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Tali Valentine
Taylor University

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Natalia Valentine

Dr. Emma Plaskitt

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Coleridge as the Mariner – Disconnection and Redemption in Comparing *Dejection: An Ode* (1802) and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798)

Both *Dejection: An Ode* (1802) and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) interact with disconnection, alienation, and depression as they were evident in the ebb and flow of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's life. Written four years apart from one another, the journey of both poems explains the nature, source, and consequences of such isolation; in other words, Coleridge's expression of, "the evils of separation and finiteness," which was to Romantic thinking was the, "Radical affliction of the human condition" (Abrams 183). Coleridge explores the nature of his own depression in *Dejection – An Ode* and preemptively shows an understanding of the suffering and redemption he would later go through in what Guite calls the "astonishingly prescient" (16) *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Comparing these two works in light of Coleridge's autobiography *Biographia Literaria* (1817) reveals a view of Coleridge's life as a physical manifestation of what he wrote, connecting the cycle of alienation and despair to connection and redemption through spiritual, relational and poetic means. Though comparing *Dejection: An Ode* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, their forms, contexts within Coleridge's biography, articulation of his philosophies, and connected moon symbolism produce an image of disconnection and redemption revealed poetically and as breathed out by Coleridge's life.

Dejection: An Ode is a realistic, conversation poem which laments disconnection and depression. Its form is a Pindaric ode mostly in Iambic Pentameter which breaks at points like “Upon the Strings of this Aeolian lute, / Which better far were mute” (lines 7-8), an intentional syntactical imperfection. It begins with a ballad epigraph and follows the generally consistent rhyme scheme and principals of what Coleridge calls the “the sublimer Ode”, the effect of which sets the poem up to echo what an ode “should” do and resultantly comments on contrasting meaninglessness. The poem fails to prosaically return back to the beginning like a classic Coleridge conversation poem because the “head” does not return to the “tail,” while conversely he says of *Frost at Midnight* (1798) that it, “coiled with its tails along its head” (qtd. in Norton Crit. 123). An exasperated conclusion of the speaker spontaneously blessing the “Lady” reaches for her “joy” but neglects to achieve his own.

The form of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is an epic English ballad that involves consistent, alternating meter and classic ballad elements such as lyric repetition, for example, “Water, water, everywhere / And all the boards did shrink; / Water, water everywhere / Nor any drop to drink” (lines 119-122). It was published in the first edition of *The Lyrical Ballads* (1798). Structural imitation would have called to mind respected precedents such as Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1590), but its diversions from this style can also be seen as a significant marker to begin the Romantic era of poetry. This divergence can be seen thematically in its focus towards the subliminal, psychological and away from antiquity, as well as in the ways both poems preference poet-prophet voice, meaning and understanding over traditional ode or ballad structures.

Although *Dejection – An Ode* was written only a few years after ultimately positive conversation poems like *The Lime Tree Bower my Prison* (1797) and *Frost at Midnight* (1798), it

biographically displays the divorce Coleridge experiences in his ability to articulate the communicative, imaginative connection with the sublime nature he once spoke of earnestly. The poem presents his dive into a dry, deadly, objective worldview – a questioning of nature’s intrinsically transforming power and a step towards opioid meaninglessness manifest in later works such as *Kubla Kahn* (1816). Guite describes this polarization, saying:

If there is a... spectrum between an utterly confident transcendental vision in which all things speak of God and are drenched in his meaning, on one, hand, and on the other a bleak matter of factness in which everything is opaque, dully and merely itself, speaking of nothing beyond its own materiality, then *Frost at Midnight* is at one end, the northern pole of that spectrum, but in *Dejection – an Ode*, Coleridge has been plunged far south to the other pole, and the contrast and challenge between the two ways of seeing nature are an agony to him (Guite 437).

Biographically, this “south pole” effectually began for Coleridge around the time the poem was published in 1802, the day William Wordsworth married Mary Hutchinson, sister of Sarah Hutchinson. Coleridge’s obsession with Sarah, a close confidant and friend, estranged him because of the isolating confines of his unhappy marriage to Sarah Fricker he described as “incompatible with even an Endurable life” (qtd. in Beer 17). *Dejection* originated under the title *A Letter to – (Sarah Hutchison)* and may have also been a response to Wordsworth’s *Ode on Intimations of Immortality* (Norton Criticism 143-4) which spoke oppositely, even gloatingly, of feeling, ending with the lines, “To me the meanest flower that blows can give / Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears” (lines 207-8). Ultimately, *Dejection* illustrates Coleridge’s disconnected depression away from such depth of thought. Coleridge’s failed relationships, health issues, resultant opium addiction, and the butterfly effect of isolation from family and the Wordsworths ravaged the entirety of his mid-life, aligning with the concepts of disconnection in both poems.

Dejection represents an extreme of physical and spiritual isolation similar to the image of his own prophetic mariner in the most hopeless stanzas in *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. In *Dejection*, the speaker can articulate what is happening in nature as he once did, when “This joy within me dallied with distress” (line 77), but he admits that he can no longer find the joy. This definition of joy for Coleridge means connection as the ultimate goal of the One-Life and demonstrates, “An equipoise of the contrary mental powers, manifested in an inner life so abundant that it breaks through the barriers of the self” (Abrams 183). An example of this concept is found in *This Lime Tree Bower My Prison* (1800) because despite being temporarily separated from his friends, Coleridge finds hope through empathy in his ability to, “contemplate / With lively joy the joys we cannot share” (lines 137-8), and eventually a consensus that “no sound is dissonant that tells of life” (line 147). This underscores the idea that when *Lime Tree* was written, he could still feel “joy” in the surrounding world even within isolation. By contrast, *Dejection*’s “joys” are spoiled by numbness. Unfeeling numbness remained a resonant fear in Romantic thinking, for example, Keats’ *Nightingale* and *On Melancholy* (Plaskitt). Coleridge details an unfeeling sorrow as a suspension of his natural “shaping spirit of imagination” (line 86). The Aeolian Lute, responding to the sublime nature around, no longer produces beauty for Coleridge and would be better off mute (line 8). The dejection is viper thoughts suffocating him and the sounds of the wind which once inspired him are now nightmares. The conversation thematically breaks and ends in unsleeping anguish and plea on behalf of his severed connection to a loved one, an anguish that reverberates in Coleridge’s own mid-life.

Written four years prior along with most of Coleridge’s conversation poems, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* deals with this theme of disconnection and depression from a standpoint of prophetic moral conviction and resolution. Guite suggests that the poem could also serve to be

his, “dissection of atheism and a challenge to pride” (199), but the interest could be seen through the poem’s ability to articulate what would become Coleridge’s life story. Motivation for writing the poems were very different - *Dejection* presents a confessional experience of suffering while *Rime* discusses the human condition from the perspective of a poet-prophet that includes an attainable solution, although the ending remains in tension. The mariner’s story as told to the wedding guest outlines Coleridge’s understanding of the role of the threads of connection to God and others, or the inability to pray. Like the north and south poles, Guite illustrates this through a metaphor of connective axes, saying, “Having broken the threads of mutuality and communication at the horizontal level, as it were, between himself and his fellow creatures, the mariner now finds the vertical axis, the thread of connection with the divine in prayer, also broken, and his isolation is complete” (457). The killing of the Albatross in line 81 symbolizes his deep understanding of what severing connective tissues such as empathy for suffering and a need for relation does – *Rime* suggests a worldview cognizant of the nature, source, and consequences of disconnection as his idea of sin. Resultant stillness and lack of movement surfaces through the mariner’s ship sitting in the water, “As idle as a painted Ship / upon a painted Ocean” (lines 112-3), reflecting a similar frustrated stillness as the night spoken out of in *Dejection*: literal, spiritual, and poetic stagnation. The source of the alienation becomes a congruent image throughout the poem – suffering arises from disconnected stagnancy and inability to form relationships horizontally and vertically. The fault of such, in the mind of Coleridge, is in “Only seeing things through the dungeon-grate of his own afflictions” (Guite, 442), inherently the opposite of imagination and connective joy.

The speaker’s reaction to the problem presented in *Dejection: An Ode* is not resolute, it does not return “tails along its head”. Reaction to the problem of isolation expressed in

Dejection is to look to nature as he always had in hopes of inspiration, prayer, and connection – wishing to return to the imaginative spirit. In isolation, Coleridge hopes to look to the moonlight as in *Frost at Midnight* and journey through reflections to return to the connectivity of noticing the “secret ministry of cold / Shall hang them up in silent icicles, / Quietly shining to the quiet moon” (lines 77-9). This dream of the distant past within *Dejection* is replaced only by nightmares. He admits, “I see them all so excellently fair / I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!” (lines 37-8), explaining to the Lady that although he still has the skill to observe and even write poetry that once lifted him into joy despite tribulation, the grates of his viewpoint as of 1802 freeze the solution to his suffering. The slight peace found at the end of the poem come from wishing the Lady well and praying for her, “Joy lift her spirit, joy attune her voice / To her may all things live, from Pole to Pole” (lines 133-4), wishing for her what he cannot have. This prayer parallels the prayer the mariner prays for the slimy things in *Rime* and perhaps whispers the beginning of the solution. Spontaneous blessing of the Lady is parallel to the spontaneous blessing of the Water-Snakes – to feel for another being in empathy, beyond one’s own grate. While anguish still abounds, movement begins through getting out of one’s own disconnected mind and blessing the other.

In *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the image of isolation in anguish experienced by Coleridge is depicted by the windless entry of a ship which the Mariner calls to by wetting his lips with his own blood. The 1834 gloss it says, “Death and Life-in-death have dived for the ship’s crew, and she (the latter) winneth the ancient Mariner” (line 195), and as a result the mariner enters Life-in-death and sees all 200 of the crew die before him. Following, in the picture of utter dryness, the Mariner serves his penance which is worse than death. To be surrounded by water but unable to quench his thirst, surrounded by men but all have dead eyes,

parallels the anguish detailed in *Dejection* - being surrounded by the supposed solution but unable to access it. The culmination of this dejection in lines 132-9 says:

Alone, alone, all, all alone,
 Alone on a wide wide sea!
 And never a saint took pity on
 My soul in agony.
 The many men, so beautiful!
 And they all dead did lie:
 And a thousand thousand slimy things
 Lived on; and so did I.

The unquenchable alienation stuttered in repetition illustrates the extent of the loss of life caused by selfishness and results in self-loathing, comparing himself to the slimy things but only wanting to die. The lowest moment occurs when the mariner realizes he cannot pray in line 245, similarly to the “unroused” state of *Dejection*’s speaker. It is not his own ability of speech or prayer but rather the moonlight illuminating the snakes that he is able to say the words which instigate the turning point: “A spring of love gushed from my heart, / And I blessed them unaware: / Sure my kind saint took pity on me, / And I blessed them unaware” (lines 284-7). The light of the moon illuminates that he is not fully alone. Only through the act of blessing the other by the prompting of the supernatural suggestion of moonlight does release finally come. Symbolizing loss of guilt and curse, the Albatross falls away (line 290), the mariner finally sleeps, divine intervention sails in, and the personified wind prompts the ship to go forth and return the mariner home to tell the story to the wedding guest. The result is a wandering responsibility to tell the story people like the wedding guest who are left “wiser” and also “sadder.” Perhaps a picture of a later Coleridge can be discerned: writing out what he had learned, attempting to come back from having sailed through dangerous, opioid waters, sobered by his journey so similar to the mariner’s.

The prominence of the moon symbol in both poems communicates an undergirding of connection across time. For Coleridge, the role of symbol acts as “the Translucence of Eternal though and with the Temporal”. In this way, the moon usually acts as a source of illumination, spiritual connection, and powerful force as notably illustrated in *Frost at Midnight* which says: “The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible / Of that eternal language, which thy God / Utters,...the secret ministry of the cold / Shall hang them up in silent icicles, / Quietly shining to the quiet moon” (lines 64-6, 77-9). This picture of moon shows an intelligible connectivity, but by contrast in *Dejection*, the speaker’s relationship with the moon is divorced. Using moon lines from the Ballad of Sir Patrick Spence, the epigraph opens the poem with an image of a moon bringing a storm. “Late, late yestreen I saw the new Moon, / With the old Moon in her arms; / And I fear, I fear, my master dear! / We shall have a deadly storm.” This ballad references a story of disaster at sea, another connecting force to *Rime*. The speaker responds to the Bard while standing at midnight in stillness under the sliver of the New Moon probably not much different from the quiet moon of *Frost*. This time, however, alienation from even his own philosophies is expressed because he sees it not in tranquility but in anguish on behalf of the numbness of unfeeling – cut off from poetry and others. Although the speaker sees its “phantom light” (lines 10-13) and can perceive the beauty of the moon, he cannot feel the spiritual movement and connection. He wishes for a storm to be brought on by the Old Moon because he wonders if movement will blow his dry spirit out of stagnancy. He supposes that all the meaning he ever saw in nature was all just his own fancy and not an outside source – he sees the image through only his own grate.

In *Rime*, the moon is a personified force of agency and redemption articulated as the moonrise which contrasts to Coleridge’s stagnancy in *Dejection*. Congruently, lack of

movement paralleled with the lack of moon coincides with isolation and disconnection when the Albatross is killed literally because without wind, the ship stays still. An element of the moon as a powerful force in *Rime* is that it controls tides and therefore takes control of action. It is the personified moon that kills the men, glitters in their eyes as a curse to the Mariner, illuminates the slimy things to teach him to bless them, and provides the sheer grace of moving the boat home while the Mariner rests. As “The moving moon goes up into the sky” (line 263), the 1834 gloss reads, “In his loneliness and fixedness he yearneth towards the journeying Moon...By the light of the Moon he beholdeth God’s creatures of the great calm” (Norton Crit. 77). Guite explains this “Moonrise” by saying, “It is the moon’s very nature both that she moves through space and is the cause of movement in others, and also that she moves us emotionally, in the inner space of our hearts” (462). The significance of the glosses is that they were added well after *Dejection* was written and imply a metaphorical moonrise had taken place in Coleridge’s own estimation of the disconnection of his depression. He comes to understand the symbol of moon as a participating, active force of the sublime in both word and action. Although the moon is the same moon in both poems, the symbol comes at different directions of the problem of isolation. In *Dejection*, it is looking at the moon through the grate of one’s own vision, in *Rime*, it is the symbol of the moving moon outside of one’s own grate.

Both poems approach disconnection, alienation, and depression in a tension between objectivity and subjectivity, in other words seeing surroundings as divorced from oneself versus intuition of personal connection. In seeking a unification of the two through Coleridge’s life’s work of fighting depression, addiction, and alienation with connectivity, he would eventually come out of the stagnant waters of *Dejection – An Ode*, and sail back to tell the story just as the mariner did. By the end of his life, his poetic efficacy was illuminated by the fact that his

supposed failures were really his living out his life's work – in *Dejection* and *Rime*, “Coleridge gives poetic form to the concept, but it is no less expressive that he lived it” (Butler 93). As a poet, he sought to live out the imagination which he describes in *Biographia Literaria* (1817), “The primary Imagination I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” (Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria XIII*). This connective force so opposite of the grate of fancy reveals a poet actively seeking truth within suffering. Just as Coleridge later articulates that one can feel in their own spirits the same instinct which impels the chrysalis of the caterpillar to leave room for the butterfly yet to come, comparing the theme of disconnection within *Dejection – An Ode* with *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* reveals that one can, “Know and feel, that the potential works in them, even as the actual works on them” (Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria XII*).

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