

LINKS, p. 171

THEMATIC: Nature

- We generally take the concept of nature for granted since it seems to exist outside culture and civilisation. However, what is overlooked in this is the way that the separation of nature and culture is itself a product of culture. Throughout history, nature has always been conceived from a particular historic-cultural position.
- This becomes most evident in the Romantic break from Augustan Neoclassicism, whose vision of an ordered nature is expressed in the symmetrical gardens of the likes of the Palace of Versailles near Paris. The Romantic dream shared by the likes of Wordsworth and Coleridge is that of a return to a 'natural', pure, undomesticated nature. Yet we see that nature can only be restored to its supposed pure state by means of a cultural supplement, provided by the aesthetics of Romanticism itself. That is to say the Romantic view of nature is mediated by a particular gaze, in this case a gaze which provides nature with an emotional supplement. Romanticism presents us with an anthropomorphic view of nature, by investing it with human emotions which are actually the projected emotions of the poets themselves. Thus nature becomes a measure of emotional weather, ranging from the dismal, gloomy skies of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to the 'jocund company' of Wordsworth's daffodils.
- What is crucial in the aesthetics of Romanticism as Wordsworth conceives it, is the dimension of memory, the recollection which provides a safe distance from which the poet can recollect his experience of the 'reality' of nature. The fusion of man with nature can never be direct but must be mediated by a certain distance, in the form of a nostalgia for a vanished moment (which is at the same time indicative of the Romantics' more general nostalgia for the vanished pastoral world). What is important to grasp here is that this 'harmonic' vision the product of fantasy, which can only be made to appear in retrospect. That is to say it never really existed. In a similar manner Wordsworth's 'Lucy' only really begins to live in memory, as an absence, which is filled out by the poet's longing. Paradoxically things are more present in their absence than when they are actually present.
- This dimension of the constitutive role of nostalgia and absence in imagining nature is clearly demonstrated in the Talking Heads song, '(Nothing) but Flowers'. The song imagines a reversal of history in which time literally runs backwards and the landscape of post-industrial society gradually disappears only to be replaced first by an agrarian culture and then finally by an Eden-like paradise. From this perspective, the ugly, vacant postmodern world of burger bars, motels, highways etc. suddenly becomes charged with an unbearable nostalgia and takes on the aura of a golden age, precisely in so far as it no longer exists. It becomes the lost paradise. The song demonstrates that theoretically any content can fill this space in the structure of desire. What is important is not the content of a given 'nature' but the way it becomes meaningful when viewed from a perspective from which it is seen as 'lost'.

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THEMATIC: The Sea

- *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* concentrates more on the infernal aspects of a life 'at sea'. In killing the albatross, a symbol of natural religious guidance, the mariner loses his bearings, he is without guidance or orientation, set adrift in an endless empty oceanic waste of his own making. His hypnotic tale, which must be perpetually repeated, parallels the endless repetition of the waves.
- *Moby-Dick*, too, deals with maritime disorientation but in a more ironic and playful way. Ahab's obsessive pursuit of the elusive whale leads him to a courageous journey into an unforgiving sea. Is this an act of great courage or of madness?
- In Shakespeare's 'Sonnet 60' the inexorable progression of the waves towards the shore becomes a metaphor of the movement of time, both in terms of the microcosm of a single life and in the larger movement of the countless lives which come into being only to pass away. The waves' progress towards their ultimately meaningless and soon forgotten destiny becomes a reflection on the illusion of progress that is the engine of human life in the west.
- The 'turbulent' sea in Turner's snowstorm contains an echo of the revolutionary, social turbulence that was sweeping Europe at the time. It is interesting how the painting evokes both a sense of chaos and form through the spiralling movement of the storm which creates a kind of inner frame (similar to those we see in the works of contemporary artist Howard Hodgkin) with the boat and the blue sky, the 'eye of the storm', at its centre. In the words of contemporary philosopher Gilles Deleuz, the painting gives us the sense of a 'chaosmos'.
- One might want to contrast the differences in men's and women's relationship with the sea. While male notions of the sea tend to revolve around the idea of combat with the elements and the gaining of mastery over them, female visions tend towards a partial identification of the woman with the sea itself. In Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* Paul's vision of Clara by the seaside is inseparable

from his sensation of the sea. Seen as a 'foam bubble' in relation to the vaster depths of the waves, Clara becomes a troubling presence to him, at once superficial and ephemeral and a symbol of unknowable depths. Lawrence's symbolism here draws on the mythical connection of woman with the sea, echoing the birth of Venus from the waves.

THEMATIC: Against Nature

- In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* the killing of the albatross can be considered a quintessential act against nature. It is removed from any natural or logical chain of cause and effect. The albatross is neither the object of a hunt, nor a threatening presence that must be killed. There is no explanation for the mariner's act, other than the fact that it defines him as irrevocably 'separate' from his environment. The mariner in fact reveals the nature of man as 'unnatural' or denatured.
- *Frankenstein* provides a warning (from a feminist perspective) about the dangers of interfering with nature. Moreover it can be read of the irrational desires to master natural forces and modify their course which sometimes lie behind scientific rationalism.
- In Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' the unnatural secret which the story gradually reveals already permeates the fabric of the text and its representations: the image of the house itself is already riven, split between its every-day appearance and the truth it conceals. Poe presents us with an unnatural world which has no outside and from which there is no escape.
- Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, while adding a perverse twist to Keats's formulation 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty' also pre-echoes contemporary culture's obsession with celebrity and the image, the shiny spectacle which has greater truth value than the real and which masks its horrors.
- In Huxley's *Brave New World*, we see the consequences of science's mastery of nature in both utopian and dystopian terms. In the society depicted in the novel, everyone is conditioned to be happy with the place allotted to them and apparently there is no conflict. Yet at the same time we understand there is an internal conflict developing in the minds of the more sensitive members of the society between understanding the need for order and a desire for the chaos and vitality offered by the outside in the form of the 'savage' reservations.
- See MULTIMEDIA LAB: Interfering with Nature, p. 205

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THEMATIC: Uncontrollable Forces - see TG p. 111

THEMATIC: Monuments and Immortality

- What remains, what is preserved of us after death? Writing has always been considered a means of preserving things but also of capturing the sense of absence of what no longer exists. In this sense a poem is a very strange type of monument, since it is both fixed (in terms of the way it is written), and at the same time mobile (in terms of the ways it can be interpreted).
- It is in a way like 'the lone and level sands' which stretch away from the ruined statue of Ozymandias in Shelley's poem, a kind of desert in which various mirages of meaning appear. In 'Ozymandias' we might hear the distant echo of Shakespeare's words in 'Sonnet 55': 'Not marble nor the gilded monuments / Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme', which point out how, while princes may be powerful, their monuments are not. They are static and dead. Only writing remains powerful, by being given new powers by successive generations of readers.
- It can be argued that Keats, though fascinated by the power of art to preserve, seems equally repelled by it. For example, his poem 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' can be seen as one of the most powerful statements of 'ambivalence' regarding the power of art. In art, moments of fleeting time are 'frozen' for all time, with all the positive and negative implications of this word. Art in its arrogant immortality is cold, indifferent to our suffering and dying. By its very nature it misses the sensation of being alive, things which Keats' poem tries to recapture 'negatively', that is by referring to their absence. The poem, though in many ways similar to the urn, in the end distances itself from its object, through the doubts it expresses about the value of its own powers, allying itself with the ashes the urn might contain.

Samuel Taylor COLERIDGE (1772-1834)



Samuel Taylor Coleridge
(1795) by Peter Vandyke.
National Portrait Gallery,
London.

Life and works

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was born in Devon in 1772, and studied at Jesus College, Cambridge, but never graduated, being more concerned with French revolutionary politics and heavy drinking. In 1794 Coleridge met the poet Robert Southey, and they became close friends. Together they planned to move to America and found a 'Pantisocracy', an ideal community made up of twelve couples, all of whom would have equal rights and live according to principles such as common ownership and the abolition of private property. But the project was never realised.

In 1796 Coleridge published *Poems on Various Subjects*. The following year he moved to Somerset, where he became friendly with William Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy. This intense friendship was very important for Coleridge's literary production and proved to be one of

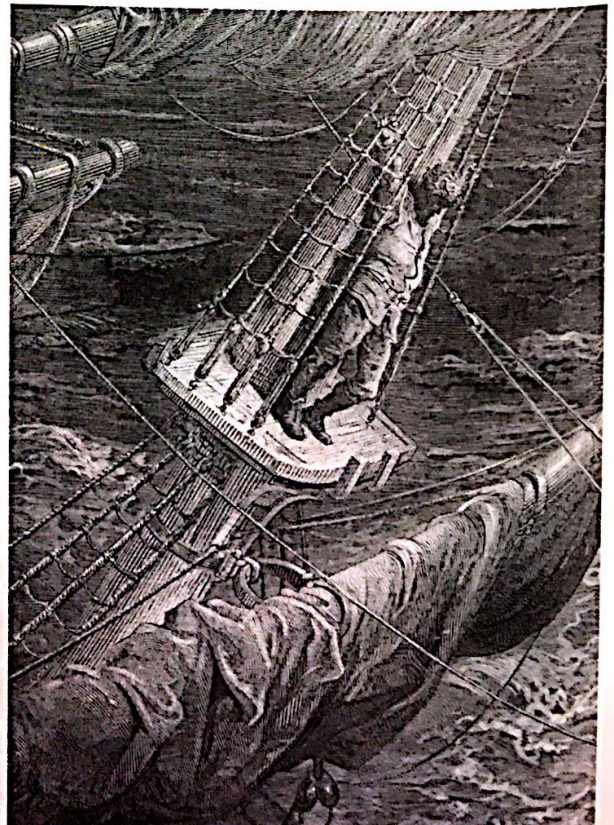
the most creative partnerships in English Romanticism. Meeting Wordsworth also marked a dramatic change in Coleridge's political ideas. After his early optimism for the French Revolution, Wordsworth had turned conservative, horrified by its violence, and Coleridge did the same. In 1797 he wrote one of his most famous poems, 'Kubla Khan', which he claimed had come to him in a dream after taking laudanum (a form of opium). Together with Wordsworth he contributed poems to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) including his celebrated long poem, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

In 1800 he eventually settled in the Lake District with Wordsworth. Coleridge became involved in journalism and his marriage with Sarah Fricker broke up after he fell in love with Sarah Hutchinson. But his love for her remained unrequited, and he turned increasingly to alcohol and opium for comfort and poetic inspiration. In 1802 he wrote 'Dejection: An Ode', addressed to Sarah Hutchinson.

After a journey to Malta and Italy, he lived with the Wordsworths for a while and began his series of lectures on poetry and drama, but after a serious argument with Wordsworth he moved to London, where he remained for the rest of his life. In 1816 he published *Christabel and Other Poems* followed by *Biographia Literaria* (1817), a mixture of criticism, philosophical reflection and autobiography. Coleridge died in 1834.

Focus on the text: *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

This long poem is divided into seven parts; each introduced by a short summary of the story so far. It was composed between 1797 and 1798 and was first published as the opening poem of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. It tells the **story of a mariner** who commits the crime of **killing an albatross** and of his subsequent punishment.



The Ancient Mariner (19th century)
by Gustave Dore

The story is told by the mariner himself who, at the beginning of the poem, finds himself at a wedding feast and begins recounting his sad story to one of the guests who 'cannot choose but hear'. He tells how his ship was drawn towards the South Pole by a storm. At some point the ship is surrounded by ice and trapped. An albatross flies through the fog and the crew herald its arrival with joy as the ice breaks and the albatross guides them to safety. But then, inexplicably, the mariner shoots the albatross dead with his crossbow. At first the crew are angry with the mariner for killing the bird and make him wear the albatross around his neck as a penance for his crime, but they later excuse him. A curse falls on the ship which is driven north to the equator and gets stuck for lack of wind under a burning sun. Horrible serpent-like creatures appear on the motionless sea. A phantom ship arrives, on which Life and Life-in-Death are drawing lots for the mariner and his crew. At this point we learn that the other members of the ship's crew are also being punished for justifying the mariner's crime, but while he survives to tell the tale, they all die from thirst. While he is in deep despair the mariner watches the beauty of water snakes in the moonlight and blesses them. As he does so the albatross falls from his neck and he is saved. However, the mariner's survival does not mark the end of his punishment. He must bear the **burden of guilt** for the rest of his days. And so he travels around, **telling his story to the people he meets**, hoping in this way to teach them to respect and love all nature's creatures.

One of the most interesting aspects of the poem is the fact that the mariner's motives for killing the albatross remain a mystery. The act is without motivation, and radically separates him from the community, and from the logical chain of cause and effect.

Stylistic features and interpretations

The poem creates a universe where **realistic and supernatural events** coexist. The landscape is portrayed in a mysterious, dream-like way and is populated not only by the albatross, a bird whose killing, according to mythology, is considered a sacrilege, but also by horrible sea-monsters which surround the ship after the bird's death. The presence of spirits and angels also contribute to create a strange, magical atmosphere.

This is reinforced by the **language** used by Coleridge, which is characterised by a frequent use of sound effects, internal rhymes, alliteration, similes and personifications. Coleridge's language in this poem is unlike that of Wordsworth: it imitates the language of medieval ballads and often contains archaic words. There is also a commentary in the margin written in 17th century style. The **sea-voyage** might represent life itself and the story might reflect the **parable of mankind**, original sin – here represented by the killing of the albatross – and the path to repentance. However, the poem refuses to be reduced to a simple parable. The 'unnatural' nature of the mariner's act can be seen as a representation of an inherent conflict between nature and man, whose own 'nature' is to continually try to overcome the limits of natural law.



'Erebus' and 'Terror' in the Antarctic (1847) by John Wilson Carmichael.
National Maritime Museum, London.