

Lecture 2: The First-Generation Romantics: Wordsworth & Coleridge

Duration: 3h

Introduction

This lecture examines the contributions of pioneering figures of British Romanticism: William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Together, they co-authored *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), a collection that revolutionized poetry by rejecting the artificial poetic diction of the Neoclassical era in favor of common language, deep emotion, and natural imagery. Although both poets appreciated imagination and nature, their approaches diverged; Wordsworth focused on memory, personal reflection, and nature's moral power, whereas Coleridge delved into the supernatural, dream-like states, and the Sublime.

Through a close reading of Wordsworth's *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey* and Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, we will analyze their distinct literary philosophies of Romanticism and investigate how their poetry departs from classical and neoclassical traditions through highlighting emotion, the imagination, and a rejection of rigid poetic conventions.

Part 1. Wordsworth and the Rewriting of Poetic Tradition

William Wordsworth's *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* (1800) is one of the most significant literary manifestos in British literature. It represents a sharp break from the Neoclassical tradition that had dominated 18th-century poetry and lays the foundation for Romanticism. Through his poetic theory, Wordsworth redefines the purpose, language, and subject matter of poetry, emphasizing emotional authenticity, simplicity, and the beauty of everyday life.

2.1 The Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798): Wordsworth's Poetic Theory

Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* stands as one of the most influential manifestos in literary history, effectively reshaping the trajectory of English poetry. It marks a radical

departure from Neoclassical aesthetics, which had dominated the 18th century, and lays the groundwork for Romanticism's core principles.

2.1.1 Rejection of Artificial Diction: Wordsworth's Poetic Theory

The *Preface* serves as Wordsworth's defense of his poetic principles and a revolutionary critique of Neoclassical aesthetics. His arguments focus on three key aspects: poetic diction, emotion and imagination, and the significance of common life.

2.1.2 Rejection of Artificial Diction: Poetry in the "Real Language of Men"

One of Wordsworth's most radical departures from Neoclassicism is his insistence on writing poetry in common everyday language. Unlike Neoclassical poets such as Alexander Pope, who employed highly refined and elevated diction, Wordsworth sought to make poetry free of artificial embellishments.

This choice was not merely stylistic but ideological. By privileging the language of common people, Wordsworth aligned poetry with democratic ideals, asserting that deep emotion and profound truth were not exclusive to the educated elite. His poetic subjects frequently included rural laborers, shepherds, and children, figures traditionally considered unworthy of poetic attention. This shift in focus reflected his belief that poetry should be accessible, sincere, and grounded in human experience.

2.1.3 Emotion and Imagination: The "Spontaneous Overflow" of Feelings

Wordsworth famously defines poetry as: "*Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility.*" This statement encapsulates a fundamental shift in poetic theory:

- **Spontaneity and Emotion:** Unlike Neoclassical poetry, which valued wit, reason, and formal constraint, Wordsworth's poetry celebrates raw human emotion as the essence of artistic expression. He rejects the idea that poetry should be an intellectual exercise governed by rigid structures, instead proposing that it arises naturally from the depths of human experience.

- **Recollection in Tranquility:** However, Wordsworth does not advocate for uncontrolled emotional outbursts. While poetry originates in intense feeling, it is refined through contemplation. The poet revisits powerful emotions in a calm, reflective state, shaping them into meaningful and structured verse. This ensures that poetry remains both deeply personal and universally resonant.

2.1.4 Common Life and the Sacredness of the Ordinary

Additionally, Wordsworth's poetic theory emphasizes the beauty and significance of ordinary life. Neoclassical poetry, on the other hand, often focused on grand themes such as epic battles, aristocratic affairs, and mythological subjects, Wordsworth turned to the mundane and commonplace.

In *Lyrical Ballads*, he sought to capture the extraordinary within the ordinary, demonstrating that profound truths could be found in the simplest moments; a wandering beggar, a reaper at work, or a child's innocent wonder. This perspective reflects his deep conviction in the dignity of common human experiences and the interconnectedness of man and nature.

2.2 Wordsworth vs. Neoclassicism: A Clash of Ideals

Significantly, Wordsworth's approach rejects the Neoclassical emphasis on order, reason, and decorum in several ways:

2.2.1 Emphasizing Emotion Over Rationality

Neoclassical poetry, influenced by Enlightenment ideals, prioritized reason, symmetry, and intellectual control. Wordsworth, however, championed feeling as the foundation of poetic creation. He believed that poetry should not be a cold exercise in wit but a sincere expression of human passion. This shift signaled a broader cultural movement away from rationalism and toward a more personal, introspective approach to art.

2.2.2 Rejecting the Hierarchy of Poetic Subjects

Neoclassicism upheld rigid distinctions between "high" and "low" subjects, reserving poetry for grand historical events or the lives of the elite. Wordsworth shattered this hierarchy

by elevating ordinary individuals as worthy poetic subjects, asserting that even the simplest life holds universal significance. In doing so, he redefined what poetry could be, making it more inclusive and reflective of real human experience.

2.2.3 Revolutionizing Poetic Language

By advocating for the “real language of men,” Wordsworth challenged the artificiality of Neoclassical verse, which relied heavily on rhetorical flourishes and highly stylized diction. His commitment to natural speech made poetry more accessible and emotionally authentic, reinforcing his belief that poetry should communicate directly with the human soul.

2.2.4 Blurring the Boundaries Between Nature and Humanity

While Neoclassical poets often depicted nature as a passive backdrop for human action, Wordsworth saw nature as a living force, deeply intertwined with human emotion. His poetry explores the ways in which nature shapes the soul, fostering introspection and spiritual awakening. This perspective marks a shift from the detached, ornamental use of nature in earlier poetry to a more immersive and reverential engagement with the natural world.

Part II. Wordsworth's Nature Poetry: Memory and Reflection in *Tintern Abbey*

William Wordsworth's *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey* (1798) is one of the defining works of Romantic nature poetry. It explores the relationship between nature, memory, and personal transformation, illustrating Wordsworth's belief that nature is not merely a landscape to be observed but a source of spiritual wisdom and moral guidance. This poem, composed during a return visit to the Wye Valley after five years, moves beyond physical description and enters the realm of philosophical reflection. Through themes of recollection, growth, and transcendence, *Tintern Abbey* exemplifies the Romantic idea that true knowledge is attained not through empirical reasoning but through introspection and emotional experience.

2.3 Memory and Personal Growth

One of the central themes of *Tintern Abbey* is the transformative power of memory. Wordsworth does not simply describe the landscape before him; rather, he reflects on how his past experiences in nature continue to influence him, even when he is far from it. Nature is not

just something external; it is internalized, living within him as a source of comfort and wisdom. This idea is beautifully captured in the following lines:

“These beauteous forms, / Through a long absence, have not been to me / As is a landscape to a blind man’s eye: / But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din / Of towns and cities, I have owed to them / In hours of weariness, sensations sweet...” (22–27)

Here, Wordsworth emphasizes that the memory of nature sustains him in times of distress and isolation. The city, filled with noise and distraction, contrasts with the serene beauty of the Wye Valley. Yet, even in urban environments, nature remains within him, preserved in his mind and capable of offering solace.

As the poem progresses, Wordsworth reflects on how his perception of nature has evolved over time. As a child, he experienced nature with an unreflective enthusiasm; what he calls "an appetite" for sensory pleasure. However, in adulthood, his relationship with nature has deepened, becoming more introspective and philosophical. He now sees in nature a source of “the deep power of joy,” a guiding force that shapes his moral and intellectual development. This shift reflects Wordsworth’s belief that our connection to nature is not static but grows and matures alongside us.

2.4 Nature as a Spiritual Guide

Wordsworth reflects nature not merely as a place of beauty but as a teacher, a guardian of the soul. For him, nature offers moral and philosophical insight, allowing individuals to transcend the artificial constructs of society. As such, *Tintern Abbey* reflects the Romantic belief that nature is imbued with an almost divine presence, shaping human character and fostering deeper awareness. He explicitly acknowledges this in the lines:

"For I have learned/ To look on nature, not as in the hour/Of thoughtless youth; but /hearing oftentimes/ The still, sad music of humanity..." (89–92). Wordsworth suggests that nature is not always joyful; it carries a solemn, reflective quality; a “still, sad music” that teaches him about the complexities of human existence. This portrayal of nature as a moral force challenges Enlightenment rationalism, which prioritized scientific knowledge over emotional and spiritual experience.

Furthermore, Wordsworth contrasts nature with the artificiality of industrialized society. While the city alienates and exhausts, nature restores and enlightens. In an era of rapid

urbanization, *Tintern Abbey* stands as a powerful defense of the natural world, emphasizing its role in preserving human integrity and well-being.

2.5 The Sublime: Awe and Reflection in Landscape

A key Romantic concept present in *Tintern Abbey* is the Sublime, the overwhelming power of nature to inspire awe, wonder, and deep reflection. Unlike the picturesque, which emphasizes harmony and beauty, the Sublime evokes an emotional response that oscillates between admiration and a recognition of human insignificance in the face of nature's vastness.

Wordsworth's encounter with the Wye Valley is not just an aesthetic experience; it becomes a profound meditation on the nature of existence. The rolling hills, the flowing river, and the open sky are not simply external features of the landscape; they become part of his inner consciousness, shaping his thoughts and emotions. This merging of the external world with the poet's inner state exemplifies the Romantic belief that nature and the human mind are deeply interconnected.

Unlike other depictions of the Sublime, which often focus on nature's terrifying or overpowering aspects, Wordsworth presents a gentler, meditative Sublime. His awe is not rooted in fear but in a sense of deep spiritual connection. This contemplative response reflects the poet's belief that true wisdom arises not from intellectual analysis but from an intuitive communion with nature.

2.6 The Enduring Significance of *Tintern Abbey*

Through *Tintern Abbey*, Wordsworth redefines nature as more than a physical landscape; it becomes a source of memory, wisdom, and transcendence. The poem illustrates the Romantic conviction that nature is not separate from human experience but deeply intertwined with it, shaping consciousness and personal growth.

By exploring themes of recollection, moral guidance, and the Sublime, Wordsworth offers a vision of nature that is both deeply personal and profoundly universal. His belief that

nature fosters spiritual insight and emotional depth continues to resonate, offering a timeless meditation on the power of memory and reflection in shaping the human soul.

Part II. Coleridge and the Supernatural

Samuel Taylor Coleridge stands as one of the most enigmatic figures of British Romanticism. While his contemporary, William Wordsworth, sought to capture the beauty of the ordinary and the natural world, Coleridge ventured into the extraordinary, embracing the supernatural, the mystical, and the eerie. His poetry reflects elements of the Gothic, psychological depth, and metaphysical speculation, all of which reflect his broader philosophical concerns.

2.7 The Role of the Supernatural and the Sublime in Coleridge's Poetry

Coleridge's approach to the supernatural is not mere escapism or an indulgence in fantasy; rather, it serves a deeper philosophical and psychological function. His supernatural elements often symbolize profound truths about the human condition, the unconscious mind, and the limits of perception. His poetry seamlessly blends the real and the unreal, compelling the reader to confront the mysteries of existence.

2.7.1 Mysticism and Dream-Like Elements: Blurring the Line Between Reality and Fantasy

Coleridge's poetry often evokes a dream-like atmosphere, where the boundaries between reality and illusion converge. This is particularly evident in *Kubla Khan*, a poem that emerges from an opium-induced vision and explores the fluid, ephemeral nature of artistic inspiration. The poem's shifting, fragmented imagery mirrors the way the mind processes dreams, revealing deeper truths through symbolic representation rather than direct statement.

- The ephemeral pleasure-dome of Kubla Khan becomes a metaphor for the unattainable nature of artistic perfection, echoing Coleridge's belief in the transient and fragile nature of creative insight.
- The dream-like quality of his poetry reflects Romanticism's fascination with altered states of consciousness as a means of accessing deeper truths.

2.7.2 The Gothic and Supernatural Forces: The Uncanny and the Otherworldly

Coleridge's poetry frequently employs Gothic elements; haunted landscapes, mysterious figures, and supernatural occurrences. However, unlike conventional Gothic fiction, which often relies on external horror, Coleridge's supernatural elements are deeply psychological, reflecting inner turmoil and existential dread.

- In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, supernatural forces punish the Mariner for his transgression against nature, but these forces are not merely external; they represent his own psychological and spiritual torment. The Mariner is haunted not only by spectral visions but also by his own guilt and isolation.
- The *Ancient Mariner* blurs the distinction between the real and the unreal, creating an eerie, hallucinatory world in which the supernatural is inextricable from the Mariner's psychological state.
- Coleridge's use of the uncanny (making the familiar strange) heightens the sense of unease and mystery, a technique that anticipates later developments in Gothic and psychological literature.

2.7.3 The Sublime: Terror, Awe, and Nature's Overwhelming Power

Coleridge's poetry is deeply invested in the Romantic concept of the Sublime; an overwhelming experience of awe, terror, and grandeur in the face of nature's power. The Sublime, as theorized by Edmund Burke, suggests that the most profound aesthetic experiences are those that confront us with our own insignificance, evoking both fear and admiration.

- *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is rich in sublime imagery, from the vast ocean to the spectral ship that defies natural laws. The Mariner's journey is both physical and metaphysical, confronting him with the vast, uncontrollable forces of nature and the supernatural.
- In *Kubla Khan*, nature is both beautiful and terrifying, rivers burst forth violently, caverns are "measureless," and the landscape teeters between paradise and chaos. This duality reflects Coleridge's belief in nature's capacity to inspire both wonder and fear.

- The Sublime in Coleridge's poetry serves as a gateway to the unknown, inviting the reader to experience moments of transcendence where the rational mind falters, and the imagination takes over.

2.8 The Supernatural as a Vehicle for Romantic Truth and Artistic Inspiration

Romantic poets, particularly Coleridge, saw the supernatural not as mere fantasy but as a profound source of artistic and philosophical insight. The supernatural provided a means of exploring:

- **The Limits of Human Perception:** The Romantics were deeply interested in the idea that reality extends beyond what can be rationally understood. Coleridge's use of supernatural imagery challenges readers to expand their understanding of existence beyond empirical observation.
- **The Power of the Imagination:** Romantic poets viewed the imagination as a faculty capable of accessing higher truths. The supernatural elements in Coleridge's poetry often function as metaphors for the creative process itself, demonstrating how poetic vision transcends ordinary experience.
- **Moral and Spiritual Inquiry:** Supernatural elements in Coleridge's works frequently serve an allegorical function. In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the Mariner's encounter with supernatural forces compels him to undergo a profound moral and spiritual transformation, illustrating the idea that suffering and redemption are intertwined.

2.8.1 Why do Romantic poets see the supernatural as a valid source of truth and artistic inspiration?

In fact, Coleridge views the supernatural as a crucial source for exploring the deeper, often hidden aspects of human existence. This perspective comes from their desire to transcend the limitations of rational thought and scientific reasoning that characterized the Enlightenment period. The Romantics were not necessarily concerned with the supernatural in a literal or

religious sense, but instead saw it as a metaphorical tool for accessing truths about the human soul, the imagination, and the nature of reality itself. In Coleridge's poetry, the supernatural is frequently a reflection of the unconscious mind; those realms of the psyche that cannot be fully understood or articulated through reason alone. For example, in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the appearance of supernatural forces such as the ghostly ship and the reanimated dead provide a means of exploring guilt, punishment, and redemption; emotions and experiences that cannot be neatly explained through conventional reasoning.

Furthermore, the supernatural offered Romantic poets a way to address the irrational and mysterious dimensions of human experience. The human mind, with its dreams, desires, and fears, was seen as a source of creative inspiration, and the supernatural allowed poets to delve into these uncharted psychological territories. Coleridge, in particular, found the supernatural a powerful means of expressing the paradoxical and transformative nature of artistic creation. By embracing supernatural themes, Romantic poets elevated the imagination to a higher, transcendent realm, positioning it as the bridge to deeper, more profound truths about existence and the cosmos.

2.8.2 How does Coleridge's use of the Sublime differ from Wordsworth's?

Both Coleridge and Wordsworth engage with the concept of the Sublime, but they approach it in distinct ways. The Sublime, as described by Edmund Burke, refers to the experience of awe, terror, and wonder that one feels when confronted with the vast, the overwhelming, or the mysterious aspects of nature. Wordsworth, in his works, often associates the Sublime with the beauty of nature and the profound, spiritual connections humans can form with the natural world. His depiction of the Sublime is generally positive, focusing on the ways nature elevates the human soul, offers solace, and deepens understanding. For Wordsworth, the Sublime is a harmonious force, one that fosters emotional and intellectual growth, and is often associated with serene, awe-inspiring landscapes such as the hills and valleys of the Lake District.

In contrast, Coleridge's treatment of the Sublime is more complex and often darker in tone. While he certainly appreciates the awe-inspiring power of nature, his exploration of the Sublime is linked to the terror and the unknown. The sublime landscapes in Coleridge's poetry; such as the desolate ocean in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* or the fantastical world of *Kubla*

Khan, are frequently imbued with a sense of danger or instability. In these poems, the Sublime elicits both wonder and fear, and the vastness of the landscape seems to overwhelm the human subject, rather than uplift it. Coleridge's interest in the Gothic and the supernatural adds layers of complexity to his engagement with the Sublime, as he often intertwines nature's power with themes of the uncanny, the irrational, and the terrifying. For Coleridge, the Sublime is not just a force for spiritual enlightenment but a means of confronting the darker, more mysterious forces that lie beneath human consciousness.

2.8.3 What role does the unconscious mind play in Coleridge's poetry?

The unconscious mind occupies a central role in Coleridge's work, especially when considering his explorations of dream-like states, hallucinations, and the mystical. Coleridge was deeply interested in the ways that human consciousness could access knowledge beyond rational understanding, and the unconscious offered a rich terrain for these explorations. His fascination with altered states of perception, whether through dreams, opium-induced visions, or the contemplative mind, allowed him to probe the boundaries between reality and illusion. In works like *Kubla Khan*, Coleridge embraces the unconscious mind as a source of limitless creativity, with the poem itself being the product of a vision that he struggled to bring into clear, logical form. The fragmented nature of *Kubla Khan* reflects the elusive quality of the unconscious, capturing fleeting glimpses of insight that can never be fully grasped or articulated.

In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the supernatural events that are described are not simply external phenomena; they are expressions of the Mariner's inner psychological and spiritual struggles. The hallucinations, such as the appearance of the ghostly ship or the albatross's symbolic significance, reflect the Mariner's own guilt, suffering, and emotional turmoil. These supernatural elements are not presented as objective truths but as projections of the Mariner's psyche, illustrating how the unconscious mind shapes and colors his perception of the external world. Coleridge's use of the supernatural, then, is intimately tied to the exploration of the mind's hidden recesses; its desires, fears, and unresolved conflicts. This interest in the unconscious aligns with Romantic ideals, where the imagination is not merely a tool for creating art, but a means of accessing deeper, often inaccessible aspects of the human experience.

In sum, the supernatural in Coleridge's poetry serves not just as a thematic element, but as a profound exploration of the inner workings of the human mind. By integrating the

supernatural with the Sublime, the unconscious, and the dream-like, Coleridge's works invite readers to step beyond the rational world and confront the unknown. These elements are not merely fantastical; they are integral to understanding the complexities of the human psyche and the infinite possibilities of the imagination.

Coleridge's engagement with the supernatural, the dream-like, and the Sublime established him as a pioneering figure in British Romanticism. His poetry not only deepened the movement's philosophical concerns but also anticipated later literary developments, influencing Gothic fiction, psychological literature, and even modernist explorations of the unconscious.

His ability to weave supernatural elements into deeply human narratives ensured his work's enduring relevance. By merging the real and the unreal, the rational and the mystical, Coleridge transformed poetry into a space where the imagination reigns supreme, revealing truths that logic alone cannot grasp.

2.9 The Rime of the Ancient Mariner: A Tale of Guilt, Fate, and the Sublime

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) stands as one of the most iconic works of the English Romantic period. This narrative poem masterfully intertwines reality with supernatural horror, exploring complex themes such as guilt, fate, redemption, and the overwhelming power of nature. Through its hauntingly vivid imagery, eerie supernatural events, and philosophical undercurrents, the poem provides a deep reflection on human existence, morality, and the relationship between humans and the natural world.

2.9.1 Blurring the Line Between Reality and the Supernatural

One of the important features of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is Coleridge's ability to blur the boundary between the real and the supernatural, creating an unsettling atmosphere in which the two realms coexist in a fluid, often disorienting manner. The poem begins as a seemingly straightforward sea voyage, with a crew on a ship encountering peril on the open waters. However, this world soon gives way to the supernatural, starting with the appearance of the albatross, an omen that will set in motion a series of events with fatal consequences.

The Mariner's inexplicable killing of the albatross serves as the initial supernatural transgression, yet its consequences feel eerily real. The curse that follows: the death of the crew,

the endless expanse of water with no relief, and the haunting appearance of the ghostly ship, creates a shift from the mundane to the otherworldly. These supernatural elements are not just figments of the imagination but seem to affect the natural world in a palpable way. The ship, trapped in the vast, waterlogged void of the sea, faces an overwhelming sense of existential futility. The famous refrain, "Water, water, everywhere, Nor any drop to drink," expresses the Mariner's helplessness, and in doing so, blurs the line between the human experience of thirst and the spiritual thirst for redemption.

Moreover, the Mariner's curse and the appearance of the ghostly ship emphasize the moral consequences of his actions in a supernatural frame. The arrival of the dead men on the ghost ship and their subsequent supernatural intervention does not feel detached from the natural world. Instead, Coleridge creates a seamless interweaving of the physical and the spectral, where the supernatural is just as real, and in some ways, more significant, than the physical world the sailors inhabit.

This blending of reality and the supernatural creates a world in which the boundaries of human agency are called into question. Is the Mariner truly responsible for the curse, or is he simply a pawn in the hands of larger cosmic forces? The poem suggests that humans are not entirely in control of their fate, and that supernatural forces may intervene in their lives as both punishment and redemption.

2.9.2 The Creation of Horror and Mystery

Coleridge excels in evoking a sense of horror and mystery throughout *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, using the sublime and supernatural to convey feelings of dread, isolation, and despair. These emotions are heightened by the poem's vivid and chilling descriptions of both the natural and supernatural elements, contributing to a growing sense of unease.

The depiction of the sea itself is one of the most powerful instruments in creating this atmosphere. The vast, unyielding expanse of water is both beautiful and terrifying. The phrase "Water, water, everywhere" becomes a symbol of the endless cycle of despair and hopelessness. While the ocean is a natural element, Coleridge imbues it with a menacing quality, suggesting that the natural world is indifferent, even hostile, to human suffering. This idea reinforces the

sublime, as the Mariner's existential torment is amplified by the overwhelming power of nature, which mirrors the larger cosmic indifference to human existence.

Coleridge further heightens the mystery and horror by introducing spectral and ghostly figures, such as the ghostly ship and its crew of dead men. These elements add an uncanny dimension to the poem, creating a sense that the natural world is no longer distinguishable from the supernatural. The dead men are not simply the corpses of the Mariner's crew; they are transformed into eerie and malevolent forces, their actions and presence invoking terror. The ghostly ship itself, which appears as a harbinger of death and doom, moves through the poem like a supernatural force of inevitability. These elements contribute to the horror of the poem, not through explicit descriptions of violence or gore, but through a profound sense of mystery and unease. The supernatural phenomena are both awe-inspiring and terrifying, leaving the reader with a lingering sense of dread.

Additionally, Coleridge's use of dream-like imagery, such as the strange, almost hallucinatory experiences the Mariner undergoes, fuels the sense of mystery. The Mariner is caught between different realities, unable to discern whether he is awake or in a dreamlike state. The blurring of time and space, the hallucinations, and the moral consequences of his actions form a mysterious atmosphere in which the reader is left to question the nature of reality itself. By pulling the reader into this disorienting world, Coleridge forces them to grapple with the terror of the unknown, which is the essence of the sublime.

2.9.3 The Role of Guilt, Fate, and Redemption

At the heart of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* lies the exploration of guilt, fate, and the possibility of redemption. The Mariner's crime: the senseless killing of the albatross, is the inciting act that brings upon him a series of supernatural punishments. His guilt is both personal and universal, and the consequences of his actions are deeply spiritual. Coleridge uses the supernatural to reflect the inner torment of the Mariner, whose soul is burdened by the weight of his transgression.

The poem presents guilt not as a simple moral failing, but as something that transcends the individual. The Mariner's guilt spreads outward, affecting his crew and the natural world around him. As the Mariner's punishment continues, the reader senses that his fate is

inescapable. His isolation in the endless sea, surrounded by water but unable to drink, serves as a metaphor for his inability to find spiritual solace. The ghostly ship, appearing as a judgment from beyond, seems to be the inevitable consequence of his actions, suggesting that fate has already been sealed.

However, redemption becomes a central theme as the Mariner begins his journey toward spiritual renewal. After enduring immense suffering, the Mariner experiences a moment of recognition, where he begins to see the beauty in nature once again. This epiphany marks the beginning of his spiritual recovery. Through this transformative experience, Coleridge suggests that redemption is possible, but it requires a deep recognition of the interconnectedness of all life and a profound respect for the natural world. The Mariner's ultimate realization that he must "teach" others to appreciate nature and its sacredness suggests that, despite his tragic actions, there is a path to redemption through repentance and awareness.

In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Coleridge combines elements of the supernatural, the sublime, and philosophical introspection to create a poem that transcends mere narrative. By blurring the lines between reality and the supernatural, he explores the dark and mysterious dimensions of human guilt and redemption. Through vivid descriptions of the natural world and the eerie intrusion of supernatural forces, Coleridge draws the reader into a world where the boundaries between the physical and metaphysical are tenuous. The poem is a profound meditation on fate, punishment, and the potential for spiritual growth, providing a deep exploration of the human condition and the larger forces that govern our existence.

2.9.4 How does *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* blur the line between reality and the supernatural?

In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Coleridge artfully blurs the boundary between reality and the supernatural by integrating eerie, otherworldly events into the seemingly mundane world of a sea voyage. The poem opens with a tale of an ordinary sailing expedition, yet it quickly devolves into the realm of the supernatural, beginning with the appearance of the albatross, which the Mariner kills without reason. This seemingly trivial act leads to an increasingly strange and supernatural series of events, including the Mariner's cursed fate and the ghostly ship that appears as a harbinger of death.

As the poem progresses, the supernatural elements appear increasingly interconnected with the natural world, making it difficult for both the Mariner and the reader to distinguish where the supernatural ends and the real world begins. For instance, the Mariner's endless suffering on the sea, where he is surrounded by water but unable to drink, evokes a physical reality that is both cruel and inescapable. Yet, the presence of the ghostly ship and its spectral crew adds a dimension of the supernatural that seems to respond directly to the Mariner's inner turmoil and guilt. This interplay creates a fluid relationship between the natural world and the supernatural forces, suggesting that the two realms are not entirely separate but are rather intertwined in a way that makes the supernatural feel tangible and real. The shifting between these worlds throughout the poem forces the reader to question the nature of reality itself, much as the Mariner is forced to confront the consequences of his actions within both the natural and supernatural contexts.

2.9.5 How does Coleridge create a sense of horror and mystery?

Coleridge's mastery in evoking a sense of horror and mystery is central to the eerie atmosphere of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. He achieves this not through explicit descriptions of violence or gore, but through his ability to create an ominous atmosphere that is rooted in both the sublime and the supernatural. The very setting of the poem, a vast, desolate sea; contributes to a sense of existential horror. The vast expanse of water, depicted as both beautiful and terrifying, mirrors the Mariner's isolation and despair. The endless stretch of water with no respite symbolizes the eternal nature of his suffering, while the famous refrain "Water, water, everywhere, Nor any drop to drink" emphasizes the hopelessness of his situation. The sea itself becomes an active agent in the poem, amplifying the sense of horror by presenting nature as indifferent to human suffering.

The supernatural elements are another key factor in building mystery and horror. The appearance of the ghostly ship and its eerie crew of dead men adds an element of the uncanny, where death and the supernatural intrude upon the natural world in an unsettling and inexplicable way. The ship, which moves through the sea as if propelled by some otherworldly force, creates a sense of inevitability and doom, as though the Mariner's fate has already been sealed by a higher power. This sense of doom is further enhanced by the mysterious and ominous language Coleridge uses, particularly in describing the strange occurrences aboard the ship. The poem's

dreamlike quality, in which the boundaries between time, space, and reality seem to collapse, deepens the sense of mystery. The Mariner's hallucinations and the disorienting experiences he undergoes heighten the feeling that he is caught in a nightmarish, surreal world where reality and fantasy are no longer distinguishable.

In addition, Coleridge uses the concept of the sublime to create a sense of awe and terror. The natural world in the poem is not merely a backdrop for human action; it is an active force, overwhelming and beyond comprehension. The Mariner's encounter with the sublime in nature, whether it is the vastness of the sea, the deadly calm, or the supernatural storm, is a terrifying reminder of the insignificance of human beings in the face of nature's immense power. This sense of the sublime, coupled with the mystery of the Mariner's curse, creates an atmosphere of profound horror that grips the reader.

In essence, Coleridge does not rely on traditional Gothic tropes of ghosts or monsters to evoke fear; instead, he taps into the deeper, more existential fears of isolation, guilt, and the unknowable forces that govern human existence. Through his vivid descriptions, eerie atmosphere, and the integration of the supernatural with the natural world, Coleridge crafts a narrative that lingers in the mind long after the poem ends, leaving the reader with a sense of mystery and unease.

Part III. Comparative Analysis: Wordsworth vs. Coleridge

Wordsworth and Coleridge, two towering figures of the Romantic movement, were united by their shared emphasis on the importance of emotion, imagination, and individual experience. However, their approaches diverged in key ways, particularly in terms of theme, language, and the role of nature in their work. These differences are most apparent when we compare their most famous works: Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* and Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

2.10 Theme: Nature, Memory, and Personal Growth vs. The Supernatural, Imagination, and the Unknown

One of the most fundamental distinctions between Wordsworth and Coleridge is the thematic focus of their poetry. For Wordsworth, nature was a source of spiritual insight and moral guidance. In *Tintern Abbey*, the poet reflects on his past experiences with nature and how they have shaped his understanding of the world. His theme centers on personal growth, the

healing power of nature, and the role of memory in preserving these life-altering experiences. Wordsworth's poetry is about reconnecting with nature in order to achieve a sense of inner peace, growth, and enlightenment. He sees nature not as something to be feared but as a comforting, steady guide to a deeper moral understanding of life.

Coleridge, on the other hand, explores more ambiguous and fantastical themes. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* focuses on the supernatural, the unknown, and the terrifying power of nature. While Wordsworth looks to nature for solace and understanding, Coleridge portrays nature as a vast, mysterious force capable of awe and terror. The Mariner's curse and the eerie events at sea are linked to supernatural forces beyond human comprehension, where the natural world intersects with the mystical, introducing elements of fear, guilt, and transcendence. Thus, while Wordsworth's poetry revolves around the self's evolution through memory and nature, Coleridge's work investigates the tension between the human spirit and the unknown, emphasizing the darker, more mysterious sides of both nature and the human psyche.

2.11 Language: Simple, Everyday Diction vs. Rich, Symbolic, and Dream-Like Language

The language used by both poets reflects their distinct approach in revealing the relationship between the human mind and the natural world. Wordsworth's language in *Tintern Abbey* is simple, direct, and rooted in the everyday. He deliberately avoids ornate or artificial diction, preferring to use the language of common people. This choice is integral to his belief that poetry should be accessible and reflect universal human experience. By using plain language, Wordsworth attempts to bring the profound emotions and insights he experiences in nature into a realm that all readers can understand and appreciate.

In contrast, Coleridge's use of language is far more intricate, symbolic, and dream-like. In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Coleridge employs elaborate metaphors, vivid imagery, and haunting symbols to evoke a sense of mystery and supernatural horror. His style mirrors the uncanny, blurred boundary between dream and reality that permeates the poem. Words like "ghostly," "spectral," and "phantasmagoric" create an atmosphere of confusion and dread, drawing the reader into a world where the lines between what is real and what is imagined are constantly shifting. Coleridge's language reflects the power of imagination and the subconscious mind, and it invites readers into a dreamlike state that enhances the sense of mystery in his poetry.

2.13 Nature's Role: Spiritual Guide and Moral Teacher vs. Mysterious Force, Capable of Awe and Terror

It is worth noting that nature's role in the poets' works represents a significant divergence in their poetic worldviews. For Wordsworth, nature is a source of comfort, wisdom, and moral guidance. As such, it is portrayed as a spiritual guide capable of shaping one's character and enhancing personal growth. In *Tintern Abbey*, nature's nurturing role is emphasized as the poet reflects on how it has sustained him during difficult times. Nature is described as a teacher who gives moral lessons and offers a sense of peace and connectedness to the world. Wordsworth's nature is infused with a benevolent, almost paternal quality that helps the individual grow in both mind and spirit.

However, Coleridge's nature in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is far more ambivalent. That is to say, while nature is still powerful, it is not solely benevolent or nurturing. Instead, nature becomes a force that can inspire both awe and terror. The Mariner's relationship with nature is one of intense struggle and guilt, where the natural world does not simply offer guidance, but imposes consequences for human actions. The killing of the albatross, for instance, unleashes supernatural retribution, and the sea itself becomes a site of endless suffering. In Coleridge's work, nature is portrayed as a mysterious force; one that can be both beautiful and terrifying, but never fully understood or controlled by human beings.

2.14 Major Work: *Tintern Abbey* vs. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

The thematic and stylistic differences between Wordsworth and Coleridge are perhaps most evident in their two major works. In *Tintern Abbey*, Wordsworth presents a reflective, meditative exploration of the self's relationship to nature. The poem focuses on memory, personal growth, and the enduring influence of nature on the human soul. It is a celebration of the inner journey and a testimony to the healing power of the natural world. The reflective, calm tone of *Tintern Abbey* invites the reader to engage in contemplation and introspection, emphasizing the connection between humanity and nature as a means of spiritual renewal.

By contrast, Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is a dramatic and unsettling narrative that examines the destructive consequences of human action. The Mariner's ill-fated decision to kill the albatross brings about a chain of supernatural events that render the natural

world both beautiful and terrifying. The poem delves into themes of guilt, redemption, and the mysterious forces that govern the universe. While Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* is about reflection and spiritual growth, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is about confronting the unknown, facing the consequences of one's actions, and the existential terror of being caught in a world beyond one's control.

Conclusion

In this lecture, we explored the distinct contributions of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge to Romanticism. Wordsworth's poetry, as seen in *Tintern Abbey*, emphasizes emotion, personal reflection, and nature as a moral and spiritual guide, using simple, everyday language. In contrast, Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* delves into the supernatural, blending reality and fantasy with vivid, symbolic language, exploring the Gothic and the Sublime. While Wordsworth focuses on nature's nurturing power, Coleridge engages with its more mysterious and terrifying aspects. Together, their works reshaped poetry by prioritizing emotion, imagination, and the transformative power of nature, which continues to influence modern literature.

Our next lecture explores the Second-Generation Romantic poets, and namely Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats. Unlike their predecessors, these poets were often rebellious, politically radical, and deeply engaged with themes of beauty, mortality, and existential defiance, traits which reflect an unprecedented poetic and ideological endeavour.

2.15 Critical Response Paper (800–1000 words): Choose one of the following questions

- Compare Wordsworth's and Coleridge's treatment of nature and imagination.
- Does *Tintern Abbey* reflect an idealized or realistic view of nature?
- How does Coleridge create a sense of horror and mystery in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*?

2.16 Works Cited

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