**Samuel Taylor Coleridge**

**Introduction & Biography**

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a leader of the British Romantic movement, was born on October 21, 1772, in Devonshire, England. His father, a vicar of a parish and master of a grammar school, married twice and had fourteen children. The youngest child in the family, 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 in London, where 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's views, however, 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.  
En route to Wales in June 1794, Coleridge met a student named Robert Southey. Striking an instant friendship, Coleridge postponed his trip for several weeks, and the men shared their philosophical ideas. 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. Coleridge and Southey envisioned the men sharing the workload, a great library, philosophical discussions, and freedom of religious and political beliefs.

After finally visiting Wales, Coleridge returned to England to find that Southey had become 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. During that period, Coleridge and Southey collaborated on a play titled *The Fall of Robespierre* (1795). While the pantisocracy was still in the planning stages, Southey abandoned the project to pursue his legacy in law. Left without an alternative plan, 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 [William Wordsworth](https://poets.org/poetsorg/poet/william-wordsworth), who greatly influenced Coleridge's verse. Coleridge, whose early work was celebratory and conventional, began writing in a more natural style. In his "conversation poems," such as "The Eolian Harp" and "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison," Coleridge used his intimate friends and their experiences as subjects.  
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 traveled 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. When he returned to England in 1800, he settled with family and friends at Keswick. Over the next two decades Coleridge lectured on literature and philosophy, wrote about religious and political theory, spent two years on the island of Malta as a secretary to the governor in an effort to overcome his poor health and his opium addiction, and lived off of financial donations and grants. Still addicted to opium, he moved in with the physician James Gillman in 1816. In 1817, he published *Biographia Literaria*, which contained his finest literary criticism. He continued to publish poetry and prose, notably *Sibylline Leaves* (1817), *Aids to Reflection* (1825), and *Church and State* (1830). He died in London on July 25, 1834.  
On the basis of seemingly contradictory responses, Coleridge has sometimes been depicted as a turncoat who betrayed his original revolutionary sympathies. His poems suggest, and his lay sermons of the period confirm, that his allegiance was always to an ideal of freedom, not to democratic insurgency. The quality of his ambivalence did not prevent his speaking out in situations which damaged his reputation among Burke’s party, his natural constituency.  
**Coleridge as a critic**  Samuel Taylor Coleridge [1772-1834] was a great poet, but he is also a great critic. He is one of the greatest of poet-critics that England has ever produced. He was a genius and when he inspired, and when the mood was upon him, he could create works of the highest order, but he was incapable of sustained and persistent labour.

          Stray’s remarks on literature and literary theory are scattered all over his prose works as, The Friend, Table Talks, Letters, Aids to Reflections, Confessions of an Inquiring spirit, Animal Poteau and Sibylline Leaves. But the bulk of his literary criticism, all that is most worthwhile in it is contained in his.

**(1)  Biographia Literaria and**

**(2)  Lectures on Shakespeare and other poets** Activity of the ‘poet’s’ mind, and a ‘poem’ is merely one of the forms of us expression, a verbal expression of that activity, and poetic activity is basically an activity of the imagination. As David Daiches points out. ‘Poetry’ for Coleridge is a wider category than that of “poem”,  
thatis 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’. This takes place whenever the **“secondary** **imagination”** comes into operation. Whenever the synthesizing the integrating, powers of the secondary imagination is at work, bringing all aspects of a subject into a completion unity, then poetry in this larger sense results.  
    **Coleridge’s Criticism:**

→      **Themes of poetry**

→      **Rustic Language**

→      **Poetic Diction**  
Coming to detailed consideration of words worth’s theory of poetic diction he takes up his statements, one by one; and demonstrates that his views are not justified. Words worth asserts that the language of poetry is, “a selection of the real language of men or the very language of men, and that there was no essential difference between the language of prose and that of poetry”. “As in lyrical Ballads “  
 Wordsworth and Coleridge in their lyrical Ballads discussed the following points: People and supernatural characters or romantics, imaginations, poetic truth and man’s inner world and human interest. According to Coleridge there are **two main points of poetry:**

**(1)**     The power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature.

**(2)**     The power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colors of imagination.

          Words worth tried to focus on the charms of novelty to things of everyday directing the human mind to the loveliness and wonders of the world. 

**The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner**

In the years 1797 and 1798 he lived near Wordsworth and his sister, Dorothy, in Somersetshire. Together with Wordsworth he published the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), a collection of twenty-three poems, containing nineteen of Wordsworth’s poems and four of Coleridge’s. The most famous of these was “*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*“. Besides Coleridge composed the symbolic poem *Kubla Khan*, written about the Mongol emperor Kublai Khan and his legendary palace at Xanadu and — as 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*. Poems like these both drew inspiration from and helped to inflame the craze for Gothic romance.  
**The distinction between Fancy and the Imagination**  
The distinction made by Coleridge between Fancy and the Imagination rested on the fact that fancy was concerned with the mechanical operations of the mind while imagination on the other hand is described the mysterious power. “The Primary Imagination” was for Coleridge, the “necessary imagination” as it makes images and impressions of what it receives through the senses. It represents man’s ability to learn from nature. The over arching property of the primary imagination was that it was common to all people. Whereas “The Secondary imagination” on the other hand, represents a superior faculty which could only be associated with artistic genius. A key and defining attribute of the secondary imagination was a free and deliberate will.  
Thus imagination creates new shapes and forms of beauty by fusing and unifying the different impressions it receives from the external world. Whereas Fancy is a kind of memory; it randomly brings together images, and even when brought together, they continue to retain their separate individual properties.  
***Biographia Literaria*** **by coleridge**  
[Coleridge](http://www.bl.uk/people/samuel-taylor-coleridge) intended *Biographia Literaria* to be a short preface to a collection of his poems, *Sibylline Leaves* (1817). However, it quickly expanded into a two-volume autobiography, mixing memoir, philosophy, religion and literary theory, and was heavily influenced by German criticism, the evaluation and interpretation of literature. Coleridge himself described *Biographia Literaria* as an ‘immethodical miscellany’ of ‘life and opinions’. In 1906, the poet Arthur Symons called the work ‘the greatest book of criticism in English, and one of the most annoying books in any language’.

**Poetic theory in *Biographia Literaria***

*Biographia Literaria* includes some of the most important English writing on poetic theory. Some of it is a response to ideas of poetry advanced by his close friend and collaborator [William Wordsworth](http://www.bl.uk/people/william-wordsworth), first in the 1800 preface to their joint publication [*Lyrical Ballads*](http://www.bl.uk/works/lyrical-ballads) and then in the preface to Wordsworth’s *Collected Poems* (1815). Referring to the latter, Coleridge says he wants in *Biographia Literaria* to make clear ‘on what points I coincide with the opinions in that preface, and in what points I altogether differ’.

**Imagination and the suspension of disbelief**

In one of the most famous passages in *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge offers a theory of creativity (pp. 95-96). He divides imagination into primary and secondary. Primary imagination is common to all humans: it enables us to perceive and make sense of the world. It is a creative function and thereby repeats the divine act of creation. The secondary imagination enables individuals to transcend the primary imagination – not merely to perceive connections but to make them. It is the creative impulse that enables poetry and other art.

*Biographia Literaria* contains the first instance of the phrase ‘suspension of disbelief’. Writing about his contributions to the *Lyrical Ballads*, which includes [*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*](http://www.bl.uk/works/the-rime-of-the-ancient-mariner), Coleridge says that although his characters were ‘supernatural, or at least romantic’, he tried to give them a ‘human interest and a semblance of disbelief’ that would prompt readers to the ‘willing suspension of disbelief … which constitutes poetic faith’.