

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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S. T. Coleridge (1772-1834) *Poems; Biographia Literaria (B, 1609-1670)*

Coleridge, like Wordsworth, was educated at Cambridge, but proved a wayward student, too much the scholar to fit comfortably with his classes, addicted to high living, and eventually to crippling debt. His only recourse was the military, in which he was even more a failure. Back at Cambridge, Coleridge paired up with the poet Robert Southey, and soon with William Wordsworth, who was to be the great intellectual mate of Coleridge throughout much of his life—though a bitter quarrel estranged them for some years—and for decades he shared with Wordsworth the distinction of being the leading British poet and thinker. It should be mentioned, because it sharply distinguished Coleridge from Wordsworth, that the former spent considerable time studying German philosophy of the day, and came away from that experience, at the University of Goettingen, far more the speculative thinker than Wordsworth.

Question: What is the 'supernatural' quality of Coleridge's poetry?

In his *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge observes that in the *Lyrical Ballads*, which bear the author names of both himself and of Wordsworth, he (Coleridge) created poems of the supernatural, while Wordsworth, as he insisted, wrote poems bearing the real speech of real men in daily life. Do you find this distinction born out in the poems you have read, and if so what is the *supernatural* element in Coleridge's work? Take "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," "Christabel," and "The Eolian Harp." What is "supernatural" about those poems? Why would Coleridge have used that term about those works?

Comparative Literature:

1. Coleridge's definition of imagination, as given in the *Biographia Literaria* (Chapter 13; 1663), claims that that faculty is "the living power and prime agent of all human perception." Do some reading in the thought of those German contemporaries of Coleridge, from whom he drew the foundations of this radical new aesthetic. (Think how totally this aesthetic differs from that of Dryden and Pope, hardly a century earlier.) Good starting point (with a commentary): the German philosopher Schelling's contemporary *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), which gives the priority to the aesthetic, in the human construction of reality.

2. You will have gathered that nature becomes a key concept for both Enlightenment thinkers like Pope—remember the "Essay on Man"—and for Romantics like Coleridge and Wordsworth. Give some thought to the difference between the usages of "nature" in the work of those two groups of poets. Coleridge, you may want to consider first, writes of "the one life within us and abroad, which meets all motion and becomes its soul." ("The Aeolian Harp," ll. 26-7). Would Pope have resonated to this kind of "pantheistic" idea?