

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

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Samuel Taylor Coleridge



Born: October 21, 1772
🇬🇧 Ottery St Mary, England

Died: July 25, 1834
🇬🇧 Highgate, England

Occupation: Poet, critic, philosopher

Literary movement: Romanticism

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (October 21, 1772 – July 25, 1834) (pronounced ['kəʊləɪdʒ]) was an English poet, critic, and philosopher who was, along with his friend William Wordsworth, one of the founders of the Romantic Movement in England and one of the Lake Poets. He is probably best known for his poems *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Kubla Khan*, as well as his major prose work *Biographia Literaria*.

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Early life and education

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was born on October 21, 1772 in the rural town of Ottery St Mary, Devonshire. He was the youngest of ten children, and his father, the Reverend John Coleridge, was a well respected vicar. Coleridge suffered from constant ridicule by his older brother Frank, partially due to jealousy, as Samuel was often praised and favoured by his parents. To escape this abuse, he frequently sought refuge at a local library, which led him to discover his passion for poetry.

He later wrote in his *Biographia Literaria*:

At six years old I remember to have read *Belisarius*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *Philip Quarll* - and then I found the *Arabian Nights' Entertainments* - one tale of which (the tale of a man who was compelled to seek for a pure virgin) made so deep an impression on me (I had read it in the evening while my mother was mending stockings) that I was haunted by spectres whenever I was in the dark - and I distinctly remember the anxious and fearful eagerness with which I used to watch the window in which the books lay - and whenever the sun lay upon them, I would seize it, carry it by the wall, and bask, and read.

After the death of his father in 1781, contrary to his desires, he was sent to Christ's Hospital, a boarding school in London. The school was notorious for its unwelcoming atmosphere and strict regimen under The Rev. James Bowyer, many years Head Master of the Grammar-School, which fostered thoughts of guilt and depression in young Samuel's maturing mind.

However, Coleridge seems to have appreciated his teacher, as he wrote in detailed recollections of his schooldays in *Biographia Literaria*:

I enjoyed the inestimable advantage of a very sensible, though at the same time, a very severe master...At the same time that we were studying the Greek Tragic Poets, he made us read Shakspeare and Milton as lessons: and they were the lessons too, which required most time and trouble to bring up, so as to escape his censure. I learnt from him, that Poetry, even that of the loftiest, and, seemingly, that of the wildest odes, had a logic of its own, as severe as that of science; and more difficult, because more subtle, more complex, and dependent on more, and more fugitive causes....

In our own English compositions (at least for the last three years of our school education) he showed no mercy to phrase, metaphor, or image, unsupported by a sound sense, or where the same sense might have been conveyed with equal force and dignity in plainer words... In fancy I can almost hear him now, exclaiming *Harp? Harp? Lyre? Pen and ink, boy, you mean! Muse, boy, Muse? your Nurse's daughter, you mean! Pierian spring? Oh aye! the cloister-pump, I suppose!* ... Be this as it may, there was one custom of our master's, which I cannot pass over in silence, because I think it ... worthy of imitation. He would often permit our theme exercises, ... to accumulate, till each lad had four or five to be looked over. Then placing the whole number abreast on his desk, he would ask the writer, why this or that sentence might not have found as appropriate a place under this or that other thesis: and if no satisfying answer could be returned, and two faults of the same kind were found in one exercise, the irrevocable verdict followed, the exercise was torn up, and another on the same subject to be produced, in addition to the tasks of the day.

Throughout life, Coleridge idealized his father as pious and innocent, but his relationship with his mother was more problematic. His childhood was characterized by attention-seeking, which has been linked to his dependent personality as an adult. 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. He later wrote of his loneliness at school in the poem *Frost at Midnight*: "With unclosed lids, already had I dreamt/Of my sweet birthplace"

From 1791 until 1794 Coleridge attended Jesus College, Cambridge. In 1792 he won the Browne Gold Medal for an Ode that he wrote on the slave trade. In November, 1793, he left the college and enlisted in the Royal Dragoons, perhaps because of debt or because the girl that he loved had rejected him. His brothers arranged for his discharge a few months later (ironically because of supposed insanity) and he was readmitted to Jesus College, though he would never receive a degree from Cambridge.

Pantisocracy and marriage

At the university he was introduced to political and theological ideas then considered radical, including those of the poet Robert Southey. Coleridge joined Southey in a plan, soon abandoned, to found a utopian commune-like society, called pantisocracy, in the wilderness of Pennsylvania. In 1795 the two friends married sisters Sarah and Edith Fricker, but Coleridge's marriage proved unhappy. He grew to detest his wife, whom he only married because of social constraints, and eventually divorced her. During and after his failed marriage, he came to love a woman named Sara Hutchinson, who did not share this passion and consequentially caused him much distress. Sara departed for Portugal, but Coleridge remained in Britain. In 1796 he published *Poems on Various Subjects*.

In 1795 Coleridge met poet William Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy. They became immediate friends.

Around 1795, Coleridge started taking opium as a pain-reliever. His suffering, caused by many ailments, including toothache and facial neuralgia, is mentioned in his own notebook as well as that of Dorothy Wordsworth. There was no stigma associated with taking opium at the time, but also

little understanding of the dangers of addiction.

The years 1797 and 1798, during which he lived in Nether Stowey, Somerset, and Wordsworth, having visited him and being enchanted by the surroundings, rented Alfoxton Park, a little over three miles away, were among the most fruitful of Coleridge's life. Besides the *Rime of The Ancient Mariner*, he composed the symbolic poem *Kubla Khan*, written—Coleridge himself claimed—as a result of an opium dream, in "a kind of a reverie"; and the first part of the narrative poem *Christabel*. During this period he also produced his much-praised "conversation" poems *This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison*, *Frost at Midnight*, and *The Nightingale*.

In 1798

Coleridge

and Wordsworth published a joint volume of poetry, *Lyrical Ballads*, which proved to be the starting point for the English romantic movement. Though the productive Wordsworth contributed more poems to the volume, Coleridge's first version of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* was the longest poem and drew more immediate attention than anything else.

In the
spring of
1798,
Coleridge
temporarily
took over
for Rev.
Joshua
Toulmin at
Taunton's
Mary
Street
Unitarian
Chapel ^[1]
while Rev.
Toulmin
grieved
over the
drowning
death of his
daughter
Jane.
Poetically



A statue of the Ancient Mariner at
Watchet Harbour, Somerset, England,
unveiled in September 2003 as a
tribute to Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

*Ah ! well a-day ! what evil looks
Had I from old and young !
Instead of the cross, the Albatross
About my neck was hung.*

commenting on the strength of Rev. Toulmin,
Coleridge wrote in a 1798 letter to John Prior

Estlin,^[2]

I walked into Taunton (eleven miles) and back again, and performed the divine services for Dr. Toulmin. I suppose you must have heard that his daughter, (Jane, on April 15, 1798) in a melancholy derangement, suffered herself to be swallowed up by the tide on the sea-coast between Sidmouth and Bere (sic. Beer). These events cut cruelly into the hearts of old men: but the good Dr. Toulmin bears it like the true practical Christian, - there is indeed a tear in his eye, but that eye is lifted up to the Heavenly Father.^[3]

In the autumn of 1798, Coleridge and Wordsworth left for a stay in Germany; Coleridge soon went his own way and spent much of his time in university towns. During this period he became interested in German philosophy, especially the transcendental idealism of Immanuel Kant, and in the literary criticism of the 18th-century dramatist Gotthold Lessing. Coleridge studied German and, after his return to England, translated the dramatic trilogy *Wallenstein* by the German Classical poet

Friedrich Schiller into English.

Coleridge's greatest intellectual debts were first to William Godwin's *Political Justice*, especially during his Pantisocratic period, and to David Hartley's *Observations on Man*, which is the source of the psychology which we find in "Frost at Midnight." Hartley argued that we become aware of sensory events as impressions, and that "ideas" are derived by noticing similarities and differences between impressions and then by naming them. Connections resulting from the coincidence of impressions create linkages, so that the occurrence of one impression triggers those links and calls up the memory of those ideas with which it is associated (See Dorothy Emmet, "Coleridge and Philosophy").

Coleridge was critical of the literary taste of his contemporaries, and a literary conservative insofar as he was afraid that the lack of taste in the ever growing masses of literate people would mean a continued desecration of literature itself.

In 1800 he returned to England and shortly thereafter settled with his family and friends at Keswick in the Lake District of Cumberland to be near Grasmere, where Wordsworth had moved.

Soon, however, he was beset by marital problems, illnesses, increased opium dependency, tensions with Wordsworth, and a lack of confidence in his poetic powers, all of which fueled the composition of *Dejection: An Ode* and an intensification of his philosophical studies.

In 1804 he travelled to Sicily and Malta, working for a time as Acting Public Secretary of Malta under the Commissioner, Alexander Ball. He gave this up and returned to England in 1806. Dorothy Wordsworth was shocked at his condition upon his return. From 1807 to 1808, Coleridge returned to Malta and then travelled in Sicily and Italy, in the hope that leaving Britain's damp climate would improve his health and thus enable him to reduce his consumption of opium. Thomas de Quincey alleges in his *Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets* that it was during this period that Coleridge became a full-blown opium addict, using the drug as a substitute for the lost vigour and creativity of his youth. It has been suggested, however, that this reflects de Quincey's own experiences more than Coleridge's.

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 in 1808,

quarrelled with Wordsworth in 1810, lost part of his annuity in 1811, put himself under the care of Dr. Daniel in 1814.

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 – those on Shakespeare renewed interest in the playwright as a model for contemporary writers.

In 1817 Coleridge, with his addiction worsening, his spirits depressed, and his family alienated, took residence in the home of the physician James Gillman, in Highgate. In Gillman's home he finished his major prose work, the *Biographia Literaria* (1815), a volume composed of 23 chapters of autobiographical notes and dissertations on various subjects, including some incisive literary theory and criticism. He composed much poetry here and had many inspirations — a few of them from opium overdose. Perhaps because he conceived such grand projects, he had difficulty carrying them through to completion, and he berated himself for his "indolence." It is unclear whether his growing use of opium was a symptom or a cause of his growing depression.

He published other writings while he was living at the Gillman home, notably *Sibylline Leaves* (1820), *Aids to Reflection* (1823), and *Church and State* (1826). He died of a lung disorder including some heart failure from the opium that he was taking in Highgate on July 25, 1834.

Poetry

Coleridge is probably best known for his long poems, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Christabel*. Even those who have never read the *Rime* have come under its influence: its words have given the English language the metaphor of an albatross around one's neck, the quotation of "water, water everywhere, nor any drop to drink (almost always rendered as "but not a drop to drink")", and the phrase "a sadder and a wiser man (again, usually rendered as "sadder but wiser man")". *Christabel* is known for its musical rhythm, language, and its Gothic tale.

Kubla Khan, or, *A Vision in a Dream, A Fragment*, although shorter, is also widely known and loved. It has strange, dreamy imagery and can be read on many levels. Both *Kubla Khan* and *Christabel*

have an additional "romantic" aura because they were never finished. Stopford Brooke characterised both poems as having no rival due to their "exquisite metrical movement" and "imaginative phrasing." It is one of history's tragedies that Coleridge was interrupted while writing *Kubla Khan* by a visitor and could not recall any more of the poem afterwards.

Coleridge's shorter, meditative "conversation poems," however, proved to be the most influential of his work. These include both quiet poems like *This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison* and *Frost at Midnight* and also strongly emotional poems like *Dejection* and *The Pains of Sleep*. Wordsworth immediately adopted the model of these poems, and used it to compose several of his major poems. Via Wordsworth, the conversation poem became a standard vehicle for English poetic expression, and perhaps the most common approach among modern poets.

Coleridge's poetry so impressed the parents of black British composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875-1912) that they named him after the poet.

Coleridge and the influence of

the Gothic

Gothic novels like Polidori's *The Vampire*, Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, Mrs Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Italian*, and Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* were the best-sellers of the end of the eighteenth century, and thrilled many young women (who were often strictly forbidden to read them). Jane Austen satirised the style mercilessly in *Northanger Abbey*.

Coleridge wrote reviews of Mrs Radcliffe's books and of *The Mad Monk* among others. He comments in his reviews:

Situations of torment, and images of naked horror, are easily conceived; and a writer in whose works they abound, deserves our gratitude almost equally with him who should drag us by way of sport through a military hospital, or force us to sit at the dissecting-table of a natural philosopher. To trace the nice boundaries, beyond which terror and sympathy are deserted by the pleasurable emotions, - to reach those limits, yet never to pass them, hic labor, hic opus est.

and:

The horrible and the preternatural have usually seized on the popular taste, at the rise and decline of literature. Most powerful stimulants, they can never be required except by the torpor of an unawakened, or the languor of an exhausted, appetite... We trust, however, that satiety will banish what good sense should have prevented; and that, wearied with fiends, incomprehensible characters, with shrieks, murders, and subterraneous dungeons, the public will learn, by the multitude of the manufacturers, with how little expense of thought or imagination this species of composition is manufactured.

However, Coleridge used mysterious and demonic elements in poems such as *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), *Christabel* and *Kubla Khan* (published 1816 but known in manuscript form before then) and certainly influenced other poets and writers of the time. Poems like this 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*.

Family connections

Coleridge was the father of Hartley Coleridge, Sara Coleridge, and Derwent Coleridge and grandfather of Herbert Coleridge, Ernest Hartley Coleridge and Christabel Coleridge. He was the uncle of the first Baron Coleridge. The poet Mary Elizabeth Coleridge (1861 - 1907) was his great-great niece. His nephew Henry Nelson Coleridge, who was an editor of his work, married Sara.

Notes

1. ^ Welcome to Taunton's Historic Unitarian Congregation and Chapel (Dec. 2005). Unitarian Chapel, Mary Street, Taunton. Obtained Oct. 21, 2006.
2. ^ John Prior Estlin (1747-1817) was a Unitarian minister and friend of English poets Barbauld and Coleridge. See, Vargo,

Lisa, (Nov. 9, 2004). The Anna Laetitia Barbauld Web Site. | A Note on John Prior Estlin. (adapted by Vargo from the Dictionary of National Biography and Richard Holmes, Coleridge: Early Visions (1989))

3. ^ Calvert-Toulmin, Bruce. (2006) Toulmin Family Home Page. Joshua Toulmin (*1331) 1740 - 1815. Obtained Oct. 21, 2006.

Bibliography

By Coleridge

- *The Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Introduction) Oxford University Press 1912
- *The Collected Works* in 16 volumes (some are double volumes), many editors, Routledge & Kegan Paul and also Bollingen Series LXXV, Princeton University Press (1971-2001)
- *The Notebooks* in 5 (or 6) double volumes, eds. Kathleen Coburn and others, Routledge and also Bollingen Series L, Princeton University Press (1957-1990)
- *Collected Letters* in 6 volumes, ed. E. L. Griggs, Clarendon Press: Oxford (1956-1971)

About Coleridge

- Essay by John Stuart Mill: *On Coleridge*
- Biography by Richard Holmes: *Coleridge: Early Visions*, Viking Penguin: New York, 1990 (republished later by HarperCollins) ISBN 0-375-70540-6; *Coleridge: Darker Reflections*, HarperCollins: London, 1997 ISBN 0-375-70838-3
- Memoir by Thomas de Quincey: *Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets* ISBN 0-14-043973-0

Related to Coleridge

- Science fiction by Douglas Adams: *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* ISBN 0-671-74672-3
- Fantasy by Tim Powers: *The Anubis Gates*

External links

- Poems by Samuel Taylor Coleridge at PoetryFoundation.org
- Romantic Circles -- Excellent Editions & Articles on Coleridge and other authors of the Romantic period

- The Coleridge Archive
 - Rime of the Ancient Mariner
 - Christabel
 - Kubla Khan
 - This Lime Tree Bower My Prison
 - Frost at Midnight
 - Dejection
 - The Pains of Sleep
- Works by Samuel Taylor Coleridge at Project Gutenberg
- The Raven
- Walk the Coleridge Way in Exmoor National Park and the Quantocks AONB
- Audio samples of works by S.T. Coleridge in Creative Commons recordings.
- Free audiobook of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* from LibriVox
- Works of Coleridge at the University of Toronto
- Coleridge web resources at Voice of the Shuttle
- Essays by scholar Catherine M. Wallace on Coleridge
- Selection of Poems by Coleridge
- Coleridge's Grave
- Friends of Coleridge Society
- Find-A-Grave profile for Samuel Taylor Coleridge
- "Kubla Khan" and the Embodied Mind, a

detailed analysis of the poem.

- Talking with Nature in "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison", a detailed analysis of the poem.
- Kubla Khan Set To Music, analysis and a musical approach to the themes of the poem for students & teachers of English

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18th century - 19th century

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Romantic poetry: Blake - Burns - Byron - Coleridge - Goethe - Hölderlin - Hugo - Keats - Krasiński - Lamartine - Leopardi - Lermontov - Mickiewicz - Nerval - Novalis - Pushkin - Shelley - Słowacki - Wordsworth

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