

Samuel Taylor Coleridge in Contrast to William Wordsworth

Samuel Taylor Coleridge is often discussed in association with his peer, William Wordsworth. This is due in part to their friendship and joint ventures on works such as *Lyrical Ballads*. Although he is often “paired” with his counterpart Wordsworth, there are several differences in Coleridge’s poetic style and philosophical views. Coleridge’s poetry differs from that of Wordsworth, and his association with Wordsworth overshadows Coleridge’s individual accomplishments as a Romantic poet. In addition, Coleridge’s poetry complicates experiences that Wordsworth views as very simple and very commonplace. Samuel Taylor Coleridge has a poetic diction unlike that of William Wordsworth, he relies more heavily on imagination for poetic inspiration, and he also incorporates religion into his poetry differently. Coleridge’s different views, combined with his opium addiction, led to an eventual breach in his friendship with Wordsworth – a friendship that had begun in 1797.

Although Coleridge and Wordsworth did not meet until the year 1797, they were familiar with one another’s work prior to that date. As early as 1793 Coleridge had read the poetry of Wordsworth, and he was specifically drawn to the political elements of his poem *Descriptive Sketches*. Their first meeting occurred in 1795 at Bristol during a political debate. Not much is documented about Wordsworth’s first impressions of Coleridge, but upon meeting him in 1795 he’s recorded as mentioning, “I wished indeed to see more [of Coleridge]- his talent appears to me very great” (Newlyn, 5). Their friendship truly began to flourish when Coleridge visited Wordsworth in March of 1797 at Racedown, and after that visit the two had a much closer relationship and communicated with one another regularly.

Despite any difference, the two poets were compatible because they were both “preoccupied with imagination, and both [used] verbal reference in new ways”(Newlyn, 31). In 1798 the publication of their joint effort, *Lyrical Ballads*, signified the height of their relationship. This came at a time when they were together in Alfoxden, where they had enjoyed the simple pleasures of spending time together, discussing ideas, and devising schemes for publications. “Never again would the two poets have the sort of compatibility which allowed for major differences of opinion, without creating unease”(Newlyn, 34).

Following this time period, their friendship began to slowly deteriorate; beginning with criticisms of each other’s poetry, then growing into conflicting views on creativity and intellect, and finally culminating in a “radical difference” of “theoretical opinions” concerning poetry (Newlyn, 87). However, their friendship could have been spared, had Coleridge not been misinformed by Basil Montagu that Wordsworth referred to him as a “burden” and a “rotten drunkard”(Romanticism, 448). That was the last straw, and had deeply upset Coleridge, who was by this point addicted to liquid opium and very sensitive about the topic. Thus, after 1810 their friendship would never be the same, and although Wordsworth and Coleridge had once been compatible, and are often paired together as Romantic poets, it was ultimately their distinguishable differences that led to their falling out.

Coleridge's different perception of poetry is what sets him aside from Wordsworth. In fact, Coleridge even reflected on the difference between his contributions and those of Wordsworth in *Lyrical Ballads*. He stated, "my endeavors would be directed to persons and characters supernatural – Mr. Wordsworth, on the other hand, was...to give charm of novelty to things of everyday" (*Biographia*, ch. xiv). Although Coleridge's retrospective interpretation of this work could be viewed as an overly simplistic division of labor, it nonetheless proves that Coleridge viewed his poetic style as different than that of Wordsworth. Moreover, Coleridge's retrospective interpretation insinuated that he dealt with complex subject matter (supernatural), while Wordsworth gave the ordinary a revitalizing freshness. Even though they worked together successfully on the publication *Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge and Wordsworth clearly had contrasting opinions about "what constituted well written poetry."

Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* uses very deliberate phrases in order to describe images. The descriptions portray a bleak atmosphere with vivid images of the "rotting deck" where "dead men lay" (*Romanticism*, 530). His lines directly address the despair of the situation with very concise language, leaving little to the imagination. The essence of the poem is summed up in the lines, "The many men so beautiful/ And they all dead did lie! / And a thousand slimy things/ Lived on – and so did I" (*Romanticism*, 534)." The detail throughout the poem is painstakingly precise, yet still as effective as the simplistic approach of other prominent Romantic writers. The succinct descriptions allow for few interpretations, but as Coleridge is quoted as saying, "...the language of real life should be refined to give poetry its intensesness (Newlyn, 88)." Somber and lonely feelings are expressed through the intensesness, and the exact diction of Coleridge is what makes it possible for this to be conveyed.

Even Wordsworth recognized that Coleridge's poetic diction in this poem differed from that of his own. In *Note to 'Ancient Mariner'* he criticized some of Coleridge's stylistic approaches. This criticism proves that Wordsworth and Coleridge were not completely compatible, and it points out how Coleridge developed his own independent poetic diction, regardless of whether or not Wordsworth approved. In Wordsworth's opinion, "The poem of my friend has indeed great defects," and he goes on to say, "the principle person has no character...[the mariner] does not act, but is continually acted upon...the events have no necessary connection" (*Romanticism*, 345). More importantly, he stressed, "the imagery is somewhat too laboriously accumulated," (*Romanticism*, 345) meaning that he believed the concise, meticulous descriptions were a flaw. Wordsworth went on to complement the passion in the poem, but his prior criticism made it clear that he would have taken a different approach to writing this poem.

The poem *Written in Early Spring* exemplifies Wordsworth's poetic style, which often involved ordinary language to create a simple poetic diction. When he describes components of nature, Wordsworth uses personification and thus avoids imagery that he would consider "too laboriously accumulated." Instead of describing the images with extensively precise detail, as Coleridge had done in *Ancient Mariner*, Wordsworth uses a common literary device to portray the images. He refers to birds that "hopped and played" and twigs that "catch the breezy air," in order to depict nature. This draws on the imagination of the reader to fill in the rest of the image, whereas Coleridge in *Ancient Mariner* provides much of the detail by invoking his own imagination as a tool.

In the views of Coleridge, it is imagination that is vital to poetry, and imagination is also central to his poetic style. He believed that high quality poetry is the result of imagination being involved in the process. The imagination is broken into two sectors, according to Coleridge, the primary imagination and the secondary imagination. In the work *Biographia Literaria* he

commented on his theory of the imagination: “The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception...the secondary I consider as an echo of the former...identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation.” The primary imagination is spontaneous, while the secondary imagination, aware of the conscious act of the imagination, is thus hindered and imperfect in expression (Barfield, 28). In particular, it was the “chemically altered imagination” upon which the addicted Coleridge grew to rely. One of Coleridge’s most notorious poems, *Kubla Khan*, was a manifestation of a drug-induced vision.

The liquid opium, known laudanum, was a double edge sword for Coleridge; it was the source of his tragic addiction and the potion that enthused his imagination. This was because the drug increases blood flow to certain parts of the brain, inducing a creative nature and often causing hallucinations. This is an explanation as to why Coleridge concentrated on the power of the imagination. The poem *Kubla Khan* was inspired by opium use, and this is evident because Coleridge devised a completely original setting that had an undertone of darkness. The setting was described with very innovative images, in lines such as, “A damsel with a dulcimer/ In a vision [he] once saw” (Holmes, 17). The event is described in the context of a vision, not a dream or a thought, and this implies that the opium caused the “vision.” Moreover, the poem refers to an evil Mongol ruler, *Kubla Khan*, who does not represent peace or joy. That creates an under tone of darkness, and with opium the visions may have been glorious but the reality of the addiction was very “dark.”

On the other hand, Wordsworth had been known to dabble with opium but he did not have the same type of dependence, nor was his opium use overly evident in his poetry. Furthermore, the primary and secondary imagination is a concept that was unique to Coleridge, and although Wordsworth incorporated imagination into his poetry, he primarily called upon other sources of inspiration.

Wordsworth draws from nature in association with “spontaneous overflow[s] of powerful feelings” and “spots of time.” This is what he judges to be essential in the creation of poetry. The “spots of time” are moments from the past that are forever present in the mind, therefore they can constantly be reflected upon. The autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*, is a prime example of how Wordsworth reflects on “spots of time,” such as when he recalled the stormy weather that coincided with the death of his father. In addition, he allows nature to influence the mood of his poetry in works such as *Tintern Abbey*. For example, Wordsworth wrote about “waters, rolling from their mountain springs,” and “the quiet of the sky,” which gave him feelings of “unremembered pleasure” (*Romanticism*, 265). Similar to Wordsworth’s criticism of *Ancient Mariner*, Coleridge criticized the manner in which Wordsworth derived inspiration from nature. Coleridge asserts that “a poet’s heart and intellect” should be “combined with appearances in Nature – not held in...loose mixture in the shape of formal similes” (Newlyn, 91). This quote comes from his criticism of Bowles, but can also be applied to Wordsworth because his experiences with nature are based on mood, such as in the aforementioned *Tintern Abbey*. Passion, to Coleridge, was much more important than language that was “polished and artificial” (Newlyn, 89).

Coleridge criticized Wordsworth’s occasional exploitations of nature, and Wordsworth showed disdain for Coleridge’s “laboriously” concise diction in *Ancient Mariner*. However, apart from differences in their poetic diction and the ways in which they derived poetic inspiration, the two poets also had different outlooks on religion.

Especially in his later years, Coleridge concerned himself a great deal with God, religion and faith. His “ill health had led him to read the New Testament in a new light,” and he then began to look for “proof of God in the natural world” (Holmes, 71). He believed that men habitually needed “to look into their own souls instead of always looking out, both of themselves and their nature” (Holmes, 72). Coleridge not only examined the Bible, but he also studied the Trinitarian view of Christianity along with the works of St. Theresa. On the contrary, Wordsworth was an Anglican, as well as a pantheist. Although he did focus on God through nature as a pantheist, Wordsworth differed from Coleridge in that he did emphasize religious symbolism.

The poem *Spots in the Sun* is an example of how Coleridge incorporated God into his poetry. The poem is filled with constant religious references, and begins “My father confessor is strict and holy” (*Romanticism*, 511). Coleridge goes on to say, “Good father, I would fain not do thee wrong” (*Romanticism*, 511). The stress Coleridge placed on religion and God is ironic because this poem intended to address the strain on his relationship with Wordsworth. This poem addressed God and referenced religious anecdotes (i.e. “Mi fili peccare noli” or “Sin not, my son” *Romanticism*, 511), and overall the poem is referred to the strain in his relationship with Wordsworth; yet Coleridge incorporates religious symbolism that essentially contrasted the ideals of Wordsworth. One would imagine that if Coleridge were addressing the problematic relationship he would use language that is partial to Wordsworth, and refrain from involving ideology different from that of Wordsworth. On a very deep level, this may be an attempt by Coleridge to use juxtaposed concepts to convey his point. However, it is important to note that Coleridge integrated God into this poem. It displayed that even though he was concerned about his relations with Wordsworth, a very worthwhile topic, he felt that he could best address the situation by incorporating religious references.

When Wordsworth addressed the deteriorating relationship between himself and Coleridge in *A Complaint*, he wrote three stanzas without mentioning a word about God or religion. He wrote, “What happy moments did I count,” and wonders “what have I, shall I dare to dwell” (*Romanticism*, 407). Wordsworth refrained from bringing God into the issue, but instead used a literary device to convey his sentiment. He metaphorically compared their relationship to something very simple, which was a well that he hoped would “never dry” (*Romanticism*, 511). Wordsworth comments on the situation from a simple standpoint and does not involve God or a higher being; however, Coleridge makes the situation more intricate by involving God. On the surface, this is an example of Coleridge complicating things that Wordsworth deemed simple. In addition, this could be viewed fundamentally as Wordsworth’s creative ability to abstain from involving God and Coleridge’s reluctance to overlook the role of God. However, to truly understand why Coleridge involved God in his poem and why Wordsworth did not, one must understand how they each individually interpreted symbolism.

When Wordsworth rewrote *Destiny of Nations* according to his own terms, he included the lines, “Even in their fixed and steady lineaments/ He traced an ebbing and flowing mind, / Expression ever varying” (Newlyn, 44). Had Coleridge written this verse the “ebbing and flowing mind” would be interpreted as that of God, because he constantly searched for proof of God’s existence outside of himself. Nonetheless, the verse was written by Wordsworth, in his linguistic ambiguity suggested that the “ebbing and flowing mind” was in fact his own. In contrast, he is looked inside himself but not inside his soul, while Coleridge asserted that man must look inside himself and it is there he will find inspiration in God.

Whether their differences stemmed from religion, means of inspiration, or simply poetic diction, it is evident that these two poets were uniquely individual. Moreover, although Samuel Coleridge is often paired with William Wordsworth, upon further examination one can plainly see that the two poets are undoubtedly different. The similarities between them often overshadow their individual achievements, ideas, and styles. Due to the fact that Samuel Coleridge sought out the acquaintance of William Wordsworth and had his appreciation for Wordsworth's poetry well documented, Coleridge is considered the lesser of the two poets. Additionally, before the men collaborated on *Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge was temporarily viewed as Wordsworth's understudy. Combined with the fact that his opium addiction crippled his poetic potential, these elements portray Coleridge as less accomplished poet than Wordsworth. Regardless of popular opinion, Samuel Taylor Coleridge possessed his own unique poetic diction, sought non-traditional methods of poetic inspiration, conveyed original theories about the imagination, and distinctly incorporated his religious philosophies into his poetry. It is for these reasons that Samuel Taylor Coleridge remains a pillar for the Romantic era of poetry.

Annotated Bibliography