UNIT 5: SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE: LIFE AND WORKS

UNIT STRUCTURE:

5.1 Learning Objectives

5.2 Introduction

5.3 Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Poet

5.3.1 His Life

5.3.2 His Works

5.4 Critical Reception of Coleridge as a Romantic Poet

5.5 Let us Sum up

5.6 Further Reading

5.7 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

5.8 Possible Questions

5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- read briefly about the life and works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge
- discuss certain basic features of English Romanticism through Coleridge's poetry
- identify the themes that consist in the philosophy of Coleridge as a poet
- make an assessment of Coleridge as a poet of his time

5.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces you to Samuel Taylor Coleridge another of the important English poet, literary critic, philosopher and theologian of the Romantic era. With his friend Wordsworth, about whom you have read in the previous units, was the founder of the Romantic Movement in England. Coleridge was also a member of the group of poets known as the Lake Poets. He is well known for his poems like "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "Kubla Khan", as well as for his major critical work *Biographia Literarira*. Coleridge coined many familiar words and

phrases, including the very famous 'Willing Suspension of Disbelieve'. In this unit, an attempt has been made to discuss the life and works of S. T. Coleridge in some detail.

5.3 SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE: THE POET

5.3.1 His Life

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was born at the vicarage of Ottery St. Mary, in Devonshire, England, October 21, 1772. His father was a clergyman of the Church of England, and a schoolmaster, good-hearted but absent-minded and impractical. Coleridge's childhood was that of a talented and imaginative boy. He read a lot about fairy tales and acted out the scenes in them, living much by himself in the world, which he created out of his Imagination. When he was nine years old his father died, and the next year Coleridge entered the great public school of Christ's Hospital, where he became a schoolfellow of Charles Lamb. Then he went up to Cambridge, met Wordsworth, but failed to lead a comfortable college life.



Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org

While still a student, he made an excursion to Oxford, and met Robert Southey. It was the restless time of the French Revolution, and these young students and enthusiasts were eager to try some new order of life. With the help of a few other friend she developed a scheme which they named "Pantisocracy," or the equal rule of all, and proposed to form a community on the banks of the Susquehanna in Pennsylvania, where two or three hours' labour a day, on the part of each, would suffice for the community, and then the remaining time could be given to the pursuit of philosophy, poetry and all the arts. Southey was married, and Coleridge was thrown much with Mrs. Southey's sister, Sara Fricker, because of which he had to marry her hastily. Among his

friends at this time in Bristol, where the Frickers lived, was the bookseller Joseph Cottle, who had great faith in Coleridge's literary potentials. He undertook the publication of a volume of poems, and lent him money to run his family.

Coleridge at the time of his marriage was only twenty-three years old. For a number of years, Coleridge and his wife, and the children born to them, led a shifting life; sometimes they were together, sometimes they were separated. Now, Coleridge would make a stay in Germany, now they would be all together with the Wordsworths (William and his sister Dorothy) and Southeys in the Lake Country. However, by 1813, the union of an irresponsible, dreamy husband with a wife of limited intellectual sympathy ended. For three years, Coleridge led a dreary life, lecturing, arguing with friends, and struggling against the habit of opium, which had finally taken his life. In 1816, he put himself under the care of Dr. Gillman, living at Highgate, on the outskirts of London. There he spent the last sixteen years of his life, cared for by a kind physician, making occasional journeys into other parts of England, receiving many visitors and continuing to write. His most notable poems were written towards the end of the 18th century. Coleridge died on 25th July 1834.



LET US KNOW

Wordsworth and Coleridge:

You should find it interesting to note the differences between Wordsworth and Coleridge as poets. Wordsworth was severe, cold, much given to calm judgment; Coleridge was impulsive, erring, warm-hearted. Wordsworth led a correct, diligent life; he was prudent and thrifty, a good housekeeper, a proper husband and father; while Coleridge had magnificent plans and dreams; he was indolent, and, fell into the terrible habit of opium, he left great works incomplete, he married in haste and repented at leisure; he led his life at the mercy of his friends.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: How did Coleridge's childhood influence his poetic mind in later times?

Q 2: What, according to you, is the meaning of 'Pantisocracy'?

Q 3: Identify the basic differences between Wordsworth and Coleridge as Romantic poets.

5.3.2 His Works

Most of the early works of Coleridge are tinged by a sense of radicalism and political reform. For example, one of his early works "Sonnets on Eminent Characters" written in 1794 is clearly partisan defining enemies and friends to the political cause. Another poem "France: An Ode" published in 1798, tends to distinguish the 'spirit of divinest Liberty' which, according to Coleridge, was to be found in the midst of nature. The context of such poems can also be traced in Coleridge's political commitment and his denunciation of monarchy and aristocracy at its worst.

Around 1795, he met William Wordsworth and both worked together with a revolutionary enthusiasm for change in society and literature. Their close association bore fruits in the form of conversation poems like "The Lime-tree bower my Prison", "Frost at Midnight", "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "Kubla Khan" which were written in between 1797-1798. Poems like "The Lime-tree bower my Prison" and "Frost at Midnight" suggest a Wordsworthian sense of transcendental reality of natural phenomena: the first one being an address to his school friend Charles Lamb, interlinks human affection, a sense of joy and unity in the midst of natural world. The second, on the other hand, is a school day memory of displacement and loneliness. The contrast between town and country, rural companionship and urban

isolation are also the important themes in the poem. “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” is one of his most memorable contributions to ***Lyrical Ballads***. The poem takes the form of a voyage discovery, but it also beautifully describes the psychodrama concerning the guilt of the Mariner who killed an albatross. “Kubla Khan”, on the other hand, is derived from Coleridge’s wide reading of mythology, history and comparative religion. Another important poem “Christabel”, intended originally for the publication in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* but refused by Wordsworth for its strangeness, is in many ways a complement to “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”. It too echoes the style of old ballads and links Christabel’s experience of life and death to that of the Mariner.

In 1802, Coleridge composed “Dejection: An Ode”, often considered his last important poem. It opens with an epigraph and is marked by an acknowledgement of the failure to respond to natural phenomena and of the decay of an imaginative joy. However, during the early 1800, Coleridge became increasingly aware of his poetic inspiration, and became interested in the processes and implications of ‘critical theory’. Despite a visible decline in his Pantisocratic ventures and his revolutionary vows, he continued to delve deeper into the central principle of his philosophy: the ultimate unity and invisibility in the process of creation. The result was his thought provoking *Biographia Literaria* (1817) where he proclaimed his ‘esemplastic’ or unifying power of Imagination. This book is a meditation on poetry, poets and above all the nature of the poetic imagination. However, his later writings are preoccupied with religious issues, with the problem of belief and joy of believing, with a moral concern with the inward impulses, and with a criticism of the Scriptures. His subsequent publication of *The Constitution of the Church and State* (1829) brings to a climax his concern with dynamic unity, and constitutes a part of the national debate on reform.

Coleridge’s prose works displayed a more openly social and religious inclination. His two *Lay Sermons* (1816, 1817) were

addressed to the 'Higher' and 'Middle' classes on questions of reform and moral responsibility. His three-volume edition of *The Friend* makes a Baconian attempt to explain the growth of knowledge; *Aids to Reflection* (1825) had a profound influence on Sterling, Kingsley, and the young Christian Socialists; and his short monograph entitled *Church and State* (1830), is based on the concept of national 'Culture' which was further taken up by Matthew Arnold and Cardinal Newman in the succeeding age. Coleridge's lectures on general literature and philosophy have survived in the form of notes and shorthand reports. All these later works develop Coleridge's leading critical ideas, concerning Imagination and Fancy; Reason and Understanding; Symbolism and Allegory; Organic and Mechanical Form; Culture and Civilization. The dialectical way he expresses them is one of his clearest debts to German Romantic philosophy, and represents a decisive counter-attack against British utilitarianism. His final position is that of a Romantic conservative and Christian radical, who strangely foreshadows much of the spiritual 'anxiety' of European existentialism. [Adapted from Margaret Drabble]

Some Important Contexts of Coleridge's Works: [Adapted from Gale Encyclopaedia]

Coleridge's career as an intellectual figure spans several decades and encompasses major works in several different fields, including poetry, criticism, philosophy, and theology. Because of the richness and subtlety of his prose style, his startling and often profound insights, and his active, inquiring mind, Coleridge is now generally regarded as the most profound and significant prose writer of the English Romantic period.

Spiritual Symbolism: The poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" perhaps best incorporates both Coleridge's imaginative use of verse and the intertwining of reality and fantasy. The Mariner kills the Albatross in bad faith, subjecting himself to the hostility of the forces that govern the universe. However, it is unclear how these forces are meant to relate to one another—

whether the Life-in-Death is in league with the submerged spirit, or whether their simultaneous appearance is simply a coincidence. After earning the curse for killing the bird, the Mariner is able to gain access to the favour of God—being able to regain his ability to pray—only by realizing that the monsters around him are beautiful in God's eyes and that he should love them as he should have loved the Albatross. In the final part, the Mariner's encounter with a Hermit will spell out this message explicitly, and you have learnt why the Mariner stopped the Wedding-Guest to tell him this story. The tale of a seaman who kills an albatross, the poem presents a variety of religious and supernatural images to depict a moving spiritual journey of doubt, renewal, and eventual redemption. We can consider the poem to be an allegorical record of Coleridge's own spiritual pilgrimage.

Influence of German Romantic Philosophy: The *Biographia Literaria*, was inspired by his disdain for the 18th century empiricists who relied on observation and experimentation to formulate their aesthetic theories. In this work, he turned to the German philosophers like Kant and Schelling for a more universal interpretation of art. From Schelling, Coleridge drew his "exaltation of art to a metaphysical role", and his contention that art is analogous to nature is borrowed from Kant.

Definition of Imagination: Of the different sections in the *Biographia Literaria*, perhaps the most often studied is Coleridge's definition of the imagination. He describes two kinds of imagination, the primary and the secondary. According to Coleridge, the purpose of poetry was to provide pleasure "through the medium of beauty."

Shakespeare Criticism: Coleridge's other great critical achievement is his work on Shakespeare. His Shakespearean criticism is among the most important in the English language, although it was never published in formal essays. His emphasis on individual psychology and characterization marked the inception of a new critical approach to Shakespeare, rendering a profound influence on later studies.

Genesis of the poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner":

The first suggestion to Coleridge appears to have come from a strange dream related to him by a friend, in which appeared a skeleton ship with figures in it. Wordsworth said: "Much the greatest part of the story was Mr. Coleridge's invention, but certain parts I suggested; for example, some crime was to be committed which should bring upon the Old Navigator, as Coleridge afterwards wanted to call him, the spectral persecution, as a consequence of that crime, and his own wanderings. I had been reading in Shelvocke's Voyages a day or two before that, while doubling Cape Horn, they frequently saw albatrosses in that latitude, the largest sort of sea-fowl, some extending their wings twelve or thirteen feet. "Suppose," said Wordsworth, "you represent him as having killed one of these birds on entering the South Sea, and that the tutelary spirits of these regions take upon them to avenge the crime." The incident was thought fit for the purpose and adopted accordingly. Wordsworth also said: "I suggested the navigation of the ship by the dead men, but do not recollect that I had anything more to do with the scheme of the poem. The gloss with which it was subsequently accompanied, was not thought of by either of us at the time, at least not a hint of it was given to me, and I have no doubt it was a gratuitous afterthought. We began the composition together on that, to me, memorable evening. I furnished two or three lines at the beginning of the poem, in particular, "And listen'd like a three years' child:/The Mariner had his will." These trifling contributions, all but one, which Mr. Coleridge has with unnecessary scrupulosity recorded, slipped out of his mind, as they well might. As we endeavoured to proceed conjointly (I speak of the same evening), our respective manners proved so widely different, that it would have been quite presumptuous in me to do anything but separate from an undertaking upon which I could only have been a clog."



LET US KNOW

In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge refers to his discussion with Wordsworth regarding two contrasting kinds of poetry—one dealing with common humdrum everyday events presented in a furnished manner with the help of the poet's imagination; the other dealing with supernatural elements underlying which there is a concern with real human actions and situations. In Chapter 16 of his *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge writes: "In this idea originated the plan of the *Lyrical Ballads,* in which it was agreed that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to produce for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for a moment, which constitutes poetic faith." You will soon understand that the poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" was written to illustrate this faith of the poet.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: Mention the most notable poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

5.4 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF COLERIDGE AS A ROMANTIC POET

By now, you must have realised that Coleridge was a major figure in the English Romantic movement. He is best known for three poems, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", "Kubla Khan", and "Christabel". Although the three poems were poorly received during Coleridge's lifetime, they are now praised as classic examples of imaginative verses. The influence of the Ancient Mariner rings clear in Shelley and Keats in the next generation. Whereas, Tennyson, Browning, Rossetti, and

Swinburne are among their Victorian inheritors. In the title of W. H. Auden's "Look, Stranger!" (1936), the echo of the Mariner's exhortation, "Listen, Stranger!" from the text of 1798, shows how far Coleridge's voice would carry. Coleridge was also influential as a critic, especially with *Biographia Literaria*. His criticism, which examines the nature of poetic creation and stresses the relationship between emotion and intellect, helped free literary thoughts from the neoclassical strictures of 18th century scholars.

In his lifetime, Coleridge was renowned throughout Britain and Europe as one of the Lake Poets, a close-knit group of writers including William Wordsworth and Robert Southey. Today, Coleridge is considered the premier poet-critic of modern English tradition, distinguished for the scope and influence of his thinking about literature as much as for his innovative verse. However, Coleridge has been variously criticised as a political turncoat, a drug addict, a plagiarist, and a mystic humbug, whose wrecked career left nothing but a handful of magical early poems. However, it has almost been established that he rendered a shaping influence on English Romanticism with his criticism along with his friend Wordsworth. Critical estimation of Coleridge, the poet and his works increased significantly from the time of his death to the twentieth century.



5.5 LET US SUM UP

From this unit, you have learnt that Samuel Taylor Coleridge is one of the important English poet-critics, philosophers and theologians of the Romantic era. With his friend Wordsworth, he became the founder of the Romantic Movement in England. Coleridge was also a member of the group of poets known as the "Lake Poets". He is well known for his poems like "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "Kubla Khan". He is well known for the major critical work *Biographia Literarira*. His works may be seen in terms of Spiritual Symbolism, Definition of Imagination, Influence of German Romantic Philosophy, Shakespeare Criticism and so on.



5.6 FURTHER READING

Albert, Edward. (1975). *History of English Literature.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Appelbaum, Stanley. (ed). (1992). *The Rime of The Ancient Mariner and Other Poems.* New York: Dover Publications.

Bowra, C. M. (1999).*The Romantic Imagination.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press

Carter, Ronald & John McRae. (1997). *TheRoutledge History of Literature in English.* London: Routledge.

Chatwin, D. (1980). *Notes on Coleridge's Poetry.* London: Mathuen Paperback Ltd.

Daiches, David. (2007). *A Critical History of English Literature. Vol II.* New Delhi: Random House.

Drabble, Margaret. (ed). (2000). *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. (6th edition). Oxford University Press.

Entry on Coleridge in Drabble, Margaret. (ed). (2000). *The Oxford Companion to English Literature.* (6th edition). OUP.

Entry on Coleridge in *Gale Contextual Encyclopaedia of World Literature*.

Fry, Paul H. (ed.) (1999). *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner: Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism.* Bedford: St. Martin's.

Milne, Ira Mark. *Gale Contextual Encyclopaedia of World Literature. Vol 1.*

Sanders, Andrew. (1999). *The Short Oxford History of English Literature.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press.



5.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q No 1: Coleridge was a talented and imaginative boy… …he was a voracious reader of fairy tales and acted out the scenes in them… …the dream world of his own creation influenced his future upbringing as a poet of fantastic and supernatural stories.

Ans to Q No 2: "Pantisocracy," generally means the equal rule of all… …originally it was a part of a proposition to form a 'Pantisocratic' community on the banks of the Susquehanna in Pennsylvania… …along with doing other works the members decided to devote equal time to philosophy, poetry and all the arts.

Ans to Q No 3: Wordsworth was severe, cold, much given to calm judgment; Coleridge was impulsive, erring, warm-hearted… Wordsworth led a correct, diligent life; while Coleridge had magnificent plans and dreams; he was indolent, and, fell into the terrible habit of opium eating.

Ans to Q No 4: "Dejection: An Ode"… …"Christabel"… …"The Lime-tree bower my Prison"… …"Frost at Midnight"… …"The Ancient Mariner"… …"Kubla Khan" and so on.



5.8 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Provide a detailed sketch of Coleridge's poetry with reference to some of his great poetic works.

Q 2: Discuss some of the important contexts of the poetic works of S. T. Coleridge.

Q 3: "The poems of Coleridge are remarkable for its precise observation". Discuss with references to the poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner".

Q 4: Discuss Coleridge's importance as a major poet of the Romantic period with particular contribution to English Romanticism.

***