

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Devon, England
(1772-1834) 62

CONTEXT

- Father Anglican vicar. Moved to London when was young. There attended at school - "Frost at Midnight"
 - XVIII England & France at war. Coleridge as a **political radical** an important young **poet** (Wordsworth, Southey)
 - **Lyrical Ballads** revolution (1798). Coleridge contribution with Wordsworth → ROMANTIC ERA (England)
 - Natural **speech** over poetic **Ornament**, **Emotion** over **Abstract thought**, **Natural beauty** over **Urban sophistication**
 - Coleridge = **IMAGINATION**, relation between **NATURE & MIND** as it exists as a separate entity "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"
 - Married in 1795. In 1799, met **Sara Hutchinson**, fell deeply in love. Became **an opium addict** "Kubla Khan"
 - Moved w/ the surgeon to preserve his health: composed many of his important non-fiction works *Biographia Literaria*
 - Coleridge is remembered primarily for the poems wrote in his 20s.
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ANLYSIS

- Wordsworth's idealization of nature, on human joy **vs.** Coleridge's **musical effects** over the plainness of common speech
 - The fragility of the **child's innocence** by relating his **own** urban childhood "Frost at Midnight"
 - The division between own mind and the beauty of the natural world "Dejection: An Ode" "Nightingale"
 - Privileges weird tales, bizarre imagery over the commonplace "Rime" (later Shelley) feelings of alienation
 - The stereotype of the suffering Romantic genius, often charact. by drug addiction: figure of the idealist
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THEMES (3)

1 The Transformative Power of the Imagination active imagination a vehicle for transcending unpleasant circumstances

- The **speaker** temporarily abandons his immediate surroundings, exchanging them for a completely fabricated experience.
- These mental and emotional jumps are often well rewarded "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" (1797)

2 The Interplay of Philosophy Piety & Poetry "The Eolian Harp" (1795)

3 Nature and the Development of the Individual, nature has the capacity to teach crucial characteristics for a worthy individual

MOTIFS (3)

1 Conversation Poems: unrhymed **iambic pentameter**, adapted this metrical form to suit a more colloquial rhythm

- ❖ Everyday language & speech rhythms: broaden poetry's audience **vs.** Neoclassicists (A.Pope, J. Dryden)

2 Delighted in the Natural World, against the **pathetic fallacy** (attribution of human feeling to the natural world)

- ❖ Nature contained an innate, constant joyousness wholly separate from the ups and downs of human experience

3 Prayer God, Christianity and the act of prayer appear in some form in nearly all of his poems "Epitaph" (1833)

SYMBOLS (3)

→ *symbolic language was the only acceptable way of expressing religious truths*

1 The Sun as a symbol of **God** "God's own head" (1797)

2 The Moon also as a symbol of **God**, has more positive connotations "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" - 2 sides of the Christian God

3 Dreams & Dremaming have a pleasurable connotation. In his real life, however, Coleridge suffered from nightmares

"The Pains of Sleep" Opium probably gave him a sense of *well-being* that allowed him to sleep.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772 – 1834) was an English poet, literary critic and philosopher who, with his friend William Wordsworth, was a founder of the Romantic Movement in England. He was born in Devonshire, England. His father, a vicar of a parish and master of a grammar school, married twice. He had three children by his first wife. Samuel was the youngest of ten by Reverend Coleridge's second wife. Coleridge was a student at his father's school and an avid reader. After his father died in 1781, Coleridge attended Christ's Hospital School, a charity school founded in the 16th century in Greyfriars in London. There he met lifelong friend Charles Lamb. While in London, he also befriended a classmate named Tom Evans, who introduced Coleridge to his family. Coleridge fell in love with Tom's older sister Mary.

Coleridge's father had always wanted his son to be a clergyman, so when Coleridge entered Jesus College, University of Cambridge in 1791, he focused on a future in the Church of England. Coleridge idealized his father as pious and innocent, while his relationship with his mother was more problematic. He was rarely allowed to return home during the school term, and this distance from his family at such a turbulent time proved emotionally damaging. Coleridge's views began to change over the course of his first year at Cambridge. He became a supporter of William Frend, a Fellow at the college whose Unitarian beliefs made him a controversial figure. While at Cambridge, Coleridge also accumulated a large debt, which his brothers eventually had to pay off. Financial problems continued to plague him throughout his life, and he constantly depended on the support of others. Because of debt or because the girl that he loved, Mary Evans, had rejected him, he had a bout of severe depression. His brothers arranged for his discharge a few months later under the reason of "insanity" and he was readmitted to Jesus College, though he would never receive a degree from Cambridge.

En route to Wales in June 1794, Coleridge met a student named Robert Southey. Influenced by Plato's *Republic*, they constructed a vision of pantisocracy (equal government by all), which involved emigrating to the New World with ten other families to set up a commune on the banks of the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania.

Southey became engaged to a woman named Edith Fricker. As marriage was an integral part of the plan for communal living in the New World, Coleridge decided to marry another Fricker daughter, Sarah. Coleridge wed in 1795, in spite of the fact that he still loved Mary Evans, who was engaged to another man. Coleridge's marriage was unhappy and he spent much of it apart from his wife, eventually separating from her. Finally, Southey abandoned the project and Coleridge spent the next few years beginning his career as a writer. He never returned to Cambridge to finish his degree.

In 1795 Coleridge befriended Wordsworth who greatly influenced Coleridge's verse. The following year, Coleridge published his first volume of poetry, *Poems on Various Subjects*, and began the first of ten issues of a liberal political publication entitled *The Watchman*. From 1797 to 1798 he lived near Wordsworth and his sister, Dorothy, in Somersetshire. In 1798 the two men collaborated on a joint volume of poetry entitled *Lyrical Ballads*. The collection is considered the first great work of the Romantic school of poetry and contains Coleridge's famous poem, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

That autumn the two poets travelled to the Continent together. Coleridge spent most of the trip in Germany, studying the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, Jakob Boehme, and G.E. Lessing. While there he mastered the German language and began translating. He translated the dramatic trilogy *Wallenstein* by the German Classical poet Friedrich Schiller into English.

When he returned to England, he settled there lecturing on literature and philosophy and writing about religious and political theory, and living off financial donations and grants. In 1799, Coleridge and Wordsworth stayed at Thomas Hutchinson's farm on the Tees at Sockburn near Darlington, where he wrote his ballad-poem *Love*, addressed to Sara Hutchinson. The knight mentioned is the mailed figure on the Conyers tomb in ruined Sockburn church. The figure has a wyvern at his feet, a reference to the Sockburn Worm slain by Sir John Conyers (and a possible source for Lewis Carroll's Jabberwocky). The worm was supposedly buried under the rock in the nearby pasture; this was the 'greystone' of Coleridge's first draft, later transformed into a 'mount'. The poem was a direct inspiration for John Keats' famous poem *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*.

In 1804, he travelled to Sicily and Malta working for a time as Acting Public Secretary of Malta under the Commissioner. Dorothy Wordsworth was shocked at his condition upon his return to England in 1806. His opium addiction (he was using as much as two quarts of laudanum a week) now began to take over his life: he separated from his wife Sarah in 1808, quarrelled with Wordsworth in 1810, lost part of his annuity in 1811.

Between 1810 and 1820, this "giant among dwarfs", as he was often considered by his contemporaries, gave a series of lectures in London and Bristol and those on Shakespeare renewed interest in the playwright as a model for contemporary writers. Coleridge's ill-health, opium-addiction problems, and somewhat unstable personality meant that all his lectures were plagued with problems of delays and a general irregularity of quality from one lecture to the next. Furthermore, Coleridge's mind was extremely dynamic and his personality was spasmodic. As a result of these factors, Coleridge often failed to prepare anything but the loosest set of notes for his lectures and regularly entered into extremely long digressions which his audiences found difficult to follow. However, it was the lecture on Hamlet given on 2 January 1812 that was considered the best and has influenced *Hamlet* studies ever since.

In August 1814, Coleridge was approached by Lord Byron's publisher John Murray about the possibility of translating Goethe's classic Faust (1808). Coleridge accepted only to abandon work on it after six weeks. Until recently, scholars have accepted that Coleridge never returned to the project, despite Goethe's own belief in the 1820s that Coleridge had in fact completed a long translation of the work. In September 2007, Oxford University Press sparked a heated scholarly controversy by publishing an English translation of Goethe's work which purported to be Coleridge's long-lost masterpiece (the text in question first appeared anonymously in 1821)

In 1817, Coleridge, with his addiction worsening, his spirits depressed, and his family alienated, took residence in the north of London, at the house of the physician James Gillman who tried to control the poet's addiction. The house became a place of literary pilgrimage of writers including Carlyle and Emerson. There he finished his major prose work, the *Biographia Literaria* (1817), a volume composed of 23 chapters of autobiographical notes and dissertations on various subjects, including some incisive literary theory and criticism. It is unclear whether his growing use of opium (and the brandy in which it was dissolved) was a symptom or a cause of his growing depression. He died in London on July 25, 1834.

Poems such as *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), *Christabel* and *Kubla Khan* (published in 1816, but known in manuscript form before then) and certainly influenced other poets and writers of the time. Poems like these both drew inspiration from and helped to inflame the craze for Gothic romance. Mary Shelley, who knew Coleridge well, mentions *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* twice directly in *Frankenstein*, and some of the descriptions in the novel echo it indirectly. Although William Godwin, her father, disagreed with Coleridge on some important issues, he respected his opinions and Coleridge often visited the Godwins. Mary Shelley later recalled hiding behind the sofa and hearing his voice chanting *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

A Selected Bibliography

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