Literary Criticism (From Plato to Leavis)
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Lecture 8
Scott-James' "The First Romantic Critic"

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Hello and welcome to today's session. Today we continue to discuss *Longinus On the Sublime* and we take a look at this essay in particular by Scott James which looks at Longinus as the first Romantic critic. In the later times, and we have also noticed in the previous sessions that Longinus began to get critical attention in the English-speaking world only from the 16th century onwards.

His work was first translated from French to English, and we also noticed that he began to be identified as one of the first modern critics from the ancient times and there is a significant way in which he begins to depart from other classical writers, other classical critics of that time. And even when we were looking at *Longinus On the Sublime*, there were sections which clearly highlighted how different he was from Aristotle, and the various ideas of literature and tragedy which was prevalent during those times.

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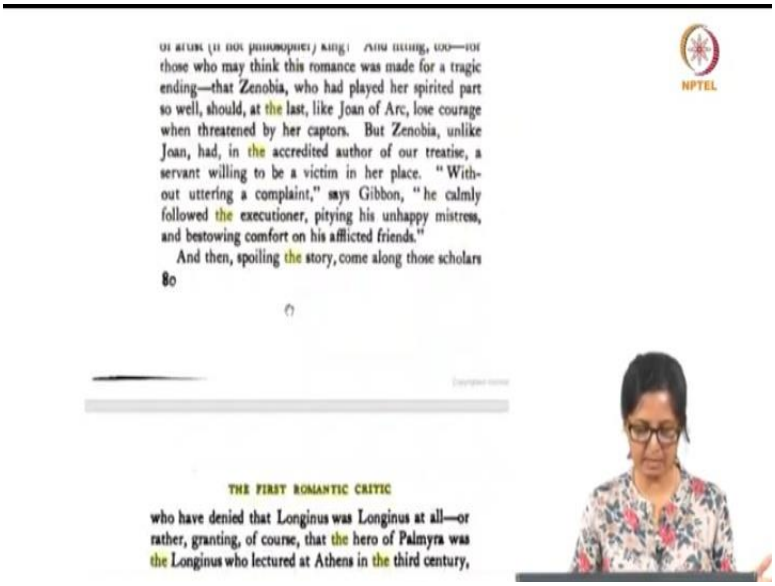

So, in this essay by Scott James, *Longinus: The First Romantic Critic,* in the first half he spends some time talking about the background of Longinus. There was always a certain ambiguity about who Longinus was, whether someone like Longinus had ever existed.

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So, Scott James spends some time looking at the biographical details and trying to locate Longinus historically. So we'll skip that section and quickly come to the part in

this essay where he begins to talk about Longinus as the first Romantic critic. And this intervention is especially significant at this point of time because we also need to figure out how Longinus could make a very distinct mark though he was writing during the classical times.

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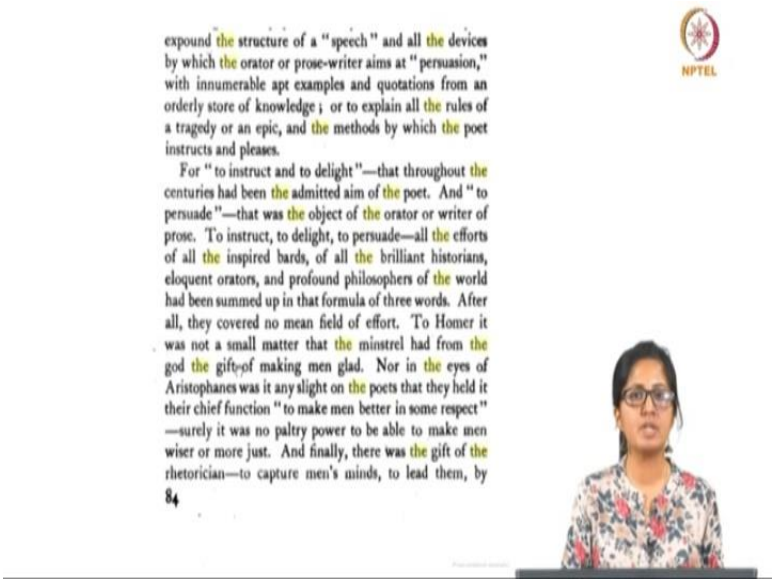

Longinus was writing at a time in Greek literature when the primary aim of literature was seen as to instruct and to delight and of course, the idea of rhetoric, the objective of the orator was also to persuade. So, there were these 3 words within which all kinds of imaginative literature and other kinds of rhetoric were understood: to instruct, to delight and to persuade.

So, anything that did not really fall within this objective of instruction or delight or persuasion was not fit enough to be considered as literature or good oratory skills. So, Longinus while writing at that time, we find him moving completely away from all of these ideas. The idea of rule, the ideal of sticking to particular methods, and Scott James also reminds us that it is not because Longinus was not aware of the rules, even in the essay that we took a look at, *On the Sublime*.

Throughout his treatise he gives examples and very relevant examples from contemporary Greek literature which also shows us that he was very well-read and right at the outset of the essay, *Longinus On the Sublime*, we also get a sense of how Longinus is addressing a fellow critic, a fellow informed critic, it is not to a layman reader that he has positioned his work.

He has in mind as his readers an informed critic, a series of people who are well-read, not just in the critical rules and methods of those times, who were also very well-versed in the kind of literature which was getting produced during that time. So, in that sense, it not because Longinus was not well-versed in the rules of those times that he decided to depart from those rules and regulations and the methods of producing good literature.

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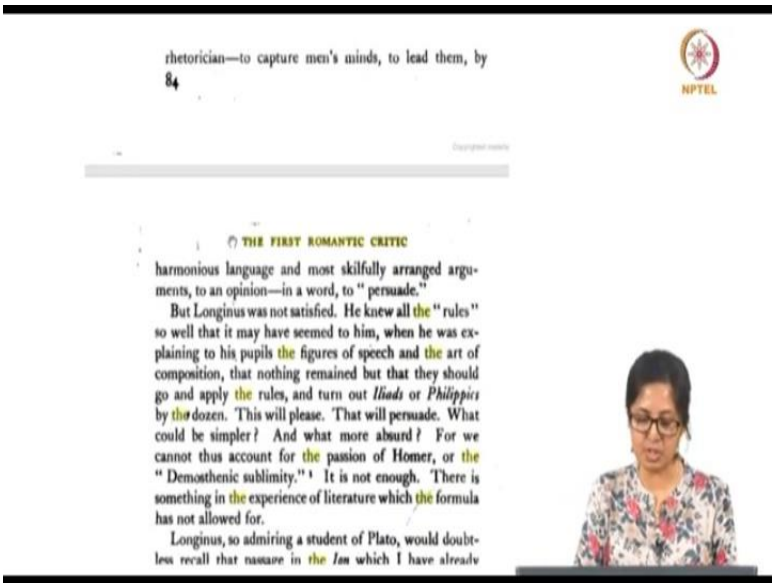

On the other hand, he identifies something else which is more important, and I read to you a certain section from Scott James, "But Longinus was not satisfied. He knew all the rules so well that it may have seemed to him, when he was explaining to his pupils the figures of speech and the art of composition, that nothing remained but that they should go and apply the rules, and turn out *Illiads* and *Phillippies* by the dozen."

And we have seen that spectacularly in the many examples that he gave in *On the Sublime.* "This will please. That will persuade. What could be simpler? And what more absurd? For we cannot thus account for the passion of Homer, or the Demosthenic sublimity."

So this is where we need to realize that Longinus begins to depart from Plato or from Aristotle. Aristotle, we have seen, he has laid down the rules and also he has gone a few steps ahead in locating the connect between what happens on the stage and what happens in the mind of the spectator.

And in that sense we also saw how *Poetics* is also about locating the connect between the text and the reader. In that sense, here we find Longinus departing significantly from that but not really losing the essence of literature. And it is not as if Longinus is not sufficiently impressed with the idea of pleasing, the idea of persuading but he says that it is a very simple thing, that is an absurd thing to happen.

If something that is very well-written, can please and can persuade, he begins to say that there is nothing exotic about it, there is nothing extraordinary about it. But the quality of good literature, Longinus begins to locate is in this power to transport, he is the first one in that sense who begins to talk about the power of literature. Whether you stick to the methods and whether you stick to the rules of grammar and the rules of producing good literature, whether or not, that becomes secondary in Longinus' observation.

On the other hand, no matter how you produce this literature, if it has the power to transport, it becomes sublime literature just by virtue of this power to transport one out of oneself.

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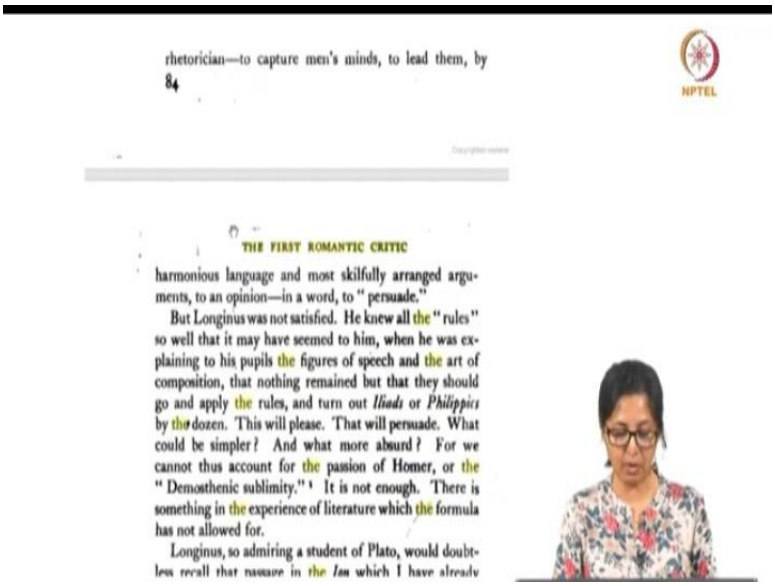

So, "For we cannot thus account for the passion of Homer, or the Demosthenic sublimity". And also recall the number of times he gives examples from Homer and how he also has a certain kind of credibility to even locate and even identify and highlight the things that he thinks Homer has not done right.

And here Scott James continues, "It is not enough. There is a something in the experience of literature which the formula has not allowed for". And that's a key thing in Longinus' treatise entirely on the sublime. He is not sticking to the formula and he is one of the first classic critics who has also identified that the formula will not work all the time.

There is a sense of universality. There is a sense of humanistic notion that we find even in Longinus, but he is also willing to make certain allowances for that by stating that these formulas, these methods may not work all the time and may not produce the desired effect all the time. So, for him, the true test of literature is looking at how the reader gets transported out of himself or herself.

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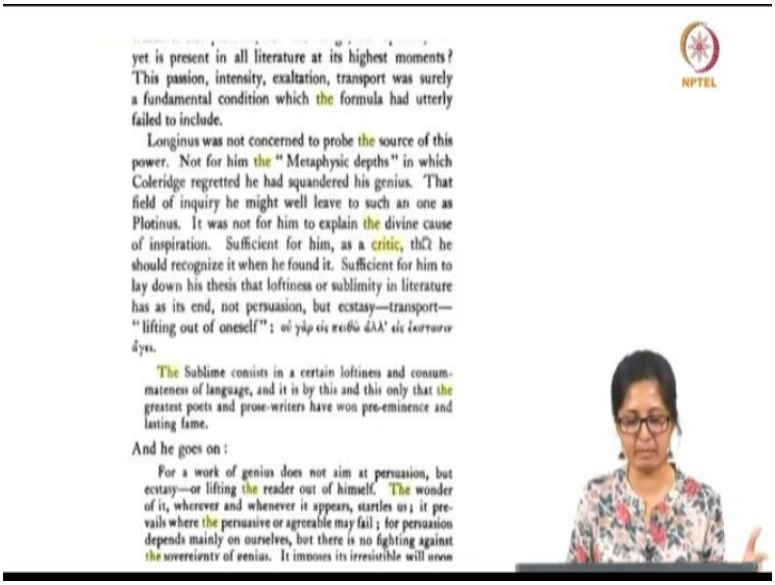

Accordingly, he does not spend much time trying to probe the source of this power, because that is not important in the writings of Longinus. For him, the very fact that the reader gets transported out of himself or herself, that should be the true test of literature. And we find that this is what makes this easy connect between *Longinus On the Sublime* and the romantic notions that we come across at a later point in history, and Longinus also happens to be the first one to talk about emotions too, about passions, about ecstasy in the context of literature.

And he willingly and almost deliberately moves away from those concrete terms, such as persuade and delight, which was easier to situate literature within.

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And since we have already gone through the essay in greater detail, we will not look at the examples that Scott James provides over here, from *On the Sublime*. There is a way in which Scott James is able to identify the prominent connects between *Longinus On the Sublime* and the notions that the Romantic critics began to talk about at a later point.

So here, he draws our attention to this excerpt from *On the Sublime,* "The function of the first is to teach; the function of the second is to move". So, these are some of the words that Longinus used quite lavishly throughout his treatise. Rather than sticking to as we mentioned, the concrete terms such as to delight or to persuade he chooses to use very abstract terms, such as transport and to move. And there is no concrete way in which Longinus has been able to spell out how this transportation happens, how the reader gets transported out of himself or herself.

So, he is in fact focusing on the essence of literature, not on the methods, not on the various ways in which good literature can be produced, but on the effect, on the essence that it ultimately has. And as here very effectively Scott James also sums up, " The sublime effect of literature, for Longinus, is attained, not by argument", and this was also a very significant thing during the Greek times when Longinus was writing: argument, persuasion, that was seen as the great mark of a fine mind.

“Not by argument, not by revelation, or illumination.” So, there are no spiritual, divine invocations that Longinus has in his work. “Its appeal is not through the reason”, and again another significant departure from what the classic masters believed in that it should be rational, it should be based on reason. And it is a very bold move that Longinus makes by moving away from the power of reason, from the power of the divine and also from the power of rhetoric.

And, he continues, “Its appeal is not through the reason, but what we should call imagination”, and though *Longinus On the Sublime* does not use the term imagination, we find that the entire text is about imagination, it is about the quality of getting transported out of oneself which is aided by the power of imagination.

Only within the framework of Romantic criticism, we begin to see this term getting used so significantly, but now looking back at Longinus’s work, we see that imagination is a word which will perfectly fit in well with all kinds of claims and arguments that Longinus is making.

“(Though there is no Greek word in his Greek, which will bear this translation). Its effect upon the mind is immediate, like a flash of lightening upon the eye.” So, this abstraction, the quality of Longinus’ writings and his methods is that, he gives a certain sense of power and clarity to something which could be otherwise seen as very abstract and almost trivial during the Greek times.

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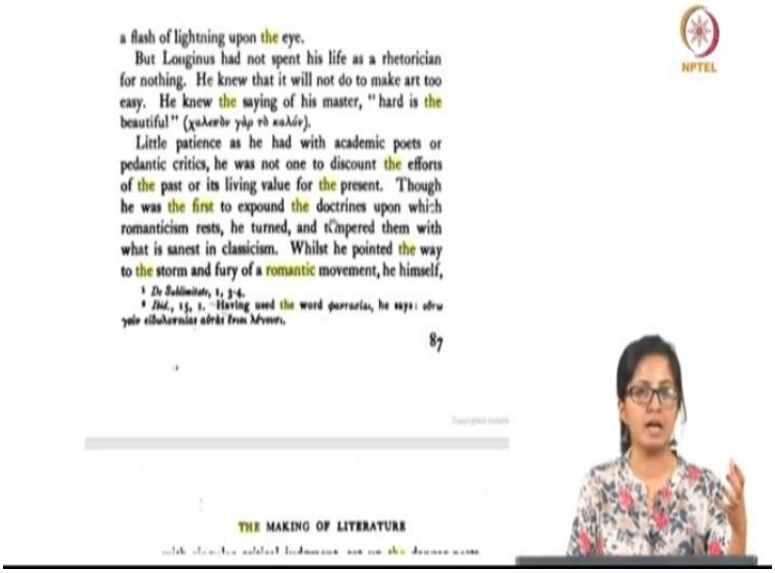

And, Scott James also spends some time trying to validate the position of Longinus as a rhetorician and this is also very important because, during the Greek times when Longinus was writing, rhetoric also held a very significant powerful stature in terms of the location within the intellectual sphere. So, by saying that Longinus was a very good rhetorician, he is also validating the claims that Longinus made when it came to literature.

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art. "Nature," it is true, is the first thing. Nature must "supply." But Nature cannot dispense with Art, whose function it is to "regulate." [3]

And he reminds us that faults are not the less faults because they arise from the heedlessness of genius. Though he has little respect for the meticulous accuracy of middling ability, and admires the daring of genius which aims at the summit and makes light of risks, still, he says, he has "observed not a few errors in Homer and the other greatest writers," and hastens to add that he is "not in the least pleased with such blunders." [3]

And so when Longinus comes to discuss the sources of the Sublime, he is not ashamed to name among them those that belong to the art, or artifice, of literature. Here the skilled rhetorician in our author asserts himself, and he discourses upon artifice in the use of figures of speech, and warns us against bombast, puerility or affectation, and the conceits of "frigidity"; and it is pleasing to be reminded that all the improprieties which he names can be traced to one common cause—"pursuit of novelty in thought—an orgy in which the present generation revels." [4] And he speaks, almost conventionally, about

[1] *De Sublimitate*, 6. [2] *Ibid.*, 2.
[3] *Ibid.*, 33. [4] *Ibid.*, 5, 1.
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And as we have already noted in Longinus' work, he is always very bold to point out the faults that even great masters like Homer had made. He does not think that a great writer can always produce great literature. Those were some of the things that the Greek masters did not, the Greek critics did not really talk about, but Longinus on the other hand, he makes a bold move by stating that even a great writer like Homer is capable of making faults.

Scott James also notes over here, "hastens to add that he is not in the least pleased with such blunders". So, though Longinus is looking at literature from a purely emotional point of view, and he is looking at the essence of literature and the idea of transport, there are a lot of emotional and passionate things that he talks about in his work. And at the same time, there is a way in which he shows no patience with the blunders that Homer makes, or the less sublime works that he produced during his advanced years.

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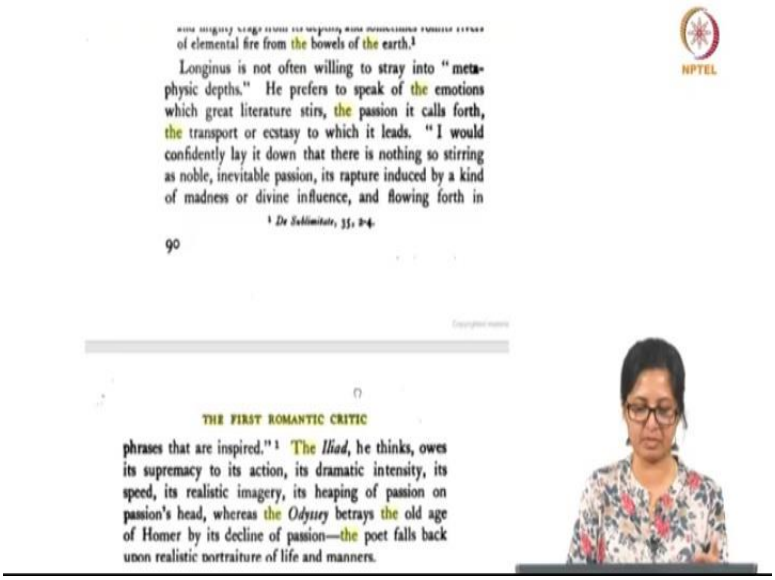

And in between this essay there is a way in which Scott James also tries to compare Longinus with the later Romantic critics, and those are some of the sections that we can come back to at a later point when we look at Romantic criticism.

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To sum up, we come to the final part of Scott James's essay, I'll first read out this excerpt for you. "For him, classicism was touched with romance, but not darkened. His romanticism was sane and bright by dint of contact with the classic order. Mysticism was arriving to obscure the ways of life and literature. But mysticism as he translated it was a lamp which could be kept trim and bright in the temple of Athena.

He could still teach the decorous rhetoric of the Greeks in the lecture rooms of Athens, yet escape from its cramping formalism in the same spirit of adventure as that which led him afterwards to serve Queen Zenobia in the desert."

So, this is fundamentally the major contribution, the major departure that Longinus' work makes, that he continues to stay rooted in the classical methods, but he does not, he is not a stickler to the rules. He believes in the essence of literature, he believes in the power of literature to transport, and this we find that is something which will make a major comeback in the later, especially from the 18th and 19th centuries onwards.

The power of literature to do things which formal rules cannot take care of, and I read this to you again, "He could still teach in the decorous rhetoric of the Greeks in the lecture rooms of Athens, yet escape from its cramping formalism in the same spirit of adventure as that which led him afterwards".

So, at a later point when we begin to look at the various ways in which theory begins to get formulated, away from the classical rules, and away from the early ways in which the English critics also try to put down rules, we find that there is a way in which we can always go back to the Greek times and see that, in various ways the Greek criticism, the Greek philosophy, it did offer a foundation to most of Western critical thought.

And here we find that, especially when we attempt a comparison between Aristotle and Longinus, we find that the Greek philosophy, it was very rich and very intense in such a way that there was enough room for these sort of differentiations to be articulated.

And we find that, though Aristotle had come up with a set of strong rules which almost dictated how literature should be like, and of course he also spoke about the emotional part of it when he was talking about catharsis, we find someone equally potent and someone equally powerful talking about the mere power of literature, the mere power of the word to transport the reader out of oneself, even when such rules are not being followed.

And this escape, this enabling of this escape from the cramping of formalism, that perhaps is the greatest contribution that Longinus made to this world of criticism and the world of imaginative literature. So, I encourage you to read through this entire essay to get a hang of what Scott James talks about, and also make a few comparisons between the various ways in which Greek philosophy laid the foundation of Western critical thought.

So, with this we come to the end of this session. I thank you for listening and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.