

# **SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE**

**(1772-1834)**

## **1) POET OF THE FRAGMENT**

- **Aesthetic /poetic:** except *The Rime*, most poems in fragment-form (*Christabel*, *Kubla Khan*)
- **Philosophic:** abrupt shifts and general obscurity; unresolved dilemmas.
- **Personal:** failed experiences such as the Pantisocracy-plan, the foundation of a paper, his marriage with Sara Fricker, his friendship with Wordsworth

➤ **Hence:** obsession with passivity, indolence, inability to act and produce, morbid self-pity

*“Wordsworth’s career is a heroic building-up, a searching of the grounds for optimism ... Coleridge seems most memorable on the process of breaking down” (W. Davies)*

## 2) REASON VS UNDERSTANDING

### REASON

*“The Power of Universal and necessary Connections, the Source and Substance of Truths above Sense,.....the Fountain of Ideas and the Light of the Conscience”*  
= Power to perceive the world of Ideas

### UNDERSTANDING

Interpretation of phenomena based on empirical observation, through the senses;  
Intelligence depending on scientific and physical data

### 3) IMAGINATION

- Embracing Reason and Understanding
- **Primary:** Faculty to perceive through the senses the world around us. "*Prime Agent of all human perception*". All men possess it.
- **Secondary:** Faculty to create, or re-create, after analysing, dissociating the aspects of reality. Only the poet (prophet) possesses it. It coincides with the Poetic Vision.

### 4) FANCY

- **Associative memory:** recollection of facts, images, events and sensations according to associations of ideas
- **Mechanical faculty:** associate, combine metaphors, similes, or other aspects of language

## 5) THE SUPERNATURAL

“... my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural....yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing **suspension of disbelief** for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. Mr Wordsworth, on the other hand, was to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural...”

*(Biographia Literaria)*

- Supernatural as a metaphor for profound human experiences which the material world alone cannot represent
- Instrument to express this metaphor: the language of images. E.g.
  - voyage
  - Albatross
  - phosphorescent phenomena of the ocean
  - sea snakes

## 6) GOTHIC AND EXOTIC

- The Other / the different
- The uncanny / the subconscious
- The unknown / the mysterious
- The archaic / The remote

### ***CHRISTABEL (pub.1816)***

“Poetry gives most pleasure when only generally and not perfectly understood ... From this cause it is that what I call metaphysical Poetry gives me so much delight”  
(*Notebooks*)

### What kind of poem?

- Fragment narrative poem / ballad style (influence of Bürger – *demon lover*)
- “[N]othing more than a common fairy tale” (Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*)
- Peculiar metre based on the count of accents - four – while syllables vary
- Part of Gothic tradition and anticipating later Vampire fiction (e.g. LeFanu’s *Carmilla*, 1872)

### Themes

- One must go through hell to achieve heaven (Blake .... Rimbaud) – Thell / Christabel
- Fall and redemption (though just hinted at)
- Exploration of repressed sexual drives – Hazlitt (derogative): a “dim”, “obscure”, “visionary” poem (is it all a dream?)
- Innocence and (mysterious) experience
- Unsaid crime – ex of “negative capability” (unsolved mystery; form of sublime)

## Geraldine

- Pure evil tempting Christabel
- Demon lover / “psychic” vampire / witch
- Femme fatale – strong erotic force
- Mother figure vs father figure (e.g. l. 301)
  - Love-hate relationship
  - Reference to pre-oedipal phase: cfr. reaction to the view of Geraldine’s breasts
  - Moonlight: full moon = benign mother; “small and dull moon” = malign mother

## Christabel

- Just victim? Or also participant? – lesbian theme (or female friendship – vogue of the time)
- Martyr figure (“Christ”, “Abel”) to redeem man’s sins
- Geraldine’s double – or viceversa = both figures of the poet’s divided self (Christabel’s dream = the poet’s visions)
- Why two heroines?