Unit 10: S. T. COLERIDGE: *BIOGRAPHIA LITERARIA* (CHAPTER *XIII & XIV*)

UNIT STRUCTURE:

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10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss Coleridge's importance as a major critic of the Romantic period
- explain the major concerns of *Biographia Literaria,* and justify their significance in the context of Romantic criticism
- identify the major issues raised in the text prescribed and assess their implications
- gain a clear idea of how Coleridge presented his ideas
- read *Biographia Literaria* as an important contribution to English Romantic Criticism

10.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the last unit of the Block 2 on Neoclassical and Romantic Criticism. In this unit, we shall discuss Coleridge's critical text *Biographia Literaria* with particular reference to Chapters XIII and XIV. Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) has been praised as one of the premier English literary intellectuals and poets of the Romantic era. As a critic, however

he sought to integrate literary analysis with the insights of other disciplines and tried to provide literary criticism a philosophical foundation. While formulating his ideas he drew from many 18th century and contemporary authors, particularly the German idealist and Romantic philosophers and critics like Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Von Schiller, A. W. Schlegel, and Friedrich von Schelling. The *Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* or better known as *Biographia Literaria* is a significant text of Romantic Criticism. Published in 1817, this work is long and loosely structured, and although there are many autobiographical elements, it is not a straightforward autobiography. Instead, it is a meditative deliberation on his ideas on imagination. This unit helps you to discuss his *Biographia Literaria* in general and Chapters XIII & XIV in particular. By the time you finish reading the unit, you will discover that at the centre of Coleridge's project is his inquiry into and defence of the 'Imagination'.

10.3 S. T. COLERIDGE: THE CRITIC

S. T. Coleridge was born at the vicarage of Ottery St. Mary, in Devonshire, England, on October 21, 1772. His father was a clergyman of the Church of England, good-hearted but absent-minded and impractical. Coleridge was an imaginative boy, and since his childhood, 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 intimate with Charles Lamb. Then, he went up to Cambridge, met Wordsworth, but failed to lead a comfortable college life. While still a student, he made an excursion to Oxford, and met Robert Southey. It was a 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 friends he 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, as a result 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. 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.

We remember Coleridge mostly for his poems like "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", "Kubla Khan", "Frost at Midnight", among others, as well as the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) to which he was contributor together with Wordsworth. For his deliberations on matters of education, religion and politics, we can read his *Lectures on Politics and Religion* (1795), his *Lay Sermons* (1816), and *On the Constitution of the Church and State* (1829). It is however, *Biographia Literaria*, which contains his best contributions to literary criticism. In it, he shows what other critics have adjudged as a worthy attempt to build the philosophical foundations of English criticism. It was Coleridge's sympathy for the radical leader, William Frend, while at Cambridge, that marked his radicalism. He had

expressed support for the French Revolution and turned to Unitarian beliefs, guided by which he gave many radical speeches in various places. After the French invasion of Switzerland in 1798, Coleridge changed his political beliefs. Coleridge's sojourn in Germany in 1798, together with the Wordsworths, is another important phase in his career as this made possible his study of the German Romantic thinkers.

Coleridge was much influenced by the German critics, especially A.W. Schlegel and in his distinctions between mechanical and organic art. To Coleridge, organicism was a useful concept applicable in the field of literary criticism. You can understand how this idea is made to work if you consider the instance of Friedrich Schlegel who wrote in 1795-6, that all Greek art can be viewed as "a single growth whose seed is grounded in human nature itself, and which possesses a 'collective force' as its dynamic and guiding principle". Schlegel continued, "And in its historical course, each 'advance unfolds out of the preceding one as if of its own accord, and contains the complete germ of the following stage." Similar to what the German theorists held, Coleridge too presumed that the process of literary invention involved the same forces – the natural, the unplanned and the unconscious, which make things, grow.

Finally, you will find that Coleridge's main contribution was in the form of literary, philosophical, religious and theological writings. It was 'Imagination', which gave him the power to penetrate deep into the things. This is what makes his readers delve into the great mass of his poetry, his essays and letters, even though they seem to be formless and unfinished. In the formative stages of his poetic career, Wordsworth collaborated with him. Both contributed to *Lyrical Ballads*, but Wordsworth alone was responsible for the important "Preface", which was to influence the whole of the Romantic movement and much of English poetry in later periods. Wordsworth's poetry is concerned with the ordinary, everyday world and with the impact of memory on the present; but Coleridge's poetry frequently communicates a sense of the mysterious, supernatural and extraordinary world. Wordsworth stated that he wanted to explore every day subjects and give them a Romantic

or supernatural colouring. By contrast, Coleridge wanted to give the supernatural a feeling of everyday reality.

Most of the early works of Coleridge are marked 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 bringing 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 murdered an albatross. "Kubla Khan" 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 as critic is often remembered for his engagement with the ideas of fancy and imagination. Rene Descartes' distinction between mind and body, self and world appealed to Coleridge a lot. As he writes: "To the best of my knowledge Descartes was the first philosopher, who introduced the absolute and essential heterogeneity of the soul as intelligence, and the body as matter". He also appreciated Kant's attempt to resolve the gap between self and nature by connecting mental faculties and the world of phenomena. However, we should see Coleridge's importance as a critic in terms of the various tenets of German speculative philosophy that he brought into English Romanticism. According to M.A.R. Habib, those "tenets, aimed in part against the mechanistic, fragmentary, and secular spirit of much Enlightenment thought, include the primacy of subjectivity and self-consciousness, the elevation of nature beyond mere lifeless mechanism

to a spiritual status, and the perception of a fundamental unity between the human self and the world of nature."



LET US KNOW

Coleridge has also been rebuked and mocked for the ambitious projects he proposed, launched, but left undone: an eight-to ten volume history of literature, an epic poem on the origin of evil, and so on. He had extraordinary literary gifts but was an undisciplined author who failed to make full use of his exceptional talent. Coleridge wrote in his copy of his book *The Statesman's Manual* (I816) that while he had produced a number of significant works, he stood in the world's eyes as "the wild eccentric Genius that has published nothing but fragments & splendid Tirades." With the possible exception of the *Biographia Literaria* (1817) and a handful of poems, none of his works holds together as an effective whole.

You will note that in *Biographia Literaria,* which is a hastily assembled work, Coleridge mixes different modes and genres like autobiography, philosophy, literary theory, and analytical literary criticism, as well as a memoir of Wordsworth, a study of his poems, and a critique of his theory of poetic diction.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Why is Coleridge important in the context of Romantic criticism?

Q 2: In what ways, was Coleridge different from Wordsworth as Romantic poets?

10.4 READING CHAPTERS XIII AND XIV

In *Biographia Literaria,* Coleridge built on his famous theory of the imagination, his exposition of organic unity, and his treatment of poetry as

the reconciliation of opposites. Let us have a brief discussion on chapters XIII and XIV of *Biographia Literaria* in the following sub-sections.

Chapter XIII :

This chapter is famous for Coleridge's distinction between **Fancy** and **Imagination**, which he also makes the basis of his theory of literary creation. Coleridge conceived fancy in a lower rank than imagination as it **"has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites."** It is "indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space; while it is blended with, and modified by that empirical faculty of the will, which we express by the word CHOICE. But equally with the ordinary memory the Faculty must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association." What you should pay attention to is the ways Coleridge uses the terms of the associative theory of invention, the "fixities and definites" being the basic elements derived from the senses. However, these are to be differentiated from the units of memory because they are reordered in a new sequence of time and space. This new sequence is based on the laws of association and governed by judgment. However, for Coleridge this has another element—the secondary imagination. This necessitates our consideration of Coleridge's ideas of Imagination. As he states: **"The IMAGINATION then, I consider either as primary, or secondary."** However, before defining imagination, Coleridge actually works through the ideas of Immanuel Kant, mainly his ideas of 'Transcendental Idealism', and those of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz. Hence, the early part of this chapter looks a bit obscure.

Coleridge then moves on to discuss in detail primary and secondary imagination. According to Coleridge, "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." M. A. R. Habib draws a parallel between Kant's reproductive imagination and Coleridge's 'primary' imagination. It is a faculty in our normal perception, which integrates the various sense data into images that then become conceptually available to our understanding. In this

process, the imagination plays an intermediary role that unites the sensory data with the concepts of understanding. However, even here, in this role of the primary faculty, imagination echoes the larger cosmic process –our perception re-enacts at the finite level the divine act of creation. Human perception thus recreates actively what is to be found in the world of nature. These elements of the world of nature, which are copied, are reproduced as images that can be further processed by our understanding. This is how we obtain an intelligible perspective on the world. However, this understanding is limited and fragmentary and the primary imagination does not contain originality; it is limited to the experience of the senses and is determined by the laws of associating data.

Then, Coleridge defines the **secondary imagination** like this: "The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead." So the important point about the secondary imagination is that it is poetic, it is creative, it synthesises the data received from the senses into new, complex unities. It assimilates the habitual order and pattern in which we are accustomed to receive the sensory data into new combinations that follow their own logic rather than the customary logic of the laws of association. The secondary imagination belongs to the poet and operates under the control of the will of the poet. This is unlike, we note, the primary imagination, which functions involuntarily in everyone. However, the secondary imagination is connected to the primary imagination on which it depends for its primary data. The secondary imagination exerts its creative operations on the impressions entering through the primary imagination. It sees the world at a higher level of truth because it sees through appearances into a deeper reality, into the actual perceptions that

it receives via the primary imagination. It perceives deeper connections of objects and events, their finite significances in terms of the comprehensive scheme of the infinite.



LET US KNOW

In the 17th century, 'imagination' and 'fancy' were suggestive of a make-believe world. The medieval period and then the Renaissance had handed down a close equivalence between "imaginatio" and "phantasia". However, "phantasia" used to signal a lighter meaning of less sober retention in memory. M H Abrams states that almost all critics till the 18th century conducted systematic investigations into aesthetics in the context of theories of the operations of the human mind. You must note that during the 17th century, the development of modern psychology coincides with the developments in natural philosophy in connection with mechanics. Such developments throw important lights on the course of literary criticism during that period. The concept of imagination was seen as the close connection between sense-impressions and ideas and visual images were taken to be the units of poetic invention. However, some also thought that poetic invention also worked through joining and separating sequences of images. When these images moved across the mind's eye, in the order as they originally arose with the sense-experience, 'memory' is made. When this sequence was changed, it gave a new order of the images of objects which was said to be the work of 'fancy' or 'imagination'. The term Imagination gradually began to replace the term "association" which was perhaps considered to be the way of getting valuable insights into the nature of the world. However, Coleridge's theory of mind was like that of contemporary German philosophers, who rendered revolutionary changes in the habitual way of thinking, in all areas of intellectual enterprise.

The important point that you must note is that Coleridge's conception of the imagination can be discussed in historical terms. Because, Coleridge's definition "was the first important channel for the flow of organicism into the hitherto clear, if perhaps not very deep, stream of English aesthetics." According to Abrams, 'Organicism' is defined as "the philosophy whose major categories are derived metaphorically from the attributes of living and growing things." Coleridge took Memory as "mechanical", and 'fancy' as "passive". However, the imagination, on the other hand, could 'recreate' its elements. Thus, imagination became a 'synthetic', a 'permeative', a 'blending' and 'assimilative' power in the hands of Coleridge. You should also take note of the fact that Coleridge's adoration of the imagination is not a simple reaction to the Enlightenment's over-emphasis on reason. He did, in fact, place the faculty of reason at the highest point of the scale. His secondary imagination touches both the primary imagination, which unifies sense data to be brought under the concepts of understanding, and reason, which unites those concepts into a composite unity. It was from the German philosophers that Coleridge learnt how to distinguish between levels of imagination as well as to overturn the traditional hierarchy of fancy as higher power than imagination. However, Coleridge came to place fancy at a lower plane of creativity. He called fancy an "aggregative and associative power", and the imagination, a "shaping and modifying power", or the "esemplastic" power.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: Why, according to you, is chapter XIII of *Biographia Literaria* important?

Q 4: What does M H Abrams have to say about Coleridge's idea of imagination?

Q 5: In what ways, does Coleridge that Secondary imagination is more productive than the Primary?

Chapter XIV :

In this chapter, Coleridge discusses *Lyrical Ballads*, and the objects originally proposed by Wordsworth and himself, the ensuing controversy, and Coleridge's philosophic definitions of poetry. He begins the essay with a reference to his idea of poetry which he understands as the power of exciting the sympathy as well as the power of giving the interest of novelty. As he writes:

"During the first year that Mr. Wordsworth and I were neighbours, our conversations turned frequently on the two cardinal points of poetry: the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colours of imagination. The sudden charm, which accidents of light and shade, which moonlight or sunset diffused over a known and familiar landscape, appeared to represent the practicability of combining both. These are the poetry of nature. The thought suggested itself (to which of us I do not recollect) that a series of poems might be composed of two sorts. In the one, the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural; and the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real. In addition, real in this sense they have been to every human being who, from whatever source of delusion, has at any time believed himself under supernatural agency. For the second class, subjects were to be chosen from ordinary life; the characters and incidents were to be such, as will be found in every village and its vicinity, where there is a meditative and feeling mind to seek after them, or to notice them, when they present themselves."

Coleridge then proceeds to explain what he and Wordsworth had intended to accomplish in the *Lyrical Ballads.* 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 procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. Mr. Wordsworth on the other hand was to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand."

When you read Coleridge's poems like 'Ancient Mariner,' 'Dark Ladie,' and 'Christabel,' you will soon understand that these poems illustrate the faith of Coleridge as a poet. However, Coleridge holds Wordsworth's endeavours to be more important than his as we find in this line: "But Mr. Wordsworth's industry had proved so much more successful, and the number of his poems so much greater, that my compositions, instead of forming a balance, appeared rather an interpolation of heterogeneous matter." While acknowledging Wordsworth's supremacy he also reminds us about the significance of *Lyrical Ballads* as a most important critical document of the Romantic movement and the controversy it created.

After deliberating on Wordsworth, Coleridge comes to his own idea of a poem. "A poem contains the same elements as a prose composition; the difference therefore must consist in a different combination of them, in consequence of a different object proposed." Then he claims that his own conclusions on the nature of poetry, in the strictest use of the word, have been in part anticipated in the preceding disquisition on the fancy and imagination. As he writes:

"What is poetry? is so nearly the same question with 'what is a poet?' that the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the other. For it is a distinction resulting from the poetic genius itself, which sustains and modifies the images, thoughts, and emotions of the poet's own mind. The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other,

according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity that blends and (as it were) *fuses* each into each by that synthetic and magical power to which I would exclusively appropriate the name of imagination. This power, first put in action by the will and understanding, and retained under their irremissive, though gentle and unnoticed, control (*laxis effertur habenis* [meaning = 'carried on with slackened reins']), reveals itself in the balance or reconcilement of opposite or discordant qualities; of sameness with difference; of the general with the concrete; the idea with the image; the individual with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order; judgement ever awake and steady self-possession, with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement – and, while it blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial, still subordinates art to nature; the manner to the matter; and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry."

FINALLY, COLERIDGE OPINES "GOOD SENSE IS THE BODY OF POETIC GENIUS, FANCY ITS DRAPERY, MOTION ITS LIFE, AND IMAGINATION THE SOUL THAT IS EVERYWHERE, and in each; and forms all into one graceful and intelligent whole."

You should note that one major aspect of *Biographia Literaria* is Coleridge's disagreements with Wordsworth. You may also read the text as an extended criticism of Wordsworth's theory of poetry. Chapter XVII of the text is an examination of the various tenets of Wordsworth's poetry. In contrast to Wordsworth's idea that metre in poetry is "superadded", Coleridge argued that metre is the prerequisite of poetry. As 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; and from all other species (having *this* object in common with it) it is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the *whole*, as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component *part*." It follows from this observation that if a poem is defined by a 'purpose', it does not arise from the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling". It is thus a deliberate art. "It is the *art* of communicating whatever we wish to

communicate, so as both to express and produce excitement, but for the purpose of immediate pleasure; and each part is fitted to afford as much pleasure, as is compatible with the largest sum in the whole." Each part of the poem is thus a means to achieving the objective of pleasure. Meter, therefore, is a special matter of choice and an imposed manner of arranging words; it is not a super addition. If the poem is regarded as an organic or harmonised whole, then it follows that "*all* parts of an organized whole must be assimilated to the more *important* and *essential* parts". Poetry needed to be defined after having considered the poem as a product of metrical composition. The problem involved the knowledge that there were great writers who wrote poetically but without metre and whose purpose is truth rather than pleasure. Therefore, 'poetry' cannot be limited to the 'poem'. That is why perhaps he added: "What is poetry? is so nearly the same question with, what is a poet? That the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the other. For it is a distinction resulting from the poetic genius itself…". Coleridge's description of the poet and the poem thus become very striking and significant in Romantic criticism.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: Name some of the poems that exemplify Coleridge's love for the supernatural.

Q 7: Provide Coleridge's definition of a poem?

10.5 IMPORTANT CONCEPTS OF THE TEXT

The following are the important concepts that you may note in the two chapters of *Biographia Literaria* that we are discussing in this unit.

Subjectivity:

A major element of Romantic thought is its turn towards subjectivity, which is to be contrasted with the classical insistence on the objective. Following the ideas of Fichte, and Schelling, as much as of Hegel, Romantic critics addressed the relations between self and nature,

and the subject and the object because they saw these different worlds as 'mutually constructive processes'. They understood human perception as being active rather than being passively receptive to impressions form the outside world. Thus, it became possible to valorise uniqueness, originality, experience, in place of convention and tradition. Imagination for the Romantics is a crucial human faculty with the capacity to unify, and it harmonises such polarities as sensation and reason. We should not suppose, simplistically, that the Romantics displaced Enlightenment 'reason' with imagination, (associated with emotion, instinct, spontaneity, and subjectivity).

Fancy and Imagination:

Coleridge in chapter XIII of his *Biographia Literaria* opines that Fancy and Imagination are two distinct mental processes, which produce two different types of poetry. He associates Fancy with light verse, but he believes all serious and passionate poetry comes from the imagination. He values imagination so highly, as he considers it the faculty, which can unite separate elements. He claims that secondary imagination "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate." The idea that has really been stressed here is to find an order in the midst of disorder.

Most of the writers, prior to the 18th century firmly believed that the only source of order is God. But an 18th century writer like Pope sought order in society as well as in religion. However, a Romantic writer like Wordsworth or Coleridge sought and found the source of order in the mind of the poet with the imagination serving to create order and unity in experience. Thus, the distinction between Fancy and Imagination is a key element in Coleridge's theory of poetry, as well as in his general theory of the mental processes. In earlier discussions, Fancy and Imagination had been used synonymously to denote a faculty of the mind, which is distinguished from reason, judgment and memory, in that it receives images that have been perceived by the senses and reorders them into new combinations. Coleridge attributes this reordering function of the sensory images to the lower faculty he calls Fancy: "Fancy... has no

other counters to play with, but fixities and définîtes. The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space." To Coleridge, fancy is a mechanical process which receives the elementary images—the "fixities and definites" which come ready-made from the senses—and, without altering the parts, reassembles them into a different spatio-temporal order from that in which they were originally perceived. The Imagination, however, which produces a much higher kind of poetry, "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create". So, Coleridge's Imagination enables the poet to "create" rather than merely reassemble, by dissolving the fixities and definites-the mental pictures, or images, received from the senses—and unifying them into a new whole. While Fancy is merely mechanical, Imagination is vital; that is, it is an organic faculty which operates not like a sorting machine, but like a living and growing plant. As Coleridge says elsewhere, Imagination "generates and produces a form of its own," while its rules are "the very powers of growth and production." In addition, in Chapter XIV of the *Biographia,* Coleridge adds his famous statement that the "synthetic" power which is the "imagination…reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image..." The faculty of Imagination, in other words, assimilates and synthesises the most disparate elements into an organic whole— that is, a newly generated unity, constituted by an interdependence of parts whose identity cannot survive their removal from the whole.

Poetry as Expression:

Romantic critics and writers very often referred to poetry as a form of expression. Such a thought was expressed in Germany by thinkers like A.W. Schlegel who observed that 'expression' gave the meaning that "the inner is pressed out as though by a force alien to us". John Stuart Mill remarked that poetry equals "the expression or uttering forth of feeling". In 1818, Coleridge wrote in "Poesy or Art", that the fine arts, "like poetry, are to express intellectual purposes, thoughts, conceptions,

sentiments, that have their origin in the human mind". For Hazlitt, poetry *expressed* "the music of the mind." According to Shelley, "poetry, in a general sense, may be defined to be "the expression of the imagination".

With the emergence in the early 19th century of an **Expressive criticism**— the view that poetry is essentially an expression of the poet's feelings or imaginative process, imitation tended to be displaced from its central position in literary theory. Coleridge said: "Images, however beautiful, though faithfully copied from nature, and as accurately represented in words, do not of themselves characterise the poet. They become proofs of original genius only as they are modified by a predominant passion; or by associated thoughts or images awakened by that passion or lastly, when a human and intellectual life is transferred to them from the poet's own spirit". Coleridge stands out as the Romantic poet most concerned to explore just how the poetic mind modifies the objects perceived through the senses without being untruthful to nature.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 8: What connections can one make between Romanticism and the 19th century Expressive theory of criticism?

Q 9: Discuss how the ideas of Fancy and Imagination are connected to poetry?

Q 10: Discuss the differences between fancy and imagination.

10.6 RECEPTION OF COLERIDGE AS A CRITIC

Coleridge is to be seen as one of the major poet critics in the English critical tradition. He seems to differ from all previous English critics with his psychological approach to literary problems. As T. S. Eliot writes in his "The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism" that unlike his predecessors, Coleridge tried to bring attention to the profoundity of the philosophic problems which the study of poetry may address. Coleridge was not interested in the poem as such, but in what it displayed of

human nature. The study of poetry thus led him to probe the imaginative processes that gave it birth. What you need to examine here is to find out how his theory of imagination can be seen in the context of a particular type of poetry, which we call the Romantic.

One important aspect of Coleridge as a critic is his distinction between "fancy" and "imagination". Coleridge speaks first of the "primary" 'imagination: the "living power" of God, in the eternal act of creation, it is also the power of creation in each person, and the "secondary" imagination which echoes the primary; in conjunction with the will and understanding, it dissolves in order to re-create, making whole and cannonising as a "synthetic and magical power." Fancy, in contrast, merely associates "fixities and definites". Although sometimes it may look intriguing, the significance of Coleridge's ideas lies in its departure from 18th century Neoclassical theory. Samuel Johnson in his *Dictionary* (1765) offers "Fancy" as one of the definitions of "imagination". However, Coleridge's distinction between the two has important implications for his conception of the poet and the poem. Neoclassical critics such as Alexander Pope and Samuel Johnson could exempt only a great genius like Shakespeare from literary decorum, insisting that others rely on deliberate craft; but for Coleridge the creative work of every poet springs from an imaginative power at once available for analysis yet mysterious in its sources. He sees a poem as *organic,* true to itself, acquiring its shape like a plant from a seed and thereby growing according to its own internal law of development.

You have been told that Coleridge's significance as a critic lies mostly on his theory of primary and secondary imagination that honours the creative capacity of poets while remaining steadfast to the primacy of God. Coleridge further states that each re-creative act that a poet performs is an act of worship. As modern scholars have pointed out, Coleridge was the most devout of all the major Romantic writers as his Christian faith is central to most of his work. He sees "a similar union of the universal and the individual" in religion and in the fine arts. Coleridge makes a similar distinction in his commentaries on allegory and symbol.

Allegory, he indicates, is mechanical and formulaic, part of the larger problem of our degenerate age of triumphant "mechanic" philosophy; but symbol is organically unified, fusing the particular and the general, the temporal and the eternal. This distinction is crucial for Coleridge, yet, as Paul De Man states in "The Rhetoric of Temporality" (1969), his arguments do not sustain it: the more that Coleridge explores the distinction, the more he complicates and blurs its terms. Indeed, some of his best-known poetry "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," "Kubla Khan," "Christabel" have invited allegorical interpretation too.

Coleridge's emphasis on the power of the imagination is at odds with much contemporary theory and historical and cultural criticism, which is suspicious of claims that appear to give certain individuals the power to create new worlds out of nothing but imagination. The New Historicist Stephen Greenblatt speaks, for example, not of the imaginative power and prowess of Coleridge but of "social energy"; and it is true that Coleridge pays too little attention to the powerful social networks of signification in which an author's work takes shape.

Over this whole unit, you would have seen how Coleridge works differently from his contemporary William Wordsworth. You would have also understood that no critical theory can be comprehensive unless it examines minutely the different aspects of its objects. Therefore, Coleridge not merely describes his idea of the imagination but works it into the larger philosophy of social relations, and man-nature relations. Once you understand this larger philosophy, you can, not only connect, but also make a deeper assessment of the nature of the critical thought that underlies all of Romantic theorising. Coleridge's theoretical work appears as part of the best contributions of Romantic thought. In order to grasp this fact, we have to examine *Biographia Literaria* taking the various nuances of Romantic Criticism in mind.



10.7 LET US SUM UP

As you finish reading this unit, you must have understood why Coleridge is often praised as one of the premier English poet-critics of the Romantic era. His importance lies in his attempt at integrating literary analysis with the insights of other disciplines like

philosophy. While formulating his ideas, he drew heavily from the German philosophers and critics like Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Von Schiller, A. W. Schlegel, and Friedrich von Schelling. *Biographia Literaria* is a significant text of Romantic criticism. It being a meditative deliberation on his ideas on imagination. In *Biographia Literaria,* Coleridge mixes different modes and genres like autobiography, philosophy, literary theory, and analytical literary criticism. You have learnt that Chapter XIII of *Biographia Literaria* deals with Fancy and Imagination to be two distinct mental processes, which produce two different types of poetry. Chapter XIV, on the other hand, has helped you to discuss Coleridge's idea of the "synthetic" power. Through a discussion of Wordsworth's poetic endeavour, Coleridge states that the faculty of imagination assimilates and synthesises the most disparate elements into an organic whole—that is, a newly generated unity, constituted by an interdependence of parts whose identity cannot survive their removal from the whole. Such ideas hold tremendous significance if seen against the context of late 18th and early 19th century criticism.



10.8 FURTHER READING

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10.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q No 1: For his poems like “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” , “Kubla Khan”, “Frost at Midnight”… …for his thoughts on matters relating to education, religion and politics in *Lectures on Politics and Religion* (1795), *Lay Sermons* (1816), *On the Constitution of the Church and State* (1829) etc.... ….for *Biographia Literaria* which is one of best contributions to Romantic criticism.

Ans to Q No 2: Wordsworth’s poetry is concerned with the ordinary, everyday world; Coleridge’s poetry frequently communicates a sense of the mysterious, supernatural and extraordinary world… …Wordsworth wanted to explore everyday subjects and give them a Romantic or supernatural colouring; Coleridge wanted to give the supernatural a feeling of everyday reality.

Ans to Q No 3: For his distinction between Fancy and Imagination… …Coleridge places fancy in a lower rank than imagination defining it having “no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites”… ...he defines imagination “either as primary, or secondary.”

Ans to Q No 4: M. H. Abrams discusses the importance of Coleridge’s imagination in historical terms… … Imagination became a ‘synthetic’, a ‘permeative’, a ‘blending’ and ‘assimilative’ power in the hands of Coleridge…. …his theory of imagination is not a simple reaction to the Enlightenment’s over-emphasis on reason…. …he called Fancy an “aggregative and associative power”, and imagination, a “shaping and modifying power”, or the “esemplastic” power.

Ans to Q No 5: Primary Imagination is "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."… …the Secondary Imagination is an "echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create"… …Thus, the latter is more productive.

Ans to Q No 6: Find it in the section itself.

Ans to Q No 7: "A poem contains the same elements as a prose composition; the difference therefore must consist in a different combination of them, in consequence of a different object proposed."

Ans to Q No 8: Romantic thinkers and writers very often referred to poetry as expression… … The German thinker A.W. Schlegel observed that in 'expression' "the inner is pressed out as though by a force alien to us"…. …with the emergence in the early 19th century of an *expressive criticism*—the view that poetry is essentially an expression of the poet's feelings or imaginative process, imitation tended to be displaced from its central position in literary theory.

Ans to Q No 9: Coleridge in chapter XIII argues that Fancy and Imagination are two distinct mental processes which produce two different types of poetry. He associates Fancy with light verse, but he believes all serious and passionate poetry comes from the Imagination.

Ans to Q No 10: As two separate mental processes Fancy and Imagination produce two different types of poetry… …He associates fancy with light verse, and imagination with serious and passionate poetry… …fancy deals with 'fixities and definites' while secondary imagination "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate."… … fancy is a mechanical process while imagination is a vital process as it produces a much higher kind of poetry.



10.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Find out the major differences between Wordsworth and Coleridge in matters relating to Romantic poetry and criticism.

Q 2: Attempt an explanation of Coleridge's main ideas in Chapter XIII and XIV of *Biographia Literaria*. To what extent does Coleridge draw upon the work of his predecessors to explain his concept of the imagination?

Q 3: What kind of distinction does Coleridge maintain between 'fancy' and 'imagination' in Chapter VIII of *Biographia Literaria*?

Q 4: Secondary Imagination is creative because it synthesises the data received from the senses into new, complex unities. Discuss.

Q 5: Coleridge considers fancy as a lower creative faculty as contrasted with imagination, which is a re-creative faculty. Discuss with examples from Coleridge's poems, which you have read.

Q 6: The distinction between fancy and imagination is a key element in Coleridge's theory of poetry and the mental processes. Elaborate.

Q 7: Why is Chapter XIV of *Biographia Literaria* is important? What ideas do we gain regarding the poetic techniques of both Wordsworth and Coleridge from this chapter? Discuss.

* * *

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