

## S.T. Coleridge: Interpreting the Theory of Supernaturalism

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### Abstract

Supernaturalism is something that is above and beyond what is natural; events which cannot be directly explained by known laws and observations. Supernaturalism is the special field Coleridge who is one of the great poets of Romantic Movement in English Literature. His thoughts are philosophical and style is simple and clear.. He writes about supernatural elements and events and describes what is unseen and beyond nature. But he describes them in such a way that they appear natural and life like. The paper aims to discuss the element of supernaturalism in the three major works of Coleridge, 'The Ancient Mariner', 'Kubla Khan' and 'Christabel’

The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown. This fear of unknown can be associated in a way with Supernaturalism. Supernaturalism is something that is above and beyond what is natural; events which cannot be directly explained by known laws and observations. Exploration of the occult and of infinity, mysticism, and numerology are some other manifestation of the intense desire of man to know what exists or lies beyond the finite mind. Imaginative and inventive fiction and poetry have been created upon this appeal and Literature has been used as a way of expression of thoughts or beliefs about the supernatural and its relation to the human mind. Throughout time, people have tried to put their thoughts down into something more concrete, into something that others would be able to either relate to, or create the basis of thought. The use of supernatural themes has enabled the writers and poets to create a reality for their thoughts, fears and beliefs of both the world and the human mind. These themes have been able to give a new light on the meaning of reality. Samuel Taylor Coleridge was a renowned Logician, Metaphysician and Bard whose disquiet life and sensitive nature had an impact on his writings and especially in the introduction of Supernaturalism in his works. Coleridge's reputation as a poet rests on four to five great poems composed within a short period of six years when, in the unsparing company of Wordsworth and Dorothy, his creative impulse found a sudden release and he wrote poems like. '*The Ancient Mariner*', '*Christabel*', and '*Kubla Khan*' etc. His writings as a whole can be found in twenty odd pages, but then they are the masterpieces of literature.

Coleridge's main object as a poet was to write about supernatural characters and events but to redeem this kind of writing from the coarse sensationalism of the school of terror by firmly linking it to the psychological truth and giving it a human and familiar look. The three major

works of Coleridge, *The Ancient Mariner*, *Kubla Khan* and *Christabel* deal with supernatural phenomena. As a poet of the supernatural, Coleridge strictly avoided crudeness from his writing, which the writers like Horace Walpole and Monk Lewis revealed in their writings. Coleridge replaced their crudeness with suggestiveness. Rather than portraying horror, he suggested it in his writings. Both in the cases of *the Nightmare* *life in Death* and the serpent-woman *Geraldine*, he resists the temptation of depicting their hideous monstrosity. He conveys the ghastliness of life-in-Death in a few suggestive lines:

*“Her lips were red, her looks were free,  
Her locks were yellow as gold  
Her skin was white as leprosy  
The nightmare life in Death was she*

The above lines suggest the physical appearance of Geraldine having some supernatural traits. Instead of depicting her horrified traits directly the poet simply suggested it in an impressive manner and creates the atmosphere of fears. Similarly the repulsiveness of Geraldine's ugly bosom is conveyed though a clever suggestion:

*“A sight to dream of, not to till?  
O Shield her? Shield sweet Christabel.”*

The omission of detailed descriptions empowered the poet to keep the reality of the supernatural phenomena provocatively unclear, unspecified and it deepened the mystery surrounding them.

Coleridge possesses an unusual gift of evoking the mystery of things. He has an eye of subtleties that could give an uncanny look even to what is just commonplace. The Ancient Mariner is made a mysterious character just by the mention of his glittering eye, long grey beard and skinny hand. Geraldine looks mysterious because of the circumstances in which she makes her appearance. Her being 'beautiful exceedingly' also contributes to her mysteriousness. Coleridge uses this faculty most effectively by presenting the ordinary natural phenomena like the rising of the sun and the moon, the blowing of the winds and the twinkling of the stars as mysterious character. Most high ice sending a Dismal sheen and making cracking and growling sound is bound to appear mysterious. The strange spectacle of the death fires dancing in reel and rout and water burning green, and blue and white like a witch's oils the romantic chasm in *Kubla Khan* is given a touch of mystery by the mention of the 'woman wailing for her demon lover'.

Another feature of Coleridge's treatment of the Supernatural is the preservation of the essential psychological truth. The supernatural touches in *Kubla Khan* or *The Ancient Mariner* are well managed and are in perfect harmony with the mental emotional molds of the characters. The poet caught in a creative frenzy is shown as capable of producing supernatural awe in the minds of his listeners. In the supernatural drama of *The Ancient Mariner*, the mariner's mood showed so closely that one can easily interpret it as taking place on the inner stage of his sub-conscious mind. Finally it is worth remembering that Coleridge makes the supernatural as in Homer and

Shakespeare, a subordinate element in a wider scheme intimately related to living human experience. The central idea of the need of love and composition for the entire creation of God and the agonizing experience resulting from its absence is to intensely human that even the supernatural character of the events cannot becloud its truthfulness.

Coleridge is said to have the most vigorous imagination among all the romantic poets but he would not have been able to create his perplexing mysteries. In the exercise of his imagination, he is definitely bolder than Wordsworth who was too careful to describe things not seen personally by him. But Coleridge imagination was bold enough to represent suitable facts from his reading, which was vast and varied, and he portrayed them as vividly as being literally present before his eyes.

Another example of Coleridge's treatment of mystery is *Kubla Khan* in which a palace to be built with a stately garden into it. And thus 'ten miles a fertile ground were enclosed with a wall' set his imagination on fire and we have the vivid description of Kubla Khan's stately pleasure palace. J.L Lower's book the '*The Road to Xanadu*' amply illustrates how Coleridge's imagination has transformed simple facts he collected during his receding into something mysterious and impalpable. The major poems of Coleridge have a strange dreamlike atmosphere about them. Dreams with him are no shadows they are the very substance of his life. He fed on his dreams and vitalized them in his poems. *Kubla Khan* is essentially a dream poem and recounting in a poetic form what he saw in a vision. *The Ancient Mariner* comes from Cruikshank's dream and displays a dreamlike movement. C.M. Bowra in the Romantic imagination illustrates the affinity of the Ancient Mariner with a dream: 'On the surface it shows many qualities of a dream', says Bowra. "at moves in abrupt stages, each of which has its own single dominating character. Its usual impressions are remarkably brilliant and absorbing with changing emotional impacts always coming with an unusual force, as if the poet were haunted and obsessed by them. When it is all over, it clings to the memory with a peculiar persistence. Just as on waking, it is difficult at first to disentangle ordinary experience from influences which still survive from sleep". This dreamlike texture of Coleridge's poems gives them a kind of twilight vagueness intensifying exploration of the Middle Ages and he was fascinated by the romances and legends associated with them. The people were superstitious and they believed in the supernatural, Coleridge found in their life plenty to draw upon and write about. '*The Ancient Mariner*.' *Christabel* and '*Kubla Khan*' are brief but wonderful ballads appreciated by all for their treatment of mystery and supernaturalism. These ballads are written with the glamour of the Middle Ages but medievalism does not form the substance of his poems. It gives them the much needed sense of remoteness and serves to fulfill Coleridge's purpose to hint at or openly display. Even *Christabel*, also portrays a medieval castle but the scene of action, the allusions to chivalry, tourneys and combats are not less important.

Coleridge shows for nature the same loving devotion as we find in Wordsworth. But Bowra rightly points out that his eye for Nature is for its more subtle charms and less obvious appeal's and he talks richer and more luxurious pleasure in those aspects of Nature that can present a

dramatic and mysterious look. Whether his descriptions are based on his personal experience or on what he has read, he never fails to give them a resemblance of truth. The icebergs around the slip or the single, sudden stride of a tropical night are scenes that he could not have seen but they look as lively and realistic as the five wild-torrents actually seen by him. Coleridge possessed the power to evoke the richness of color as well as the magical associations of sound much better than any other poet. He is equally successful both in giving graphic descriptions and in achieving broad, generalized effects. In his early poems, under the influence of Wordsworth, he took a pantheistic view of Nature and also accepted it as a moral teacher, but later he came to believe that it is we who invest nature with life and it simply reflects our own moods.

Coleridge depicted that while writing about supernatural characters and events, his main problem was to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth that is sufficient to obtain *the willing suspension of disbelief* for the moment, which constitutes 'poetic faith'. He succeeded in his purpose by giving his Supernaturalism the solid base of the dramatic truth of human emotions so that the authenticity of human experience is never violated. His treatment of Supernaturalism is very subtle. He does not cumulate horrors; neither had he given gruesome details, none horrified incidents were depicted by him. He only suggested them while giving his readers a free hand to use their imagination and fill in the necessary details. Instead of abruptly stepping into the realm of the supernatural, he first wins the faith of his readers with an accurate rendering of the familiar landscape and then slowly proceeds to exploit this faith and introduce the supernatural elements. He wrote some of the great romantic poems. *The Ancient Mariner* is one of them. Every line of it exudes the peculiar romantic flavor. But the Ancient Mariner cannot just be dismissed as a romantic tale of wonder and mystery. It is much more than that. Different readers have tried to interpret the Mariner's experiences in different ways. Some of the critics take the Mariner as a mental and spiritual adventure, and a unusually inquiring spirit. According to Mr. Tillyard from social point of view these spiritual adventures are criminals. They disturb the existing order and they imply a criticism of the accepted round of life. They are self-appointed outcasts. The shooting of the Albatross in the present context was an antisocial act, something that by everyday rules not be done. As a logical consequence of his revolt against society, he has to go through an agonizing experience of alienation. He repents his isolation and escapes it by the enlargement of his sympathies, and he is allowed to return to common life. '

The Supernatural being the prominent field of Coleridge, it was but inevitable that he should lay the scene of his poems in the middle ages, with their marked propensity for magic, witchcraft and superstition. Coleridge is careful not to show any abruptness in introducing supernatural elements. He first takes his readers around familiar places and veins his faith in the narrative through vividly portrayed minute details. Then minor hints of the supernatural are gradually dropped. Finally, the entire scene puts on a supernatural looks. But by now the reader's sensibility is so attuned to the mood of the narrative that he readily accepts whatever he is told. In *The Ancient Mariner*, there is a very vivid description of the ships journey southward to the equator

with a good wind and a fine weather, and then a storm blast drives towards the South Pole. In part II there is a very vivid description of the ships journey southward to the equator with a good wind and a fine weather, and then a storm blast drives towards the South Pole. With the introduction of mist and snow the scene takes on a weird look. In part II, the Mariner announces-

“We were the first that ever burst into that silent sea.

Then the atmosphere is given some more supernatural touches. The breeze drops and the sea becomes perfectly still. The sun stands high in a “hot and copper sky”. Their ship looks as idle as 'a painted ship upon a painted ocean'. On account of intense heat, the mariner had a weary time. Their throats are parched and their eyes are glazed. It is in such a background that the specter ship is introduced with its ghastly crew of Death and life in Death. In *Christabel* also the supernatural atmosphere is very gradually built up hear the hooting of the owl as the castle clock strikes the mid night hour. The toothless mastiff bitch makes answer to the clock striking hours and quarters and is said to be able to see the coffin of *Christabel's* dead mother. A thin grey cloud spreads on high and the moon behind it looks both small and dull. *Geraldine* is introduced in an air of hushed expectancy. But her evil nature is not revealed immediately. The poet gives short cumulative touches to suggest that she is an evil spirit. She collapses at the massive Iron Gate belike through pain. She refuses to join *Christabel* in prayer. The mastiff bitch makes an angry moan as she passed by the kennel. When they enter the hall, the dying ashes give out a tongue of light, a fit of flame, in the light of which *Christabel* is able to see *Geraldine's* eye. Even at this moment the poet does not still us that it is a serpent's eye. Thus the poet prepares us fully well before revealing her reality as she exposes her ugly bosom and puts a spell on *Christabel*.

Another very important feature of Coleridge's treatment of the supernatural is a very clever and subtle blending of the natural and the supernatural. Indeed the two are so indistinguishably fused with each other that it becomes difficult to locate where the one ends and the other begins. Who will say with any definiteness whether the bloody sun, no bigger than the moon, standing right up above the mast in a hot and copper sky, the death fire dancing at night and the water burning green and blue and white like a witch oil constitute natural or supernatural phenomena? Does *Christabel* make a hissing sound because of womanly jealousy or because under the spell of *Geraldine*. She has begun to acquire some of the evil *Geraldine* stands for? In *Kubla Khan* the mighty fountain being momentarily forced is definitely invested with supernatural energy but the similar employed to describe it are so familiar that we accept the fountain as quite nature. *Kubla Khan* is not strictly a narrative poem, but it does offer the glimpses of Coleridge's narrative art. References to the woman waiting for her demon lover and the Abyssinian maid playing on her dulcimer and ranging of Mount *Abora* bring into it the same king of mysterious elements as we find in *The Ancient Mariner and Christabel*. *Kubla Khan* is also fragmentary and who can say if, had it been completed, it would not have been another gem of supernatural poetry. Coleridge was not a great poet, but he was nevertheless a motivating one. His distinction lies in the utter facility with which he combined the concrete with the abstract, the neutral with the supernatural, in his

complete hold of the concrete and superficial manipulation of impossibilities. There, he provided both the elements of belief and interest that makes the success of such poems. It is the simplicity and effect intertwined in the associating the concrete with the abstract. That helps us in receiving these abnormal impressions as facts, and in our accepting these lines as facts. Coleridge has verily accomplished his poetic creed and his success can be seen in the presentation of the supernatural in the poems where terrifying figures and mystical events happen as if they were part of everyday life.

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