

# **Atheistic Implications and Innuendos in Coleridge's 1797 Poetry**

Proposal for an M.A. Thesis in English Literature

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**רמזים לאתאיזם וכפירה בשירות בשנת 1797 של סמואל טיילור קולרידג'**

הצעת מחקר לתואר שני בספרות אנגלית

המחלקה לבלשנות וספרות אנגלית

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## Introduction

“I have too much Vanity to be altogether a Christian – too much tenderness of Nature to be utterly an Infidel” (Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge Volume 1, Letter XXIX, Sunday night, March 30, 1794)

This brief statement by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in a private letter to his brother, Reverend George Coleridge, is reflective of the poet’s complex relationship with traditional Christian theologies. Although Coleridge returned to the Anglican Church of England in 1814, during the writing of the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1797 and 1798 he was working as a Unitarian preacher and had given evidence at the 1793 Cambridge trial of William Frend, who stood accused of heresies and breaking university and national law.

Coleridge’s exploration of religious views is an important aspect of his poetry that has often been overlooked in scholarship of his early work. Whilst the poetry Coleridge wrote in his latter years has been extensively analysed, primarily by Christian theologians and academics attempting to show that Coleridge’s thoughts were ultimately orthodox, critic Owen Barfield notes in the introduction to *What Coleridge Thought* that more attention has been “paid to Coleridge as a thinker than to Coleridge as a poet and a critic” (3). There appears to be a lack of research into the relationship between Coleridge’s early poetry and his “problem of dealing with the supernatural” (367) in the words of Stephen Maxfield Parrish. My research attempts to help fill this gap by using close reading techniques to focus on the religious iconography and themes within Coleridge’s early poems, to examine how Coleridge used his poetry to explore his own philosophical and religious views.

## Aims and General Descriptions

My research will consist of a close and detailed analysis of three of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poems that were written around the period that Coleridge and William Wordsworth wrote the *Lyrical Ballads*. The proposed thesis will offer analysis of the use of religious symbols, icons, and metaphors in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's three poems that he wrote alongside William Wordsworth in 1797. The research will draw on scholarship on Coleridge's philosophical and religious views, Coleridge's own presentation of his views in his *Biographia Literaria*, and the critical discussion surrounding Coleridge's poetry. By combining the critical discussion of Coleridge's philosophy with a close analysis of Coleridge's poetry from the same period, my research will move away from previous analyses that have often focused on each in isolation rather than the interactions between the poetry and theology.

In this thesis I will focus on three poems that are preoccupied with the philosophical question of the nature of evil, namely "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", "The Wanderings of Cain," and "The Three Graves". My research will ask if, and to what extent, Coleridge's personal religious and philosophical views are portrayed in the poetry he was writing at the time. Secondly it will ask what light the three poems can shed on Coleridge's perspective on human suffering and divine punishment, the topic of the chosen poems. My goal is to understand and analyse the underlying convictions and moral messages that Coleridge alludes to in his 1797 poetry, allowing for a better understanding of one of the most influential Romantic poets.

## Methodology

My research will focus on religious symbols, metaphors and icons in the poems, how they are used and the implications that their usage have on Coleridge's views on divine providence and punishment. I will also be using biographies of the poet, including the 1838 biography written by Dr James Gillman (who treated Coleridge for his opium addiction and lived with him for the last eighteen years of his life), Coleridge's letters, and his great work of literary criticism and philosophy *Biographia Literaria* in order to situate an understanding of Coleridge's poems within his own theological and philosophical framework.

## Scholarly Background

### 1. Coleridge and Religion

Whilst there are many scholars who have written about Coleridge's religious and philosophical views, few have written about Coleridge's exploration of those views in his poetry. The starting point I will therefore rely upon for the critical discussion are the primary sources of the three separate works ("The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", "The Three Graves" and "The Wanderings of Cain") that I will be discussing in my chapters, Coleridge's personal letters published by Coleridge's grandson (himself a literary scholar) Ernest Hartley Coleridge in two volumes in 1895, the essays on philosophy found within Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, and the short work *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* that was published by his nephew and editor six years after Coleridge's death.

*Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* (henceforth *Confessions*) was certainly written long after the period in which Coleridge wrote the poems I will be discussing in this thesis, yet nevertheless, the work remains a useful resource, as Coleridge is (at least

supposedly) confessing his earlier sins. In doing so Coleridge presents arguments against Christianity from his understanding of a Deist perspective (a view he was repeatedly accused of harboring during his career). My thesis will compare the arguments made by Coleridge in *Confessions* and in his poetry, showing the similarities but also the differences between the answers Coleridge provides in *Confessions* and in his poems.

I will further draw upon scholarship which directly addresses the primary sources I analyze. Joseph Henry Green's 1849 introduction to *Confessions* is a strong starting point for seeing the intentional modulating and redirecting of Coleridge's more controversial religious views, with Green arguing that Coleridge was presenting an explanation of why a questioning faith leads to the truth of the word of God and is preferable to blind faith.

More recent scholarship such as J.A. Stuart's paper on Augustinian underpinnings in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", Harry White's discussion of Coleridge's "Uncertain Agony", Douglas Hedley's book *Coleridge, Philosophy and Religion* in which he places Coleridge "centrally in the Christian Platonic tradition" (150)m and J. Robert Bach's *Coleridge and Christian Doctrine*, amongst many more, have all continued with this work of reinterpreting Coleridge as a religious traditionalist. My research will move beyond these traditional reinterpretations of Coleridge's poetry and show how the arguments and icons of Coleridge's poetry do not align with the traditional Christian reading.

My research will draw heavily from the work of Owen Barfield's seminal study *What Coleridge Thought*, especially its introduction, in which Barfield addresses why critics have felt the need to tame and reinterpret Coleridge to make him appear

more presentable after his status was left highly tarnished by his perceived Deist and sceptical theological stances. Harold Bloom's introduction to his edited volume of *Confessions* is a similarly important source emphasising that Coleridge dealt explicitly with philosophical questions that would plague thinkers in subsequent decades during which Coleridge's positions would eventually become widely adopted. Stephen Parrish's essay on the poetic as well as philosophical distinctions between Coleridge and Wordsworth is useful not only for its observations about the poets' divergent styles but because Parrish begins to build a compelling framework for noting differences between Coleridge and Wordsworth's theological stances.

## 2. Scholarship on the Poems

Research on the poems I have selected will be drawn from the critical work of scholars on the poems themselves, as well as from Thomas Hutchinson's introduction to the 1920 edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* in which he establishes numerous points of commonality in theme, tone, and iconography between the selected poems. I will further refer to J. Lowes's *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination* and the connections he draws between "The Wanderings of Cain" and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", as well as grounding the controversial discussion around the inspiration of "The Wanderings of Cain".

My close analysis of the poems will rely heavily on the work of a number of critics both to support my thesis's argument and to critique it. Amongst those I will be referring to the essays of Martin Scofield, Pamela Edwards's essay on Coleridge's views on Church and State, Anthony John Harding's analysis of icons in Coleridge's poetry and the work done by Harold Bloom, George Whalley, D.W. Harding and Edward E. Bostetter on "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner". I will also be referring

to L.C. Knight's work on icons and symbols in Coleridge's wider poetry throughout my thesis to support arguments advanced about the images in the poem.

I will rely in my introduction on scholarly work done by critics such as Raimonda Modiano and biographies of Coleridge's life such as Lawrence Hanson's study of Coleridge's early years, including his time at Cambridge, and *Life of Coleridge* by James Gillman, the physician who Coleridge spent the last years of his life living with the poet. These biographies will supply the historical context in which Coleridge's poetry should be viewed. I will also be referring to Kathleen Coburn's extensive work on *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* which provide valuable insights into the thought process that went into writing the poems and the sections of the poems and images that Coleridge rewrote and reworked.

## **Chapter Outline**

### **Introduction**

This chapter will provide important background and context for understanding the analysis in the following chapters. I will introduce the critical discussion surrounding Coleridge's theological and philosophical views at the time and how they differed from traditional views, including that of future poet laureate and close friend William Wordsworth. I will also present the argument of my thesis and justify its selection of texts.

### **Chapter One – “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”**

This chapter will focus on Coleridge's ballad “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”, traditionally understood as a story about remorse and redemption. I will challenge the traditional understanding of the poem by exploring a range of critics'



opinions as to whether the ballad is intended to be understood as a story of redemption and penance and by examining how Coleridge intentionally undermines traditional notions of sin and redemption in the poem. The chapter will also explore the use of the albatross, its iconographic significance both historically and in the story, and how the portrayal of the mariner both in the poem and as the story-teller intentionally subverts the apparent meaning of the ballad.

### **Chapter Two – “The Three Graves: A Fragment of A Sexton’s Tale”**

This chapter will examine the section of Coleridge’s abortive attempt to write a six-part extended blank verse poem with William Wordsworth known as “The Three Graves”. The chapter will examine how Coleridge deals with what critic Thomas Hutchinson describes as “the problem of dealing with the supernatural” (367) in a poem that is centred around “the terrible effects of a curse invoked upon a human being” (367), namely the mother’s curse of her daughter. The chapter will examine the moral questions that Coleridge poses in “The Three Graves” and the answer he offers in the poem in the context of his later writings and concurrent beliefs. The chapter will also examine the role of the narrator in the poem using Coleridge’s statements in the *Friend*, and the similarities and differences between the mariner and old Sexton as narrators.

### **Chapter Three – “The Wanderings of Cain: Canto II”**

This chapter will discuss another of Coleridge’s unsuccessful efforts to co-author a work with Wordsworth during the 1797 period in which they set out to “imitate the death of Abel” (Preface to “The Wanderings of Cain”). This chapter will focus more intensely on the moral questions that Coleridge is raising in his explicit

juxtaposition of the innocent figure of Enos and the fratricidal Cain. This chapter will also most directly be able to address the questions around Coleridge's beliefs in divine punishment due to the explicitly biblical theme of the Canto.

## **Conclusion**

The conclusion will serve as a summary of the arguments that have been made in the three central chapters, linking the themes and conclusions that were common between the poems as well as identifying any important differences between the stances Coleridge adopts in the poems. The themes of redemption, divine providence, divine justice, moral and religious scepticism will all be discussed in this chapter. This chapter will then use that discussion to reframe the poems in the context of Coleridge's philosophical views, as established in the introduction, and suggest how the poems may be viewed as an examination of Coleridge's views. It will also suggest what conclusions Coleridge appears to be drawing from said examination in the poems and the relationship between the philosophical conclusions of the poems and Coleridge's views at the time.

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