UNIT 9: S.T. COLERIDGE: "LOVE" FROM LYRICAL BALLADS

UNIT STRUCTURE

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9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- discuss the practice of romantic poetry
- explain the life and works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge
- analyse and discuss the poem “Love” from the Lyrical Ballads in details

9.2 INTRODUCTION

Before we delve into the details of the poem "Love" by S.T. Coleridge, let us gain a brief idea on Romanticism, Romantic Age and Romantic poetry.

It is important for us literature students to contextualise a poet or a writer and study his or her poetry in the backdrop of their historical and social setting and thus it is imperative that we know about the Romantic Age in literature to better appreciate Coleridge's life and works.

Romanticism was a pan European movement, ie, it spread throughout Europe and was not limited to a certain country or place. As a movement sharing certain features, Romanticism was to be found majorly in Germany, France and England. It originated towards the end of the 18th century and flourished during the first part of the nineteenth century. It occurred as a result of and in reaction against the values, critical norms and standard literary practice of the preceding age. Although, it manifested itself mostly in the arts and literature, Romanticism has had a lasting impact on history and politics and has shaped prevalent modes of thinking. Many of our conventional views regarding the poet or the author as an isolated brooding figure away from society are a contribution of the Romantic Age. There have been many attempts to define Romanticism but there is no consensus amongst scholars as to a standard definition and thus, it is important for the student to note that the Romantic period as a term is used generally to define the literature of roughly the end of the 18th century and the first third of the 19th century that share a common historical situation. It is when literature moved in directions that were marked in contrast to the standard literary practice and values of the 18th century. The Romantic period is generally considered to have come to an end in around 1850 or earlier when it paved the way for another movement, Realism.

The age that preceded the Romantic Age was the 18th century, also known as the Enlightenment or the Augustan Age. It was the age of reason and it advocated a rational and detached scientific approach to most human endeavors and dilemmas. The Enlightenment had developed and championed logic and reason above all other qualities and there was little room in this worldview for the emotion-based nature that would define Romanticism. According the Enlightenment view, people and their relationships, roles, institutions, and indeed, their societies, could be understood best if organised and approached with a scientific perspective. During this time, it was believed that objectivity was not only desirable, but also achievable. Subjective emotions, contemplation of nature, and the creative impulse felt by individuals were denied any importance and only the Classical standards of order, harmony, proportion and objectivity were preferred.

Romanticism, then, emerged as a reaction against what was perceived to be a cultural climate that had been lacking in spontaneity, creativity, and individuality. It emphasised emotional and subjective spontaneity and highlighted the importance of individual feeling and imagination. The Romantics believed the imagination to be a source of creative faculty. Another important aspect of Romanticism is its distrust in society and unlike the Enlightenment, the Romantics sought a "return to nature". The Romantic Age viewed nature with reverence and assigned an important role to nature in individual development and imagination. They went against the 18th century standard of viewing Nature scientifically and regarded it as a vital, living force capable of stirring powerful emotions in humans.

Romantic poetry is thus the poetry that emerged in the Romantic Age and that which differed significantly in form and content to the poetry of the preceding age. English Romantic poetry is known for its six major poets with Wordsworth as the most towering figure among them. The others are William Blake (1757-1827), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), P.B. Shelley (1792-1822), John Keats (1795-1821) and Lord Byron (1788-1824).

The Augustan Age was called so because the writers of the age imitated the literature and culture during the reign of Augustus (27 BCE - 14 CE). There was a revival of interest in the Classics and the authors sought to imitate classical forms. Their language was derivative, ordered and ornate and their relationship to nature was one of cautious imitation. They did not give in to the power of nature but sought to behold it through the lenses of reason and emphasised the importance of collective society rather than individualism. Emotion was subordinate to Reason, which was the prime source for inspiration.

The Romantics sought to lose the artificiality of that poetry and sought to communicate 'real events in simple language coloured by the imagination'. Nature was of prime importance and individual imagination was the prime creative faculty.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. What is meant by Romanticism? When did it originate?

Q2. Name some of the major Romanic poets.

Q3. Why was the Augustan Age called so?

9.3 S.T. COLERIDGE: THE POET

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (21st October 1772 - 25th July 1834) was an important English poet and critic who belonged to the Romantic Age. He is well known for poems such as "Kubla Khan", "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and also for his famous work of criticism, Biographia Literaria. Coleridge, along with William Wordsworth, published *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, which is considered the beginning of English Romanticism.

9.3.1 His Life

Coleridge was a well known English Romantic poet, critic and philosopher who was born on October 21st, 1772 at Devonshire, as the youngest son of the Vicar of Ottery St. Mary. It is here that he spent his childhood but was later sent to the charity school Christ's Hospital in 1782 after his father's death. He studied there till 1791 after which he went on to study at Jesus College, Cambridge. It is during this time that he discovered Voltaire and decided to be a philosopher; letting go of his initial leanings towards surgery and medicine. He continued at Cambridge till 1794 when he left without a degree and enlisted in the army under the false name of Silas Tomkyn Comberbacke. His stint with the military regiment was a short one and he promptly returned to the University after a few weeks. Around this time he met the poet Robert Southey and both of them, inspired by the French Revolution, together imagined a society and government that was by all and for

all. They referred to this idea as "Pantisocracy" and envisaged establishing a community of like-minded people in the backwoods of America. This scheme, however, did not materialise owing to unforeseen practical difficulties.

Coleridge married Sarah Fricker in 1795 and composed a number of poems which were published in a volume in 1796. In the same year, Coleridge edited the weekly paper *The Watchman* which folded after 10 issues, just a couple of months into publication. Coleridge's friends Thomas and Josiah Wedgwood saved him from debt and granted him an annuity of 150 pounds which enabled him to pursue his literary career.

Coleridge met Wordsworth in the summer of 1795 and the two soon developed a strong friendship. This was to have a big impact on the course that the Romantic Movement took in England. Their association and their discussions on poetry, life and literature resulted in the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 which is taken as the beginning of the Romantic Age in England. While Wordsworth's aim in the collection was to present poems that present the ordinary as extraordinary, Coleridge was meant to showcase the extraordinary as ordinary. Poems by Coleridge included in the first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* were "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "Nightingale"; also added were two scenes from Osirio, a tragedy by Coleridge which was staged in 1812 as Remorse. Three more poems were added to the 1800 version; The Dungeon, The Foster-Mother's Tale and the poem that shall be taken up for discussion in the following sections, "Love".

Coleridge toured through Germany and studied at Göttingen University sometime after the first publication of the Lyrical Ballads. It is here that he began a lifelong study of the German philosophers such as Immanuel Kant which enabled him to rethink his views on philosophy, religion and literature. Coleridge's marriage was falling apart by the time he returned to England in 1799 and his romantic feelings

now were directed towards Sara Hutchinson, whose sister Mary would later be married to Wordsworth. Coleridge's daughter Sara was born in 1802 and this year also marked his complete estrangement with his wife. His health, too, deteriorated around this time due to the damp climate of the Lake District, and he started using laudanum to help his condition which led to his lifelong addiction with opium.

He went on a walking tour of Scotland with Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy in August 1803 but soon separated from them and continued the tour alone resulting in a cooled relationship between the two poets. Having returned from Scotland, he travelled to the Mediterranean island of Malta in 1804, in an effort to recuperate from his failing health. However, the notebooks he kept in Malta reveal his inability to shake neither his physical illness nor his opium habit during the time he was there and he prayed for physical and spiritual support. The notebooks also document a period of painful self-analysis.

9.3.2 His Works

Coleridge established himself as one of England's foremost literary critics after 1802, a period that saw him produce very little poetry. He published his famous work of criticism *Biographia Literaria* in 1817, which is an important two-volume collection of critical essays. This also included most of his seven brilliant lecture series on Shakespeare which he delivered from around 1808 to 1819. Meanwhile his opium addiction worsened and in 1816 Coleridge confessed to Byron his daily habit of swallowing enormous doses of the drug. Towards the end of his life, Coleridge lived with a London doctor, James Gillman and his family. This was an attempt to check his addiction and failing health. It is here with the doctor and his family that Coleridge finally found happiness and tranquility and he was entirely absorbed in studying philosophy and religion towards his final years. He had also reconciled with both his wife and the Wordsworths by the time he died in 1834. This brilliant poet-critic will forever be remembered as a man of powerful imaginative vision.

9.4 THE TEXT OF THE EXTRACT

Love

All thoughts, all passions, all delights,
Whatever stirs this mortal frame,
All are but ministers of Love,
And feed his sacred flame.

Oft in my waking dreams do I
Live o'er again that happy hour,
When midway on the mount I lay,
Beside the ruined tower.

The moonshine, stealing o'er the scene
Had blended with the lights of eve;
And she was there, my hope, my joy,
My own dear Genevieve!

She leant against the arm('e)d man,
The statue of the arm('e)d knight;
She stood and listened to my lay,
Amid the lingering light.

Few sorrows hath she of her own,
My hope! my joy! my Genevieve!
She loves me best, whene'er I sing
The songs that make her grieve.

I played a soft and doleful air,
I sang an old and moving story-
An old rude song, that suited well
That ruin wild and hoary.

She listened with a flitting blush,
With downcast eyes and modest grace;
For well she knew, I could not choose
But gaze upon her face.

I told her of the Knight that wore
Upon his shield a burning brand;
And that for ten long years he wooed
The Lady of the Land.

I told her how he pined: and ah!
The deep, the low, the pleading tone
With which I sang another's love,
Interpreted my own.

She listened with a flitting blush,
With downcast eyes, and modest grace;
And she forgave me, that I gazed
Too fondly on her face!

But when I told the cruel scorn
That crazed that bold and lovely Knight,
And that he crossed the mountain-woods,
Nor rested day nor night;

That sometimes from the savage den,
And sometimes from the darksome shade,
And sometimes starting up at once
In green and sunny glade,-

There came and looked him in the face
An angel beautiful and bright;
And that he knew it was a Fiend,
This miserable Knight!

And that unknowing what he did,
He leaped amid a murderous band,
And saved from outrage worse than death
The Lady of the Land!

And how she wept, and clasped his knees;
And how she tended him in vain-
And ever strove to expiate
The scorn that crazed his brain;-

And that she nursed him in a cave;
And how his madness went away,
When on the yellow forest-leaves
A dying man he lay;-

His dying words-but when I reached
That tenderest strain of all the ditty,
My faltering voice and pausing harp
Disturbed her soul with pity!

All impulses of soul and sense
Had thrilled my guileless Genevieve;
The music and the doleful tale,
The rich and balmy eve;

And hopes, and fears that kindle hope,
An undistinguishable throng,
And gentle wishes long subdued,
Subdued and cherished long!

She wept with pity and delight,
She blushed with love, and virgin-shame;
And like the murmur of a dream,

I heard her breathe my name.

Her bosom heaved-she stepped aside,
As conscious of my look she stepped-
Then suddenly, with timorous eye
She fled to me and wept.

She half enclosed me with her arms,
She pressed me with a meek embrace;
And bending back her head, looked up,
And gazed upon my face.

'Twas partly love, and partly fear,
And partly 'twas a bashful art,
That I might rather feel, than see,
The swelling of her heart.

I calmed her fears, and she was calm,
And told her love with virgin pride;
And so I won my Genevieve,
My bright and beauteous Bride.

9.4.1 Explanation of the Extract

Coleridge suggests that all the things in life that move the corporeal body of man (thoughts, passions, delights) arise from the purpose of promoting Love's "sacred flame". This suggests that while love might very well be placed at a higher divine level, the things that promote it are very much based in the materiality of man. Reminiscent of Shakespeare´s language; "this mortal frame" reminds us of "this mortal coil" of Hamlet´s soliloquy, but whereas Hamlet is racked with indecision and the morbid pain of death, Coleridge is feeling fully alive and trembling ("stirred") at the thought of love. The words "Sacred flame" also introduces a religious element into his devotion. This

expression leads to contemplation in the poet narrator who says that in the temporal frame of his "waking dreams" he relives a particular incident from the past, when he lay on a "mount", beside "the ruined tower". The image of the tower becomes emblematic of the nature of this memory that will be recollected.

The poet then transports the reader to that memory of his, where it appears to be twilight- where the moonlight and the light of the fading evening are entwining. Here in this memory, stood his beloved Genevieve. The imagery is near Gothic in nature: the old tower, a mount which could be a grave, and moonlight shining down on the scene, but this does nothing to detract from the poet´s happiness. In fact, he cleverly uses the somber surroundings as a contrast, further emphasising his joy. The beloved is said to be leaning against the statue of a knight, listening to him. She is carefree and loves the poet best when he sings to her woeful songs. Hence, the poet indulges her with an old sad story, whose rustic quality was well suited for the landscape they were in- that of the tower. The story he sings to her is of the very knight whose statue Genevieve is leaning against. The latter seems to modestly don the role of a coy graceful maiden, who listens to the song, in a manner expected of a lady- especially heightened by his piercing gaze upon her face. The medieval tale of the night speaks of a prolonged pining (continued over 10 years) of the knight for "the Lady of the Land" (probably a princess).

The knight's tale seems to mirror the plight of the poet narrator, and in that there is a moment of recognition- as he "sang another's love/ Interpreted my own"- and the narrating of that tale thus becomes a means of venting his own feelings towards Genevieve. The listener continues to modestly listen, forgiving his insolent gaze. However, the tale takes on a dark turn when the poet speaks of the knight's insanity, restlessness and insomnia- and of a darker side to his mind, that appears randomly- out of his gloom, sometimes suddenly even in the midst of happiness ("green and sunny glade"). What appears as an angel, the knight knows is a "fiend"- his inner demons perhaps? The

knight's rumination is halted by a shift to the next stanza, where without being conscious of his own actions, the knight charges at a band of villains- who attempt to rape the Lady. The grateful lady, who weeps at his feet, then nurtures and does away with the darker side of him- his "scorn" that drove him mad. The medieval scene takes a turn for the gothic- as the setting becomes darker, like the tale itself, and the knight is nursed in a cave. Thereafter, the "madness" of the knight is culled as he nears death. It is also worth noting the condition of the knight´s mind - "the scorn that crazed his brain" - which the loving care of his lover alleviated, helping to make the madness go away perhaps reflects Coleridge himself who suffered from depression and suicidal instincts, perhaps brought on by his opium addiction. When the poet narrator is about to sing out the dying words of the knight, his faltering voice and "pausing harp" move Genevieve greatly. The harp seems to suggest towards the minstrel tradition, where a minstrel was a medieval singer or musician who sang and recited lyric or heroic poetry to the nobility, usually accompanied by an instrument (the lyre/harp). Coleridge thus seems to be drawing from various literary traditions and tropes about love, over different time periods. Coleridge's temporal framework is located in the tradition of Romanticism. It is from this vantage point that he goes back to locate the idea and treatment of love over time. The suggestion perhaps is that Love has been an essential universal part of people's lives and has found expression in different ways in the love poetry that circulated first orally. Coleridge now takes recourse to the written word to express that very orality- which is what this tradition has originated from.

Then, Genevieve is stirred by what she has heard, and the poet's music and words. These the poet notices and begins to hope about a successful realisation of his desired love story with Genevieve. Repressed emotions surface in her. She weeps with sorrow for the woeful tale and delights in her realisation of her love for him (or him for her). It had felt unreal- dreamlike- when she had shyly enunciated his

name. In the present time of the poem, we must remember that all this- the wooing of Genevieve with the tale- had been a dream itself, a memory revived.

Genevieve breathes deeply, making her bosoms heave, and then rushes to the poet to cry. This scene mirrors the knight's tale where the Lady had wept and ran to the knight's feet. There is again a recalling of a certain tradition of love. Genevieve embraces the poet, in that memory, and now meets the gaze of the poet- directly. The poet reads her eyes as displaying a mix of love, fear and a sense of feigning this apparently bashful air of hers, while moving into his arms, and hence a practiced "art" that she puts on to express her love for him. The poet soothes her and she then confesses her love for him. And that is how the poet narrator had convinced Genevieve of his love- and how the recollection of the poet in the present time had ended.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q4. What does Coleridge suggest with regard to love in his poem?

Q5. What does the knight's tale mirror?

Q6. Why does the knight's tale take a dark turn?

9.5 MAJOR THEMES

Love: It is a song of love and a song of wooing. It's a serenade with a difference that woos with a tale of unrequited love that finally finds due recognition and response. The context serves a two-fold purpose: one that of the lover and his object of adoration. This is strengthened by the traditional and abiding nature of the experience and the pursuit. After all, since medieval times at least knights in arms and damsels in distress had dominated the narrative world of English literature. The nature of love itself in those days had an unreal ethereal aspect and there was no brash avowal of love people are used to in modern times. The admiration that develops into an

understanding reaches the perfect love and all other passions thoughts and deeds are reflection of this love.

Chivalry: In medieval times, chivalry was upholding the worth of the lady with the belief that the lady could do no wrong. It was based on a faith in self-sacrifice. Chivalry was the code of honour of the medieval court. Knights as the epitome of chivalry were the upholders of the codes of behavior of the elite to be looked up to by the plebians. This courtly tradition had inspired much significant literature in all the genres of poetry drama and fiction. Coleridge's poem "Love" keeps this tradition of chivalric wooing at the backdrop perhaps to give his pursuit the sanction of tradition. Besides this is an innocent endeavour to please the beloved.

Ballad: Coleridge exploits the ballad sentiment and form in Love. Ballads had been folk poems sung by an individual without personal references. Ballads were mostly about events and individuals known in the community. Even though ballads celebrate love, they often have a tragic end. Coleridge however, maybe because of his historical context underlines personal references and refuses to celebrate unrequited love. The ballad form and sentiment are exploited in his endeavour to win the heart of his lady love, Genevieve.

Gothic Setting: The Gothic setting of the poem is important as the Romantic's sense of history made them recreate the past which runs the threat of being forgotten and also to give it a currency in their poetry. Colerdige's Love has a ruined gothic tower as the backdrop which is ideally suited for the narration of a ballad upholding chivalrous sacrifice and love.

9.6 POETIC STYLE

The poem "Love" by Coleridge included in the 1800 edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* is a ballad. A ballad may be defined as poem or song describing a story in short stanzas. Centuries-old in practice, the composition of ballads began in the European folk tradition, in many cases accompanied by musical instruments. Ballads were not originally transcribed, but rather preserved orally for generations, passed along through recitation. Their

subject matter dealt with religious themes, love, tragedy, domestic crimes, and sometimes even political propaganda.

A typical ballad is a plot-driven song, with one or more characters hurriedly unfurling events leading to a dramatic conclusion. At best, a ballad does not tell the reader what is happening, but rather shows the reader what is happening, describing each crucial moment in the trail of events. To convey that sense of emotional urgency, the ballad is often constructed in quatrain stanzas, each line containing as few as three or four stresses and rhyming either the second and fourth lines, or all alternating lines.

The present ballad has been presented in 24 quatrains; with each quatrain rhyming alternately on the 2nd and 4th lines such as:

Whatever stirs this mortal frame,…..
And feed his sacred flame. (1st quatrain)
And told her love with virgin pride;
… My bright and beauteous Bride. (Last quatrain)

All the essential elements of a traditional ballad as mentioned in the previous paragraph can be seen in this poem by Coleridge. The clear and simple language unfolding a story in rhymes too is reflective of the oral tradition of the ballad.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q7. What is a ballad?

Q8. Why were ballads originally not transcribed?



9.7 LET US SUM UP

We have talked about Romanticism and the Romantic Age in England and also discussed salient features of this movement. We then proceeded to situate Samuel Taylor Coleridge in this tradition and briefly discussed his life and works. We read and discussed the poem Love by

Coleridge from the 1800 edition of the Lyrical Ballads evaluating and understanding its form and language and highlighting its major themes. This unit on Coleridge should serve as a basic introduction to the poetry and life of this great poet-critic and should encourage the student to read further on this important English Romantic.



9.8 FURTHER READING

1) Abrams M.H. *The Mirror and the Lamp*.

2) Bowra C.M. *The Romantic Imagination*.

3) *Critics on Coleridge. 20th Century Views*.

4) Coleridge, ST. *The Clark Lectures 1951-52*. Humphry House

5) Day, Aidan. *Romanticism*. The New Critical Idiom.

6) Sengupta, Debjani & Shernaz Cama. (ed) *Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge*. Worldview Critical Editions. 2008



9.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q1: Romanticism was a pan European movement, ie, it spread throughout Europe and was not limited to a certain country or place. As a movement sharing certain features, Romanticism was to be found majorly in Germany, France and England. It originated towards the end of the 18th Century and flourished during the first part of the nineteenth century.

Ans to Q2: Some of the romantic poets are namely: William Blake (1757-1827), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), P.B. Shelley (1792-1822), John Keats (1795-1821) and Lord Byron (1788-1824).

Ans to Q3: The Augustan Age was called so because the writers of the age imitated the literature and culture of the reign of Augustus (27 BCE - 14 CE). There was a revival of interest in the Classics and the authors sought to

imitate classical forms. Their language was derivative ordered and ornate and their relationship to nature was one of cautious imitation. They did not give in to the power of nature but sought to behold it through the lenses of reason and emphasised the importance of collective society rather than individualism. Emotion was subordinate to Reason, which was the prime source for inspiration.

Ans to Q4: Coleridge suggests that all the things in life that move the corporeal body of man (thoughts, passions, delights) arise from the purpose of promoting Love's "sacred flame". This suggests that while love might very well be placed at a higher divine level, the things that promote it are very much based in the materiality of man.

Ans to Q5: The knight's tale seems to mirror the plight of the poet narrator, and in that there is a moment of recognition- as he "sang another's love/ Interpreted my own"- and the narrating of that tale thus becomes a means of venting his own feelings towards Genevieve. The listener continues to modestly listen, forgiving his insolent gaze.

Ans to Q6: However, the knight's tale takes on a dark turn when the poet speaks of the knight's insanity, restlessness and insomnia- and of a darker side to his mind, that appears randomly- out of his gloom, sometimes suddenly even in the midst of happiness.

Ans to Q7: A typical ballad is a plot-driven song, with one or more characters hurriedly unfurling events leading to a dramatic conclusion. At best, a ballad does not tell the reader what's happening, but rather shows the reader what's happening, describing each crucial moment in the trail of events. To convey that sense of emotional urgency, the ballad is often constructed in quatrain stanzas, each line containing as few as three or four stresses and rhyming either the second and fourth lines, or all alternating lines.

Ans to Q8: Ballads were not originally transcribed, but rather preserved orally for generations, passed along through recitation. Their subject matter dealt with religious themes, love, tragedy, domestic crimes, and sometimes even political propaganda.



9.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Discuss the historical and personal contexts that shaped Coleridge, the poet.

Q2. What was the significance of the *Lyrical Ballads*?

Q3. What was Coleridge's most famous work of criticism?

Q4. On which eminent literary figure did Coleridge deliver a series of lectures?

Q5. Where was the poem "Love" first published?

Q6. What is the basic underlying theme of the poem?

Q7. Discuss the form of the poem.

Q8. Can you identify grounds of similarity between Coleridge and the poet-narrator?

Q9. Discuss the concepts of *'Chivalry'* and '*Gothic setting*'.

Q10. What is the function of the narrative within the narrative to be found in the poem?

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