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## **S. T. Coleridge as a Critic: An Assessment**

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## Introduction

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772- 1834) is one of the distinguished literary figures of the Romantic Age of the English literature. As a poet, critic and philosopher, he prodigiously influenced the writers and critics of his time and even later. Along with his friend and poet, William Wordsworth, Coleridge wrote poems in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) which also includes his famous poem 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'. Both, Wordsworth and Coleridge entrenched new trend in the English poetry with the publication of *Lyrical Ballad* and it became one of the pioneering texts of the English Romanticism. Besides writing some of the remarkable narrative and lyric poems, Coleridge has engendered fresh insights in the field of literary criticism. In the words of George Saintsbury, "Coleridge is the critical author to be turned over by day and by night... Begins with him, continues with him, come back to him after excursion, with a certainty of suggestion, stimulation, correction, edification" (341) Moreover, he rates him with other great critics like Aristotle and Longinus.

## About S.T. Coleridge

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, poet, philosopher, critic and co-founder British Romantic Movement, was born in 1772 in Devonshire, England. In his school days, he attended Christ Hospital School and met Charles Lamb, a lifelong friend. Along with William Wordsworth and Robert Southey, he formed a group, popularly known as Lake Poets. His famous poems are *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, *Frost at Midnight*, *Kubla Khan* and *Christabel*. Coleridge occupies respectable place for his use of supernatural elements in lyrical poetry, theory of imagination and reinventing interest in Shakespeare.

## About *Biographia Literaria*:

Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* was published in two volumes in 1817. In the twenty three chapters of this autobiographical work, Coleridge addresses various topics of philosophy, religion and literature. Moreover, *Biographia Literaria* earned great respect to Coleridge and is considered as the most significant work on literary criticism of the Romantic Period which blends philosophy and literature in a different way.



## Coleridge's Views on Prose, Poem and Poetry:

According to Coleridge, poetry is the product of pure imagination, idealizing the real and realizing the ideal. Poetry is the wider term for Coleridge and it is an activity which involves “whole soul of man.” As a thinker and critic Coleridge raises questions related to nature and function of poetry. In his definition he writes, “A poem is that species of composition which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its immediate object pleasure, not truth.”(479) Hence, the immediate aim of poetry is to give pleasure to reader and not the truth.

Further, comparing poetry and prose, Coleridge argues “a poem contains the same elements as a prose composition”. Both these use words but the difference between poem and prose composition is in the use of same words differently. Here Coleridge emphasizes on the use of meter and rhyme which is essential for poetic composition. He opines that rhyme and metre are fundamental elements in order to memorize whatever is written. Whereas prose uses sentences and paragraphs without metrical structure and therefore is “ordinary writing.”

In addition to this, for Coleridge term poem and poetry are not the same. However, some critics believe that this distinction is not much clear. In his work *Biographia Literaria* he tries to differentiate between poem and poetry. This seems interesting that the term poetry is deeper and wider for Coleridge. It is an activity of poet's mind which every poet, artist or scientist work. Here, Coleridge recognizes the power of imagination as the soul of poetry. On other hand, a poem is simply one of the forms of expression. In fact, Coleridge was more concerned with the organic wholeness of the poem. In *Critical Approaches to Literature*, David Daiches explains Coleridge's concept of poetry and observes:

Poetry' for Coleridge is a wider category than a 'poem'; that is, poetry is a kind of activity which can be engaged in by painters or philosophers or scientists and is not confined to those who employ metrical language, or even to those who employ language of any kind. Poetry, in this larger sense, brings, 'the whole soul of man; into activity, with each faculty playing its proper part according to its 'relative worth and dignity'. (105)



## **His Theory of Imagination**

The thirteenth and fourteen chapter of *Biographia Literaria* deals with Coleridge's theory of imagination. He believes that poetry as an art of imagination was confused with fancy in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Coleridge admits imagination as a power that unifies all experiences of thoughts and feelings, reason and emotion. "Coleridge set himself to investigate philosophically the "seminal principle" of the imagination, and to discover the nature of the faculty of the soul by which the poet expresses himself through the forms of art." (James. 211) He divides imagination at two different levels 1) The Primary Imagination and 2) The Secondary Imagination.

## **The Primary Imagination**

According to Coleridge, the primary imagination is universal and possessed by all. It is simply the power of perceiving and the object of sense (person, place and things) both in their parts and as whole. As Coleridge describes,

"The primary Imagination I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I Am." (478)

It is involuntary act of the mind which enable it to form a clear image of the object perceived by the senses. The human mind collects impressions and sensations from the external world and it unconsciously arranges them and imposes some shape and size on them so as to construct a clear picture of the outside world.

## **The Secondary Imagination**

The secondary imagination is typical attribute of the artist and chief source of all poetic creation. In fact, it is conscious use of the power of imagination which more active than the primary imagination. For Coleridge, "The secondary imagination, I consider as an echo of the former co-existence with the consciousness will. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate."(478) This type of imagination consciously uses and links faculties of intellect, perception, will and emotions together. Coleridge considers the secondary imagination as a poetic vision and the faculty that a poet has to



“idealize and unify”. Further, “the magical and synthetic power” as Coleridge calls it, bridges the gap between the matter and the spirit and in order to harmonize the opposites.

## **Esemplastic Power of Imagination**

In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge used the term “esemplastic” to describe the power of imagination. It is an ability to shape dissimilar elements of concepts into a unified whole. By this term, Coleridge means the power by which an image or feeling or object is made to modify many others in order to create a new sense. Therefore, the secondary imagination with its “plastic stress” reshapes objects of the external world and makes them more artistic and beautiful. Coleridge has appropriately used the word “esemplastic” to describe the power of imagination which unifies different objects and material in an organic matter.

## **Fancy and Imagination**

Coleridge broadly differentiates between fancy and imagination. It is simply a kind of memory and mechanical process which randomly brings together, images that have similarity to form a new picture. So, Coleridge considers fancy as inferior to imagination.

Fancy, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with but fixities and definitives. Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space. But equally with the ordinary memory it must receive but its materials readymade from the law of association.

So, imagination and fancy differ in its kind and nature. The distinction between two will be clearer with the following examples. The following couplet by Chesterfield is an example of fancy:

“The dews of the evening most carefully shun, they  
are the tears of the sky for the loos of the sun.”

In the above couplet, four things sky, evening, dews and tears are combined. It is as if four separates, put on the screen to form a new picture. It does not receive any coloring or modification from the poet’s mind.

But to elucidate imagination Coleridge gives the following lines from the sonnet of William Shakespeare:



“Full many a glorious morning have I have seen  
Flatter the mountain- tops with sovereign eye.”

In the above lines the morning, thoughts of as a glorious queen, flatter the lowly mountain tops by agreeing to cast a glance as it. All the pictures in the lines have one central thought or feeling running through them which unifies them into a single vision.

Hence, Coleridge’s views on imagination and the distinction between fancy and imagination is a unique contribution in the field of literary criticism. Before him, most of the critics used fancy and imagination almost synonymously. Fancy represents mechanical process of the mind which passively accumulates the data in the memory. Whereas, imagination is described as “mysterious power” which is responsible for constructing all forms into one graceful and intelligent whole.

## Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said that Coleridge’s views on poetry and theory of imagination began new discourse in the field of literary criticism. Perhaps, he is the first critic who studies the nature of imagination and examines its role in creative process. Apart from poetic capabilities, Coleridge’s ideas on poem, poetry, imagination and fancy show that he for the first time brings psychology and philosophy into literary criticism. He is the one who tries to inquire the process of poetic creation to form new kind of aesthetics. Appreciating Coleridge, David Daiches points out "It was Coleridge who finally, for the first time, resolved the age old problem of the relation between the form and content of poetry."



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