature, Wollstonecraft contends that women can adopt a beneficial balance of feeling and thinking. While this article is repetitive, it gives a nice examination of the Wollstonecraft's melancholia and healing. Kautz's illustration of Wollstonecraft's feminist contentions regarding her intellectual and emotional capabilities is applicable to my argument.

Mellor, Anne K. Romanticism & Gender. New York: Routledge, 1993. This chapter examines the Romantic sublime and its gender connotations. Mellor defines and compares the masculine sublime, exemplified by Wordsworth, Burke, Coleridge, and Kant, with the feminine sublime, shown by female Gothic authors and female authors from Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The masculine sublime promotes solitary masculine empowerment, while the feminine sublime pushes for connection and equality. Mellor's argument is well developed, nicely supported and easy to understand. I will be using Mellor's differentiated definitions of the feminine and masculine sublime to set up my reading of Wollstonecraft.