

Introduction to S.T. Coleridge

Who was Samuel Taylor Coleridge?

Samuel Taylor Coleridge is a widely celebrated poet, philosopher and critic. He was born in England in the late eighteenth century. Coleridge was one of the priests of the English Romantic Movement. He had a rich romantic imagination, and was the master of narrative verse, supernaturalism, witchery of language, and exquisite verbal melody. In his poems, he created a world of magic, mystery, and awe. His poetry is replete with characteristics such as the love of liberty, interest in the supernatural and the mysterious, the revolutionary zeal, the medieval imaginative faculty, and new experiments in verse. Moreover, we also find simplicity of diction, humanism, love for nature, and expression of melancholy in Coleridge's poems.

Coleridge's poetry, like other romantic poets, is highly rich, sensuous, and pictorial. In fact, his fondness for the weird and the unusual romantic themes makes him, inevitably, the purest of the Romantics. Besides, the chief contribution of Coleridge to poetry is his subtle appeal for the supernatural to the Romantic sense. He had intense imaginative power and also possessed a talent of creating hallucinatory reality and communicating moral truths through his works.

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1. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Life (Birth, Parentage, Childhood, & Education)

1.1 His Birth and Parentage

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was born on October 21, 1772 at Ottery St. Mary in Devonshire, where his father, John Coleridge, was a vicar and schoolmaster. His father was an easy-going country parson who was remarkable for his knowledge of books. His mother, Ann Bowden Coleridge, was his father's second wife. Young Coleridge was very close to his father as compared to his mother. Whereas, his relationship with his mother was distant and, sometimes, Coleridge had to provoke her to gain her attention.

1.2 His Siblings

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was the youngest of the fourteen children of his parents. His surviving siblings included seven brothers—John, William, James, George, Edward, Luke, and Francis Coleridge—and a sister named Ann Coleridge. From his father's first marriage, he had four sisters named Elizabeth, Mary, Florella, and Sarah Coleridge.

1.3 Coleridge's Childhood and Education

In his childhood, Samuel Taylor Coleridge was a dreamy and indolent boy. Instead of taking interest in boyish sports, he loved to lie in the sun and read fairy tales. By his excessive reading of such stories, he succeeded in thoroughly alarming himself by all kinds of magical possibilities. Before he was five, he had read the Bible and *The Arabian Nights* and remembered considerable portions of both books. By the age of six, Coleridge had also read books like *Robinson Crusoe*. He was a sensitive, introspective, extraordinarily precocious, highly imaginative, and somewhat lazy child.

When Coleridge was eight years old, his father died. He felt extremely distressed at the loss of a person with whom he shared the most intimate relationship. At that time, his elder brothers had started earning and they successfully took the charge of their younger siblings. But no one of them exercised a wise and direct influence upon Coleridge.

After the death of his father, Coleridge was sent to the Charity School of Christ's Hospital, London. As a poor and neglected boy, Coleridge remained in this school for seven or eight years. During these years, he hardly ever went home, and experienced awful loneliness, especially during holidays when most of his friends were away. When his brothers, George and Luke, moved to London, the situation became better for him. He gradually got intimate with Luke, but once again felt alone and sad when the latter returned to Devon.

1.4 Coleridge's Bad Health and Friendship with Charles Lamb and Others

While in school, Coleridge suffered from bad health, particularly, rheumatic trouble and mild feverish condition. Due to which, he had to spend his time at the sanatorium where he occupied himself with reading classics. He read Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare, the sonnets of Bowless, and Thomas Taylor's translation of 'Plotinus'. He also became precociously interested in medicine and metaphysics. Soon, Coleridge started writing poetry. At the age of fifteen in 1787, he wrote one of his earliest known poems, 'Easter Holidays' and 'Dura Navis'.

It was at his school that Coleridge began his long-term friendship with future essayist Charles Lamb. He also became close friends with squib writer Charles Valentine Le Grice and Tom Evans. In 1788, Coleridge visited his friend Tom Evans' home in London. There he experienced motherly love for Tom's mother and later in 1792 wrote *To Disappointment*, where he put her in his mother's place.

1.5 His Youthful Enthusiasm and Infatuation with Mary Evans

At this time of his life, Coleridge shook off his indolence for a while and was full of youthful enthusiasm. He thought of becoming an apprentice to a shoemaker. If one day he was desperately anxious to be a shoemaker, another day he pored over all the medical books he could find. While at another time he recited Homer or Pindar in loud accents. Coleridge also fell in love with Tom's elder sister, Mary Evans, for five years and also wrote a poem to her, giving her the name Lewit. Though he loved her extremely, he never proposed to her.

1.6 Coleridge's Life At Cambridge and His Enrollment in Army

At Christ's Hospital School, Samuel Taylor Coleridge received a scholarship to attend Jesus College, Cambridge. When leaving school, he composed a poem *On Quitting School for College* saying goodbye to his previous homes in an optimistic manner. At nineteen, he entered Cambridge in 1791. There Coleridge became an enthusiastic republican and the leader of a group of students more

addicted to wine parties than to the pursuit of learning. He was second to Samuel Butler in the Craven Scholarship, but offended the authorities by his Unitarianism and his sympathies with French Republic. Moreover, he also spent a large part of his scholarship money on drugs and prostitutes. Getting into large amounts of debt, he ran away from Cambridge in 1793 and enlisted as a soldier.

This was the most strange proceeding on his part because Coleridge had an extreme horror of warfare. After serving three months in the English army, however, he was discharged and returned to college. In 1793, his poem *Absence: A Farewell Ode on Quitting School for Jesus College*, Coleridge appeared in *Sherborne "The Weekly Entertainment."* In 1794, Coleridge left the college without taking a degree. Later on, while traveling to Wales, Coleridge met a student named Robert Southey, striking an instant friendship with him.

2. Coleridge's Scheme of "Pantisocracy" & Marriage

Shortly afterwards, in 1795, Samuel Taylor Coleridge devised a utopian scheme for an egalitarian society with his fellow poet and friend Robert Southey. He called this scheme 'pantisocracy' and its sole purpose was the reformation of the human race. This scheme was communistic in essence. The 'Pantisocracy', meaning government by all, was to be an ideal community somewhere in America. It called for a small group of intellectuals to give up their possessions and labor together for the common good. The members of the community were to combine agriculture and literature. Their work was to be limited to two hours each day. Moreover, it was compulsory for each member of the community to marry a good woman, and take her with him. Coleridge's vision behind this scheme was to minimize the greed among common men. Besides Coleridge and Southey, other members included in the scheme were the poet Robert Lovell, three of the Fricker sisters—Sara, Edith and Mary—and George Burnett. The three poets married the three sisters—Southey married Edith, Coleridge married Sara, and Lovell married Mary. While George Burnett proposed unsuccessfully to another Fricker sister, Martha. But the scheme of 'Pantisocracy' had soon to be given up when the two men—Southey and Coleridge—found that they had no money to pay their travelling expenses to America.

3. Coleridge's Life with his wife Sara Fricker

Sara was the eldest of the three Fricker sisters. All the sisters were graceful, educated and emancipated. When Coleridge first met Sara he wrote to Robert Southey (who was engaged to Sara's sister Edith) saying of Sara: "Yes – Southey – you are right.... I certainly love her. I think of her incessantly and with unspeakable tenderness..."

Later on he also wrote a poem 'The Kiss' for her. But Coleridge's marriage with Sara was a failure and the couple separated by 1804. Coleridge laid all the blame on Sara, while Sara had her own story to tell.

During the 40 turbulent years of their marriage, Coleridge only lived with Sara for less than six of those years. Besides, to support his growing family, he never made enough money. Even when they were together, he constantly complained of various illnesses, consumed excessive amounts of opium, and spent a lot of time in bed.

It has also appeared from some reminiscences dictated in old age to her daughter that Sara Fricker at one time expected Southey to marry her. Sara's acrimonious comparisons of Coleridge with Southey as husbands besides other temperamental and practical difficulties from both sides, eventually made Coleridge's marriage a failure.

4. His Reputation as a Young Poet and Major Life Conflicts

Coleridge's youthful reputation as poet was based on a few short poems in the Cambridge Intelligencer and the Morning Post, on the play *The Fall of Robespierre* and on other poems, such as, *Religious Musings*, circulated among friends. His literary and social interest in Bristol introduced him to Joseph Cottle, a bookseller and publisher. In 1796, Coleridge published his first volume, *Poems on Various Subjects*, for which he got 30 guineas from Joseph Cottle.

During this period, Coleridge was beset by a continual conflict which in a sense these events represented: the struggle with what he called "bread and cheese", the efforts to be a practical husband, father, and professional man. The conflict, acute enough in the economic conditions of the wars against France, was not lessened on the professional literary side by the shifting intellectual currents and values of the period after the French Revolution.

Coleridge's personal problem was also aggravated to an extent by a progressive disease of heart and lungs unrealized either by him or his family and friends. The autopsy after his death, in July, 1834, showed that a progressive disease of heart and lungs had made him appear neurotic or hypochondriac all his life. This physical state, usually referred to in connection with his later life and death, may well have been one of the governing facts of his life from about 1795.

5. Coleridge's Meeting and Friendship with William Wordsworth

Samuel Taylor Coleridge met William Wordsworth in 1797 in the Village of Racedown in Dorsetshire. It was a most memorable meeting and proved to be the beginning of a memorable friendship. Wordsworth's friendship helped to ripen Coleridge's poetic genius. Moreover, the sympathetic association of Wordsworth's sister, Dorothy, also had a pleasant effect upon Coleridge's mind and health.

Coleridge's alliance with Wordsworth and his sister resulted in the form of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). *Lyrical Ballads* was a volume of poems on which the two poets had collaborated. Its publication successfully marked the beginning of the English Romantic Movement in English literature. The ultimate success of the *Lyrical Ballads* had brought fame to both the poets.

In 1798, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Dorothy went to Germany to learn German and some of the philosophy and literature of that country. But Coleridge returned to England in 1799 after the death of his second son, Berkeley.

In 1799, Coleridge went north at Wordsworth's invitation and for the first time saw the Lake District. It was on this journey that he first met Sara Hutchinson. He fell in love with her, but the love proved painful. Because, although Coleridge had long realized the imperfections of his marriage with Sara Fricker, he did not believe in divorce. He, then, returned to London as a leader writer for the *Morning Post* and to begin a translation of Schiller's *Wallenstein*.

6. Coleridge's Broken Health and Opium Addiction

In the beginning of the 19th century, Coleridge's health broke down. To ease the pain that tormented him, he took opium. It acted like a miracle. But the pain soon returned when the drug lost its effect. As a result, Coleridge became a slave to the drug. The tyranny of opium spread its dark shadow over the rest of Coleridge's life. From time to time, his health improved for a short period but, on the whole, he felt wretched and miserable. His imagination, excited by opium, flamed out at intervals, but his power of concentration grew weaker and weaker. He had given some account of his state of his mind at that time in the pathetic Ode to Dejection.

Coleridge's family and friends did break him at the habit for a time, but he suffered so dreadfully. For him it was better to die than to endure his sufferings. His trip to Malta and Italy didn't have a positive impact on his health. Then, urged on by his friends, he started a course of lectures in London, which achieved much success.

7. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Famous Poems

7.1.1 The Rime of Ancient Mariner

The Rime of Ancient Mariner (1797-1798) is a Literary Ballad in seven parts. It is written in the traditional ballad meter and deals with the supernatural punishment and penance of a seaman who wantonly kills an albatross. Nothing can exactly explain the witchery and magic of this poem. The situation in The Rime of Ancient Mariner is extremely dramatic, employing striking dialogues, in stanzas rendered more effective by a system of repetition known as the 'refrain'. The supernatural in the poem adds to the effects of horror and mystery. Also, the characterization and diction of the poem is simple and its haunting beauty is like the effect of enchantment. The moral is that of all-embracing love.

7.1.2 Christabel

Christabel (1797-1800) is an unfinished Gothic ballad. Coleridge wrote its flawless first part in 1797 while the second part in 1800 which is not as effective as the first one. Christabel is the third of the famous 'Mystery Poems' of Coleridge. It narrates the medieval tale of witchcraft and mystical association. The supernatural atmosphere of the poem represents the eternal conflict between the forces of good and evil as personified in the innocent heroine Christabel and in the snake woman Geraldine. In Christabel, the human and the supernatural elements interpenetrate each other in a more complete and subtle way than in The Rime of Ancient Mariner.

7.1.3 Kubla Khan Or A Vision in Dream: A Fragment

Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote Kubla Khan in 1797 and published it in 1816. He penned down the poem on awakening from an opium induced sleep into which he had fallen after reading a passage in Purchas's Hakluytus Posthumus (Vol. I; p. 148). The poem is a mystical fragment and considered unrivalled for pure music, power of poetic diction, and imaginative suggestiveness. Moreover, the poem is also a feat of supernaturalism and mystery. Coleridge has also used various sensuous

phrases and images in Kubla Khan. It is a poem of pure romance, in which all romantic associations are concentrated within a short compass to create a sense of mystery and awe.

7.2 Personal Poems by Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Besides mystery and romantic poems, Samuel Taylor Coleridge has also written several personal poems as well. Some of these are:

7.2.1 Frost at Midnight

Coleridge wrote Frost at Midnight in 1798. The poem is a quiet and extremely personal restatement of the enduring themes of early English Romantic Movement—nature’s impact on the imagination. In the poem, the loving and lovable musings of a father beside a cradle of his child rises to a climax expressing Coleridge’s conception of Unity.’

7.2.2 The Eolian Harp

The Eolian Harp (1795) is, according to Coleridge, his ‘most perfect’ poem. It is one of his early conversation poems. The poem is a blank verse and uses a Romantic image of the eolian harp as both the order and the wildness found in nature. It is beautiful in cadence and discusses the poet’s anticipation of his marriage with Sara Fricker.

7.2.3 The Nightingale

The Nightingale (1795, Published in 1796) consists of three-stanzas in a conversational style. It demonstrates Coleridge’s love for nature and rural life over the urban and more modern conveniences. This poem clearly reflects the Romantic ideas of the poet and is also a memorial to his friendship with Wordsworth.

7.2.4 Dejection: An Ode

Dejection: An Ode (1802) is the poet’s dirge to his own imagination. The poem is an agonized cry of one who feels he has lost his potent voice before he could create all the symphonies he was capable of creating. Coleridge wrote this poem in a state of mental torment caused by marital strife, indifferent health, desertion by friends, financial stress, and unfulfillment in love.

7.2.5 Hymn before Sunrise, in the Vale of Chamouni

Coleridge’s Hymn before Sunrise, in the Vale of Chamouni (1802) draws a relationship between nature and art. The poem describes the poet’s feelings that, according to him, he experienced on his own. Many consider the poem to be overworked by exclamatory sentences and an enlargement of German stanzas by Friederike Brun.

7.2.6 Youth and Age

In his poem Youth and Age (1823, Published in 1832), Coleridge presents a sharp contrast between youth and old age. The poem vividly explains the difference between these two stages of life. Youth is like a budding flower, while old age is like the dawn. Coleridge has used various beautiful images in the poem to present these two stages of life.

7.2.7 Epitaph (1833, published in 1834)

Coleridge composed his own Epitaph in 1833. It was published on his death in 1834. In his Epitaph, which is rooted in ideals of Christianity, the poet asks the passersby to pray for his mercy and forgiveness. Here are some lines from Coleridge's Epitaph:

O, lift one thought in prayer for S.T.C./ That he who many a year with toil of breath / Found death in life, may here find life in death!

7.3 Political Poems by Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote some famous Political Poems as well. Some of these poems include:

7.3.1 France: An Ode

Coleridge wrote France: An Ode in 1793. Evoked by Napoleon's invasion of neutral Switzerland, Coleridge condemns the French as not obedient to the moral law and no longer representing the true spirit of Liberty. The Ode seems to mark the end of his impassioned defense of France, and the beginning of his conservative, somewhat Burkean philosophy.

7.3.2 Religious Musings

Coleridge wrote Religious Musings in 1794. It is a desultory poem suffering from a turgid style and somewhat inconsistent thought. Yet it gains value from the principles of Unity and Harleian Necessity whereby Coleridge views the poorer features of the French Revolution as stages toward the final good. It is, in fact, one of Coleridge's first poems of critical merit and expresses his early feelings about religion and politics.

7.3.3 Ode on the Departing Year

Coleridge wrote an Ode on the Departing Year at the close of 1796. It represents a transitional stage from his earlier enthusiasm for the French Revolution to his later disillusionment. The poem is filled with passionate declamation against the 'brood of hell'. Coleridge is indignant with his own country, which had 'joined the wild yelling of Famine and Blood'.

7.3.4 Fears in Solitude

Coleridge penned down Fears in Solitude in 1798. It is a historically significant poem in which the poet reiterates his abhorrence of French politics. He also discusses the threats that his country is facing. We can note the low-keyed blank verse until the moment (line 129) when he relinquishes his pacifism and lashes out at the French. After Fears in Solitude, Coleridge remained cool to French politics.

8. Samuel Taylor Coleridge as a Critic

Coleridge's pre-eminence as a critic is accepted almost as much as his preeminence among the poets. There are many for whom he is the most important English critic, chiefly because he raised central questions about criticism itself, its method and philosophical basis. In both philosophy and

literature, Coleridge was a man of stupendous learning. His refined sensibility and penetration intellect, therefore, made him apt to the task of a critic.

Coleridge's practical criticism consists of his evaluations of William Shakespeare and other English dramatists, John Milton, and William Wordsworth. In *Biographia Literaria*, he has caught certain intentions as well as successes or failings of Wordsworth and illuminated them in depths. His remarks on Shakespeare, in fact, display a sound intuition of the profound unity of dramatic art. Thus Coleridge's criticism is rich in suggestions of far reaching significance and keen insight rarely to be met with in any other critic. He does not merely judge any artist or his work on the basis of rules. Nor does he pass any judgment. Rather, he gives his responses and reactions to a work of art.

9. His Theory of Imagination

Coleridge's most significant contribution to English literary criticism is his theory of imagination. His treatment of the subject is different from all the previous discussions of imagination. Coleridge was the first critic who presented a difference between Imagination and Fancy, and also primary and secondary Imagination. His theory of imagination radically revolutionized the concept of artistic imitation.

According to Coleridge, poetry is neither an imitation or a copy of nature, nor is the creation of something different from nature. Rather, it is a creation based on the sensations and impressions received from the external world. The poet's imagination perceives these impressions, modifies them in a way that opposites are reconciled and harmonized, and in this way poetic creation takes place.

It is, however, in literary criticism that Coleridge's achievement is the most lasting. His judgements are all permeated by a trend of thought that is strongly under the influence of great doctrinal preconceptions. Coleridge's well-known differentiation between imagination and fancy is a way of laying stress upon the creative activity of the mind, as opposed to the passive association of mental pictures.

The idea of unity, through the immanent Divine life, between Man—a spiritual entity—and Nature, a manifestation of Divine. Lastly, the idea of the organic unity of all life transcending outward phenomena of perfect harmony among Man, Nature, and God.

Nature and Man are the two phases of divine unfolding. In this philosophy are to be found the sources of Wordsworth's spiritual interpretation of Nature and of Coleridge's theory of imagination. Imagination, according to Coleridge, is that synthetic and magical power by which a poet diffuses a tone and spirit of unity that blends each into each. It has a tendency to bring the whole soul into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other, in accordance to their relative dignity and worth.

10. Samuel Taylor Coleridge as a Romantic Poet

Both Coleridge and Wordsworth were high priests of Romanticism. They officially began the Romantic Movement of English poetry with the publication of their *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. They gave the movement both purpose and direction. But it was Coleridge who gave the movement a

philosophical turn. The Romantic Movement actually began with the sentimental subjectivism of Rousseau. Then it developed into the transcendentalism of Kant and Hegel. On the basis of his studies of these, Coleridge proceeded to work out a subtle and distinctive philosophy of imagination. All the characteristics of Romanticism are found in Coleridge's poetry. Love of liberty, interest in the supernatural and the mysterious, the revolutionary zeal, the medieval imaginative faculty, new experiments in verse, simplicity of diction, humanism, love for Nature, and expression of melancholy and similar other traits of Romantic poetry can be easily found in Coleridge's poetry.

The three most popular poems of Coleridge—The Ancient Mariner, Kubla Khan, and Christabel—are the English Romantic masterpieces. They are the most unusual as well as romantic. Coleridge had a rich Romantic imagination. He was also a lover of Nature. Moreover, in his treatment of the supernatural, he is superb and supreme among all the Romantic poets. Kubla Khan, The Ancient Mariner, and Christabel are truly supernatural poems. Besides, Coleridge's greatest contribution to the Romantic movement is the recreation of the medieval atmosphere of wonder and mystery.

Coleridge's status as a Romantic poet is supreme. His poetry contains a characteristic note of subjectivity and melancholy. He was a humanitarian and wanted absolute justice and love to reign in the world. Coleridge's poetry in certain aspects illustrated the Romantic temper even better than that of Wordsworth. He was, in fact, the supreme embodiment of all that is purest and most ethereal in the Romantic spirit.

11. Samuel Taylor Coleridge as a Journalist and His Other Works:

Between 1794, Coleridge wrote spasmodically for **The Morning Post** and **The Courier**. In spite of the stresses of his personal life, his Morning Post Contribution of this period is vigorous journalism of a high order. In 1813, by the good offices of Lord Byron, his tragedy Remorse was produced at Drury Lane. Coleridge published the autobiographical and critical **Biographia Literaria**, and **The Sibylline Leaves**, and became the center of an admiring literary circle.

12. Coleridge's Burial Place :

Coleridge was originally buried in the crypt of the local Highgate Grammar School Chapel. In 1961, he was re-interred in the aisle of St. Michael's Parish Church in Highgate, London. Coleridge's life was sad, tragic and difficult. He suffered grief and remorse and his epitaph reflects that. Coleridge's epitaph asks passersby to pray that he who "Found death in life, may here find life in death!"

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