

# Reimagined Worlds in the poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Coleridge (1772–1834) and Reimagined Worlds

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In this HSC Extension 1 Elective Reimagined Worlds, we explore the four set poems through the lens of Romanticism, as a means to consider the ways in which Coleridge responds to and re-evaluates shifting political, social and philosophical circumstances in his own world. Focusing closely on the experimental form of Coleridge's poetry, we consider the ways his poems act to re-enchant the post-Enlightenment world, while defamiliarising the concerns of the real world through evocative representations of the imagination.

Coleridge suggests creative power lies with poets who can magically transform worlds and offer unity. This notion of unifying objects through the imagination is seen across the four poems as Coleridge endeavours to re-engage his world through Art and comment on the process while doing so.

## Context

The poems set for study in the elective, *Reimagined Worlds*, were all written in the early part of Coleridge's career, most significantly influenced by his friendship with the Wordsworths which began in 1795 and the social and political stage of the French Revolution.

'The Eolian Harp' was one of Coleridge's earliest (later coined) *Conversation Poems* written in 1795, while 'Kubla Khan' was written in 1797, as was the first part of 'Christabel', the second part being written in 1800. Finally, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' was written in 1798, yet we are studying his revised version published in 1834 with the gloss.

Romantics represented purposefully exotic, unrealistic places, strangely detached from the world – inhabited by knights and damsels as we see in 'Christabel' or distantly familiar/unfamiliar lands as portrayed in 'Kubla Khan' and 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'. In contrast, 'The Eolian Harp' shows Romanticism and its preoccupation with the mind and its creative ability, with the interaction between the imagination and the natural world.

After the French Revolution with the death of Louis XVI and France's declaration of war on England, Coleridge used the cause as a means to promote his own intellect on the public stage of the progressives in Britain and establish himself as a political radical. Yet with the arrest of William Frend, a Cambridge

don, for treason in 1793, Coleridge recognised the treasonous potential of projecting his views.

Responding to these conflicts, Coleridge moved to Nether Stowey in Somerset in 1797, to live by William Wordsworth and his sister, Dorothy. Here, the poets compiled *Lyrical Ballads* containing Wordsworth's 'Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey' and Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'.

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 the imagination.

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Unlike the previous Rationalism of the Enlightenment period which saw the splitting of the individual (subjects/mind) and the rest of the world (objects/matter), the Romantics, focused on unity – what Coleridge would coin as 'esemplastic' – drew on the higher creative plane of the Imagination as the way to return God to the world and unite the fractured mind/matter and head/heart. This unification is explored throughout the *Conversation Poems*, particularly 'The Eolian Harp'.

## 'The Eolian Harp'

Written in 1797, 'The Eolian Harp' is considered the first of the eight *Conversation Poems* including works such as 'Frost at Midnight' and 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison', grouped as such by literary critic, George McLean Harper in 1928. Central to each of these poems, and key to understanding Coleridge's pantheistic representation of the

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imagination through the motif of the harp in 'The Eolian Harp', is his philosophy of the 'One Life' wherein individuals are universally connected through their relationship with God and nature.

'The Eolian Harp' was written in August 1795 at Clevedon, the home where Coleridge and his fiancée, Sara Fricker would live following their marriage. The poem uses the harp – a popular instrument of the period – to portray Coleridge's love for Sara as regenerative, as within that moment of love he finds the unity he really seeks between God and nature. The opening twelve lines entwine his love for Sara through images of the natural world surrounding their home:

My pensive Sara! thy soft cheek reclined  
Thus on mine arm, most soothing sweet it is  
To sit beside our cot, our cot o'ergrown  
With white-flowered Jasmin, and the broad-  
leaved Myrtle,  
(Meet emblems they of Innocence and Love!)  
And watch the clouds, that late were rich with  
light,  
Slow saddening round, and mark the star of eve  
Serenely brilliant (such would Wisdom be)  
Shine opposite! How exquisite the scents  
Snatched from yon bean-field! and the world  
so hush'd!  
The stilly murmur of the distant Sea  
Tells us of silence. (1–12)

In the same way that the music of the harp is determined by the wind, the rhythm of the poem is determined by the waves of the poet's mind simultaneously in tune with nature. These connections and this unity, as reflected in Coleridge's belief in 'One Life' suggests the music of the harp, and therefore the coherence of the mind, is not random when the poet believes the world is one.

As nature interacts with Coleridge's object, the harp, the romantic imagination is released with folklore:

Such a soft floating witchery of sound  
As twilight Elfin's make, when they at eve  
Voyage on gentle gales from Fairy-Land,  
Where Melodies round honey-dropping flowers,  
Footless and wild, like birds of Paradise,  
Nor pause, nor perch, hovering on untamed wing!

O! the one Life within us and abroad,  
Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,  
A light in sound, a sound-like power in light,  
Rhythm in all thought, and joyance everywhere –  
Methinks, it should have been impossible  
Not to love all things in a world so filled;  
Where the breeze warbles, and the mute still air  
Is Music slumbering on her instrument. (lines 21–34)

Interestingly, lines 26-34 were added by Coleridge twenty-two years later in a publication in 1817.

Ultimately, the poem reveals the double life of Coleridge's imagination where his idealist notions of transcendentalism are compromised by the experiences he faces in the 'real world'. He vacillates between his religious/social duty and a longing for something that is both erotic and creative. The objects he holds so dearly in nature seem only tenuously bound with his One Life deity. Yet through the imagination, Coleridge can dissolve tensions to create symbols to reimagine a world wherein reason and nature combine in a conciliatory, unified manner.

## 'Kubla Khan'

'Kubla Khan' is as near enchantment, I suppose, as we are like to come in this dull world.

John Livingstone Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu* (London: Constable, 1927) p.409

Written in 1797, 'Kubla Khan' (originally spelt Can and thus pronounced as such to maintain the opening rhyme scheme) is Coleridge's most overt foray into a 'romantic' reimagined world, an escape from the reductive world of the Enlightenment.

As with 'Rime', Coleridge recited this poem at gatherings for nineteen years before it was published in 1816 with a Preface – a constructed context to reimagine the world of the poem, which acts to raise more questions than offer answers.

In the summer of the year 1797, the Author, then in ill health, had retired to a lonely farmhouse between Porlock and Linton, on the Exmoor confines of Somerset and Devonshire. In consequence of a slight indisposition, an anodyne had been prescribed, from the effects of which he fell asleep in his chair at the moment that he was reading the following sentence, or words of the same substance, in Purchas's Pilgrimage: 'Here the Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be built, and

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a stately garden thereunto. And thus ten miles of fertile ground were inclosed with a wall.'

While the Preface asks us to focus on the poet's drug induced imagination, the pointedly complex construction of a 'Vision in a dream' seems at odds with this as the images we are offered become a subliminal exploration of the imaginative process itself. We are presented with Coleridge's reimagined view of his dream across four vistas: the 'stately pleasure dome', the 'deep romantic chasm' where 'the sacred river ran', 'the shadow of the dome' and finally, the 'damsel with a dulcimer.'

Written in iambic tetrameter, the first lines of the poem present the imposing power of the Tartar despot, Kublai Khan, an historical figure who across the two generations from his grandfather, Genghis, had taken over most of Asia. Nigel Leask in "'Kubla Khan" and Orientalism: The Road to Xanadu Revisited' expands on the interest in Orientalism in England in the 1790s.

In contrast to the power asserted by this ruler and the earthly paradise he tries to create, Coleridge shows the dominant reimagined world created by the poet through seductively elaborate rhymes and intricately woven alliteration and assonance, wherein his imagination becomes the magical 'pleasure-dome' which exceeds the pleasure of any physical structure created by the hands of man. In this reimagined world

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran  
Through caverns measureless to man  
Down to a sunless sea

we envisage the poet's mind where the 'deep romantic chasm' offers the 'mighty fountain' of inspiration.

Simultaneously, with the benefit of imagination, Coleridge finds unification following the chaos, fragments (highlighted in bold) and tensions of the second section,

A savage place! as holy and enchanted  
As e'er beneath a **waning moon** was haunted  
By **woman wailing** for her demon-lover!  
And from this **chasm**, with ceaseless turmoil  
seething,  
As if this earth in **fast thick pants** were breathing,  
A **mighty fountain** momentarily was forced:  
Amid whose swift **half-intermitted burst**  
Huge **fragments vaulted like rebounding hail**

In the third section, the poet rises to the fore as he addresses his Muse, 'A damsel with a dulcimer/ In a vision once I saw', yet he admits that he cannot be transformed by the paradise he cannot reproduce:

Could I revive within me  
Her symphony and song,  
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,  
That with music loud and long,  
I would build that dome in air,  
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!

And in that, he is confined by the limits of his own reimagining, as are we – 'And all who heard should see them there' – who have become complicit in the reimagining of this dream. The poetic imagination has exceeded the power of Tartar despots and the possibilities of nature to paradisiacal levels, 'For he on honey-dew hath fed,/ And drunk the milk of Paradise' for those, who like Coleridge, can create poetic reimaginings.

## 'Christabel'

The reason of my not finishing 'Christabel' is not, that I don't know how to do it – for I have, as I always had, the whole plan entire from beginning to end in my mind; but I fear I could not carry on with equal success the execution of the idea, an extremely subtle and difficult one.

S.T. Coleridge, *Table Talk*, 1833.

'Christabel' is an incomplete poem written in two parts – the first was completed in 1797 and the second in 1800. Coleridge intended to write three more parts ('1400 lines', he explains) but these were never completed. The unfinished nature of the poem seems core to understanding the influence of Coleridge's context as well as the motivation for what appears to be the most purposefully contrived construction of a reimagined world we will study. As a 'fragment poem', like 'Kubla Khan', we see the way in which the form of the poem shapes meaning. Coleridge takes fragments of his imagination to then metafactively create a commentary on the imagination. Unlike the other poems, in 'Christabel', Coleridge juxtaposes an overt exploration of an almost medieval, mystically reimagined world with the rigid structure of four accents on every line despite the syllable count, as he explains in the Preface to the poem.

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The beauty of nature seen across the other three poems, is largely absent in 'Christabel' as the focus is shifted to gendered sexual dynamics and the disruption it causes families, with more focus on women than seen in any other of his poems. The medieval castle, much like Khan's 'pleasure-dome' is constructed to protect life and yet rather masks the fear and entrapment of those within. It is a place of cultural and social laws; there is no paradisiacal realm here, so importantly, Christabel must leave 'the castle gate' to enter the muted wood where

The thin gray cloud is spread on high,  
It covers but not hides the sky.  
The moon is behind, and at the full;  
And yet she looks both small and dull.  
Thy power to declare,  
That in the dim forest  
Thou heard'st a low moaning,  
And found'st a bright lady, surpassingly fair;  
And didst bring her home with thee in love and in charity,  
To shield her and shelter her from the damp air'

Inherent to Geraldine's contradictions as seductress turned mother ('Seems to slumber still and mild,/ As a mother with her child') seems to be the ambiguities of the imagination and the visionary exploration of the unconscious as seen across all the poems set for study. Christabel's imagination has been enslaved by the sexual act and we are left querying Coleridge's contextual influences and their effect on his creativity.

Part 1 follows the descent of 'holy Christabel' to one who is morally stained and therein trapped by her own silence. We can only wonder at this stage, if Christabel is not the poet struggling to command the language required to finish the poem – an imagination thwarted by sexual longing.

Coleridge's attention shifts in Part 2 to reveal the delineation of men and women in the castle and what has kept them apart. The mythical intensity of the first part diminishes with the appearance of Sir Leoline who is rather ambiguous, like Geraldine. He has cut himself off from the living world since the death of his wife, 'Each matin bell, the Baron saith,/ Knells us back to a world of death'. Yet Geraldine reminds him of her father, Sir Roland de Vaux of Tryrmaine, his long-lost childhood friend

with whom we find another complex and painful relationship where love turned to hate.

The vision of Geraldine returns Sir Leoline to the world of the living, 'he kenned/ In the beautiful lady the child of his friend!' As Geraldine turns to Sir Leoline, with her 'snake's small eye', attention is given to the appearance of the 'reimagined' Christabel:

The maid, alas! her thoughts are gone,  
She nothing sees – no sight but one!  
The maid, devoid of guile and sin,  
I know not how, in fearful wise,  
So deeply she had drunken in  
That look, those shrunken serpent eyes,  
That all her features were resigned  
To this sole image in her mind:  
And passively did imitate  
That look of dull and treacherous hate!  
And thus she stood, in dizzy trance;  
Still picturing that look askance  
With forced unconscious sympathy  
Full before her father's view—  
As far as such a look could be  
In eyes so innocent and blue!

As Part 2 draws to a close, the transference of Geraldine's eye to Christabel suggests the seduction by this enchantress has been psychological as well as sexual and in turn, we view the seduction of imagination which Coleridge has affected. In the conclusion of Part 2, the deep psychology of the way love can turn to hate is revealed with special regard to the relationship between father and daughter.

It seems Coleridge's obsessive relationship with his son Hartley, influenced this poetic, psychological investigation which well preceded the work of Freud in its understanding of the complexity of parent/child relationships and their effect on the mind (Basler, 1943). The abrupt conclusion to this incomplete work has warranted extensive investigation by academics, yet ultimately this cannot be part of our exploration. Coleridge's foray into the reimagined world of a medieval wood and castle, enchanted by superstition and the preternatural Geraldine, gives us further insight to the extraordinary role of imagination in offering insight to the scope of humanity in Coleridge's world.



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## 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'

The most carefully planned and the most scientifically and efficiently conducted expedition ever made up to its time in the realm of reality provided the poet with a world of wonder and a nucleus of recollections from whence emerged in its own good time the most romantic voyage ever undertaken in the realm of the imagination.

Bernard Smith. *Imagining the Pacific: In the Wake of Cook's Voyages*, p 171

Chronologically, the last of the poems set for study, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', sees Coleridge take the trope of voyage and reimagine it in the form of a highly experimental, bizarrely fantastical journey. Contextually, it is important to note, as discussed in Bernard Smith's 'Imagining the Pacific', that William Wales, Captain James Cook's astronomer on his 1770 voyage to the South Pacific, was Coleridge's Mathematics teacher at Christ's Hospital School during his secondary schooling in the 1780s. Wales kept prolific journals and there is little doubt he would have regaled his students with stories from his travels, with particular focus on astronomical and meteorological phenomenon. Surrounded by those interpreting the world scientifically, with museums and encyclopaedias on the rise, Coleridge reimagine the world to shift focus to the role of the individual and the mind, to those who can recreate through imagination – poets.

Coleridge writes a highly self-conscious lyrical, literary ballad constructed through alternating tetrameter and trimeter to create a mythic tale noted for its immediacy:

The Sun now rose upon the right:  
Out of the sea came he,  
Still hid in mist, and on the left  
Went down into the sea.  
And the good south wind still blew behind,

But no sweet bird did follow,  
Nor any day for food or play  
Came to the Mariner's hollo!

Furthermore, Coleridge enhances his focus on otherworldliness by using archaic language to frame the Mariner from an alternate history and to

defamiliarise the reader as they reimagine the world. The retrospective recount enforces the multiple voices echoing from other worlds throughout the poem. He affects this antiquarian frame by opening with words such as 'stoppeth', 'may'st', 'eftsoons' and constructing what is clearly a pre-Reformation world:

To Mary Queen the praise be given!  
She sent the gentle sleep from Heaven,  
That slid into my soul.

In doing so, it seems in the construction of this archaic, reimagined world, Coleridge (who is interestingly vehement in his anti-Catholicism) seeks values that transcend history and he uses morality as a means to do so as further evidenced in *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*: 'All our notions are husked in the phantasms of Time and Place, that still escape the finest sieve and most searching Winnow of our Reason and Abstraction.'

On the one hand, the reimagined world offers us a Christian, 'One Life' tale of sin, punishment and redemption, while simultaneously presenting the allegorical vision of the romantic poet. Having committed the self-centred sin of disconnecting himself with nature and God, 'With my cross-bow/ I shot the ALBATROSS' the Mariner recounts stanzas of punishment

And every tongue, through utter drought,  
Was withered at the root;  
We could not speak, no more than if  
We had been choked with soot.

Ah! well-a-day! what evil looks  
Had I from old and young!  
Instead of the cross, the Albatross  
About my neck was hung  
until the eventual redemption occurs,  
O happy living things! no tongue  
Their beauty might declare:  
A spring of love gushed from my heart,  
And I blessed them unaware:  
Sure my kind saint took pity on me,

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And I blessed them unaware.  
The selfsame moment I could pray;  
And from my neck so free  
The Albatross fell off, and sank  
Like lead into the sea.

Yet, the Mariner explains that his redemption is incomplete – ‘And a thousand, thousand slimy things/ Lived on; and so did I’ and

Since then, at an uncertain hour,  
That agony returns:  
And till my ghastly tale is told,  
This heart within me burns.

While the Mariner offers his own interpretation to the tale, ‘He prayeth best, who loveth best’, Coleridge’s exotic imagery and symbols (albatross, sea snakes, life-in-death etc) force us as readers to contemplate the world he has reimagined according to the interpretative constructs of our own histories.

Ultimately, in the same way that ‘The Eolian Harp’ shows the tension between our need to know and our inability to know all, ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ reveals the limits of our ability to interpret poetry (reimagined worlds) as well as our inability to understand God and human motive. In reimagining the world of the Mariner, Coleridge searches for religious authority and the meaning therein, while exposing that these discoveries can occur in places of meaninglessness which induces new understanding, as the poet asserts the role of poetry as it shapes meaning.

## Suggested Reading

- Roy P. Basler, ‘Christabel’ *The Sewanee Review*, Vol 51, 1 (1943) pp.73-95
- John Beer, *Coleridge’s Poetic Intelligence* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1977).
- John Beer, ‘Coleridge, Hazlitt and ‘Christabel’, *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, Vol 37, 145 (1986) pp.40–54
- Frederick Burwick (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- William Christie, *The Two Romanticisms and Other Essays* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2016).
- Nigel Leask, ‘Kubla Khan and Orientalism: The Road to Xanadu Revisited’ in *Romanticism*, Vol 4 Issue 1, pp.1–21.
- John Livingstone Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu* (London: Constable, 1927).
- Lucy Newlyn (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- Seamus Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* (Oxford: Oxford university Press, 1999).
- Bernard Smith, ‘Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner* and Cook’s Second Voyage’, in his *Imagining the Pacific: In the Wake of Cook’s Voyages* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1992), pp.135–171.