

# Romanticism: New Waves of Imaginative Thinking

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## **ABSTRACT**

*In this paper I discuss the rebirth of the gothic genre which materialized at the end of the Romantic Period as a mode of escape from the cultural harshness brought by the industrial revolution. This genre represents a new wave in imaginative thinking that integrated mystical elements into poetry to create spine tingling tales. It is for this reason that I chose to analyze Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poems "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "Christabel" as well as Lord Byron's poem "Manfred." All three of them are examples of gothic style of writing that resulted from cruel and reprehensible cultural reality. In the first poem, the strange and unusual supernatural creatures create an atmosphere filled with darkness and obscurity. In the second poem, the main character's struggle against her evil twin parallels doppelganger that existed between two war threatening countries, England and France. In the third poem, Byron incorporates the spirits and spells in order to shed his guilt from his forbidden offense. The single greatest impact of these poems is the ability to transport the reader from their present reality to a preceding time in history that was far less complicated.*

As modern industrialization sprang up in England during the eighteenth century, the culture grew extremely cruel to the vast majority of people. It divided them into two classes, the elite with special privileges and the commoners with obligations. The Romantic Period was forged by those who looked at the world in a different light. A writer of that time was often viewed by the majority "as a spokesman of society addressing a cultivated and homogeneous audience and having as his end the conveyance of 'truth'" (Baker, Web). Spun from revolutions and political upheaval, Romantic writers were inspired by dreams of liberty. Their ideas were often viewed by the nobles as a threat to society owing to a new way of thinking. Death by guillotine was their punishment. Yet, it is from this radical ideology and the new perception of the world that the greatest literature emerged.

One of the most influential writers of the Romantic Period is Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He whole heartedly believed in democracy where everyone had the right to be heard. In his poem, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," he challenged the Romantics to launch into the supernatural world in their search for freedom. Even though "Christabel" never once employs the term invasion" (Mulvihill, 273), it is based on the threat of the French incursion. Equally, both poems reflect Coleridge's opinion about his culture because they aim to mirror the concerns of his time and to incorporate nature into the people's lives. As a result, he captures the hearts of his readers in his quest for democracy and freedom.

Another influential writer of the Romantic Era is George Gordon, Lord Byron. Lord Byron wrote during his many travels. His poetry "combined the more

popular features of the late-eighteenth-century romanticism: colorful descriptions of exotic nature, disillusioned meditations on the vanity of earthly things, a lyrical exaltation of freedom, and above all, the new hero, handsome and lonely, yet strongly impassioned even for all of his weariness with life" (Byron, 333). Byron's poem "Manfred," is a brilliant example of his style of poetry. It portrays the vibrant beauty of the Swiss Alps. The poem's main character is a very attractive and solitary gentleman who desperately seeks freedom from his earthly transgression. It is for this reason that many people believe that "Manfred" was actually a confession of Byron's own guilt that was brought on by his forbidden love. Byron's personal letters and journals reflect his character's image and bring extraordinary uniqueness into his writings (Gatton, Web). In addition to that, Byron also protests against social injustices and integrates mystical elements to escape the underlying turmoil of the modern industrialization of that time.

During the late eighteenth century, a revolutionary uprising occurred and forced England to enter a new and innovative era known as the Romantic Period. It was a turbulent time of change from an agricultural society to a nation of modern industrialization. New industries replaced the old-fashioned hand labor industry, forcing harsh environments with extended working hours, inadequate pay, and cruel discipline. The "constant threat of inflation and depression" loomed because the English government chose to fund the French and American Revolutionary wars despite public outcries for economic, political, and social reforms (Greenblatt, 2). As a reflection of the harsh English society, writers reached back into Medieval Europe and reintroduced the Gothic genre by incorporating eerie plots, apparitions, and mysterious deaths (Greenblatt, 21). "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,"

"Christabel," and "Manfred," are mirror images of the new wave in imaginative thinking that resulted from the notoriously cruel and reprehensible cultural society.

Archaic language integrated throughout Coleridge's poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" was used to escape the present and hold onto the past. As a result of the "global and domestic consequences of the expanding British Empire," the English culture was by in large viewed with great cynicism (Levy, 693). It was for this very reason that many Romantics yearned to revert to a point-in-time that was much simpler and ethically purer. In his poem, Coleridge cleverly incorporated the use of archaic words and spellings as a method to break away from reality and to capture a distinct period in history that was far less complicated. Coleridge chose to incorporate words such as: "gossamers" in place of cob webs, "spectre-bark" instead of ghosts, and "corses" denoting corpses into his poem to enhance its literary mysticism and timeless appeal (Coleridge, 435, 439).

The incorporation of the medieval style of gothic writing is yet another technique that the writer used to escape the complexity of his modern culture. Coleridge's gothic writing style took the reader on a fantasy adventure surrounded by an atmosphere filled with darkness and obscurity. Readers were carried to an extraordinary place adrift at sea with no land in sight. The vessel aboard the open water in Coleridge's poem is important because it symbolized his flight of imagination far away from the realisms of life. It introduced the reader to bizarre and unusual supernatural creatures that symbolized the real cultural dangers that modern industry presented to society. These paranormal creatures derived from the darkest recesses of Coleridge's mind included such monstrosities as "thousands" of grotesque "slimy" sea monsters that "crawl with their legs" as-well-as ghostlike

apparitions (Coleridge, 433, 436). Creatures such as these once again echoed on “contemporary maritime exploration and scientific experimentation,” which was highly considered as the “twin dangers of imperialism and science” during the Romantic Period (Levy, 693).

Coleridge also integrated nature and its spiritual affect on one’s character. While on their expedition, the Mariner and his fleet encounter a bird known as the Albatross. The Albatross is a symbolic representation of all that is characteristically pure and good. The Albatross followed and encircled the ship for many days begging for food. The Mariner looked upon the Albatross as a savaging vagabond; thus, he decided to eradicate the bird. As Coleridge writes, “With my cross-bow / I shot the Albatross” (81-82). This “pivotal act of slaying the unsuspecting bird reflects the Mariner’s failure to achieve universal benevolence. Coleridge may also be suggesting that the Mariner, by having cut himself off from all domestic ties, seems to be incapable of acting kindly toward a “sweet Bird,” “a Christian Soul,” that “every day for food or play / Came to the Mariner’s hollo!” (Levy, 88, 65, 73-74). As the story continues to progress, Coleridge speaks of the repercussions of the Mariner’s action by saying;

*“Ah! Well-a-day! What evil looks  
Had I from old and young!  
Instead of the cross, the Albatross  
About my neck was hung” (434)*

The compassion that the Mariner’s shipmate exhibited toward the dead bird is undeniably symbolic of the Romantics’ appreciation and respect for nature and the natural world. It can also be viewed as a moral lesson that is yet to be learned by the Mariner. The Mariner discusses his misconduct by saying,

*“And I had done a hellish thing,  
And it would work’em woe.  
For all averred, I had killed the bird  
That made the breeze to blow” (422)*

As the story continues to develop, a series of wretched punishments are bestowed upon the Mariner for his indefensible slaughter of the Albatross and for his lack of sorrow and regret. Starting with the initial punishment of thirst, the crew and the Mariner begin to feel the repercussions of disrespecting the life of a once living and breathing animal. As Coleridge states,

*“And every tongue, through utter drought  
Was withered at the root;  
We could not speak, no more than if  
We had been choked with soot” (434)*

Coleridge further elaborates on the punishment of dehydration by writing,

*“Water, water, everywhere,  
And all the boards did shrink;  
Water, water, everywhere,  
Nor any drop to drink” (433)*

Yet still another punishment that the Mariner is subjected to is that of isolation and loneliness. The Mariner thought he saw a ship sailing toward his vessel to rescue his suffering crew. However, much to his regret, it was a ghost ship, a ship of imminent demise. Every single one of his fellow crewmen fell to their death leaving the Mariner in total seclusion. Responding to his own feelings, the Mariner says,

*“Alone, alone, all, all alone,  
Alone on a wide wide sea!  
And never a saint took pity on  
My soul in agony” (436)*

Eventually, the Mariner comes to the realization of the importance of remorse and repentance for the slaying of the Albatross. Only once he learns how

to appreciate and respect God's living creatures, his curse is shed. Coleridge illustrates the Mariner's acceptance of all living creatures when he writes,

*"And I blessed them unaware:  
Sure my kind saint took pity on me,  
And I blessed them unaware.  
The selfsame moment I could pray;  
And from my neck so free  
The Albatross fell off, and sank  
Like lead into the sea" (437-438).*

Relieved from his horrible punishment, the rain begins to fall and his thirst is instantaneously quenched. Coleridge further celebrates the Mariner's new found appreciation of nature and of all of God's creatures when he writes,

*"He prayeth best, that loveth best  
All things both great and small;  
For the dear God who loveth us,  
He made and loveth all" (446)*

In conclusion to his poem, Coleridge explains that the wedding guest spellbound by the Mariner's story, learns a priceless lesson in moral values that day and departs as "a sadder and a wiser man" (624).

One nuance that directly reflects the deplorable conditions that plagued the modern cities of industrialization is evident in line 138 of Coleridge's poem. Coleridge directly refers to the chimney sweep profession when he states, "We had been choked with soot." This line explicitly alludes to William Blake's poem "The Chimney Sweeper" in which the poet refers to children whose parents could no longer financially afford to care for them and sold them into the merciless labor industry (Blake, 85). These children often worked long laborious hours and were rarely fed or bathed. Time and time again, they developed emotional and medical problems. Sadly, the only true hope these

children had to live for was death.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "Christabel" is another reflection of the new wave in imaginative thinking in which the main character's struggle against her evil twin shows the desire to escape the ominous war with France. With France waging war on England, Coleridge never completed "Christabel" in its entirety. In his poem, the main character named Christabel is a very young and beautiful woman who is seen as a pure and innocent girl. The character named Geraldine is equally young and beautiful. Christabel and her mirroring character Geraldine is a doppelganger. Another doppelganger parallel that should be taken into consideration is the ongoing struggle between England and France. France can be compared to Geraldine because of its persistent threat of war with England. England, on the other hand, can be compared to Christabel because of its peace keeping efforts and desperate struggle to avoid war at all costs.

Lord Byron's poem "Manfred" is yet another direct reflection of the new waves in creative thinking that incorporates metaphysics as a way to escape the harshness of society. A parallel exists between Byron's true life events and his story of "Manfred." In his story, Byron refers to Manfred's distraught feelings over the death of his sister and lover, Astarte. Manfred speaks of their incestuous love when he says, "... though it were / The deadliest sin to love as we have loved" (23-24). Lord Byron opens with a quote from Shakespeare's play "Hamlet," "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (636). The setting of Byron's story takes place in the Swiss Alps, partially in the "Castel of Manfred, and partially in the mountains" (636). The poem begins inside a gallery at the stroke of midnight. Manfred sequentially calls upon seven spirits, "the Air, Mountain, Ocean, Earth, Winds, Night, and Manfred's

guiding Star” and asks forgiveness from his offense (637). The spirits, however, cannot fulfill Manfred’s desire of wanting to be absolved from his offense. When the seventh spirit appears, she takes the form of Astarte. Wantonly Manfred reaches out to touch her, but she vanishes. As Manfred drifts asleep, a magic spell filled with gloom and doom is delivered to him in his state of unconsciousness. The magic spell explains to Manfred that he would be tortured by his own disposition and would yearn for death but would be made to live. The following morning, Manfred goes alone to “the Mountain of the Jungfrau” (Byron, 642). It is here, on top of the mountain, Manfred attempts to plunge to his death. Much to Manfred’s misfortune, a hunter takes him back to his cabin and gives him a glass of wine. Manfred looks at the glass of wine and sees it as his and Astarte’s blood, symbolic representation of their incestuous relationship. As the story develops, Manfred leaves the hunter’s cabin and goes to the lower valley in the Alps where he summons a “Beautiful Spirit! With thy hair of light, / And dazzling eyes of glory” (13-14). The beautiful spirit offers to help Manfred, but in turn he must vow to forever be enslaved to her. Manfred refuses to accept the conditions of her proposal by saying,

*“I will not swear-Obey! And whom? the spirits / Whose presence I command, and be the slave / Of those who served me-Never!” (157-159). Astarte appears before Manfred once more, and begs for forgiveness, “Say that thou loath’st me not-...” (125). Initially Astarte is silent. And then she replies to Manfred by saying, “Manfred! To-morrow ends thine earthly ills. Farewell!” (151).*

The next day, the Abbot of St. Maurice visits Manfred to offer him religious comfort, but Manfred refuses spiritual console. Later that day, upon Manfred’s death bed, he breaks down and says to the Abbot, “Give me they hand” (149).

It is in Manfred’s final moments that he accepts human contact that he shunned throughout his life.

In conclusion, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” “Christabel,” and “Manfred,” are some examples of the new waves in imaginative thinking that resulted from the notoriously cruel and reprehensible cultural society. Old English verbiage was used in the poem “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” to escape the present and hold onto the past. Historically, the Romantic Period was a terribly stressful time when people longed to return to days that were less demanding. During that time, writers incorporated medieval style of gothic techniques to escape the complexity of modern culture. Fantasy adventures filled with darkness and obscurity were typical. Supernatural creatures incorporated into poems were symbolic of the cultural dangers that modern industry posed. Nature and its spiritual affects on one’s character were also implemented. It was in the “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” that the Mariner learned to respect all living creatures and learned a valuable moral lesson in ethics. Deplorable conditions plagued the modern cities of industrialization as illustrated in line 138 of Coleridge’s poem “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner. In the poem “Christabel,” the main character’s struggle against her evil twin was discussed and compared to the desire to escape the ominous war with France. Lord Byron’s poem “Manfred” incorporated metaphysics as a way to elude the harshness of society.

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