

## Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772 - 1834)



Coleridge was a poet, critic, and philosopher, whose LYRICAL BALLADS, written with William Wordsworth, started the English Romantic movement. Although Coleridge's poetic achievement was small in quantity, he has gained a reputation as an authentic visionary. The poet Shelley called him a "hooded eagle among blinking owls."

Samuel T. Coleridge was born in Devonshire, England, the youngest son of a vicar. *"At six years old I remember to have read Belisarius, Robinson Crusoe, and Philip Quarll - and then I found the Arabian Nights' entertainments - one tale of which (the tale of a man who was compelled to seek for a pure virgin) made so deep an impression on me (I had read it in the evening while my mother was mending stockings) that I was haunted by spectres whenever I was in the dark - and I distinctly remember the anxious and fearful eagerness with which I used to watch the window in which the books lay - and whenever the sun lay upon them, I would seize it, carry it by the wall, and bask, and read."*

After his father's death Coleridge was sent away to school in London. Coleridge studied at Jesus College. He joined in the reformist movement stimulated by the French Revolution, and abandoned his studies in 1793. After an unhappy love-affair and troubled by debt he enlisted in the army under a false name. Soon he realized that he was unfit for an army career and his brother helped him leave by making use of the 'insanity' clause. Coleridge met the radical poet Robert Southey (1774-1843) in 1794. Coleridge moved with him to Bristol to establish a community, but the plan failed. In 1795 he married the sister of Southey's fiancée though he did not really love her.

Coleridge's collection POEMS ON VARIOUS SUBJECTS was published in 1796, and in 1797 appeared POEMS. In the same year he began the publication of a short-lived liberal political periodical The Watchman. He started a close friendship with Dorothy and William Wordsworth, one of the most fruitful creative relationships in English literature. From it resulted Lyrical Ballads, which opened with Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and ended with Wordsworth's Tintern Abbey. These poems set a new style by using everyday language and fresh ways of looking at nature. 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', a 625-line ballad, is among his essential works. It tells of a sailor who kills an albatross and for that crime against nature endures terrible punishments. The ship upon which the Mariner serves is trapped in a frozen sea. An albatross comes to the aid of the ship, saves everyone, and stays with the ship until the Mariner shoots it with his crossbow. The motiveless killing leads to punishment:

"And now there came both mist and show, / And it grew wondrous cold; / And ice, mast high, came floating by, / As green as emerald." After a ghost ship passes the crew begin to die but the mariner is eventually rescued. He is doomed to tell the story over and over again.

Two brothers granted Coleridge an annuity of 150 pounds, enabling him to pursue his literary career. Disenchanted with political developments in France, Coleridge visited Germany in 1798-99 with Dorothy and William Wordsworth, and became interested in the philosophical works of Kant. He studied philosophy at a German University and mastered the German language.

At the end of 1799 Coleridge fell in love with Sara Hutchinson, the sister of Wordsworth's future wife, to whom he devoted his work *DEJECTION: AN ODE* (1802). During these years Coleridge also began to compile his *NOTEBOOKS*, daily meditations on his life.

Coleridge had become addicted to opium, freely prescribed by doctors as a pain-killer. In 1804 he sailed to Malta in search of better health. He worked for two years as secretary to the governor of Malta, and later traveled through Sicily and Italy, before returning to England. In 1809-10 he wrote and edited with Sara Hutchinson the literary and political magazine *The Friend*.

From 1808 to 1818 he he gave several lectures, chiefly in London, and was considered the greatest of Shakespearean critics. The poem *Kubla Khan* was inspired by a dream In the summer of 1797 the author had retired to a lonely farm-house. He had taken medicine and after three hours sleep he woke up with a clear image of the poem. Disturbed by a visitor, he lost the vision, with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images. Modern scholars are not convinced by this story, but it reflects Coleridge's problems with the management of practical life and finishing his ideas.

In 1810 Coleridge's friendship with Wordsworth came to crisis, and the two poets' relationship was never fully restored. During the following years Coleridge lived in London, on the verge of suicide. After a physical and spiritual crisis he underwent medical treatment to free himself from opium. He found a permanent harbour in the household of Dr. James Gillman, and enjoyed an almost legendary reputation among the younger Romantics. During this time he rarely left the house.

In 1816 the unfinished poems *CHRISTABEL* and *KUBLA KHAN* were published, and next year appeared *SIBYLLINE LEAVES*. After 1817 Coleridge devoted himself to theological and politico-sociological works - his final position was that of a conservative Romantic and radical Christian. Coleridge was elected a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1824. He died near London on July 25, 1834.