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Dale J. Nelson

Mayville State University, ND

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Haggard's *She*: Burke's Sublime in a Popular Romance

Abstract

Applies Edmund Burke's critical theory of The Sublime to the enduringly popular H. Rider Haggard's *She*, a favorite of both Lewis and Tolkien.

Additional Keywords

Burke, Edmund—Theory of criticism; Haggard, H. Rider. *She*

Haggard's *She*: Burke's Sublime in a Popular Romance

Dale J. Nelson

“**E**nchantment is just what this writer exercised; he fixed pictures in our minds that thirty years have been unable to wear away,” Graham Greene confessed in “Rider Haggard’s Secret” (Greene 209). J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis also affirmed the spell cast by *She*—Tolkien in Henry Resnick’s 1966 interview (“I suppose as a boy *She* interested me as much as anything” [Resnick 40]), and Lewis in a review of a Haggard biography: “His openings—what story in the world opens better than *She*?—are full of alluring promise, and his catastrophes triumphantly keep it” (Lewis 97). Lewis perceived a problem for criticism as being posed by Haggard, in that the man’s style is often bad and his would-be profundities embarrassing, and yet something fascinates readers, namely, Lewis said, “the myth.” Lewis believed that the mythopoeic quality can transcend the defects of an author’s words, so that a reader is moved, even so.

In his remarks in “The Mythopoeic Gift of Rider Haggard,” Lewis hastens to discuss the archetypal figure of Ayesha, She herself, the immortal queen. Ayesha appears, however, only in the twelfth chapter of a book of twenty-eight chapters, and thereafter is not always on stage. Readers are likely to be caught up in the book long before this great *femme fatale* takes the stage. But Haggard has surrounded her with plentiful images and events that have intrinsic power. They partake of the quality, productive of imaginative fascination, a “delightful horror” (Burke 73), which Edmund Burke (1729-1797) called the *Sublime* in a treatise published in 1756. So abundant are these images and events that one could fancy that Haggard wrote his romance as a deliberate attempt to include as many of them as feasible; however, so far as I know, Haggard had never heard of the book, which Jacques Barzun said marked “the new cultural direction from Neoclassicism to Romanticism” (356); Haggard’s tale must surely be one of the greatest artifacts of popular Romanticism ever written.

This article will offer representative images and events in *She* that could serve as textbook examples relating to Burke's Sublime. The italicized items that follow are taken from the list of things conducing to the sense of the Sublime, which appears on pages 58-87 of the Boulton edition of Burke's treatise. The page references are to Karlin's edition of *She*.

Most of the things listed by Burke are visual, but some are aural or tactile. The *cries of animals* arouse tension in the English explorers who witness a battle between a crocodile and a roaring lion (Haggard 68). The *idea of extreme pain* appears in this relatively early scene, as the agonized lion, struggling convulsively, is gripped in the reptile's jaws (69). Also, Ayesha rules the dangerous Amahaggers in large part by fear, admitting that occasionally she condemns offenders to torture. The romance's narrator, Horace Holly, inspects sculptures in the "cave of torture" but refuses to "harrow the reader" by describing them (175). And the Amahaggers have a cruel method of execution of their own, namely placing over the victim's head a white-hot earthenware pot (99-100).

The cries of animals are one aural source of the sublime; indeed, any sound of an *excessive loudness* may be productive of the sublime. Haggard describes a "frightful roar of wind" and a "shriek of terror from the awakening crew" when a storm at sea arises (51), and, a few chapters later, a crowd of disappointed cannibals that "thundered" in pursuit of the Englishmen who prevented their hot-potting a victim (101); but more awe-inspiring is the "grinding and crashing noise" produced by the preternatural, moving "pillar of fire" in the cave, the "womb of the Earth," where the secret of Ayesha's immortality is hidden (286-87). The opposite of loudness, *silence*, may also conduce to the sublime; the Englishmen behold an archaic mausoleum where "the most intense silence reigned" (173), and the explorers "did not dare to speak" in the precincts of an ancient temple where, over all, hovered "the dead silence of the dead" (263).

Closely associated with profound silence may be *solitude*, such as we imagine with Holly as *he* vividly imagines the scene, when he listens to Ayesha translate a wall inscription in the hidden land of Kôr: "I gave a sigh of astonishment—the utter desolation depicted in this rude scrawl was so overpowering. [...] What must the old man [the last survivor of a

plague] have felt as, in ghastly terrifying solitude, by the light of one lamp feebly illumining a little space of gloom, he in a few brief lines daubed the history of his nation's death upon the cavern wall?" (180). Haggard has been careful to situate Ayesha herself in solitude; she has no consort until the Englishmen, including Leo Vincey, the youth whom she believes to be the reincarnation of her lover, arrive. She has ruled her empire in the heart of Africa for two thousand years, rarely seen even by her subjects—waiting, all this time, alone, waiting for her beloved Kallikrates to return to her.

The present inhabitants of the lost realm of Kôr could not construct its vast, monumental architecture. The ruins left by the vanished builders possess *vastness*, *hugeness* and *grandeur*, which Burke lists as qualities productive of awe and astonishment. Holly writes that he wishes he could "give some idea of the grandeur" of "miles upon miles of ruins—columns, temples, shrines, and the palaces of kings, varied with patches of green bush." Holly notes that these buildings were of "extreme massiveness" and were made with hard, durable materials, so that while the roofs have fallen in, most of the walls and "great columns still remained standing" (259). Similarly, Burke states that a sense of a thing's *difficulty*, the sense that some work required immense effort to accomplish, relates to the Sublime. The example he gives is that of Stonehenge. Ayesha shows Holly a series of caves that were worked, ages ago, by the builders of Kôr. She says:

"Look upon this great cave. Sawest thou ever the like? Yet was it, and many more like it, hollowed by the hands of the dead race that once lived here in the city on the plain. A great and wonderful people must they have been, those men of Kôr, but, like the Egyptians, they thought more of the dead than of the living. How many men, thinkest thou, working for how many years, did it need to the hollowing out this cave and all the galleries thereof?" (177)

Holly can only answer, subdued, "Tens of thousands" (177-178). One may wonder, in passing, if Tolkien's dwarves, and their immense underground realms, might owe something to the doomed inhabitants of Kôr (a name, incidentally, which Tolkien borrowed in the creation of his early legendarium; see the two *Books of Lost Tales*). There are many other examples of such scenes of decayed splendor in *She*.

Burke allocates the concept of *power* to natural phenomena when he mentions that of wild animals or the violence of earthquakes, floods, etc.; and he also mentions human beings, if they have "prodigious strength." Ayesha possesses the ability to "blast" her enemies by means of some mysterious force of nature that she controls (207). Eventually she exerts this power in order to strike dead Ustane, Leo's "wife," by pointing at her. Holly surmises that "some mysterious electric agency or overwhelming will-force" was harnessed (227).

Considering the three spatial dimensions, Burke considers *width* the least impressive, *height* more impressive, and *depth* the most able to provoke a sense of the Sublime. As an example of width, ancient walls and columns extend to one's left and right in the ruins of Kôr. Representing height, a rather grotesque, towering pile, formed by skeletal remains, thrown down from an opening above the Englishman's viewpoint throughout centuries, receives Holly's inspection; in his amazement, he exclaims, and his outburst starts an avalanche of bones moving towards the spectators (182). Haggard saves his greatest picture of depth for the climax of the story, when the surviving Englishmen, trying to make their way from the subterranean Place of Life where Ayesha has died (the sight of her terrible death having also stricken the English servant, Job, dead), must leap eleven or twelve feet across a "bottomless" chasm, from which wind blows. Probably the scene affected Tolkien's conception of the Bridge of Khazad-Dûm where Gandalf falls into darkness (*The Fellowship of the Ring*, Book II, Chapter 5). Holly's leap falls short, but Leo, who jumped first, seizes his right wrist and hauls him up.

"And then . . . the light went out" (306)! This brings us to *darkness, gloom, night, obscurity*, over which Burke dwells with much emphasis. He asserts that a clear idea is a little idea; for a sense of dread, terror, and astonishment, some kind of obscurity is necessary. Like Charles Lamb, in "Witches and Other Night-Fears" (written later than Burke's treatise), Burke holds that darkness is the habitation of ghosts and goblins because of its terror, rather than being terrifying because it is the place of such phantoms (Burke 144). Accordingly, because darkness arouses dread, Haggard has made Ayesha to dwell in a gloomy realm. One could adduce dozens of passages in *She* in which darkness is emphasized, since much of Kôr is a subterranean realm, which must be

lit by torches—sometimes made of conventional materials, but, on special occasions, by blazing mummies (218-219)!

When Ayesha leads the Englishmen to the Place of Life, they come to a “view that was positively appalling in its gloom and grandeur”:

Before us was a mighty chasm in the black rock, jagged and torn and splintered through it in a far past age by some awful convulsion of Nature, as though it had been cleft by stroke upon stroke of the lightning. [...] It was impossible to make out much of its outline, or how far it ran, for the simple reason that the point where we were standing was so far from the upper surface of the cliff, at least fifteen hundred to two thousand feet, that only a very dim light struggled down to us from above. (271)

A more subtle example of the power of the visually obscure: the first time Ayesha is present in the story, Holly is aware she is behind some curtains; he cannot see her, but he senses that she is there, studying him. “Minute grew into minute, and still there was no sign of life, nor did the curtain move; but I felt the gaze of the unknown being sinking through and through me, and filling me with a nameless terror, till the perspiration stood in beads upon my brow” (141).

This article has not related each and every one of the things Burke listed to *She*; notably, his inclusion of horrible *stenches*. Burke grants that “whatever is in any sort terrible [...] is a source of the sublime” (39), including such “odious” things as snakes and spiders (57, 86), but he concentrates on things that, “at certain distances,” arouse dread or awe (40), rather than disgusted alarm, and so does Haggard himself.

Perhaps I may be permitted to offer, instead, one thing that Burke didn't mention, namely the thought of great depths of time. Haggard's romance is drenched in a sense of antiquity; Ayesha, herself over two millennia old, rules in ruins that were thousands of years old when she arrived. In “On Fairy-stories,” Tolkien mentions as a perennial human desire—one aspect of our yearning for wonders—the desire to “survey” vast tracts of time. (See his remarks on Wells's *The Time Machine* in the section titled “Fairy-story.”) Readers of *The Lord of the Rings* will hardly need to be reminded of the habit that the inhabitants of

Middle-earth, in the late Third Age, have of recalling the elder days before them, and, of course, they themselves are remote from us in time. Tolkien told Henry Resnick that the "Greek shard of Arynatas [sic; Amenartas]" in Haggard's tale appealed to him as a device "by which everything got moving" (Resnick 40). It is, surely, Holly and Vincey's suspenseful examination of this mysterious object that Lewis had in mind when he praised the book's opening. Haggard provides the reader with transcriptions, taken from the potsherd, which has been passed down through many generations of Vincey's family, of classical Greek, Latin, medieval English, and more recent inscriptions, taking up several pages of the third chapter. (He received expert antiquarian help from Dr. Hubert Holden and Dr. John Raven, according to Daniel Karlin's introduction to the World's Classics edition of *She*.) The linking of ancientness with exotic languages is, surely, something that would have appealed to Tolkien—and it may well be that it helped to inspire his conception of the testament of Isildur about the Ring, in Book II, Chapter 2 of *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

While many readers will agree with Lewis that the idea of Ayesha, She Who Must Be Obeyed, the anguished, threatening, beautiful, immortal is one that possesses archetypal power, and that the "wild, transporting, [...] forbidden hope" of "immortality in the flesh" (Lewis 99-100) that Ayesha embodies possesses authentic mythic quality, it should also be granted that Haggard's romance is swathed in "sublime" images and events that contribute a great deal to the imaginative appeal of this perennially popular book. "How seldom in the literary life do we pause to pay a debt of gratitude except to the great or the fashionable, who are like those friends that we feel do us credit," Greene remarked (209). It will be seen that one could easily apply Burke's approach to the Sublime to numerous "great or fashionable" authors, such as Coleridge ("The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," "Kubla Khan," "Christabel"), de Quincey (*Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*), Conrad (*Heart of Darkness*), James (*The Turn of the Screw*), or even, perhaps, scenes of hastily run-up modern cities being overtaken by "the bush" in some pages of V. S. Naipaul describing scenes in the interior of Africa (e.g. in *A Bend in the River*). But Greene wanted the enchantment produced by popular writers such as Haggard also to be remembered. Burke's recognition of the appeal of the Sublime helps to explain the continuing

appreciation of readers, including ones who possess wide literary experience, for writers of popular, even pulp, Romanticism, such as Haggard, Hodgson, Lovecraft, and countless other writers of fantasy and science fiction—and, moreover, persuades us that what actually draws readers to some works of admittedly high literary quality may often include the unacknowledged ingredient of the Sublime.

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